Lund University – Department of Sociology – Social Anthropology

“If they win, we disappear”

An interview study of local mining opposition in northwestern Ecuador

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Abstract

In the contemporary globalised era, social and economic development is being increasingly associated with extractivism. Opening up resource markets to multinational extractive industries is a common strategy used by Latin American states for promoting economic growth and reducing poverty. This thesis is a case study of the current establishment of large scale mining in the Tropical Andes of Ecuador, aiming to explore its local impacts and implications. With data from six ethnographic interviews, the thesis explores how conservationists and activists in the mining opposition from campesino communities in the areas of Los Cedros and the Chocó Andino understand large scale mining in their territories. Analysing the mining opposition as a mobilisation of cultural politics, the thesis identifies that the opposition find mining damaging to the social fabric and natural environments of the communities, and as incompatible with local livelihoods and cultural practices. Further, the dominant development model on which the mining establishment rests is exposed by the opposition, whose alternative articulations of development challenge modern capitalist meaning systems.

Keywords: social anthropology, mining, extractivism, cultural politics, ecological imaginary, development, social fabric

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1. Introduction

In the Tropical Andes of northwestern Ecuador, a little known struggle is being fought. It is a struggle emblematic of the contemporary globalised economy – one between global forces and local practices, between extractors and defenders of the land, between multinational companies and rural communities at the margins of influence.

Large scale mining is often described as a key component of global sustainable development, yet it leaves impacts on the surrounding natural and social environments. In a time of increasing consciousness of the environmental degradations that are mounting on a global scale, the demand for minerals and raw metals is also at an all time high. Mining is perceived as the foundation for meeting the material needs of modern society, and at the same time, in the current era of electrification and renewable energies, it underpins global transitions towards "sustainability" (Jacka 2018).

As opposed to most neighbouring South American countries, large scale mining is a relatively new phenomenon in Ecuador. Mineral reserves have been known and exploited on a small artisanal scale since pre-Columbian times, however not until the 2007–2017 presidency of Rafael Correa is mining considered an important economic strategy of the country. Correa considered Ecuador's entry into the global mineral market a key strategy for social and economic development. In 2012, Correa stated to the public that "we cannot be beggars sitting on a sack of gold" (Macleod 2015: 92). As this quote suggests, gold is the mineral resource most demanded in the global markets from the Ecuadorian subsoil and exploitation of this gold is expected to alleviate the country's poverty. Between the years 2007 and 2017 the country saw a boom in concessions granted by the state to national and international companies for mining (Mestanza-Ramón et al 2022). This thesis is a case study of ongoing mining conflict in two local areas in Ecuador impacted by the recent upsurge in mining concessions: the Los Cedros Forest Reserve with surrounding areas, and the Chocó Andino bioregion. These Andean forest areas are some of the most biodiverse ecological landscapes on earth and they are inhabited by non-indigenous communities of *campesino* (smallholder farmer) population. Conservationists, agricultural producers, activists and other local people from the campesino communities are mobilising in opposition against the mining establishment.

This study situates itself within the research context of Latin American political ecology. This is a field which has focused on critical examination of power structures in and

socio-environmental impacts of large scale resource extraction, an economic activity which is increasingly globalised and associated with "development". Different notions of development are visible among extractive industries, states and local communities alike. Through qualitative studies zooming in on the knowledge of marginalised groups in these encounters, Latin American political ecology has initiated a discussion of alternatives to the dominant extractivist model of development. I aim to contribute to this literature with an ethnographic interview study of an ongoing opposition movement against large scale mining. By seeking the points of view of local people from inside this resistance, the study will explore how the politics of mining opposition is formulated and mobilised – how it is anchored in livelihoods, cultural practices and meaning systems.

1.1. Purpose and research questions

The purpose of this thesis is to qualitatively explore this contemporary case of conflict over resource extraction, and more specifically the side of the opposition. The study aims to make visible to the world the struggle of rural Ecuadorians against the presence of unwanted multinational industries in their home environment, and explore the interrelated social and environmental impacts of mining. By delving into perceived impacts of mining, this study is an effort to explore the motives, perspectives and notions that underpin the opposition. In doing so, the study also enters the conversation of differing models of development. The ambition is that this local case of mining opposition can expose some of the global power asymmetries inherent in modern capitalism and its dominant paradigm of development.

Adopting a qualitative exploratory approach, the thesis aims to answer the following research questions:

- With a particular focus on the conservationists and activists in the local opposition, how is mining portrayed and understood by different actors in the areas of Los Cedros and the Chocó Andino?
- What are the major impacts of mining for the local communities of these areas?
- How does the mining opposition relate to different notions of development?

2. Theory and earlier literature

2.1. Theory

In this section I present the theoretical tools of this study, which cover two main areas. First, I outline a brief definition of extractivism and developmentalism in the contemporary dominant sense, where globalised markets play a key role. Subsequently, adopting the terminologies of cultural politics and social imaginaries, I discuss theoretical approaches to understanding oppositions to extractivism and developmentalism.

2.1.1. Locating mining in the context of extractivism and developmentalism

Jerry K. Jacka (2018) describes mining as an emblem of the modern industrialised economy. It embodies the capitalist logic of endless capital expansion through acquisition of natural resources, and highlights a dimension of globalisation which shapes an increasing number of peoples' lives after corporate practices. Mines are the pillars of modern affluence: they are the sources of structure and infrastructure, of electricity and digitalisation, of renewable and non-renewable energy. The accumulation of this material wealth underpins what has been described as the "extractive imperative", which calls for steadily expanded extractive practices. The extractive imperative, or *extractivism*, is the capitalistic ideology which favours large scale resource extraction as economic practice, and, for countries of the global South, as "development" (Jacka 2018: 62).

In the twenty-first century, the global South has seen an upsurge in "extractivism as development" (Gastón Pérez 2019). As modern livelihoods become increasingly dependent on mining, mineral markets have been liberalised and globalised, expanding onto territories of indigenous peoples and overtaking traditional subsistence modes. These changing dynamics of extractivism have been accompanied by *developmentalism*, that is, the discursive pattern which associates socioeconomic development with growth, modernisation and linear progress (Kottak 1999: 26). Importantly, the term "development" has no absolute meaning but is the subject of contested ideology and discourse. Although the relationship between extractivism and "development" may appear contradictory, the two uphold each other as, in Latin America in particular, explicit "development" plans in recent decades have been based on intensive exploitation of resources (Gastón Pérez 2019: 26). The developmentalist notion of development is a discourse of modernisation and linear progress (Kottak 1999: 26),

regarding non-industrial livelihoods as archaic and favouring rapid economic growth through industrialisation. Developmentalism thus implies a perception of a given locality as poor and in need of this modernisation and civilisation (Escobar 1999: 100–102; Ulloa 2015: 323). Globalised extractivism is a cornerstone even in the economic policy of left-leaning governments, such as that of former Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, often rationalised by the quest for development. Correa's developmentalism is illuminated by his 2012 statement that "misery cannot be part of our identity, and we cannot be beggars sitting on a sack of gold (...) the worst racism is pretending that misery is culture" (Macleod 2015: 92, my translation).

With an increasing consciousness of global environmental degradation among development practitioners, extractivism and developmentalism is often mediated by concerns of sustainability. The paradigm of "sustainable development" is a discursive regulation of extractive industries which implies the need for corporate social and environmental responsibility. At the practical level also, mining companies are generally required to pass an environmental licence to ensure minimised environmental impacts. However, critical voices argue that "sustainable development" does little more than offer further discursive space for extractive industries to legitimise themselves, while the structural conditions for extractivism and capitalist expansion remain untouched (Jacka 2018: 65–66; Kottak 1999: 26).

2.1.2. Cultural politics

Social conflicts related to mining and its consequences is an increasingly studied topic in political ecology and ecological anthropology. The mining company seeking access to and exploitation of subsoil resources to expand profits, and the state, granting concessions and entering in development cooperation with the companies, are stakeholders of these conflicts with extractivist rationales (Jacka 2018: 63). On the other side is often found an opposition to mining from local communities.

Escobar's (1999) notion of *cultural politics* (*política cultural)*, is a relevant tool for exploring the resistance to extractivism. Cultural politics as conceptualised by Escobar is a politics which departs from the cultural practices and understandings of marginalised groups. Cultural politics thus highlights frictions and power hierarchies in encounters between social groups, institutions and other actors. A particular marginalised social group's cultural practices and concepts become political once in encounter with dominant cultural and economic powers (Escobar 1999: 251). Cultural politics is thus the process where collective politics, often in the form of reactionary movements, is generated from certain cultural

meanings and practices. In the case of Colombian afrodescendant communities discussed by Escobar, local concepts of biodiversity and territory, and its importance for the communities' cultural, economic and ecological practices, are articulated in interactions with state institutions. Thus, cultural politics can function as a formulation of group identity in socio-environmental conflicts (Escobar 1999: 259). The term "campesino" constitutes another cultural identity – mostly defined by its traditional small-scale agriculture – whose collective political struggles have been illuminated widely in Latin American scholarship.

2.1.3. Social imaginaries

The field of *social imaginaries* discusses broad areas of disjunction between collective meaning systems, where the friction between the global economy and ecological perspectives plays a central role. Social imaginaries "elucidate the ways in which cultural configurations of meaning creatively configure the human encounter with – and formation of – the world" (Adams et al 2015: 19). In other words, social imaginaries directs attention towards the process in which people and societies shape relationships with their surrounding world (Adams et al 2015: 19–20). The modern capitalist endeavour for endless economic expansion has its social imaginary counterpoint in the "*ecological imaginary*", theorised by Castoriadis and Adams et al as the limits of modernity and its value systems (Castoriadis 1981: 15). As phrased by Adams et al (2015: 35), "Modernity has seen the realm of history invested with meaning, whilst concomitantly the kosmos has been stripped of its intrinsic significance". Put simply, *what people do in the world* has been charged with meaning in the imaginary of modernity, while *the world itself* has been excluded from this creation of intrinsic meaning. By highlighting these processes, the ecological imaginary, which according to Castoriadis is present in ecological justice movements globally, proposes holistic views, a restructuring of human needs, and new relations between humans and the world (Castoriadis 1981: 14).

2.2. Extractivism and its responses in Latin America: A literature review

In recent years, Latin America has become an important hub for political ecological case studies. This rapidly growing academic field positions itself in opposition to dominant, state and corporate-elite driven approaches of socio-environmental management in which the discourse of "development" plays a central role. Latin American contributions to political ecology have criticised the current paradigm of development as reliant upon globalised large scale extractivism that degrades environments and furthers marginalisation of ethnic minorities and rural people (Escobar 1999, 2015; Leff 2005; Toledo & Barrrera-Bassols 2008; Ulloa 2015). Macleod's (2015) study of gold mining establishments in Guatemalan campesino communities is illustrative. Presented by the state government and mining companies as "development" in areas with high unemployment and disadvantaged infrastructure, Macleod identifies that the mine signifies imposed extractivism with deforestation, contamination and dispossession as impacts (Macleod 2015: 92–95). Importantly, Macleod and other scholars (Schilling et al 2021; Schilling-Vacaflor & Eichler 2017) have provided ethnographic accounts of the impacts of extractive industries on social life in rural areas. These political ecological studies have highlighted the deliberate strategies some multinational companies use to impose themselves and create internal social frictions, something that the present study will elaborate on.

Responding to damage to natural environments, communities and livelihoods presented by the extractivist model, Latin American scholars as well as social movements have made proposals for new ways of conceptualising development and the relationship between society and nature. Often, these alternative concepts draw upon the identity construction of indigenous movements and their notions of human–nature relationships (Ulloa 2009). The concept of *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* (good living), emergent from Quechua indigenous traditions of Ecuador and Bolivia, has seen an upsurge in academic interest as an alternative to developmentalist development (Gudynas & Acosta 2012; Radcliffe 2012). The *sumak kawsay* lifestyle embraces norms of coexistence and harmony between humans and nature. Acknowledging that humans are simply "one thread in the web of life" (Macleod 2015: 85, my translation), *sumak kawsay* emphasises that degradation of ecosystems unavoidably implies damages to humans themselves. Escobar (2015) demonstrates that *sumak kawsay* is only one of various Latin American articulations of an emerging alternative paradigm of development.

A key source of the critiques to the current paradigm of economic development is local agricultural livelihoods. The term “agroecology” describes self-sustaining farming that adapts to the conditions of particular ecosystems, and is widely used by the informants of this study to describe their production. Figueroa Paz (2018) suggests that agroecology and any small-scale agriculture, given its monumental importance in rural Latin America, must be understood not only as an economic practice but as ingrained in interrelating social, political, economic, ecological and cultural dynamics. The livelihood is a key source of local knowledge, traditions and relationships as well as the unity of rural communities. Any effort at development, Figueroa Paz argues, must have these conditions and their basis, that is the producer, their family, community and ecological environment, as point of departure (Figueroa Paz 2018: 301). The study of livelihoods is a core theme for political ecology at large, whether it be examining impacts at community level of global economic practices or exploring contradicting narratives of development and environmental management (Carr 2015). Agroecology in particular has been discussed in relation with rural development as a starting point for participatory “bottom-up” development approaches, with basis in the knowledge of local people (Altieri & Nicholls 2017: 232–233). To a degree overshadowed by ethnic indigenous movements, agroecology and other campesino livelihoods provide a source of resistance politics which in the literature has received less attention.

3. Methods

This thesis is an interview study. As is often the case in the methodology of ethnographic interviews, the interviews that are the basis of this study have been loosely structured and guided by the talking points of the interviewees. This semi-structured approach to interviewing is an important tool in ethnography as it corresponds to the inductive aims of qualitative research. The aim of my research is to explore what my informants regard as key aspects of their opposition to mining, and hence a semi-structured approach is advantageous. Keeping the interview as an open-ended interactive process is key for placing the experiences and perspectives of the interviewees at the centre (Davies 2008: 106). As will be discussed throughout this chapter, my choice of method places demands on the researcher's flexibility and attention: attention to who the interviewees are, what the interviewees find important, who is represented and not, to the context in which the interview takes place, and to the researcher's own role in the creation of knowledge.

3.1. The field

The data of this study was collected during six semi-structured virtual interviews with people in the conservationist and anti-mining activist environment in northwestern Ecuador. My initial access to this field was facilitated by the contacts of my girlfriend who in early 2022 conducted a field study in the Chocó Andino for her bachelor in biology. During this period she, and I through our close contact, learned about the countrywide debate topic that was the spread of large scale mining in areas with high biodiversity, and the growing mobilisation of local resistance. With my great interest in matters of socio-environmental justice, I immediately made contact through WhatsApp with a few people involved in the mining opposition who had accommodated my girlfriend. I was amazed with the warm, encouraging and helpful response I got and soon I had been recommended just over a dozen potential interviewees in community members, NGO-workers, conservationists and other local people with some involvement, thoughts and or experiences in the mining issue.

The six people that comprise my definitive field are individuals who were recommended to me by other contacts in their networks. Although my field emerged with the indispensable help of other people, with the many recommendations I was able to make a selection of

individuals whose roles and positions I deemed as potentially more relevant. Whereas all my interviewees position themselves as opponents to mining, they complement with different experiences from their different communities, occupations and social positions. Before the interviews, me and my interviewees established a text message based connection where I introduced myself as a student of social anthropology with an interest in the social and ecological perspectives of the mining opposition. Following ethical principles of transparency, I also disclosed the overarching purposes of the study before the interviews.

The interviewees (anonymised with pseudonyms) are:

- *Alicia*, conservation biologist from the area around the Los Cedros forest working for an Ecuadorian anti-mining NGO.
- *Diego*, biologist and technical coordinator of the Mancomunidad del Chocó Andino.
- *Adrián*, producer of organic panela from Pacto and a leading member of an agricultural cooperative.
- *Joaquín*, conservation worker from Brillasol.
- *Gabriela*, engaged in social matters and an active community member of Magdalena Alto.
- *Carolyn*, NGO-worker from the Quito district and with a focus on observation of the rights of nature. Currently active in supporting the Chocó Andino anti-mining movement.

My limitation of the field to only one side of the conflict over mining – the opposition – has to do partially with limited time and space. It is my assessment that a total representation of all perspectives of an issue is unattainable, and that these limitations are meaningful in order to reach qualitative in-depth understandings of the one side. Also, the limitation of my field to conservationists and activists in the mining opposition of local communities follows my overarching purpose to gain knowledge of what key aspects, dimensions and talking points drive the opposition in their political mobilisation. The aim is not to provide a neutral or objective representation of the mining establishment, but rather to explore experiences and notions of a certain group of people impacted by mining through interactive engagement.

Importantly, the "mining opposition" or "local communities" which my study to some degree aims to represent, cannot be mistaken for harmonious and homogenous groups of

people. Every local context is a complexity and the voices of communities cannot be essentialised or romanticised (Yeh & Bryan 2015: 535). As became increasingly clear to me throughout my data collection, my case of mining conflict contains a sizable group of people, unrepresented in this study, whose perspectives are of importance for understanding the social impacts of mining: this group is the young individuals from local communities, mostly unemployed men, who accept employment at mining companies. These individuals illustrate the complexity of mining conflicts and represent a middle ground, often moving from one side to the other. My choice not to include the perspectives of receivers of employment in my field is motivated by time limitations and the aim of focusing on the notions and experiences behind the political mining opposition. Nevertheless, this group of people constitutes a meaningful field for future studies on the topic, as they too have negotiated the strategies of mining companies and made complex decisions over their lives.

3.2. The interviews

The interviews were conducted between March 2nd and April 5th 2022 over the digital video communication platform Zoom. The interviews followed a semi-structured format where my interview guide consisted mostly of broad themes of my research interest. The conversations took notably different shapes and directions based on the different verbal patterns of my informants and their specific experiences. This required a flexible approach on my part as both interviewer and interviewee are unavoidably active in the making of meaning in ethnographic interviews (Davies 2008: 106–109). Open-endedness has been particularly important in my case as the different individuals in my study formulate their mining opposition in different ways based on different experiences and activities. The root of Adrián's engagement is his agricultural production, whereas for Carolyn the "rights of nature" permeated her commitment to the issue. Further, keeping a mutual give-and-take element of the interviews allowed my interviewees to engage me in their realities. For example, the phrase "*Imagínate…*" ("You imagine…") was a frequent appeal *to me* to see things from their perspectives.

The digital format enables easy interactions across the globe, however the physical dimension of being together in interaction is missing. The ability to read body language was reduced in the interviews, leading for example to difficulties in interpreting if a pause implied the end of a reasoning or not, in turn impacting follow-up questions etc. The physical distance

impacted the interviews by impairing the element of organic conversation, and made the feel of the interviews slightly more formal. Despite these challenges, the platform served well the purpose of allowing for fruitful conversations about mining and its opposition. The video communication format allowed my informants to participate from the security of their own homes, and the glimpses I got from some of their home environments was a valuable element. The interviews were recorded for transcription with Zoom's record function upon the consent of my informants.

To contrast my interview data from mining opponents, I have included smaller amounts of text data from the digital communication channels of mining companies.

3.3. My positioning as a researcher: The ethics of ethnography in global power structures

In the interview situation, emerging understandings are affected by several contextual factors, such as preexisting relationships, language, cultural differences, power and politics. For example, as an anthropology student driven by ideals of social and ecological justice, I position myself as sympathetic to the emancipatory political cause of my informants. Whereas my political sympathies with my field have allowed for trust, mutual understanding and fruitful conversations in the interviews, they have required me to be attentive to the role of my subjectivity in interpretation and representation. To counteract biases, I have worked with systematic transcription and coding and attempted to maintain quotes in the text as close as possible to the original statements (although certain edits at the level of individual words have been made to adapt spoken statements to written language).

Furthermore, the interviews were held in Spanish, a language in which I am comfortable but not proficient. The language required efforts on my part to keep pace in the conversations and to make appropriate translations of quotes. My assessment is that the data was not heavily affected by the language, as my informants made efforts to meet me at my pace of Spanish and as all interviews were recorded for me to listen back. The language however highlights a certain relationship between myself and my informants, as I by adjusting to a different language make implicit assertions of being interested in a foreign "otherness", and perhaps of being more educated. Me doing the interviews in my informants' native language was key for reaching the necessary understanding – I could not have done it otherwise – however it has demanded reflections of potential power dynamics in the interview situation. Moreover, while

this study is driven by a belief that academia needs to expand beyond English and be more linguistically inclusive, my Spanish knowledge does not give me as a Swedish student any interpretive precedence of Latin American matters.

The language question relates to another important contextual factor in the interviews. This factor is my position as a researcher from the global North researching a marginalised group from the global South. I myself in my encounters with my informants am part of the globalised political and economic relationships which tie these distant parts of the world together, and which are an object of my research interest (Davies 2008: 45). As Diego pointed out to me, Sweden and its material wealth is part of a global capitalist system which has exploited resources of the global South to feed the global North. As he sees it, the presence of multinational mining companies in rural Ecuador is a result and an expression of this economic model. My role as a middle class Swedish male in this encounter thus comes with a few implications. First, me being a part of global capitalism underscores the impossibility of researching as an "outsider" in the quest for objective knowledge (Sundberg 2015: 118). Second, it requires me to consider the benefits and stakes of my informants talking to me, and highlights the need for ethical considerations on how to represent people whose interests and perspectives are marginalised (Sundberg 2015: 117–120). Third, my role in global power structures is associated with an historical ethnographic authority (Davies 2008: 266).

An aim of this study is to elevate the voices of a group whose political agency is marginalised. I set out this aim in a context where, as put by Sundberg, "white or 'Western' researchers often position themselves and their research as serving a greater good 'for mankind'" (Sundberg 2015: 122). Therefore, ethical considerations are necessary of the ways in which my research actually benefits the people that are studied. With this study I cannot claim to have directly benefited the people or the communities which are studied. What I know at this point is that the individuals I have been in contact with from the Los Cedros and Chocó Andino areas have expressed positive attitudes towards my project and its aim to raise awareness of an issue important to them. At best, the study can have indirect positive, if small, impacts if it contributes to discussions of socio-environmental justice and political inclusion of marginalised groups, in Sweden, Ecuador and globally.

4. Locating the study: Mining in northwestern Ecuador

This study has its geographical focus in the provinces of Pichincha and Imbabura of northwestern Ecuador, a region known for its undulating landscapes and plentiful ecological diversity. The area is located in the biodiversity hotspot which is the tropical Andes, whose humid forests contain about a sixth of the world's plant species as well as critical fresh water sources, providing favourable conditions for agroecological production (Justicia 2007). At the core of the study are two different localities – in close proximity to one another however separated by the Pichincha–Imbabura border – which also constitute two separate local cases of mining conflict. The first locality is the Los Cedros Forest Reserve and its surrounding communities, which are looking back at a recent court decision that has granted rights to the protected forest and banned mining in the area. The second locality is the Mancomunidad de Chocó Andino, an association of local *parroquias* (parishes) where a current mobilisation is happening against the establishment of mining. In both localities, the population is dominated by smaller non-indigenous campesino communities.

4.1. Los Cedros Forest Reserve

The Los Cedros Forest Reserve was founded in 1980 to protect 4800 hectares of primary tropical forest located in the Intag Valley in southern Imbabura. Los Cedros is one of many cloud forests sitting on the slopes of the Andes between 1500 and 3000 masl (metres above sea level). The initiative of protecting the Los Cedros forest is shared among local community leaders and conservationist organisations with awareness of the forest's exceptional diversity of endemic species (Reserva Los Cedros 2022).

In 2017, mining concessions and environmental licences were granted in Los Cedros to the state owned mining enterprise ENAMI-EP and Canadian firm Cornerstone Capital Resources. This opened up substantial parts of the forest reserve and its surrounding areas for mining and the mining companies immediately initiated their exploration activities in the area. In 2018, local authorities made legal appeals that the unconsulted mining concessions implied a violation of the constitutional rights of people as well as of nature. A provincial court found that the right to prior consultation of local people had been violated and recommended further assessment of the rights of nature. After an additional appeal, where

local authorities reverberated the importance of the rights of nature, the case moved to the Constitutional Court. Three years later, in December 2021 the Constitutional Court published its verdict which stated that the mining concessions and environmental licences granted in Los Cedros breached three sets of rights: the right of local people to prior consultation; the right to water and a healthy environment; and the rights of nature or the rights of *Pachamama* (Mother Earth) (Prieto 2021). The decision declared that the protected forest of Los Cedros in itself is a holder of rights and that the authorisations given by the state rested upon insufficient evidence that environmental damages could be mitigated (Case 1149-19-JP/21). The case of Los Cedros has received global attention as a groundbreaking legal way to promote conservation in times of climate change and increasingly endangered ecosystems (Reserva Los Cedros 2020).

In the vicinity of the Los Cedros forest, a number of small communities are located, with agroecological farming, animal handling and ecotourism as primary livelihoods. One of these communities is Magdalena Alto, which ENAMI-EP notably has claimed has "benefitted" from their projects (Twitter @ENAMIEP 05/04/2022). The inhabitants of Magdalena Alto and neighbouring communities are no longer encountered with mining companies but – and this will be highlighted in chapter 5 – are still experiencing the impacts of their earlier presence. Mining concessions are still an imminent presence in nearby areas in the Intag Valley, traversing communities, cultural heritages and places of conservation value including in the two adjacent protected forests Cebu and Chontal.

4.2. The Chocó Andino bioregion and the MCA

The *Mancomunidad de la bio-region del Chocó Andino* (MCA) is an initiative of cooperative government between rural parishes in the northwestern Quito District in the province of Pichincha. The parishes of the Mancomunidad comprise a third of the bioregion of the Chocó Andino, which, ranging from 500 to 4700 masl, is dominated by tropical Andean forest. Recognising the high conservation values of the ecosystems and cultural landscapes of the area, the MCA aims to "consolidate the region as a productive, sustainable and biodiverse territory for its inhabitants" (Mancomunidad del Chocó Andino). In 2018 the Chocó Andino region was declared a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO, however this has not hindered the proliferation of mining concessions in the zone. As of July 2021, there are 14 active mining concessions in the Chocó Andino out of which 13 are within the MCA. An additional seven concessions are in preparatory stages (Plan V 2021).

Pacto is the name of the MCA's largest parish and also the most affected by mining concessions. Pacto, whose dominant livelihood is organic production of the sugarcane based product panela, has been a focus point of the opposition to mining. Among other things, community members have demonstrated their concerns about the threats of mining to the panela livelihood, and have organised vigilance and road barriers to prevent mining company vehicles from leaving Pacto with minerals (Plan V 2021).

In 2014, the movement Quito Sin Minería (Quito Without Mining) was launched to mobilise the MCA and various grassroots organisations in joint opposition towards mining. In 2021, Quito Sin Minería initiated an ongoing campaign to bring about a popular consultation about a prohibition of mining in the Chocó Andino region. The popular consultation is described as a means for local people to assert their constitutional rights to participation in decisions concerning the future of their territories. As of May 2022, the popular consultation has been approved by the Constitutional Court and the forms have been handed out. According to the Constitutional Court, 200 000 signatures of inhabitants of the Quito District who refuse future mining projects, are needed for a prohibition. Anti-mining activists in the Quito District are hopeful that the 2021 judgement on Los Cedros has set a very favourable precedent for their struggle, and that 200 000 names will be reached easily in a time of rapidly growing awareness.

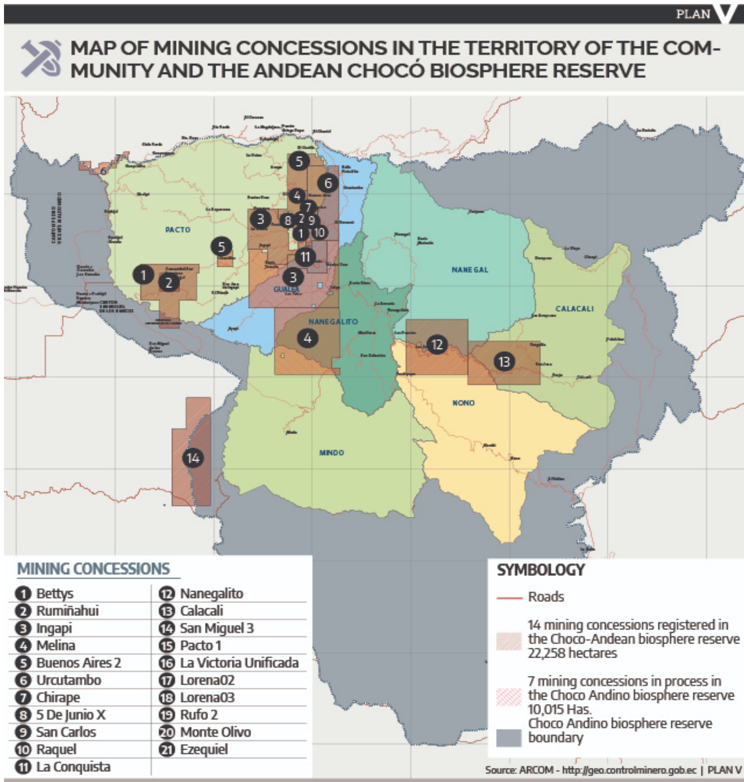

Figure 1. *Maps over the Chocó Andino region and its current mining concessions*. (Image source: Plan V 2021).

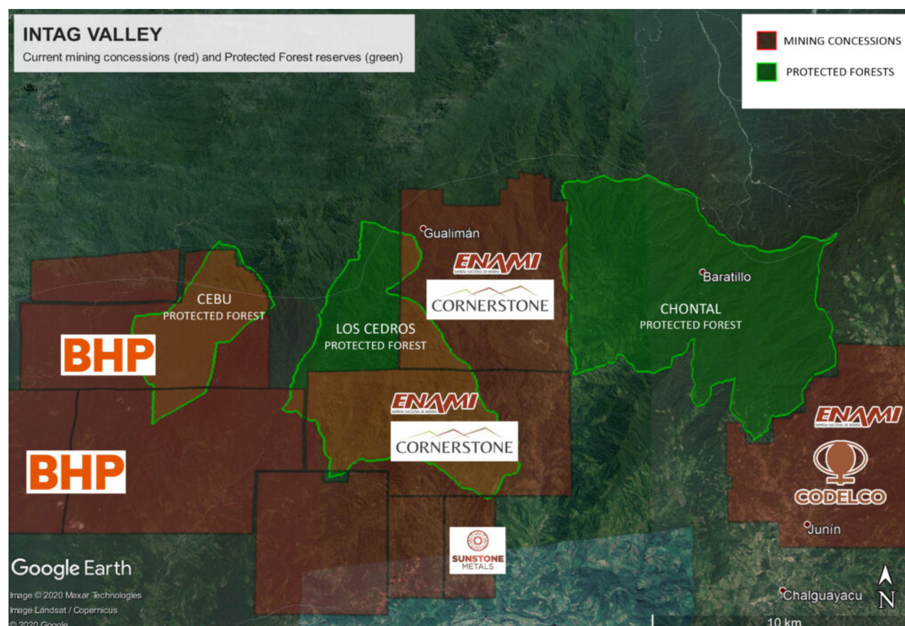

Figure 2. *Mining concessions in the Intag Valley. After the 2021 Constitutional Court decision, mining companies have left Los Cedros Forest Reserve, yet the formal concessions remain.* (Image source: Reserva Los Cedros)

Text box. *Briefly on mining concessions and Ecuadorian law*

According to the 2009 Mining Law, the subsoil and its minerals are the sole property of the Ecuadorian state. The state can issue mining concessions to both state and private actors, which first go through an exploratory phase. In the exploration phase, the Mining Law requires mining companies to acquire an environmental licence, granted upon approval of management plans and a study of the environmental impact. Following a subsequent phase of economic evaluation, a contract for the exploitation of minerals can be entered by the state and the concession holder (Aillon Vásconez & Zaldumbide 2021). Any actor engaged in mining in Ecuador is subject to the constitutional principle of free and informed prior consultation. The prior consultation is a right of the concerned communities, populations and indigenous groups to their participation and approval of decisions concerning large scale investment projects in their territories (Rocha 2017). If a precedent is set by the case of the Los Cedros Forest Reserve, the constitutional articles on the rights of nature and the rights to water and a healthy environment are also legal principles with which mining projects must comply.There are concerns that along with the rising number of legally granted mining concessions, illegal mining has also proliferated. In Pacto for example, several cases of illegal exploitation and mining without the necessary environmental licences have been reported in recent years (Plan V 2021; Rainforest Action Group 2021).

5. Mining understood differently

In this chapter I will present my data and explore how mining is portrayed and understood by mining companies and, most important, the local mining opposition. For the opposition, understandings relate to the impacts they see and foresee in Los Cedros and the Chocó Andino. Impacts pointed out by my informants are of a social as well of an environmental nature.

5.1. The narrative of mining companies

We have seen that the Ecuadorian state presents the establishment of globalised mining as equal to economic and social development. This section will show that the national and multinational mining companies make narrative efforts of their own to legitimise their activity.

The state owned National Mining Company ENAMI-EP, which exercises mining by itself and in alliances with international companies, is a holder of many of the concessions from this period. Concessions are also held by companies from countries such as Canada, United Kingdom, Japan, Australia and China (Aillón Vásconez & Zaldumbide 2021; Reuters 2021). In their communication channels, ENAMI-EP describes mining as an ancient activity which "has allowed for the social and economic development of humanity throughout its history" (Twitter @ENAMIEP 20/04/2022, my translation). It is disclosed that ENAMI-EP "manages mining activity in a sustainable manner, in accordance with high quality parameters and social and environmental criteria" (Twitter @ENAMIEP 05/04/2022, my translation). In an educative true-and-false post, the company dismisses the "myth" that mining uses chemical substances that harm nature and confirms that it uses "modern technology that conserves the conditions of life, the ground and the water" (Twitter @ENAMIEP 13/03/2022, my translation). Also in the social domain, mining in Ecuador is portrayed as a responsible practice. ENAMI-EP reassures that "the mining companies comply with their social and tributary obligations" and, in a developmentalist language, "generate dignified employment, promote new entrepreneurships and improve the quality of life in the zones of influence" (Twitter @ENAMIEP 12/03/2022, my translation).

BHP is an Australian mining company with several concessions in the tropical Andes of northwestern Ecuador. The message communicated on the frontpage of BHP's website is that their work is necessary for a sustainable future. "What we produce is essential for the world to continue to grow and many of our products will help make the transition to cleaner energy possible" (BHP 2021). The website also has a presentation of the strategies for sustainable partnerships with local communities, where it is stated that BHP "aim to create and contribute to social value in the communities where we operate through the positive social and economic benefits generated by our core business, our engagement and advocacy on important issues, and our contribution as community partners" (BHP 2021). What signifies this narrative, shared among other international companies (Lundin Gold; Cornerstone Capital Resources 2022), is the extractivist developmentalist notion that growth and capital expansion through resource exploitation by itself will lead to socioeconomic development, and the expressions of "responsibility" and "sustainability". Another Australian mining company SolGold, joint holder of the Cascabel concession in northern Imbabura province, reports that their project will generate more than 6000 employments. Moreover, significant incomes for local communities through taxes and royalties will "directly benefit the Ecuadorians with more opportunities and development" (Twitter @SolGold_plc 22/04/2022).

As of 2021, over 27 000 employments had been generated by the mining sector in Ecuador and communities throughout the country have benefited from improved infrastructure related to mining projects (Mingaservice 2021). As we will see throughout the study however, by the opposition mining is understood as a threat to both social life and environment.

5.2. Impacts on the *tejido social* – the social fabric

5.2.1. Ruptures

> The hardest, most conflictive part is that they [the mining companies] break the *tejido social*, break the heart of the people… They make you have conflicts within the families, the communities themselves (Interview with Adrián, my translation).

Adrián makes this assertion with a troubled voice. He sees a dramatic change in the social environment since the first arrival of international mining companies in his community. Adrián has lived his whole life in the parish of Pacto, which is part of the Mandomindad de

Chocó Andino (MCA), and he is part of a cooperative of local panela producers. He has seen how in the past five or so years Pacto has transformed from a place where families, neighbours and community harmonised with each other and shared a firmly rooted sense of unity, to a place characterised by division and suspicion among people.

All my informants share similar experiences of ruptures in what is referred to as the "*tejido social*", the social fabric of their communities. These ruptures have occurred in a rapid and abrupt fashion in what before have been unified communities whose members generally always have been in support of nature conservation and the local agricultural livelihoods. The reason for the fragmentation is the establishment of mining and the manipulative strategies of the mining companies. Among other things, the companies take advantage of the widespread unemployment among young people in rural areas.

> [The mining companies] use malicious strategies, of only offering jobs sporadically, then people start fighting and they start dividing the community… It is very easy for them to do this but it is very difficult to restore the unity. The damage is extremely serious because these are communities that are historically neglected by the government… [Before mining], people organised to demand improvements of the roads or demand anything, and now this unity and this harmony is not there anymore. People say that it is not the same anymore, even in families, it is a very serious harm to the *tejido social* (Interview with Alicia, my translation).

Alicia, a conservation biologist from the surrounding areas of the Los Cedros Forest Reserve, points out the offering of employments as the main strategy of mining companies. This strategy, in turn, is part of a deep seated narrative of inherent poverty in the Ecuadorian countryside. Alicia comments that in small campesino communities isolated from urban life, a strong social fabric develops naturally among people as they steadily have to engage with each other and cooperate for their common livelihoods. The dominant image reflected by politicians is that campesino communities such as the ones around Los Cedros and in the Chocó Andino are underdeveloped and miserable. Nevertheless, while material conditions are meagre Alicia maintains that "these people in their realities, in their own ways, live well, they are happy and have a strong *tejido social*". She suggests that the mining companies change the self-image of the communities by telling them that the campesino lifestyle is miserable due to a lack of material assets while making promises of employment and poverty alleviation.

> That is the strategy of the mining companies, like molesting, molesting, pressuring, pressuring… (Interview with Alicia, my translation)

> They employ the young people that do not have jobs, they can pay them whatever they like without social protection. The mining companies take advantage of young people that want to consume rapidly and they employ them. They abandon their families, fractions occur in families, and this is where the problems begin… (Interview with Diego, my translation).

The latter quote from Diego, technical coordinator of the MCA, underscores that the strategy of offering sporadic mining jobs has indeed succeeded in achieving fragmentation. Mining companies subscribe to the dominating narrative that portrays campesino life as a poor life; this is part of the sell that leads people to take the mining jobs. Diego's experience, shared by my other informants, is that people have internalised the belief that nurturing animals or growing crops in the backyard is poor. When an alternative to this supposed poverty arises, he continues, – whether it be moving to the city or working for a mining company – people will consider it, even if the employment is short-term, underpaid and insecure.

5.2.2. Targeting young men

In their study of extraction projects in Bolivia, Schilling-Vacaflor and Eichler (2017) refer to the strategy of offering sporadic employments as a "carrot" technique for gaining local support of extractivist projects. The strategy, Schilling-Vacaflor and Eichler find, is particularly directed towards individuals who have expressed attitudes friendly to the extractivist project, in order to insert sympathetic attitudes and make deeper any disjuncture in the community (Schilling-Vacaflor & Eichler 2017: 1452).

Directing the strategy towards certain individuals has been the case also in northwestern Ecuador. The interest of employment converts particularly young unemployed men to be in favour of the mining establishment, leaving families and communities divided and pinned against each other. Fractions within the family thus follow a generational pattern, as the youth are the targets of recruitment by mining companies, whereas the older generations, who have dedicated their whole lives to overseeing and conserving the campesino production and lifestyle, are at the forefront of conservation. Familial division has been the case also in the Los Cedros area, whose inhabitants are looking with hindsight at the encounters with mining companies but are still living with the impacts their presence has left on the communities.

Gabriela, an active community member of Magdalena Alto right at the edge of the Los Cedros forest, recounts her experiences:

> *Gabriela*: Now the company has left the territory, but we are still waiting for them to come forward responsibles like they said… The most damage they made was in the *tejido social*, the division. There was a total split in the community and, more than community, between family members. Because years ago it was quite beautiful working here, all the people supported and helped each other, people did voluntary collaborative work and contributed to the community, and all that so… Yes the company has given us jobs and contributions and that, but it has left us harming what is the true sense of the community, which was our unity. Now it is like the people are… everyone for themselves.
>
> *John*: Do you have direct experiences of this division? Close to your own family?
>
> *Gabriela*: Experience like in the family, no. The family of my husband are few and they work independently so no. But of others, yes, like neighbours you could say. Of seeing the dads not accepting [the mining company] and the sons wanting them. Especially the youngsters, right? For the jobs. I have seen how the husbands refuse, the wives want them for worries about feeding the family.
>
> Giving jobs to the local people was their strategy, searching for people that support them so that they could keep entering more and more. The company would help out little by little and people would support the [mining] project little by little. Because of the jobs more than because they wanted to support it (my translation).

Similar experiences are shared by Joaquín who is from Brillasol, just north of Magdalena Alto and Los Cedros. The mining company that was present in his community (which was Cornerstone Capital Resources), Joaquín recalls, targeted lowly educated young individuals in need of work and without awareness of the impacts the mine would have on the environment and agriculture.

> And they succeeded easily because they dealt with people that did not have the knowledge, they had never seen mining, they had no idea, no such things were ever documented here… To feel that in a few months or a year the form in which we have associated all the time changed completely, you feel a tremendously negative impact that you do not have words to describe. Caused only by a company with its interests, a company that is not even from the country, seeking to extract what is in the ground, harming everything and bringing the profit to the country of origin… These impacts are extremely difficult to make sense of, let alone to accept (Interview with Joaquín, my translation).

5.2.3. Targeting local leaders

Although the offering of employment to youth is seen as the most important manipulative practice of the mining companies, the *tejido social* has been disturbed also from other directions. Targeting leaders of activist groups and conservation communities with bribes, threats and persecution is one such strategy. Adrián has leading roles in an agricultural cooperative and in an anti-mining NGO in Pacto, and has been responsible for receiving and guiding authority and corporate representatives in his community. He has seen how leaders in his vicinity have been coerced and inverted by mining companies. Since the arrival of mining companies in Pacto, conservationist leaders who used to work close to the local people and in defence of the nature have, in Adriáns words, "all of a sudden become ambitious, not thinking of the future of the people but only wanting money for the day, not acknowledging how much they are destroying Pacto and the Chocó Andino" (my translation). NGO-worker Carolyn reports that cases of bought leaders – inversion in exchange of a house, a car, money – have been recorded in several communities. Adrián himself has received bribe offers and several threats to his life and his family from mining companies, an experience that is resonated in Schilling-Vacaflor and Eichler's findings in their study of gas industries in rural Bolivia (2017: 1452–1454). Adrián notices that as a defender of nature and the local production he is criminalised. For him, giving an inch to the companies is not an option, however he has understanding for those who have succumbed to the manipulation:

> You defend the territory, defend nature, they file reports on you, they file reports on you for entering a private farm, they make up stories about you, they file reports for damages from afar… They will scare us, but we have to continue. We as leaders have to keep going forward so that the people keep supporting us and have confidence in what we are doing. Not everyone can be a leader. (Interview with Adrián, my translation).

If the offering of employments to youth can be described as a "carrot", the coercion and deterrence strategies illuminated here are better understood as "sticks" (Schilling-Vacaflor & Eichler 2017: 1452–1454)

5.2.4. Avoiding prior consultation and breaking down resistance

If the strategies discussed here are deliberate, what motives do mining companies have to manipulate people and disturb the social fabric? The strategy of socialising in the communities by sporadically offering jobs, presenting the projects as an alternative to poverty, manipulating leaders and in other ways altering public opinions on mining, can be

seen as a way for the companies to avoid prior consultation. The prior consultation is a constitutional right for the local communities of Ecuador to partake in decisions concerning state or private investment projects in their territories. My informant Gabriela, who in her role as secretary of her community has been able to communicate with local authorities the last eight years, is convinced that the company that was present in Magdalena Alto deliberately avoided the constitutionally prescribed democratic process. A consultation, she says, would never have come out in favour of mining:

> The majority was always against [mining]. If there was a popular consultation here before the mining projects began, they would have a total defeat. That is the case, they know that is the case, therefore there has not been a popular consultation here. Because they know they would lose. So they impose themselves (Interview with Gabriela, my translation).

Gabriela's comment is backed by the December 2021 Constitutional Court judgement on Los Cedros, where the Court decided on the rights of the people and natural environment of Los Cedros. A substantial part of the judgement was establishing that a majority was still against mining, that the right to prior consultation had been violated, and that rather than "development" mining caused harmful division of the communities (Corte Constitucional del Ecuador).

Despite provisions in the constitution of a democratic process, mining companies rely instead on strategies of imposition. Manipulating and dividing communities by short-term employments and smaller aid inputs, as well as more malign practices such as bribery and threats, is a simultaneous process of self legitimisation and dissolution of resistance. Schilling-Vafler and Eichler (2017: 1452) refer to these strategies as "carrots-and-sticks" and "divide-and-rule" techniques in the quest for the communities' adherence. Or as activists and conservationists Alicia and Carolyn and phrase it:

> For the companies it is easier doing what they want when the community is divided, when there is no opposition to the project, right? (Interview with Alicia, my translation)

> The people [of campesino communities] will normally be against mining… It is just showing that mining will indeed bring jobs, that mining will bring development, and in this way breaking the resistance (Interview with Carolyn, my translation).

The measures aim to demonstrate that the mining projects do provide employment and economic development while successively degrading the resistance. This is an important

motive because, as several of my informants point out, the mining industry is aware that public resistance is the one factor that can hinder their establishment.

The findings of this section suggest that there is more to the story than what is disclosed by ENAMI-EP that "mining companies comply with their social and tributary obligations". If mining companies, as BHP states, "aim to create and contribute to social value", the question arises as to who gets to state what "social value" is. In the social area, the mining opposition understands mining as both a threat and as something visibly damaging to the communitary and familial unity. As the following section will continue to discuss, "responsible mining" in the Tropical Andes of northwestern Ecuador is a contested if not oxymoronic notion also when it comes to environmental impacts.

5.3. Concerns of impacts on natural environments and livelihoods

5.3.1. Environmental impacts – an inevitability

The mining companies present themselves and their activity as "responsible" and "sustainable" also environmentally. While it may be the case that mining can be exercised in ways more or less damaging and contaminating, mines unavoidably bring an environmental impact. Environmental concerns related to gold mining are backed by extensive scientific research (Fields 2001; Alves Teixeira et al 2018). The removal of the subsoil on a large scale, in steep landscapes with extensive sources of water and pristine forests, evokes preoccupation among conservationists and local communities. Impacts that are most pinointed from mining opponents in northwest Ecuador are water insecurity, deforestation, pollution and loss of biodiversity (Quito Sin Minería). Joaquín, a local conservation worker from Brillasol, is concerned with what exploitative mining and its impacts would mean for the ecosystems where he lives.

> As I see it, there could be places where there could be mining without damaging like it would damage here. We are talking about primary virgin forests, forests where new species are always discovered… Imagine how much is still hidden in these ecologies? We are also talking about the water sources. These are fragile grounds, rainy forests that in time will be damaged… With mining there are no safeguards, no security (Interview with Joaquín, my translation).

Most mining projects in Imbabura and Pichincha are still in the exploration phase and therefore the ecological impacts are not assessable. Yet, as noted by conservation biologist Alicia from the Intag Valley, the few locations with exploitative mining have led to not only deforestation but also acidification of the ground which has reached important water sources (Interview with Alicia). Large scale mining claims extensive land areas and opens up holes in the ground, sometimes more than a kilometre of depth. Guaranteeing the restoration of habitats that have been removed in such locations is extremely difficult. As hydrobiologist Diego from the Chocó Andino comments, any corporate claim that a mining ground will be restored to its prior state and ecosystem is unbacked, as large volumes of soil are contaminated and extracted from the ground. This material, Diego continues, has to end up somewhere, and at the very best environmental impacts are dislocated and prolonged. Large mines also use large tailings dams, which Alicia and Carolyn fear will concentrate toxic waste; in undulating, rainy landscapes such as the Tropical Andes this implies a serious contamination hazard.

The fact that the 2021 Constitutional Court verdict established mining as a breach of the rights of nature gives foundation to the worries. Gabriela's conviction of the harm mining would mean for the environment was confirmed to her when three judges from the Constitutional Court visited her community to research the case. Gabriela was present when the judges made a conclusion that mining in Magdalena Alto was something harmful to both natural and social environments.

5.3.2. Water, agroecology and cultural practices

The security of water is a central concern for the mining opposition, as contamination in water sources impacts the agroecological livelihood. The communities of Brillasol and Magdalena Alto, for example, are located in a valley along the Magdalena River and receive their fresh water from the cloud forests at higher altitudes. The higher altitudes is where the mining concessions are located (although mining activities have ceased here since the 2021 judgement), and contamination of the water there would inevitably affect the water in the valley where people live and produce.

In Pacto in the Chocó Andino, Adrián has already begun to see the spread of contamination in water supplies, affecting the production of panela. Sugarcane and panela have dominated the subsistence of Pacto for almost a century and, as Adrián describes, the cultivation has been the same for all this time. Every year, harvests of sugarcane abound "as if

it were a new discovery" (Interview with Adrián, my translation), indicating the regenerative nature of this agriculture. Adrián owns a family enterprise of organic panela production and he is concerned that the increasing water pollution threatens the status of his production as organic. He fears that a disappearance of the productive sources in the natural environment would require the use of chemicals to sustain agriculture, an option which would lead to the loss of the certification of the production as organic and, subsequently, make impossible the exportation of and profits from panela (Interview with Adrián). As Adrián sees it, such a future would not be manageable for Pacto's agroecology:

> If they win, we disappear. It is either or: mining or production (Interview with Adrián, my translation).

And more than just a mode of subsistence, what is at stake here is a lifestyle and a cultural practice. Adrián speaks of his production with sentiment; he describes the work as the space where a sense of community is born, where youth and elders associate and where a relation to the territory and respect for nature is developed. The changes in the natural landscapes that mining imposes have significant impacts also on the sector of ecotourism, which is important in the Los Cedros and Chocó Andino areas and depends on intact environments. Besides being an economic practice, ecotourism also has a sentimental value as it is a display to the outside world of the local cultures and the campesino traditions of relating with nature.

5.3.3. Mobilising an opposition against the threats of mining

The mining opposition understands the establishment of large scale mining as an acute threat to the natural environments and in turn livelihoods of Los Cedros and the Chocó Andino. Nevertheless, conservation experts and activist leaders are left with the demanding task to unite their communities with increasing fragmentation in the attitude towards mining. The imminent impacts of mining on the ecosystems, on agroecology and other rural livelihoods have generated responses from the opposition, although a unified mobilisation has been made difficult by the reported ruptures in the *tejido social*. Pointing at the socio-environmental impacts, the message of the mining opposition is that mining is incompatible with these communities' form of life. Joaquín and Gabriela think that the most important task at hand is continuing to educate people about the importance of conservation and thereby formulate

shared ideals and a unified opposition. If the people are not granted their right to democratic participation by the state and the companies, they will exert it themselves.

> *Joaquín:* When we carry out projects in the community we can involve the people so that, hopefully, if not everyone there will be a great majority in these activities… If we are all conscious that we need to conserve the forests, if we can have work and activities that do not damage the environment, the next time mining comes here we will have a strong opposition and we will not allow what has been allowed.
>
> *John*: Are you hopeful?
>
> *Joaquín:* I have hope at this moment that when we initiate these movements, we will be able to include the people, the families, and we will be successful… So that the people have a focus on this and other issues that come from elsewhere, mining projects and such. We know what we want and we settle only with what we want. We will not let ourselves be manipulated or bought easily like we have been (my translation)

Gabriela fills in on the topic:

> It would be good to, firstly, try to conscientize the people of conservation and then seek a form of development (my translation).

This section suggests that the mining establishment poses threats to the natural environments of the communities, and by extension it livelihoods and cultural practices are at risk. As touched upon in the last quote from Gabriela, the mobilisation of people against mining is related to the question of development. In the following chapter, I will use the concept of cultural politics to explore how mining opposition and development relate. Furthermore, by means of social imaginaries theory, the next chapter will contrast globally dominant notions of development with local, alternative articulations of development.

6. Rethinking development

> Diego*: It is the same speech as always, right? That they need jobs, they need money to invest in the country, they need to move the economy, a source of employment and wealth.*
>
> John*: Is it a speech about development?*
>
> Diego*: Of course. Of development, of gigantic constructions, so big that they serve for nothing, it has to be a big construction, no matter the function. It cannot be a small road, it has to be stupid big so that, I don't know what for, so that people see it, so that politicians gain votes… Proposing other forms of relating ourselves with the earth is the only way for us to survive as a species.*

The Ecuadorian state presents the current boom in large extractivism as the country's plan for development. "Development" is the buzzword also for the mining companies; the position is that their presence will alleviate the poverty of rural Ecuador. The notion of development used by the state and companies is one of developmentalist and extractivist ideology. This chapter will explore the relationship between the mining issue and development. The chapter will also proceed the analysis towards a response to the dominant notions of development which underpin the mining establishment. Using cultural politics and social imaginaries as theoretical tools, I will explore local articulations of alternative ways of thinking about development.

6.1. Development through supporting local community

6.1.1. Structural neglect and the narrative of inherent poverty

Questioning the "development" brought upon by mining companies is not saying that the communities of the Los Cedros and Chocó Andino areas are without necessities. My informants share the view that much can be improved in their living situations. The successes of mining companies in recruiting workers and proponents is for example evidence of the widespread unemployment and discontent among youth. Welfare systems such as education and healthcare, and roads and other basic infrastructure are lacking in access throughout rural Ecuador (Kindernothilfe.org 2022). However, rather than poverty being inherent to rural life

as indicated by the developmentalist narrative, my data suggest that these problems are the result of a lacking support of the campesino livelihoods. The institutional neglect of agroecological livelihoods, as well as of ecotourism and nature conservation, is an important talking point in the cultural politics of conservationists and activists in the mining opposition:

> The great majority of these communities are agricultural. There are many needs and problems with fair prices for the producers, good roads to export the products… A development must support and improve the commercial conditions of production for the agriculturists. Sometimes there are projects for this but it is not anything structural. I think that if initiatives of diversifying agriculture are supported, if an aggregated value is attributed to what is produced and to tourism also, that would make more sense for a better life for these communities (Interview with Alicia, my translation).

> You see, the people of the rurality lack rights to education and healthcare. But they do have obligations, right, we have the obligation to feed the rest of humanity, and to protect the water et cetera… For me social justice is that campesinos have the same access to education and health as do the cities, that campesinos are paid more for their production, that their efforts to conserve nature are recognised, that people in the countryside can live well and not have to emigrate to the cities. That they have rights and not only obligations (Interview with Diego, my translation).

> The government does very little. They focus very little on agriculture. They are an enterprise that only thinks about wealthy people. They don't think about the production. [The government] thinks that everything we see in the supermarkets is automatically rechargeable. They don't realise that it comes from the countryside, where all production comes from… They are a great enterprise that don't want us to be independent (Interview with Adrián, my translation).

It is the challenging task of my informants and the opposition movement to communicate this to the wider public; that social and economic improvements must take the local production as a starting point, and that unemployment, lacking welfare and low incomes have to do with how campesino communities are treated structurally rather than with campesino life itself. Mobilising these messages is an act of cultural politics as the cultural practices of campesino life are at the core the political mining opposition, and the culturally demarcated campesino collective is the stakeholder group whose interests are forwarded. Thus, conservationists and activists are endeavouring to mobilise the people that pertain to these cultural practices and express the importance of conserving and promoting them. According to the opposition movement, improvements in the social and economic areas are indeed needed but cannot be a pretext for further marginalisation of the local culture and livelihood.

Instead of the developmentalist and extractivist model, then, a "development" must focus on strengthening the conditions at the community level. The above quotes from Alicia and Diego propose fair pricing in the agricultural production, improvement of infrastructure and serious efforts to elevate the access to social welfare systems as measures for improving living standards and thereby raising people's confidence in campesino life. These are measures which according to them have been ignored in a current structural neglect of agriculture and the countryside. Such efforts at improving local conditions have been ignored in favour of the mining establishment through a state narrative of poverty and development, illustrated by president Correa in his explicit "misery" label in his 2012 statement (Macleod 2015: 92). As biologists and activists Diego and Alicia see it, the state and mining companies utilise in a calculated way the neglect and the problems in the countryside, and reiterates the narrative of rural poverty, to consolidate and legitimise mining.

> Campesino means poor. That is what they have sold us, right? If you have crops and raise animals you are poor. That is one of the reasons why people seek a life in the cities. But when things like the pandemic happen, you realise that campesinos are not that poor, and that their lives are as strong as anyone else's (Interview with Diego, my translation).
>
> It is very sad because they take advantage of the fact that the majority of these territories are far from urban zones and historically neglected, with many needs and problems. They are willing to offer anything in exchange for mining projects (Interview with Alicia, my translation).

6.1.2. A lacking support of local livelihoods

The will and ambition for a development which meets the necessities of rural communities and their livelihoods is thus largely missing from state institutions. The one-sided commitment to extractivism overshadows other aspects of development articulated by local people. For my informant Gabriela for example, a positive development for her community is inseparable from the communitary unity. Development in the sense of external investment projects, which is the association Gabriela makes when I ask her about "development", is interesting only if it helps her community find unity in their way of life.

> We need to (...) try to understand what we can do in union, because right now we are everyone for themselves… Yes, we do need [development] but I think that helping the families is the most important, and if we protect the forest and protect nature they could

> help us with that, and together with us find a way of life in that way. And of course we have agriculture, animal husbandry, and tourism also, they could help us with that (Interview with Gabriela, my translation).

The priority for Gabriela is supporting families, unity and the local productive practices, which in her phrasing is an alternative *to* development.. Development (from the outside) is welcome but more important is strengthening families and their unity, focusing on conservation and agriculture and promoting the community's livelihood in that way. The potential for a positive development, as she sees it, thus comes from the bottom-up and it entails a restoration of the lost sense of community. This is where the enthusiasm lies; in the speech about the potential of campesino life, of communitary collaborations and microenterprises, of sugarcane, fruit and cacao, of ecotourism and conservation of the environment: this is what signifies the cultural and natural landscape. Development needs to depart from this local context with its particular people, traditions and knowledge, and not from the supposed needs of large scale investments prescribed by the state government and extractive industries.

An important cultural political message is that campesino life is not a poor life, but its richness is largely overlooked. As Adrián from Pacto put it:

> We are not a hundred percent well but we are more well off than bad. [Panela production] is soft work. In our production, people can work from seventeen until seventy years old… The work allows us to feed ourselves and our kids. We are all microentrepreneurs, all our work is in the family and some have one or two workers. In one hectare of sugarcane you can live calmly you and your family (Interview with Adrián, my translation).

Nevertheless, almost never have state or local authorities supported the production in Pacto, as it does not bring large scale economic growth. Adrián would like to see efforts to improve the conditions of his agroecology. The only time he can recall the panela producing population being recognised by the state government, was when president Correa promised to alleviate their poverty through the establishment of mining.

In this section we have seen that the promises of development from the state and mining companies are exposed and refused by the mining opposition. By articulating the local productive tradition of agroecology as a departure point for any effort at development, the mining opposition engages in cultural politics where the cultural practices and meanings of campesino life are mobilised against dominant forces of extractivism and developmentalism.

The next section will analyse the conflicting views of mining as a clash of social imaginaries and explore local articulations of alternatives to the extractivist/developmentalist paradigm.

6.2. Beyond the extractivist/developmentalist paradigm

> Diego*: I was taught that we are part of nature and we have to respect everything that surrounds us. The water comes from the river, not from the tap, and so we have to protect it. The aliments come from the earth and so we have to protect it. We are part of all this (...). I am an ecologist and also an activist because I believe that the human being needs to save itself. I am fighting against mining because I believe in the human being, because I believe that humanity can change the situation in which we live. I am a human being and therefore this is my battle.*

In this section I will argue that the conflict over mining establishment in northwestern Ecuador is a case of friction of collective worldviews, or social imaginaries. I will introduce what Adams et al (2015) and Castoriadis (1981) have conceptualised as the "ecological imaginary" in the Los Cedros and Chocó Andino cases, and suggest a connection between this imaginary and two articulations of an alternative paradigm of development visible in Ecuador's mining opposition. Informed by the experiences of rural people, indigenous groups and social movements around the world, the ecological imaginary is a counterpoint to the anthropocentric meaning system inherent in modern capitalism and its quest for endless expansion. The ecological imaginary encapsulates cultural configurations of meaning which attribute intrinsic significance not solely to humans and human progress but to the natural world in which all life resides (Adams et al 2015: 35).

Diego's quote in the above vignette suggests that mining elucidates some of the basic questions of human existence in, and relationships with, the world. The mining opposition in the Los Cedros and Chocó Andino areas is pertinent to worldviews and concepts that go beyond the practical and that challenge dominant understandings of "development" at its foundations. For my informants, nature is more than a storage of resources for humans – an idea which according to mining opponents from campesino communities is self-evident, but which in contrast with the capitalist logic behind extractivism, is a contested notion. The natural world has a protection value in its own right, and not only because it is the bread and butter of humanity. This concept of intrinsic meaning is a rejection of modern capitalism –

which perceives nature as meaningful only insofar as it supports human progress – and underlies proposals of a reinvention of human needs and relationships with the natural world. These ideas and worldviews, present in the conflict over mining, comprise the ecological imaginary.

As the technical coordinator of the MCA and a leading figure of the anti-mining cultural politics, Diego is equipped with an articulate language. In this excerpt he expresses the ecological imaginary as he criticises modern economic logics while dislocating humanity from the assumed centre of meaning creation:

> We need to change the form in which we relate with the land. We need to find alternatives to the bullshit that is the current economy. I think the planet has ecological limits which need to be respected. We are part of nature and we are not owners of anything. And if we disappear from the planet, nature and the planet will keep on turning around the sun, it will recover and it will keep moving without us (Interview with Diego, my translation).

Also other informants express ideas corresponding to the meaning configurations of the ecological imaginary. Gabriela thinks that "we need to protect nature like we protect the human being because in doing so we are more friendly to the well-being of all", while Joaquín points out the "peace and harmony" nature and rural life brings him and which in itself is worth conserving. Adrián speaks of nature as a subject begging for humanity to approach it differently:

> Now with the big destructions at the global level, it's because nature cannot defend itself anymore. Nature in itself is begging for you to help it and if people aren't there to defend it there will be much destruction, many tragedies… (Interview with Adrián, my translation)

6.2.1. Sumak kawsay / buen vivir

The ecological imaginary and its shift from human-centric to holistic systems of meaning is an integral element in discussions about development. These views imply a rejection of the developmentalist notion of development and they underpin various articulations of an alternative paradigm. One such articulation is found in *sumak kawsay,* an indigenous deriving concept which articulates the "good living" as harmonious coexistence between humans, all life and the world. *Sumak kawsay* embraces relationships and holistic values while rejecting

the "economised" view of the world which evaluates natural values in terms of "resources" (Leff 2005).

As other studies have shown (Macleod 2015; Radcliffe 2012) *sumak kawsay* is also a politicised concept in resistance to extractivism and represents a "renovation of the critique of development" (Gudynas & Acosta 2011). As phrased by indigenous leader Humberto Cholango: "[*Sumak kawsay* represents the] definite burying of the exclusionary neoliberal system" (cited in Radcliffe 2012: 241). According to *sumak kawsay*, quality of life has to do with harmonious relationships and it thus criticises the narrative of inherent poverty in the rurality. *Sumak kawsay* is an alternative to the developmentalist paradigm as it seeks for marginalised people to speak for themselves, and not be recipients of the agendas of corporate and national elites (Radcliffe 2012: 241). Moreover, its adherence to the holistic meaning systems of the ecological imaginary implies a rejection of the developmentalist notion of development as economic progress and modernisation.

The insights of *sumak kawsay* are cultural political talking points also among the mining opposition in northwestern Ecuador. For Diego and Joaquín, the *buen vivir* (they refer to the Spanish rather than the Quechua term) is strongly associated with life in the countryside. They suggest that the mining establishment and its impacts both on social life and the environment remind campesino people that rural life contains much of the *buen vivir*. The campesino lifestyle and the ecologies which it is dependent on are therefore worth conserving:

> People now remind themselves, sometimes they forget, that life in the countryside is a good life. Life in the cities is vulnerable. Here [in the countryside] we have the security of always having somewhere to turn, of always having time, of always having close to the earth which protects you and nourishes you (Interview with Diego, my translation).

> Living in peace, in plain harmony and enjoying what you love, that is the buen vivir. Personally what I love is living in the countryside. I want to stay here. Here I have everything, here I have my heart, here I have my life (Interview with Joaquín, my translation).

For Chocó Andino and Los Cedros locals Diego and Joaquín, *sumak kawsay* or *buen vivir* is thus an articulation of the position of humans in their surrounding world. It offers a language for people to promote conservation and to imagine healthy coexistence with the ecosystems. Any political or economic project, as they see it, must be legitimised and rooted in the particular socio-environmental context and that is not the case with mining. My informants

are non-indigenous and use the language of *sumak kawsay* to varying degrees, however they share the criticism of the poverisation and disregard of the rurality as well as the notion that development is equal to growth and progress. They attribute intrinsic meaning to the surrounding world and its living and nonliving components and express a scepticism towards modern notions of economic progress and nature as a resource.

6.2.2. The rights of nature

Another articulation of an alternative view of development is made by my informant Carolyn, an intellectual from the Quito district who works as an observer of the rights of nature. Since 2008, the Ecuadorian constitution recognises the rights of nature (*los derechos de la naturaleza*) and Carolyn has been engaged in observing the adherence of these rights. According to Carolyn, recognising nature as its own subject of rights is a paradigm shift in thinking about development.

> Now we think of nature as property, it is a resource but it is not a subject of rights. [The rights of nature] means beginning to change the form in which we view nature, not only as an object that you extract and utilise, but as a person that you protect (Interview with Carolyn, my translation).

The judgement in favour of the Los Cedros Forest Reserve was the first successful case for the Ecuadorian rights of nature. Before the 2021 verdict, Carolyn and her colleagues at an official observatory had worked in numerous other cases of environmental conflict for the favour of the rights of nature. She says that the 2021 judgement is groundbreaking in several ways:

> It has been harsh for the mining industry, because this is an understanding that the whole country cannot or should not be open to mining. We are such a biodiverse country, right, that mining should not be going in the whole country and in various places mining would be an obvious crime. And the advancement of the Los Cedros case is demonstrating that, starting from the legislation, we can limit the effects of activities that are very abusive with nature (Interview with Carolyn, my translation).

Carolyn thinks that the advancement of the rights of nature is a timely opportunity for thinking in other paradigms when it comes to development. She thinks that we need to move

beyond the talk of "sustainable development" as this concept has been able to uphold business as usual:

> [Sustainable development is a way of] only saying that there exists a social responsibility and that they will compensate in some way. Paying back to communities or doing some reforestation is an excuse for the companies to keep doing damage… I think that we have to think in other paradigms (Interview with Carolyn, my translation).

The rights of nature as this new paradigm, Carolyn continues, implies reflecting upon what in the modern world has been our dominant relationship with nature. In the name of development we have used nature for our purposes and, at best, made calculations of to how much abuse we can expose nature.

> The rights of nature imply questioning: what has been our relationship with nature? And what has been this "development" that this has allowed? Within this development, how much enslavement of nature have we allowed? And what we are doing with sustainable development is asking: how much can we damage nature? It is better to say, let's not damage nature (Interview with Carolyn, my translation).

6.2.3. Summary

In this section I have explored the case of mining in the Tropical Andes of Ecuador as a case of friction between modern capitalism, represented by mining companies, and the ecological imaginary, represented by the mining opposition. The two sides to this conflict subscribe to different underlying notions of meaning, human needs, and human relationships to the natural world. I have argued that this implies a dividing line between different ways of thinking about development, where conservationists and anti-mining activists reject developmentalist notions through alternative articulations such as *sumak kawsay* and the rights of nature.

7. Conclusion

The establishment of mining in the biodiversity hotspots and campesino communities of the Ecuadorian Tropical Andes illustrates the pervasiveness of modern extractivism. At the same time, it reveals the potency of local opposition and contradicting narratives. This thesis has shown that by international mining companies and the Ecuadorian state government, mining is portrayed as a socially and environmentally responsible practice necessary for the social and economic development of the countryside. On the other hand, conservationists and activists in the opposition understand mining as an acute threat to social life, communitary and family unity, natural environment and livelihoods, imposed on communities. Visible ruptures in the social fabric, water pollution and irreversible damages on ecosystems and agroecology are critical impacts pointed out by local people.

Faced with a developmentalist and extractivist narrative of mining companies, the mining opposition aboards the task of formulating alternative paths for development. The opposition rejects the state and corporate narrative of an inherent rural poverty and instead articulates the need for a development which strengthens the conditions for local livelihoods such as agroecology, ecotourism and conservation. I have understood the mobilisation of these campesino cultural practices in the struggle against mining as an act of cultural politics. This cultural political endeavour confronts the challenge of uniting the divided families and communities around support for what is described by informants as the local way of life. Finally, underpinning the opposition of mining are also certain worldviews which challenge the imaginary and meaning system of modern capitalism, and the dominating understandings of development.

Studying mining conflict as a case of clashing social imaginaries implies opening up for questioning the foundations of modern western ways of imagining the place of humanity in the world. The worldviews of *sumak kawsay* and the rights of nature as expressed by the informants of this study indicate the existence of politically potent articulations of a new paradigm of development; new ways of thinking about human needs and the relationship with nature. The ecological imaginary which is visible in the mining opposition – and in *sumak kawsay* and the rights of nature – is a timely set of worldviews in a time of globally accelerating environmental degradations. Articulations of this new paradigm are at the same time a struggle on the part of rural communities for social justice as they emphasise a neglected autonomy and integrity of their ways of life. The growing academic interest in

sumak kawsay and other articulations of an alternative development paradigm is a critical response to the need for pairing ecological justice with social justice.

For Ecuadorian campesinos, conservationists and activists, engaging in political opposition to mining is a lot of work. It implies heavy evidence burdens and dealing with intractable bureaucratic and judicial systems. It requires access to judicial resources and environmental expertise competitive with the powers of states and multinational industries. It requires indeterminate hours of studying and educating about impacts, socialising, raising awareness, collecting signatures, demonstrating and talking to institutions. In the case of Los Cedros, these efforts have been rewarded in favour of the rights of local communities and nature. In the Chocó Andino, it is a work in progress where currently the signatures of 200 000 people from the Quito District are being pursued.

While the opposition to globalised large scale mining is a complex endeavour, the underlying rationale behind it is quite simple. It is about democracy, harmony and respect for the territory and its inhabiting life. Or as phrased by Diego, who envisions the Chocó Andino in the future becoming a leading region for humanity's social and ecological transition:

> There has to be places where we as humanity apply the tools in our reach to declare peace with nature and live with her. We have thousands of tools, and we have to apply them somewhere. I hope the Chocó Andino will be this place; one of the places in the world that allows us humans to make an ecological and social transition (my translation).

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