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December 2024

Climate crisis, extractivism, and security in Mesoamerica

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Introduction

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December 31st, 2024

Latin America is the most violent region in the world. Even when there are no open wars, homicide rates are very high, and the population faces various risk situations that create a strong perception of insecurity. Organized crime, threats against human rights and environmental defenders, forced displacement due to poverty or political persecution, and the extreme vulnerability of migrant populations are all factors that contribute to this perception.

It is also the most unequal region in the world: the top 10% of earners receive, on average, 12 times more than the poorest 10% (IDB, 2024). Inequality especially affects rural and ethnic communities —Indigenous and Afro-descendant groups— who live in remote areas under extremely precarious conditions. However, the poor and marginalized urban populations are also disproportionately affected. Women, particularly those who are heads of households, are especially vulnerable.

This situation affects all Mesoamerican countries to varying degrees. In this subregion, the situation becomes even more complex as environmental destruction and climate crisis exacerbate many of these problems, especially for the poorest sectors. Since Latin America is one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change, Mesoamerican countries have experienced an increase in extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and tropical storms, for decades. These phenomena are intensifying every year, making it more difficult to recover ecosystems, economies, and societies. This situation is contributing to the growing migration of populations and communities toward the northern part of the continent.

However, the relationship between climate change and environmental destruction, on the one hand, and violence and insecurity, on the other, has not been sufficiently analyzed—neither for the Latin American region as a whole nor, even less so, in the context of Mesoamerican countries. What we do know mainly relates to violence against environmental leaders and defenders. Here, once again, the region holds the unfortunate distinction of being the most dangerous in the world. We need a better understanding of how these phenomena are interconnected in different territories and to map out responses, both from national and local governments and from civil society organizations, as well as ethnic and rural communities.

This document is an effort to contribute to these analyses. It builds on a general study conducted by Maritza Islas, which examines the close relationship between extractivism and climate change, arguing that extractivism should be considered a key factor in worsening the global climate crisis, including in Latin America. The text focuses on how the energy transition—widely seen as a fundamental step in mitigating climate change—can also deepen certain extractivist dynamics in this Latin American subregion.

Additionally, Elvira Cuadra describes and analyzes the scenarios of violence and insecurity in Mesoamerica, linking them to dynamics of crime, organized crime, and political violence across different Mesoamerican countries. She also examines how these scenarios are constantly evolving due to various internal and external factors.

Through a regional analysis and a case study of Mexico, Carlos Tornel explores the growing relationship between militarization and extractivism in Latin America, as well as the convergence of capitalism, extractivism, and militarism at different levels. This phenomenon is facilitated by the intrinsic processes of the state itself. As a result, the armed forces are increasingly involved in dynamics that enable and deepen large-scale extractivist projects.

The core of this document presents a report on the discussions and testimonies of participants at an in-person meeting held in Mexico City on September 25 and 26, 2024. These participants included experts, activists, and human rights and environmental defenders from Mesoamerica. They shared their knowledge on violence, extractivism, the energy transition, and militarization in their respective countries and territories. Participants came from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama. The report summarizes their testimonies and provides an overview of similar dynamics across the Mesoamerican subregion. It also includes country-specific case studies that illustrate the relationship between violence, militarization, and extractivism in particular territories. At the end of the document, reflections on possible solutions to this complex situation are also highlighted.

Mesoamerica is facing extractivism, violence, and militarization scenarios that are becoming increasingly critical.

Nevertheless, we hope that this initiative and report represent a small step toward building networks and collective knowledge that will help us achieve greater environmental justice and security —understood in a broad sense— for our countries.

We would like to give a special thanks to the human rights and environmental defenders who participated in this working group. They contributed their time, knowledge, and testimonies—at times sharing experiences of violence that directly affect them in their territories. It is also important to highlight the ongoing work they carry out in each of their countries.

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The Extractivist Paradox:

Between the Triple Planetary Crisis and the Energy Transition

Maritza Islas Vargas

In its report *Global Resources Outlook* (UNEP, 2024), the International Resource Panel of the United Nations Environment Programme finally acknowledged something that Latin American and Caribbean peoples have known and experienced for centuries: extractivism is the main driver of the triple planetary crisis, composed of climate change, biodiversity loss, and the pollution and waste crisis. With this diagnosis, international organizations and various governments are promoting the so-called energy transition as the most viable solution to face the triple planetary crisis. However, this strategy presents a great paradox: it will require more than three billion tons of minerals and metals for the generation of wind, solar, and other sources of energy (World Bank, 2020). In other words, extractivism is presented as the means to solve the problems it itself generated.

The extraction and processing of energy and materials, such as fossil fuels, minerals, non-metallic minerals, and biomass, generate more than 55% of greenhouse gas emissions (GHGs) and 40% of health impacts related to particulate matter. When considering land use change, climate impacts rise to more than 60%. Furthermore, agriculture and forestry are responsible for more than 90% of the total biodiversity loss and water stress related to land use (World Bank, 2020).

In Latin America and the Caribbean, extractivism has not only involved the removal of large volumes of nature for export (Gudynas, 2009), but also the imposition of structural devices —markets, financial institutions, global value chains, fiscal mechanisms, free trade agreements, legislation— through which certain groups or entities acquire the ability to control and dispose of the territories of others (Machado, 2013), as well as dynamics that reinforce violence. Territories and their respective ecosystems are structured as subordinated spaces, exploited as sacrifice zones for supplying the economies-societies where the processing and asymmetric consumption of resources takes place (Gudynas, 2009).

In communities affected by extractivism, in addition to the overexploitation of ecosystems and inhabitants, a triple violence of capitalist, racist, and patriarchal nature is exacerbated:

→ • Capitalist, since territories are emptied of ecological, symbolic, historical, cultural, landscape, and social value, and are reduced to mere commodities, important only in terms of their economic value and their contribution to the maximization of profits for a few actors (Martínez Alier, 2004; Svampa, 2013).

→ • Racist, since it creates hierarchies of superiority and inferiority that justify domination and oppression over others (López, 2020). This way, the destructive impacts of extractivism are transferred to populations seen as expendable, annihilating various ways of being, knowing, and inhabiting territories.

→ •Patriarchal, since it reinforces and exacerbates existing machismo violence, displacing women from decision-making about territories, and imposing masculinized labor structures that exacerbate sexist stereotypes, confining women to domestic spaces, and making them more vulnerable to chauvinistic violence (Colectivo Miradas Críticas del Territorio desde el Feminismo, 2018).

The violation of human rights and the exacerbation of socio-environmental conflict are added to these processes, which makes the Latin American region one of the most dangerous for land and environmental defenders (Global Witness, 2024).

The Unfulfillable Promises of the Energy Transition

As conceived in the hegemonic discourse, in addition to increasing violence, the energy transition increases fossil and mining extractivism, since it does not aim to change the metabolic profile of society—i.e., the patterns of production, consumption, circulation of goods, and waste generation. Rather, its goal is to ensure the functioning of the system (Bringel and Svampa, 2023). It also does not challenge the inequalities between high-income countries and impoverished economies, where the former consume six times more materials per capita and are responsible for ten times more climate impacts per capita than the latter (UNEP, 2024: xiv).

So far, renewable energy has not replaced fossil fuels but has been added to the energy portfolio required by the capitalist economy to function. Global energy consumption increases each year. However, in 2019, 41% of the increase came from renewable energies (British Petroleum, 2020). Neither the promise of decarbonizing the economy nor the one of dematerializing has been fulfilled. Globally, material use has tripled in the past 50 years and continues to grow at an average rate of more than 2.3% annually. Moreover, it is estimated that the extraction of material resources could increase by nearly 60% from 2020 levels by 2060, rising from 100 to 160 billion tons (UNEP, 2024: xiv).

This trend shows that, within the framework of a capitalist economy that requires the permanent and accelerated expansion of its activities, it is impossible to fulfill the promise that technology will make resource consumption more efficient. The reconciliation of infinite economic growth and reduced energy consumption, while discursively appealing, is physically impossible. Since 1990, global material efficiency has improved little. In fact, efficiency began to decrease around 2000 (UNEP, 2016). This means that, despite technological innovations in recent decades, more energy and materials are required per unit of GDP.

Bearing this in mind, we can understand that the urgency for energy transition is more related to the need for some economies to maintain their current levels of production and consumption, as well as to the interest of certain actors, especially corporate ones, in exploring new markets in an environmental and climate emergency context.

So far, the energy transition model proposed mainly by central states and corporations reproduces the inequalities and dynamics of the fossil model. In other words, it is a centralized model in the hands of a few, privatizing profits while exacerbating and socializing environmental and social costs. The expansion of extractive frontiers —driven by the depletion of geopolitically and geologically accessible resources and the "opportunities" offered by new extraction techniques— along with the cumulative effects of environmental devastation, constantly increases the number of populations affected by extractivism.

In the Latin American and Caribbean region, the consequences of this model are already evident. In Ecuador, for example, there is growing exploitation of balsa wood, driven by China's demand for wind turbine manufacturing (Artacker et al., 2024). The extraction of cobalt and lithium severely impacts Argentina, Bolivia, and Chile in what is known as the "lithium triangle." Throughout Latin America, mega-projects for solar panels and hydrogen infrastructures further increase land grabbing (Bringel and Svampa, 2023: 52).

In addition to being unsustainable and unfair, the corporate and technocratic energy transition model is highly fragile, as it depends on critical minerals that are very scarce in nature, such as lithium, cobalt, graphite, indium, and rare soils. At this point, it is important to note that the biophysical limit of this transition lies not only in the depletion of minerals but also in the planet's ability to continue absorbing its waste.

In this scenario, collective organization against the exacerbation of the extractivist model becomes crucial. In this sense, the proposals emerging from climate movements, anti-mining struggles, and, in general, popular ecology envision other possible paths, oriented toward socially and environmentally fair decarbonization. These promote dis-investment from fossil fuels, democratization of decision-making on the transition, and decentralization and de-privatization of technologies and energy generation. It is essential to explore and support these alternatives if we seek to guarantee not only a simple, technological transition but a true eco-social transformation.

It is important to bear in mind that the energy transition is not inherently fair, nor necessarily ecological or sustainable. For this to happen, production and consumption models must be rethought, and an equitable distribution of benefits and costs must be ensured, along with respect for the rights to access information, participation, and justice for communities affected by energy and extractive projects.

While it is true that, to face the triple planetary crisis, measures such as modifying the energy matrix are necessary, this cannot be done at the expense of the health of ecosystems or the integrity of entire peoples. Unless the transition is fair, it will not be a true solution.

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Scenarios and Security trends in Mesoamerica

Elvira Cuadra Lira

Mesoamerica, the geographical region encompassing Mexico and Central America, has historically been a transit zone between the two continental masses of the American hemisphere. It comprises eight independent countries: Belize, Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama. It currently has an estimated population of 180.5 million people, the majority of whom live in Mexico (129.5M), and the rest in Central America (51M). Of these, a quarter are young people aged 15 to 24.

Despite its potential and wealth, Mesoamerica is undergoing a deep crisis, marked by poverty and inequality affecting more than half its population. There are limited opportunities for access to education, healthcare, and basic services; high unemployment and informal economies; severe effects of climate change and environmental vulnerability; the rise of new authoritarian regimes, militarism, militarization, high levels of corruption, and the growing influence of organized crime within state structures at the highest levels.

Two of the most devastating consequences of this scenario are the high levels of insecurity and violence affecting the entire region. These factors, in turn, fuel migration flows and forced displacement of people from Mesoamerica and other regions trying to reach the United States.

Dynamics of Violence and Insecurity

Security in Mesoamerica can be analyzed through three dynamics: a) delinquency and crime; b) organized crime; and c) political violence. Each shows distinct behavioral trends.

Data related to crime and criminality, generally coming from official sources, have shown downward trends for several years, particularly in 2021. For instance, homicide rates per 100,000 inhabitants have decreased significantly across the region. El Salvador stands out due to the implementation of the so-called "Bukele model." However, Costa Rica has seen a notable rise in its homicide rate in recent years, and Mexico continues to have a high rate —estimated at 29— with slight variations between 2018 and 2022.

Femicides, another form of lethal violence, show a different pattern than the homicide rate because, in addition, the levels of cruelty and acrimony with which women are murdered have increased. Sexual violence also shows worrying levels in all countries and primarily affects girls and adolescents.

One of the criminal acts that most influences the perception and conditions of security is robbery. Statistics show a general downward trend in the region, with the exception of Costa Rica and Mexico, where the rate per 100,000 inhabitants has increased over time. However, there are significant variations in the rates across countries.

According to data from Latinobarómetro (2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, 2020), the perception of security as a problem decreased in all countries in the region. Although there was a systematic downward trend in all cases, the most significant decline occurred in 2020. Despite the decrease in the perception of security as a problem, the victimization rate trended differently. Mexico, Panama, and Honduras are the countries with the highest victimization rates.

Reconfiguration of Organized Crime

Various specialized reports indicate that transnational organized crime groups are undergoing rapid reconfiguration around the world. The Americas is the third most affected continent by crime, and foreign criminal actors have increased their influence since the Covid-19 pandemic. Meanwhile, the States have become key facilitators of illicit economies—such as Mexico and Honduras.

Two key factors are that most governments in the region fall under flawed democracies, hybrid regimes, or authoritarian regimes, which lowers their resilience to transnational organized crime. Social conflicts and how governments address them also reduce this resilience.

The main forms of transnational organized crime identified in Mesoamerica are financial crimes such as money laundering; human trafficking and smuggling; arms trafficking; cannabis trade; trafficking of cocaine, synthetic drugs, and heroin; extortion and illegal protection rackets. According to the 2023 *Global Organized Crime Index* (GI-TOC, 2023), criminality, criminal markets, and the influence of criminal actors increased in Central and North America in 2023, while resilience against organized crime decreased in Central America.

The same report indicates that, during the pandemic, criminal groups identified new niches and operating methods, such as extortion, cybercrime, and the black market for essential goods. These groups continued to engage in these activities once societies returned to normal.

On the other hand, among the three regions in the hemisphere, Central America has the highest crime rate and the lowest level of resilience, making it a vulnerable area given the high level of interconnectedness and transnationality of criminal markets.

Rising Political Violence

Mesoamerica has become a region where political violence is widespread. This is mainly perpetrated by states and criminal groups. One of the most critical examples is Mexico, which saw numerous political candidates assassinated

during recent elections, as well as murders and systematic attacks on journalists. In Honduras, political violence has especially targeted environmental and territorial defenders. According to international organizations, Honduras is one of the most dangerous countries for these defenders.

A particularly severe case is Nicaragua, where the government has established a police state for several years, maintaining tight surveillance and political control over citizens and carrying out persecution against various groups it deems opponents. In other countries in the region, there have been various episodes of social mobilization and conflict, including incidents of political violence. Some examples include Panama, with protests against mining; Costa Rica, protesting budget cuts to education; and Guatemala in 2023, following the presidential elections and rejecting attempts to suspend the election results.

Comparative analyses by CETCAM (Barberena, 2023; CETCAM, 2023; Ramírez, 2023) reveal that the authoritarian contexts in Mesoamerica have resulted in serious restrictions on civil rights and freedoms. These include at least eight forms of persecution against human rights defenders, social organizations, independent media and journalists—along with the use of judicialization as a form of criminalization.

Current Scenario

Mesoamerica is a region where the security landscape and conditions have been changing for years due to the influence of endogenous and exogenous factors. The behavior of indicators over time shows trends that can be considered fragile since, even when they have decreased over time, they contrast with other important trends, such as the increase in various forms of violence and the prevailing victimization rates. Furthermore, at a territorial level, there are dynamics of violence and crime that result in indicators well above national and even regional trends.

Endogenous factors, such as difficult living conditions and limited educational and employment opportunities, especially for young populations, exert a significant influence as drivers of certain forms of violence and insecurity. In addition to this, they encourage migratory flows and forced displacement.

On the other hand, the region is under pressure from factors that could be considered exogenous insofar as they are related to transnational phenomena, such as organized crime, especially international drug trafficking and the reconfigurations its operating dynamics are undergoing; the flow of irregular migrants transiting through the region, which has increased in recent years due to social problems, but also political instability; and the effects of climate change and environmental vulnerability affecting numerous populations.

Although some security policies can be considered successful, as in the case of El Salvador, the truth is that they are reactive and, in general, show a worrying tendency toward hardening, the adoption of punitive approaches, and the militarization of security. In a context of fragile democracies and weak institutions, this poses a significant risk.

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Militarization and Green Extractivism:

Two Sides of the Sample Capitalist Coin

Carlos Tornel

In Mexico, the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO, 2018-2024) deepened, more than any other administration, the participation of the armed forces in a total of 27 areas of almost every area of public life. The National Guard, originally conceived as a civilian force, was rapidly militarized and, along with the army and navy, now has multiple responsibilities: the construction of airports; the administration of the Banco del Bienestar (Bank of Welfare); the development of the (misnamed) Maya Train (Tren Maya); the remodeling of hospitals; the fight against fuel theft (*'huachicoleo'*); border surveillance; the distribution of social programs, such as Jóvenes Construyendo el Futuro (Youths Building the Future) or Sembrando Vida (Sowing Life), and the distribution of fertilizers; as well as the administration of ports and customs (Centro PRO, 2022). This growing participation of the armed forces in the country's public life is not an anomaly. In Latin America, the trend towards militarization has been exploited by both right-wing and left-wing governments: from the militarization of Mapuche territories in Chile under Gabriel Boric's government to ensure "the movement of goods," to Xiomara Castro's declaration of a state of emergency in Honduras, which allowed for the militarization of the police, prisons, and judicial systems, to the use of the military in El Salvador to impose a state of siege and to shoot alleged members of "criminal gangs" (Kyle and Reiter, 2023).

Armed Forces and Extractivism in Latin America

The increasing reliance on the military is part of a broader deepening of extractivism in the region and reveals a deeper symptom of the structural crisis of capitalism. On the one hand, militarization is, in part, a response to capitalism's exhaustion of value and systemic dislocation, highlighting the system's inability to sustain itself on its own terms (Jappe, 2017; Ornelas, 2023). The gradual decline in dependence on living labor for value production has led capitalism toward a model increasingly based on accumulation by dispossession (Harvey, 2004). This disruption of 'traditional' sources of value and surplus extraction has made capitalism more reliant on war and violence as a means to obtain cheap nature, energy, food, minerals, and labor (Patel & Moore, 2017). By invoking new justifications that reframe old colonialist practices to appropriate unpaid labor and energy, capitalism has paradoxically grown more dependent on states and their capacity to manipulate force through armed groups operating in both legal and illegal spheres. These groups are essential for enforcing an increasingly violent extractive regime, which is normalized and presented as 'necessary' —often under the excuse of national security and through the declaration of states of emergency—to preserve liberal and developmental myths such as 'representative democracy', 'sustainable development', and 'green growth'.

On the other hand, extractivism has been a constant feature of Latin American capitalism for the past five centuries (Acosta, 2013). However, over the last 30 years, there has been a transition in extractive paradigms: from the "Washington Consensus" —driven by market-driven neoliberalism— to the "Commodities Consensus", a model of resource extraction based on exporting unprocessed minerals, promoted by progressive or center-left governments to capture revenues and finance social programs without fundamentally altering capitalist or developmentalist structures (Svampa, 2015).

Recently, this has evolved into what Breno Bringel and Maristela Svampa (2023) call the "Decarbonization Consensus," marking a new phase of capitalist accumulation by dispossession. This emerging consensus promotes a global capitalist pact focused on "energy transition" and "sustainable development," under the seemingly benevolent rhetoric of "decarbonizing," "mitigating," and "adapting" to climate change—despite climate change being exacerbated by capitalism itself. This framework has opened new areas for expansion and investment. The proliferation of large-scale solar and wind projects, along with the development of geoengineering technologies, not only adds another layer to the existing extractive model—spurring increased interest in so-called "critical minerals" and land dispossession—but also acts as a smokescreen that allows the reformulation of old colonial patterns, such as the notion of Terra Nullius: lands deemed "empty," "idle," or "misused" but now seen as having potential to decarbonize the economy (Gómez-Barris, 2017; Tornel & Montaño, 2023). If, as Patrick Wolfe (2006) suggests, the ultimate goal of colonialism is securing access to land, then green extractivism and the decarbonization consensus represent a new turn in the capitalist accumulation model—ushering in an even broader phase of colonization (Isla, 2022; Lang et al., 2024), now justified in the name of environmental protection and sustainability.

The consequences are stark: Latin America has become the most dangerous region for environmental defenders. Over the past decade, at least 2,100 murders have been documented, most linked to mining and large-scale development projects (Global Witness, 2024). Mexico reflects this trend, with at least 204 assassinations —likely an undercount— while killings and disappearances related to the so-called "war on drugs" have claimed 36,000 lives during AMLO's administration alone (Paley, 2023). Under the guise of ensuring "national security" or protecting "sovereignty," states have justified increased militarization in response to threats such as organized crime, the climate crisis, public health emergencies like the COVID-19 pandemic, or even disruptions in trade and supply chains. These circumstances have been used as a means to establish permanent states of siege, institutionalizing emergency as the norm (Agamben, 2005). A particularly notable case is that of organized crime, which operates both as a justification for states of emergency and as a confluence of forces that, according to Dawn Paley (2014), offers a long-term "solution" to the problems of capitalism. By combining terror with the

implementation of neoliberal policies and opening previously inaccessible territories to globalized capitalism, the distinction between the "licit" and the "illicit" has been key to the functioning of capitalism, which, as Segato (2015) argues, is sustained through a "second economy."

The Interaction Between Capitalism, Militarism, and Extractivism

The so-called "second economy" is not external but central to capitalism. It is a way for capitalism to expand into territories and forms of production that were previously inaccessible. The official nomenclature of "organized crime" or "drug cartels" often obscures the industries and value chains that benefit from these activities, including transnational corporations, bankers, shareholders, and, in many cases, the state's own repressive forces (Paley, 2014). Recognizing the centrality of "illicit" economies implies understanding that the distinction between the licit and the illicit is not only a key axis of the extractive-colonial model but has been a fundamental part of capitalism over the past 500 years across its various accumulation regimes. Therefore, this distinction arises from power relations that define and legitimize certain forms of accumulation while excluding others (Terán, 2023). Echoing Agamben's argument (2017: 2-3), "Powers and institutions are not delegitimized today because they have fallen into illegality; rather, the opposite is true: illegality is so widespread and pervasive because these powers have lost all awareness of their legitimacy."

What is extraordinary about the present moment lies in the paradox of the increasing porosity of the State and its growing dependence on criminal economies, which blur the boundaries between the legal and the illegal, the formal and the informal, and erode the influence and articulation of both official and unofficial institutions (Terán, 2023). In other words, "crime and the accumulation of capital through illegal means are no longer exceptional but have become structural and structuring forces in politics and the economy" (Segato, 2015: 76). The growing indistinction between these spheres marks a rupture with the traditional way of defining military interventions and armed conflicts in the 20th and early 21st centuries. Militarization and warfare are no longer confined to conflicts between states; they now permeate economic and social life, placing national security and the logistical organization of capitalism at the center. Instead, they emerge as part of a "perpetual war regime," in which governance and military administration are deeply intertwined with capitalist structures, and vice versa (Hardt & Mezzadra, 2024). Thus, the corporatization of armed forces and the militarization of corporations foster a military culture based on a "pedagogy of cruelty." This promotes a new form of warfare whose objective is not victory over a specific enemy but war itself—meaning that war becomes a mode of existence.

The convergence of capitalism's systemic crisis, extractivism, and militarism manifests on multiple levels:

First, there is an increasing militarization of territories to dominate and discipline resistance. Socio-ecological conflicts in Latin America reveal a growing reliance on state violence to ensure accumulation by dispossession, from the construction of megaprojects to mining—both legal and illegal—and to perpetuate a culture of fear that inhibits and immobilizes local organizing (Zibechi, 2023). Militarization functions as a counterinsurgency strategy, accompanied by social engineering tactics aimed at manufacturing consent and legitimizing extractivist processes. These actions include the use of propaganda, psychological operations, participatory mechanisms and recognition strategies, as well as the provision of security and social development as persuasion tools (Verweijen & Dunlap, 2021).

Second, the deployment of armed forces is framed as a "natural" response to declared states of emergency or insecurity in order to protect and safeguard national security interests. The growing presence of organized crime paradoxically serves as a means to legitimize states of siege while simultaneously offering an alternative for individuals deemed "disposable" or "useless" in the eyes of capitalism (Jappe, 2017), providing them with identity, purpose, or a means of subsistence (Terán, 2023).

Third, there is a push toward the "greening" of the military industry and war (Bigger & Neimark, 2017; Edwards, 2023), which, aside from functioning as a form of "greenwashing" for military interventions, becomes a strategy to create new spaces for valorization and accumulation in conflict zones.

Green Militarism in Mexico and Its Consequences

In Mexico, the political discourse proclaiming the end of neoliberalism functions as a mirage, concealing the profoundly capitalist and extractivist nature of AMLO's government and the so-called "Fourth Transformation" (4T). Far from breaking with capitalist structures, the 4T has reconfigured the national territory to facilitate investments and the flow of capital through megaprojects such as the Interoceanic Train, the misleadingly named Maya Train, the construction of airports, and a state-owned mega-refinery. AMLO's strategy (and that of his party, Morena) has been to capture popular discontent and disillusionment with party elites, creating a clientelist structure dependent on local and regional power brokers, thus avoiding any real transformation of the economic, political, and social model (Olvera & Gutiérrez, 2023). The result has been an increasing reliance on the armed forces to ensure the development and legitimacy of these projects, accompanied by a comprehensive war of attrition and low-intensity conflict that marginalizes the rights of Indigenous communities, peasants, and other disadvantaged groups in order to protect

capitalist interests. This strategy has led to the use of populist discourses with immunological overtones, criminalizing migrants, land defenders, journalists, and activists by labeling them as 'criminals', 'terrorists', 'threats to national security', or 'extremists' (Fryba, 2023).

Two key examples illustrate the epistemic violence embedded in the 4T's project and its alliance with the armed forces in furthering extractivism and dispossession. The case of the Maya Train represents an effort to implement ethnocide under the guise of 'ethnodevelopment', as proposed by Fonatur in its Environmental Impact Statement (Giraldo, 2022), deepening the dispossession and destruction of nature with a colonial and clientelist approach that claims to bring 'sustainable development' to the region. Similarly, the Ayotzinapa case, involving the disappearance of 43 students in 2014, reveals how AMLO's government has sided with the armed forces, protecting their interests and perpetuating impunity in State crimes despite overwhelming evidence against the military (Gibler, 2023).

Alternatives and Internationalism from 'the belows'

The subordination of the state to capitalism has given rise to an 'ecoterritorial turn' in Latin America, fostering alternative political horizons beyond the state, the market, and formal democracies. This shift centers on the convergence of diverse emancipatory, communal, and collective frameworks that redefine the struggles for territorial defense and the reimagining of a 'good life' (Svampa, 2018). Various configurations of 'societies in movement'—comprising rural, urban, peri-urban, Indigenous, and peasant communities, among others—have territorialized their struggles through resistance to capitalism and 're-existence', that is, by naming and proposing new ways of being, existing, and understanding the world (Leff, 2017). These movements challenge and break capitalist structures of value production in defense of the material and symbolic conditions that sustain communal life. From everyday practices emerge proposals for food and energy sovereignty, the reclamation of verbs —such as eating, learning, dwelling, and healing—, over nouns —such as food, education, housing, and health— returning agency and capacities to local and collective entities in opposition to the counterproductivity and alienating dependence on state institutions (Esteva, 2022). To a great extent, these practices arise or take on political significance in response to the advance of extractivism and the intensification of violence in their territories.

In the Sixth Declaration of the Lacandon Jungle (EZLN, 2005), the Zapatistas propose a dialogue to "build from below and for below an alternative to neoliberal destruction." In line with their journey to 'rebellious Europe' in 2021, and acknowledging new forms of warfare, Zapatismo has articulated an internationalism from the many 'below', recognizing the diverse forms of rebellion in different territories,

regardless of whether they are located in the Global North or South. In other words, the emerging internationalism does not seek to impose a universal liberation project or an alternative path but rather aims to build a radical pluralism from which it is possible to transform pedagogies of cruelty into emancipatory, ontological, and liberatory pedagogies. This implies the construction of territorialities beyond the state as a means to foster dialogues and encounters between these alternatives. Following the Zapatista formulation, these alternatives coalesce around a shared rejection —a joint "No" or a resolute "¡Ya basta!" ('Enough is enough!')— which gives way to a plurality of alternatives specific to each territory, history, and process (Esteva, 2022).

Although it remains anathema to many thinkers—particularly within civil society—the issue of self-defense will be an integral part of many of these processes. As Gelderloos (2021) points out, nonviolence has not only served to delegitimize groups seeking deep, structural, and radical change through diverse tactics but has also been key in justifying the use of force in oppression while denying it in resistance.

It is paradoxical to interpret this phase of capitalism — characterized by a fourth world war waged in daily life and across body-territories— without considering a framework of self-defense. However, justifying the use of force or violence against infrastructure and oppression does not mean reducing the debate on self-defense to a simple assessment of its legitimacy; rather, it must be understood as an integral part of constructing new political horizons beyond the state, the market, and democracy. In other words, self-defense—as practiced in Rojava (Syria), Cherán (Michoacán, Mexico), the Zapatista territories (Chiapas, Mexico), or in Colombia's Cauca region—is part of a diversity of tactics aimed at cracking capitalism. Instead of seeking to reach the structures of power "above," these movements strive to transform and defend daily reality from where other worlds are indeed possible.

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Climate Crisis, Extractivisms, and Violence in Mesoamerica

Report from the first in-person meeting of the Regional Working Group

Mexico City, September 25 and 26, 2024

Report by: María Alejandra Rico

The dynamics of violence in Latin America cannot be understood outside the context of the environmental inequalities and injustices produced by extractive economies in the region. Thus, talking about organized crime implies addressing both legal and illegal economies; disputes over the control of natural resources, territories, and populations; militarization; and violence stemming from the States. In this sense, socio-environmental damage is closely linked to forms of violence that precede and follow land grabbing, the expansion of monocultures, and changes in land use. All of this occurs amid growing threats to democracy and a rise in authoritarianism and the far right around the world.

The effects of climate change appear in this scenario to deepen long- and medium-term issues. However, while this phenomenon captures the attention of the Global North, the violence and inequalities underlying it are less visible, even though they are well known in the Global South—particularly in Latin America. This makes it especially relevant for **socio-environmental leaders in the region to have their own voice in global discussions**, in order to highlight the background and impacts of the agendas being promoted to address the consequences of climate change, as well as those focused on the energy transition.

This text compiles and synthesizes the reflections of the first in-person meeting of a Regional Working Group on Climate Crisis, Extractivisms, and Violence in Mesoamerica. The meeting brought together participants with notable experience defending social and environmental rights from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, and Panama. This space framed the discussion from the perspective of Mesoamerica as a region that exemplifies the complexity of the relationships between violence, extractivisms, and climate change. It is clear that these phenomena transcend national borders through large-scale extractive projects and a wave of authoritarian governments —both right- and left-wing— across much of the region.

This Working Group has an important precedent. In 2022, the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) and the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung's regional security project in Latin America formed a Latin American regional working group on climate change, environment, peace, and security, composed of experts from ten Latin American countries. The report that emerged from those discussions (Delgado et al., 2024) addressed four themes: governance; extractivism and land use changes; environmental and climate justice; and protection of nature and territories. Some conclusions from this document served as a starting point for the conversation from and about Mesoamerica.

Socio-environmental struggles in the context of new and old extractivisms (and their old and new violences)

Once the conversation had been grounded in the current state of the relationship between violence and extractivism in the Mesoamerican countries, the Working Group participants shared their insights on this relationship from national, subregional, and local perspectives.

In **Mexico**, the start of the "war on drugs" in 2006, under then-President Felipe Calderón, was a turning point for the reorganization of organized crime in the country. It also marked a gradual process of militarization in which the line between organized crime and the State became increasingly blurred: **all armed groups are involved in land grabbing**. During the Felipe Calderón (2006–2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (2012–2018) administrations, control strategies were marked by terror, increased violence by State actors, and violations of human rights. In contrast, the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018–2024) promoted control through intimidation strategies and launched several megaprojects that have led to territorial reorganization. The presence of the armed forces in every corner of the country discourages community participation and involvement. Additionally, this military presence has extended pa-

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Case 1

The Community of Tancítaro, Michoacán (Mexico)

Working Group

The preeminence of organized crime throughout the territories puts the hope on the peoples and communities that resist criminal orders—sometimes within small protective bubbles. That is the story of the municipality of Tancítaro, in the state of Michoacán, the leading producer and exporter of avocados in Mexico and the world, with nearly two million tons harvested in 2023 (AFP Agency & Sánchez, 2024). On November 16, 2013, the communities of the municipality organized to expel criminal organizations from their territory and to build a territorial network of surveillance and protection, a new police force—the Tancítaro Public Security Corps—and other forms of community or-

ganization that marked a decade last year (González, 2023). During this period, the defense of autonomy has been constant, since multinational companies that accelerate the enclosure of territories are behind the cartels. These actors are increasingly difficult to counter. Arms trafficking worsens the violence, as these territories receive discarded weapons from major wars (Ukraine, Gaza Strip). Meanwhile, avocado environmental certification processes undermine the local economy by disregarding small and medium producers. The Mexican government shows no interest in engaging in dialogue with communities about these issues, despite defining itself as the government of the people.

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triarchal practices and aesthetics in the territories, triggering gender-based violence previously unseen in these communities. At the same time, processes were launched to undermine community organization. Communities are now divided between defending autonomy and engaging with official party politics.

The militarization of territories has shifted the logic as to who is responsible for environmental matters. Inquiries about the environmental aspects of these megaprojects now must be addressed to the armed forces. The same applies to environmental litigation. This situation—and the mere presence of the military—discourages the population from opposing the megaprojects.

Gender, Disappearance, and Forced Displacement in the Defense of the Forest (Mexico

Florina Mendoza Jiménez

From time immemorial, indigenous peoples[1] of Latin America have defended not only their territories, but also their identities, bodies, and knowledge, as they confront multiple invasive, colonizing, and warlike strategies. Colonialist actions and experiences have imposed a global hegemonic power structure, tracing social, political, economic, and cultural orders that have developed over the centuries and persist today. Rita Segato calls this conquistualidad—a continuity of imposed conditions, reaffirmed through practices that perpetuate these impositions. The following quote captures the idea:

> *From coloniality comes a return to conquistuality [...] For our continent, Latin America, the extreme forms of cruelty expanding from Mexico, Central America, and Colombia southward, with their dramatic, chaotic, and increasingly violent atmosphere, can be attributed to the idea that in our landscapes the Conquest was never completed, never consummated, and is still an ongoing process. (Segato, 2016: 99)*

Segato's analysis is fundamental to understanding the continuity of violence against Indigenous populations as ongoing and constitutive processes in our territories. The colonial enterprise does not end—it persists and evolves over time. This results in dispossession and forced displacement, as well as disappearances and killings of land and environmental defenders. In this context, the participation of Indigenous women in territorial defense is understood through their conception of the land as an extension of their own bodies—something that must be cared for, protected, and healed.

Specifically, I focus on the experiences of three communities: Mier y Terán, Ndoyonoyuji, and Guerrero Grande in the municipality of Atatlahuca, in the state of Oaxaca, southern Mexico. In addition to being forcibly displaced, these communities experienced killings and continue to demand the reappearance of four people, including the defender Irma Galindo, who disappeared on October 28, 2021.[2] It is important to highlight that extractivist practices, such as illegal logging, do not occur without the knowledge and consent of various levels of government—municipal, local, or state—which leaves communities vulnerable to territorial dispossession tactics.

Mexico is considered one of the most dangerous countries in the world for land and environmental defenders. Global Witness (2022) reports that 54 defenders were killed in 2021. Of these, nearly half were Indigenous, and about two-thirds of the killings occurred in the states of Oaxaca and Sonora, where mining companies and logging activities are most prevalent. Furthermore, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) reminds us that when a defender is attacked, everyone in their community and defense context is left unprotected—this vulnerability extends across zones of care.

In recent decades, women in Mexico and Latin America have confronted problems that go beyond local struggles and are tied to global, extractivist dynamics related to the appropriation of "natural resources" (Olivera Bustamante et al., 2014: 38). It is essential to recognize that these impacts threaten the continued existence of diverse cultures in Mexico and around the world, but also the safeguarding of the environment and the balance of life on the planet.

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1 There is currently a debate about the naming of indigenous peoples, who have also been called "Indian" or "native" peoples.
2 In response to this disappearance, the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (2021) issued precautionary measure MC-1050-21 to the Mexican State to protect the integrity of displaced families and the rights of children and the elderly. Likewise, the UN, through the Committee on Enforced Disappearances, issued a request to the Mexican State for the urgent search for five forcibly disappeared people.

The situation in Panama is different in that it is a country without an army. Instead, it has civilian forces: the Panamanian National Police, the National Aeronaval Service (Senan), the National Immigration Service, and the National Border Service. Although there is no militarization in the strict sense, civilian forces do play a role in regulating socio-environmental conflicts, primarily in the protection of private interests. This is the case with the privatization of coastal areas and the restriction of beach access for the Panamanian population by police officers.

In the last election period, several National Assembly deputies investigated for links to drug trafficking were reelected.

The use of legislative power to make agreements to purchase the seabed in the Atlantic off Panama and its use in concessions of up to 10 years, money laundering and the sale of coastal areas, as well as the introduction of carbon credits to seize the collective territories inhabited by indigenous populations in Panama, have been reported. The population is affected by the rising cost of living, the restriction on free movement within Panamanian territory, and threats to leaders who denounce the corrupt link between extractive businesses, political leaders, and damage to biodiversity. In the shadow of the tax havens revealed in the *Panama Papers* investigations, there are also allegations of human trafficking and timber smuggling.

The Mining Contract (Panama)

Working Group

In 2023, the Supreme Court of Panama declared unconstitutional a state copper mining concession granted to a Canadian company. The history of the concession contract-law demonstrates the lack of transparency inherent in these agreements and businesses. Signed in 1997, it authorized the mining company First Quantum to exploit the largest open-pit copper mine in Central America for 20 years, with the possibility of extending this right for another 20 years. Civil society

organizations filed a lawsuit in 2009, but it wasn't until 2017 that the Supreme Court ruled it unconstitutional due to the violation of access to a healthy and clean environment. The contract was only made public in 2021, increasing public discontent. In 2023, the Panamanian government renegotiated the contract without public participation. After several weeks of protests, this new agreement was once again declared unconstitutional (BBC News, November 28, 2023).

Disguised Militarization in Panama

Sharon Pringle Félix

There is a connection between security and environmental issues. Like other countries in the region, Panama is no exception.

Taking a look at the depths of the severl Panamas that co-exist across 75,517 km² is a broad and challenging exercise that demonstrates how the dynamics of violence intersect with environmental issues. This was made possible through the working group on Climate Crisis, Extractivism and Violence in Mesoamerica, proposed by the Friedrich Ebert Foundation's regional projects on Social, Ecological Transformation and Security.

The Panamanian case is complex. It is a territory that went from a 21-year military dictatorship, after a nearly century-long US occupation, to beating its chest for not having an army. It is a place that, according to security standards, is among the safest

countries in the region. Hence the phenomenon of massive migration, beyond being a transit point for people moving north.

Despite this, there is a "disguised militarization" in inland areas. These are coastal areas with residential complexes that have privatized access to beaches, as well as ports, protected areas, and islands where there is a security apparatus that is not far removed from the dynamics that once existed.

Militarization practices have not prevented the onslaught of extractivism, even though there is an apparatus set up to "protect" these areas. In other words, every security entity at the borders, in the air, at sea, and on land is not far removed from the standards that the United States applied to its bases, nor from the repression suffered during the dictatorship that ended in 1989.

The Darien Gap, on the border with Colombia, is the first crossing in Central America toward the United States. Up to 2,500 people cross through there daily. They face a dangerous route with fast-flowing rivers, trails, and limited drinking water, but also organized crime groups that profit from migration and exert control over the territory through sexual violence and other human rights violations. The humanitarian crisis is of such magnitude that the environmental impact has not yet been considered.

In the province of Chiriquí, on the border with Costa Rica, one of the places where there was resistance to mining, people who resisted it are being persecuted. Furthermore, drug trafficking is prevalent in that same area. Currently, people are still being pursued.

Guatemala is a country that exports raw materials for electricity generation, namely oil and minerals. This leads to the arrival of megaprojects that exacerbate violence against women, especially indigenous women, who are leading the struggles against extractivism and holding protests against mining companies. In doing so, they are exposed to stigmatization within their own communities, which feel they should remain in their homes. Mining and hydroelectric projects also trigger other social problems, such as alcoholism, which in turn exacerbates domestic violence. Finally, the militarization of territories goes hand in hand with sexual violence against indigenous women, as happened in the El Estor and La Puya mining projects. Those who abuse women can be workers arriving from outside the territories, employees of multinational corporations, the police, or the military. Multiple forms of violence thus combine to exert control and power over women and territories.

It is in northern Guatemala—in the Petén region, Alta Verapaz—where mining and monoculture plantations are concentrated, and at the same time where the country's greatest poverty is concentrated, exacerbated by water scarcity. The country has seen the introduction of genetically modified seeds and a situation of injustice in agricultural labor, since, despite the fact that different family members work shifts, only the man is paid.

While women and youth fight battles within their own communities to build strategies for participation and visibility, many of them with indigenous identity at the center, outwards they face multinationals that try to evade community consultations, largely because they lose them. The Xinka people have said no to mining in multiple popular consultations. A milestone, now 12 years old, is the consultation in Mataquescuintla, Jalapa, where 98% of the population voted no to mining and energy projects in their territory. In 2013, the Constitutional Court declared it the first binding referendum on a national and international scale. Today, it is commemorated as a triumph of community organization in the defense of land (Álvarez, November 23, 2023).

Bernardo Arévalo's (2024) arrival to the presidency highlighted a struggle for democracy against corruption waged in the most vulnerable territories. Those at the forefront of this fight were the poorest and most discriminated, as well as Indigenous peoples, who played an important role in helping the current government win. Once in office, the ministerial cabinet was composed equally of men and women, but only one Indigenous woman. There is a continuing debt there.

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Case 5

The Imprisionment of Bernardo Caal Xol (Guatemala)

Working Group

Bernardo Caal Xol is a teacher, trade unionist, and defender of the land and territorial rights of the Q'eqchi' Maya people. In 2015, Bernardo was defending the rights of the Santa María Cahabón communities, affected by the construction of the Oxec II hydroelectric plant on the Oxec and Cahabón rivers in the Alta Verapaz department. Bernardo filed several legal appeals, and in 2017, the Guatemalan courts recognized that the communities' right to prior consultation had been violated. As a result, Bernardo was accused of attacking employees of Etzone, S.A., a contractor for Oxec, S.A. In 2018, he was sentenced to seven years in prison for the crimes of aggravated unlawful detention and aggravated robbery. Amnesty International, along with other Central American civil society organizations, reviewed the case and, finding no evidence that Bernardo had committed any crimes, declared him a prisoner of conscience. On March 24, 2022, he was released from prison for good behavior, but he was not found innocent, and his case remains open (Amnesty International, March 25, 2022).

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Criminalization of Bernardo Caal and the Defense of the Cahabón River: Extractivism, Violence, and the Climate Crisis in Guatemala

Glenda Yojana Ixtabalán

Bernardo Caal's case is directly linked to the extractivist model prevalent in Guatemala, where transnational and national companies have sought to exploit water resources for energy generation, often at the expense of Indigenous communities. The Cahabón River is one of the largest in Guatemala, located in the northern department of Alta Verapaz. Its importance stems not only from its length but also from its cultural, ecological, and economic significance. It flows through several municipalities, including Cahabón, San Pedro Carchá, and Laquín, known for their Maya Q'eqchi communities, who depend on it for their livelihoods.

The river has been impacted by the construction of several hydroelectric plants, which have altered its flow and affected the access to water for thousands of Q'eqchi families. These hydroelectric plants, such as Oxec I and II, have not only caused serious environmental damage but also exacerbated social conflict in the region (Martínez-Alier, 2019).

In 2011, the hydroelectric company Oxec, S.A., began construction of the Oxec II hydroelectric plant on the Cahabón River without consulting local communities. Bernardo Caal opposed the construction due to the potential environmental and social impacts it could generate. In 2015, Caal was arrested and charged with "inciting violence" and "damaging property" for his participation in peaceful protests. In retaliation for his leadership, he was detained and sentenced in 2018 to more than seven years in prison for aggravated robbery and unlawful detentions, charges that human rights organizations have denounced as fabricated to silence his activism. Amnesty International declared Bernardo Caal a prisoner of conscience, arguing that "his imprisonment is part of a campaign to criminalize his activism in defense of the environmental and collective rights of Indigenous communities" (Amnesty International, 2022). His imprisonment deeply impacted his family, leaving them emotionally affected and economically vulnerable. His wife and children have suffered stigmatization, fear, and uncertainty due to his absence, which has weakened the stability of their home.

Caal, a Q'eqchi' Indigenous leader, was convicted for his fight against hydroelectric projects affecting his community. His imprisonment sent a message of intimidation to other Indigenous leaders and activists, seeking to discourage them from resisting the exploitation of natural resources. However, it also inspired national and international mobilizations in defense of Indigenous peoples' rights. His criminalization symbolizes the historical marginalization of Indigenous peoples and their struggle to preserve their sacred lands and resources. Caal's struggle to protect the rivers is also a defense of the cultural and spiritual identity of his people, deeply connected to the land.

In this case, extractivism is linked to the territorial dispossession of Indigenous communities and the violation of their collective rights. In addition to seeing their access to water compromised, the communities feel that their cultural and spiritual relationship with the territory is in crisis. According to Gudynas (2020), extractivism not only involves the extraction of natural resources, but also the imposition of an economic logic that disregards local ways of life and generates environmental and social conflicts.

It is important to emphasize that the criminalization of Bernardo Caal for defending the Cahabón River must be analyzed from several perspectives, such as systemic violence against territorial defenders or environmental defenders, extractivism in Guatemala, and the relationship of these phenomena to the climate crisis, especially in Indigenous regions.

It is necessary to highlight the way in which extractive industries, such as hydroelectric power, displace communities and pollute their lands and waters. Hydroelectric projects on the Cahabón River have privatized water and reduced access to this vital resource for communities.

This pattern of criminalization is not an isolated phenomenon, but rather part of a broader context of violence against environmental defenders in Guatemala and Latin America in general, where, at times, the extractive industry and the State have acted together to delegitimize those who oppose the exploitation of natural resources.

The expansion of hydroelectric megaprojects in Guatemala has been presented as a solution to generate "clean" energy. However, these activities often have negative consequences for the local and global environment. In the case of the Cahabón River, the construction of dams has severely altered river ecosystems, affecting biodiversity and exacerbating the effects of climate change.

It is important to note that climate change, fueled by the destruction of ecosystems and the alteration of

natural cycles, disproportionately affects Indigenous peoples, who directly depend on these environments for their subsistence (Gudynas, 2020). In this sense, the struggle of Caal and the Q'eqchi' communities is not only a defense of their territories, but also a resistance to a development model that contributes to the climate crisis. The criminalization of territorial defenders, like Caal, reinforces a system that seeks to perpetuate control over natural resources, even when this means the destruction of ecosystems and the violation of human rights.

The imprisonment of Bernardo Caal Xol is a paradigmatic example of how the defense of territorial rights in Guatemala faces opposition from powerful interests that prioritize resource exploitation over the well-being of communities and the sustainability of the planet. The criminalization of land defenders is not only a violation of human rights, but also contributes to deepening the climate crisis, as it hinders the protection of natural livelihoods essential to mitigating the impacts of climate change

Struggle and Resistance of the Xinka People

Glenda Yojana Ixtabalán

The Xinka people live primarily in southeastern Guatemala and have historically been fighting to defend their territory and livelihoods. In recent years, this resistance has intensified due to increasing pressure from extractive industries—especially mining—which have severely impacted their communities. Concessions granted to foreign companies to exploit mineral resources have generated conflicts that highlight structural violence, the prevailing extractivist model, and its relationship to the climate crisis.

One of the most emblematic cases of the Xinka people's struggle against extractivism has been their opposition to the Escobal mining project, owned by the Canadian company Tahoe Resources (now Pan American Silver). This silver mine, one of the largest in the world, has been the subject of controversy due to its environmental impacts and the lack of prior consultation with affected communities, in violation of International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples.

The mining project is located in San Rafael Las Flores, a territory ancestrally inhabited by the Xinka people. Local communities have reported that the mine has caused water pollution, river diversion, and soil degradation, affecting their agriculture and subsistence. As Martínez-Alier (2019) points out, extractivism in Indigenous territories implies "a logic of dispossession and appropriation of natural resources, in which economic profit is prioritized over the collective rights of Indigenous peoples."

The Xinka people have resorted to peaceful resistance, organizing community consultations where most of the population has rejected the presence of the mine. How-

ever, despite the results of these consultations, the Guatemalan government has allowed the company to continue its operations, exacerbating tensions in the region.

In 2013, Tahoe Resources was accused of ordering an armed attack against peaceful protesters outside the mine. Amnesty International's (2016) report documents how violence against territorial defenders has increased significantly in Guatemala, with Indigenous leaders facing criminalization, persecution, and, in many cases, murder.

The use of force by extractive companies, in collusion with the State, reflects a pattern of systematic violence aimed at silencing human and environmental rights defenders. In this context, the criminalization of Indigenous leaders as a strategy to delegitimize their struggle is evident. As Solano (2019) explains, "violence in regions affected by extractive projects is not incidental, but rather part of a system that uses repression to ensure the continuity of the economic model based on the exploitation of natural resources."

It is important to note that precious metal mining requires enormous amounts of water and energy, which exacerbates water stress in local communities and accelerates environmental degradation. Gudynas (2020) points out that "extractivism is directly linked to the climate crisis, as it destroys ecosystems that are vital to regulating the global climate and maintaining biodiversity." In the case of the Xinka people, the degradation of their lands affects their ability to adapt to the effects of climate change, such as drought and variations in rainfall patterns, which puts their food security and traditional way of life at risk.

Furthermore, the Xinka people maintain that their relationship with the land is not merely economic, but spiritual, and that the destruction of their territories also affects their identity and worldview. This deep connection with the land and nature is at the heart of the fight against extractivism. The goal is not only to preserve resources for future generations but also to defend a way of life in harmony with the environment. Finally, it is important to highlight that the Xinka peo-ple's resistance to projects like the Escobal mine is not only a struggle to defend their territory, but also for climate justice and the recognition of their rights. The criminalization of Xinka leaders and the violence they face are indicative of how the extractivist model, driven by corporate and government interests, continues to perpetuate inequality and dispossession to the detriment of local communities and the environment.

Climate change is causing significant disruption in **Costa Rica**, a country that also lacks an army, but where criminal groups are currently vying for territorial control. These changes in ecosystems are leading to a reduction in land use, for example, on the coasts, diminishing fishing activity. There is increasing privatization and gentrification of beaches, where private territories lacking institutional reach can be seen. This has the effect of increasing structural poverty in coastal regions, leaving the population more vulnerable to illicit activities and organized crime.

Consequently, violence has increased in recent years, particularly homicides. This increase is related to Costa Rica becoming a drug trafficking hub to the north. Organized crime groups are deploying into the territories to establish areas of operation. To do so, they clear forests and build clandestine airports. At the same time, they have political operators who go to communities and "buy off" leaders, for example, by financing water infrastructure for communities. They also finance political campaigns in alliance with the pineapple sector.

Pineapple Expansion (Costa Rica)

Working Group

In the rural areas of Costa Rica's southern and northern borders, the pineapple sector generates 30,000 jobs, but at very high social and environmental costs. This economy, although legal, benefits from illegal logging to establish pineapple monoculture plantations, destroying forests near or within protected natural areas. There, soils are eroded into deserts; wetlands are dredged; aquifers are contaminated; and agrochemicals are sprayed, also affecting communities. Very few projects have environmental impact studies. As they expand, pineapple plantations cause the disappearance of cassava and plantain crops. They also degrade the diversity of wildlife, including macaws, deer, sloths, and birds. The sector is also experiencing cases of human trafficking, especially on the border with Nicaragua. It is characterized by job insecurity, which significantly affects migrants who lack access to labor rights due to their irregular status. The grueling workdays inhibit social cohesion, corrupt the leaders of development associations and many church pastors, and infiltrate social movements. In short, it is an economic activity that displaces social and community life.

The Rodrigo Chaves administration (2015) is attempting to reverse the 2010 ban on open-pit metal mining, achieved thanks to massive public support, which has made Costa Rica a country with a long tradition of environmental legal protection. Faced with the existence of artisanal mining led by organized crime groups, the executive branch asserts that "legal" mining, even if it is harmful to nature and communities, is better than "illegal" mining promoted by criminals. This is the case of the invasion begun in 2015 in Crucitas, the largest gold mining area in Central America. At the same time, the government uses xenophobic arguments that resonate with the population, given that armed groups are responsible for human trafficking with Nicaraguan migrants working in artisanal mining. This fosters antagonism toward socio-environmental leaders, who are also the main enemies of organized crime, putting them doubly at risk.

Costa Rican public institutions are weakened and have not escaped the populism that impacts other countries in the region, with a judiciary power that attempts to counterbalance the attacks from other public powers, the business community, and organized crime groups, while at the same time facing a constant government call for confrontation with environmental sectors. A growing narrative of permissiveness toward violence can be observed in the country, as well as an inability of the government to engage in dialogue.

Therefore, there is an increase in migration and, with it, an increase in xenophobic discourse and an increase in violence since Costa Rica has become a cocaine trafficking

point, while police forces that should address this situation have weakened.

In **Nicaragua**, Daniel Ortega's dictatorial regime is sustained by state terrorism carried out by the army, police, and paramilitary groups, supported by banks and financial capital. Thus, repression has escalated since the popular protests of 2018. Despite the international illegitimacy of his government, the country has enjoyed stable economic growth and receives funding from entities such as the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank. This is based on extractive economies, such as extensive livestock farming, trawling (prohibited in Costa Rica), wildlife trafficking, legal and illegal mining, gold and silver exports, and African palm cultivation—in addition to 141 mining concessions in indigenous territories. This has led to very high levels of deforestation and fires, the contamination of water sources, and the impact on protected areas. The closure of civic spaces, the decrease in social spending, crimes against humanity, and an aggressive fiscal policy toward citizens have triggered mass migration. The regime has also capitalized through drug and wildlife trafficking, as well as through income obtained from migration routes (of Latinos, Africans, and Asians).

It is estimated that more than 400 people have been denationalized and 10% of the native population has migrated. There is systematic criminalization and the closure of civic spaces without distinction, as well as serious human rights violations. Furthermore, neo-extractivist policies, megaprojects, and the lack of free and informed prior consultations have spread.

Honduras is one of the most dangerous countries for environmental defenders. According to Global Witness, at least 149 defenders have been murdered since 2010, many at the hands of the police and the military. The extradition and conviction for drug trafficking in the United States of former President José Orlando Hernández (Moynihan, March 8, 2024) was an important step in combating the impunity of his political class, but several of the criminal structures he represented remain in place. The country has a securitized environmental agenda: evictions and displacements to prevent deforestation, green battalions, and the creation of a Commission for Agrarian Security and Access to Land, which has carried out 33 violent evictions of indigenous peasant groups. Given the preeminence of military thinking in managing these conflicts, environmental issues become a contested public arena. Xiomara Castro's administration (2022) has not reversed this trend and has continued with the militarization of territories, as well as with the criminalization and prosecution of those who oppose mining and agro-extractive projects. Outwards, the government sustains anti-mining policies and compliance with the Sustainable Development Goals, but within it, economic commitments to local elites prevail, including those linked to drug trafficking and mining.

Adding to this situation is the fact that the country has become a drug-producing region. The Tocoa and Mosquitia regions, where Juan López was murdered, have become a trafficking zone. Mining exploitation has also increased. Since 2013, the government has granted concessions to Chinese companies for iron ore reserves. There are mining concessions in at least 25 protected areas.

	Case 9

BioCLIMA (Nicaragua)

Working Group

In 2020, the Bio-CLIMA project: Integrated climate action to reduce deforestation and strengthen resilience in the Bosawás and Río San Juan biospheres had been supported by the Green Climate Fund, a United Nations body created within the framework of the Paris Agreement to finance the fight against climate change, with a grant of $116 million. In 2021, several civil society, Indigenous, and Afro-descendant organizations denounced irregularities in the Nicaraguan government's implementation of the project, which disregarded communities' rights, such as the right to prior consultation. The Daniel Ortega government had granted concessions to nearly 60% of the Bosawás Biosphere Reserve, and since the project's approval, 13 Indigenous residents of the territory, including two minors, had been murdered. After four years of legal wrangling, the Green Fund subjected the project's approval to certain conditions that guarantee its transparency (Alonso, April 12, 2024).

	Case 10

Guapinol and the San Pedro Sector (Honduras)

Working Group

In the municipality of Tocoa, Colón department, a mega-extractive project underway affects the Guapinol and San Pedro rivers, the Ceibita stream, and the Carlos Escaleras National Park. Led by the EMCO group, the project involves the extraction of iron oxide from protected areas, a pelletizing plant, and energy production through the burning of highly polluting coke oil. Several communities in Tocoa established the Guapinol Camp in Defense of Water and Life, as well as held town hall meetings to publicly discuss the impacts of the megaproject. In response, the state militarized the area and launched a campaign of criminalization and prosecution of the communities. Four leaders have been murdered. The most recent case is that of Juan López.

The Legislative Assembly of **El Salvador** approved the 32nd extension of the State of Emergency, which began in March 2022. The security model now imposed is based on the suspension of constitutional guarantees, the automation of processes—arrests without further evidence, arrests in flagrante delicto, and detections for illicit activities—and the automation of provisional detention. The judicial body lacks the capacity to respond or oversee. During this period, at least 73,000 people were arrested, and most were placed in pretrial detention. The Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) has received complaints of systematic and widespread illegal and arbitrary detentions; illegal searches of homes; abuses in the use of force; and violations of the rights of children and adolescents (IACHR, September 4, 2024). Moreover, the data is completely opaque, as it is confidential.

Since 2021, an increase in military presence in the territories has been reported. The State of Emergency has also served to intimidate organized territories, as well as to threaten and displace populations crossed by urban, tour-ism, and extractive infrastructure projects, as well as drug trafficking routes. It has also been used to criminalize environmental defenders by detaining their families and accusing them of gang membership. The strategy of fear has worked, and social organizations, journalists, and people of color are paralyzed, feeling that there is a context in which it is not worthwhile to expose themselves, as hate speech has permeated a large part of Salvadoran society. There is also a weakened institutional framework, particularly the judiciary, which is not independent.

This way, the State plays the role of facilitating extractiv-ism and making it express. The government is recovering lands from cooperatives that were not regularized, thus increasing land grabbing. At the same time, agro-extractivism is being promoted through the expansion of the sugarcane frontier. Beaches are being made available for residential development, and gentrification is on the rise. There is also a phenomenon of territorial control so that entrepreneurs can build.

Pacific International Airport   (El Salvador)
Working Group

The Pacific International Airport, being built in the eastern part of the country, is a flagship project of Nayib Bukele's administration (2019). Its implementation has entailed the approval of ad hoc *laws that allow the government to expropriate and set prices for properties in the area—well below their commercial value—(Miranda and Chávez, November 29, 2023). There has been little transparency regarding the con-sultancies that led to the project and allegations of corruption in the environmental licensing process, as the airport is being built in a protected area: a Ramsar mangrove forest site. This is possible because the Ministry of Environment changed the land use from a protected area to a development area. The area is also associated with drug trafficking and had previously been abandoned by the State.*

In several of the experiences reported from different countries in the region, there are some connecting threads that are often considered independently. One of the most repeated factors is the involvement of organized crime in legal and illegal extractive activities, from its role in the forced displacement of populations in territories where megaprojects are planned, the intimidation and use of violence against organized communities, and the exploitation of undocumented migrants, to its alliance with local elites for money laundering and the capture of political, legislative, and judicial powers.

This last point highlights what the group called extractive corruption, the mechanism that promotes and facilitates the legal frameworks and impunity necessary for companies to act "legally," even if they are harming the environment and local populations. Furthermore, **there are indications that public investment in infrastructure and major projects seeks to strengthen typical routes for various types of illegal trafficking.**

While these are not exhaustive diagnoses, there is a clear link between violence perpetrated by armed groups, whether legal or illegal, extractive projects, the weakening of democracy, and, as a common thread in Mesoamerica, the high exposure and risk faced by environmental defenders, who remain veiled in these relationships. Community advocacy and organizing work is a way to counter the progressive closure of civic spaces or the stigmatization of forms of community organization.

Responses from Governments, Multilateral Organizations, and Social Organizations: Ambiguous Tools, Shadowy Discourses, and Alternatives for Mobilization

Government responses to the types of schemes described in the previous section are ambivalent, even when they involve initiatives to protect the rights of human rights de-

fenders and communities. Many of the legal instruments and frameworks for the protection of the environment and its defenders are tools for social movements, but they often suffer from problems of transparency, effectiveness, and political will that undermine their objectives. For example, the protection mechanisms for human rights defenders in Mexico (Mexican Government, May 3, 2016) and Honduras (Legislative Branch of Honduras, 2015) are a benchmark for the region, but they are not sufficiently effective in preventing serious crimes and security threats against these individuals. This category also includes environmental information platforms, which are sometimes outdated or not fully accessible, and the signing and ratification of international pacts, agreements, and conventions, such as the Escazú Agreement and International Labor Organization (ILO) Convention 169. **Often, these endorsements in favor of human and environmental rights occur in scenarios where regulatory changes are simultaneously being made in favor of extractive companies**. This way, the creation of spaces for citizen consultation and participation can be perverted into scenarios of bureaucratic validation of projects, without facilitating genuine community discussion and participation.

Another widespread government response involves the use of the armed forces and police to intervene in socio-environmental conflicts through intimidation, stigmatization, and direct violence. This creates spaces of insecurity that inhibit participation and stigmatize, even within the communities themselves, those who oppose large-scale extractive projects. Undermining community cohesion by favoring certain groups or sectors within populations is an increasingly common strategy used by corporations and states.

The judiciary has played a counterweight to the excesses of the executive branch, especially in Costa Rica and Panama, by halting projects that openly violate local and international regulations. In other countries in the region, the judiciary has been instrumentalized to stigmatize and criminalize community organizing.

Regarding the multilateral organizations that play a role in these conflicts, the IACHR and the United Nations appear to be the most prominent. The former, through country reports, on-site visits, precautionary measures, and rulings of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights. The latter, through recommendations, urgent communications, reports, pacts, and conventions. International cooperation organizations also play an allied role, funding and serving as a platform for dialogue for civil society. Finally, international banks such as the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI), the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), and the World Bank can exert pressure by placing conditions on financing for states. However, all of this comes with political and social costs, driven by paternalism and unequal relations between the global North and South. For example, the imposition of global agendas that do not always represent the region's priorities and the constraints on the types of organizations and discourses recognized within these frameworks. Finally, churches of different denominations emerge, either as allies with the ability to mobilize communities emotionally and morally or as actors for the demobilization and stigmatization of social struggles.

Work and alliances to begin the path toward alternative ways of living, producing, and governing

Faced with this situation, community organizations are assessing their potential to strategically position themselves and advance their own agendas and processes. They are also seeking to activate institutional mechanisms and international support to the extent that their autonomy is not affected. This is not an easy process, and organizational processes can be affected. The strategies implemented by communities include strategic litigation, applied research, protection and self-care networks and protocols, the construction of alternative narratives and media, identity strengthening, and political dialogue.

The Working Group identified several strategies necessary within the movements and in their relationships with other social actors to advance the transition toward the world we want: more democratic systems that allow communities to decide according to their ways of life and needs; states based on citizen participation and transparency; the reduction of armed forces to a minimum; recognition of the limits of natural resources; and the construction of less consumerist ways of life.

When asked what is doable, the need to depatriarchalize from within communities and movements was highlighted, based on the recognition and appreciation of care in all spheres of life, including politics, and the importance of considering the emotions and attitudes at play, not as something additional to social struggles, but as a constitutive part of them. Learning to speak and negotiate while recognizing others (even if they think and act differently) seems like a small thing, but it becomes a strategic action. It is about seeking and creating other ways of doing politics, of getting involved and being political subjects.

Likewise, we must make the experiences that are working in communities visible, beyond the hopelessness of the general context: the creation of hydroelectric plants and community cooperatives to produce what is needed, without exploiting nature or people, is an experience in certain municipalities in Guatemala that certainly exists with its own forms and strategies in different territories. It's about transcending the pessimistic diagnosis and seeking the possibility of hope and justice.

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Climate crisis, extractivism, and security in Mesoamerica

Latin America is the most violent region in the world. Even when there are no open wars, homicide rates are very high, and the population faces various risk situations that create a strong perception of insecurity. Organized crime, threats against human rights and environmental defenders, forced displacement due to poverty or political persecution, and the extreme vulnerability of migrant populations are all factors that contribute to this perception. The situation becomes even more complex as environmental destruction and climate crisis exacerbate many of these problems, especially for the poorest sectors. Since Latin America is one of the most vulnerable areas to climate change, Mesoamerican countries have experienced an increase in extreme weather events, such as hurricanes and tropical storms, for decades. However, the relationship between climate change and environmental destruction, on the one hand, and violence and insecurity, on the other, has not been sufficiently analysed—neither for the Latin American region as a whole nor, even less so, in the context of Mesoamerican countries. This document is an effort to contribute to these analyses.

Further information on this topic can be found here:
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