

ARTICLE

Extractivism, territorial conflicts and Social Work in Latin America: Contributions to the professional discussion

Extractivismo, conflictos ecoterritoriales y Trabajo Social en América Latina: Contribuciones al debate profesional.

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Abstract:

In Latin America, in the last three decades there has been a strong discussion in critical thinking regarding extractivism as a form of accumulation that is based on the export of commodities. Despite the long existing discussion on this subject in the social sciences in Latin America, the debates on extractivism and its impacts on the territories have not attracted significant attention from Social Work research. Although there is an incipient field of socio-environmental discussion in Social Work in Latin America, categories such as conflict, resistance and extractivism have not acquired a theoretical and empirical depth in bibliographic production. In this context, this article aims to analyse the epistemic, re-

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search and methodological contributions that the link between extractivism and Social Work can generate to the professional debate in Latin America. On the one hand, we make a conceptual reflection on the relationship between Social Work, extractivism and territorial resistance based on the existing literature. Then we reflect on an experience developed based on an Action-Research work that has sought to analyse the socio-ecological impacts of the expansion of the fruit agribusiness in the Ñuble region, in Chile. Finally, we propose some challenges for Social Work from the work and the reviewed bibliographic production, to respond in a significant way when addressing the impacts of extractivism in the territories. These challenges are: 1) epistemic contributions that aim to broaden the way of understanding knowledge in Social Work from the territories in resistance to extractivism, 2) research contributions that allow for evidencing in a well-founded way the socio-community impacts caused by extractivism in the territories, and on the other hand, to analyse the multiple experiences and learning of resistance that emerge from extractivism. And 3) the enrichment of methodologies relevant to territorial work that seek to go beyond the separations between the social/environmental and the human/non-human.

Resumen

En América Latina, en las últimas tres décadas ha existido una fuerte discusión en el pensamiento crítico respecto al extractivismo como forma de acumulación que se basa en la exportación de commodities. A pesar de la larga discusión existente sobre esta temática en las ciencias sociales en América Latina, los debates sobre el extractivismo y sus impactos en los territorios no han atraído atención significativa por parte de la investigación en Trabajo Social. Si bien hay un incipiente campo de discusión socioambiental en Trabajo Social en América Latina, categorías como conflicto, resistencia y extractivismo no han adquirido una profundización teórica y empírica en la producción bibliográfica. En este contexto, este artículo tiene como objetivo analizar las contribuciones epistémicas, investigativas y metodológicas que la vinculación entre extractivismo y Trabajo Social pueden generar al debate profesional en América Latina. Por una parte, hacemos una reflexión conceptual sobre la relación entre Trabajo Social, extractivismo y resistencia ecoterritoriales en base a la literatura existente. Luego reflexionamos a partir de la experiencia desarrollada en base a un trabajo de Investigación-Acción que ha buscado analizar los impactos socio-ecológicos de la expansión del agronegocio frutícola en la región de Ñuble, Chile.

Palabras Clave:
Extractivismo;
Conflictos ecoterritoriales; Trabajo Social



Finalmente, proponemos algunos retos para la profundización del debate profesional a partir del trabajo y la producción bibliográfica revisada. Dichos retos son: 1) aportes epistémicos que apuntan a ampliar la forma de entender el conocimiento en Trabajo Social a partir de los territorios en resistencia al extractivismo, 2) aportes investigativos que permitan evidenciar de manera fundada los impactos socio-comunitarios que provoca el extractivismo en los territorios, y por otra parte, analizar las múltiples experiencias y aprendizajes de resistencia que emergen al extractivismo. Y 3) el enriquecimiento de metodologías pertinentes al trabajo territorial que buscan ir más allá de las separaciones entre lo social/ambiental y lo humano/no-humano.

Introduction

On August 30, 2019, Buenaventura Farías made the radical decision to take his own life. After a lifetime working as a shepherd in the province of Petorca, at the age of 83, he decided to end his life. His relatives pointed out that in the last period, he became increasingly saddened by the prolonged drought in the territory, repeatedly saying, “everything is going to dry up” (Rojas, 2019). The lack of water affected his crops, and a few days before his death, he sold the last 20 cows he had due to the difficulty of continuing to feed them (Rojas, 2019). All this happened while in many hills of this valley, “green deserts” of avocado monocultures were flourishing.

This story is not just about Buenaventura. It reflects many stories throughout Latin America / Abya Yala. These are increasingly frequent chronicles of dispossession, showing the dramatic point to which extractivism is reaching: in the territories it occupies, it not only displaces its inhabitants or pressures for the internalization of its practice but also corners to such an extent that it makes other forms of life impossible in the occupied territories. In Latin America, over the last three decades, there has been a strong discussion in critical thinking regarding extractivism as a form of accumulation, based on the export of commodities with high socioecological impacts on the communities where these projects are located (mainly oil exploitation, mining, agribusiness, cellulose, etc.). This form of “development” deepens in the neoliberal phase of the capitalist mode of production, which feeds on the exploitation and seizure of territories and their natural common goods (Svampa, 2019; Gudynas, 2013; Machado, 2015).

Despite the long-standing discussion on this topic in the social sciences, debates on extractivism and its impacts on territories have not attracted significant attention from research in Social Work. While there is an incipient field of socio-environmental discussion in Social Work in Latin America (Quintana-Ramírez, 2019; Sepúlveda y Úcar, 2018), categories such as conflict, resistance, and extractivism have not gained theoretical and empirical depth in bibliographic production (except for works such as Jerez, 2015; Panez, 2020; and Mora et al., 2017). It seems important to problematize this lack of depth for two central reasons. Firstly, a considerable part of professional practice is permeated by the logics of NEOLIBERAL policies, naturalizing the installation of extractive projects in the territories where Social Work intervenes and even operating as agents of demobilization of possible opposition to such projects, which according to Marro (2018), renew political strategies of counterinsurgency in Latin America (taking examples from cases in Brazil and Argentina in the last two decades). The second reason is that, although there is a fertile discussion in the critical field of Social Work regarding the ethical-political project in Latin America and the incorporation of emancipatory approaches in professional action, within this debate, there is no emphatic positioning regarding the impacts that extractivism and socio-ecological crisis generate in shaping the social issue. The question of how we position ourselves theoretically and politically as a professional collective in the face of the increasing ecoterritorial conflicts and the advance of extractivism on the territories remains an open one that requires answers.

In this context, this article aims to analyze the epistemic, research, and methodological contributions that the link between extractivism and Social Work can generate to the professional debate and resistance to this process in Latin American territories. For this purpose, our methodology draws on two central components. Firstly, we reflect conceptually on the relationship between Social Work, extractivism, and ecoterritorial conflicts, taking references from Latin American political ecology on extractivism and the review of literature from journal articles, book chapters, and undergraduate and postgraduate theses that have addressed the link between Social Work, extractivism, and ecoterritorial conflicts. Secondly, we reflect based on the experience we have developed as a research team on “Agribusiness and socio-ecological inequalities” at the School of Social Work of the University of Bio-Bio, based on an Action-Research project that has sought to analyze the socio-ecological impacts of the expansion of fruit agribusiness in one of the regions of the central-southern zone of Chile (Ñuble region) and how these impacts affect the reproduction of inequalities in the territories. This research work has also carried out a process of support to one of the rural communities in this region that opposes the construction of a megaproject dam that comes to dispossess the existing ways of

life in the territory, in order to increase the irrigation capacity of large farmers. This case is paradigmatic, as Chile's strategy of promoting non-traditional agricultural exports is often presented as a successful example of economic growth, even as a model to be replicated. However, in the last decade, the socio-ecological limits of the agribusiness strategy have been evident, such as the decrease in the availability of water, the increase in land and water conflicts, and the social, cultural, and symbolic transformations they cause in the territories where they are located (Panez et al., 2018).

Thus, the article is structured in the following way. In the next section, we provide a brief overview of the discussion of Latin American critical thinking on extractivism, resistances, and ecoterritorial conflicts, taking a stance within this debate regarding the polysemy of the concepts of extractivism and resistances. The following section proposes a preliminary review of the production in Social Work that is directly and indirectly linked to the relationship between ecoterritorial conflicts and extractivism, reflecting on the scope and gaps in the current discussion. Subsequently, we delve into the experience as an action-research team in the Ñuble region. For this, in the section "Expansion of agribusiness and the Ñuble region in Chile," we characterize the territory of the Ñuble region and the main features of the agro-export sector, within the extractivist matrix of the country. After this contextualization, we reflect on our team's involvement with communities affected by megaprojects, within the scenario of conflict in the region, visualizing the scope and challenges of this journey. We conclude by sharing conclusions that seek to continue opening paths of reflection and action on possible bridges between Social Work and ecoterritorial conflicts in the face of extractivism. The conclusions propose three areas of deepening for the professional debate on extractivism in Latin American territories: 1) epistemic, 2) research, and 3) methodological.

Contemporary Debates in Latin America on Extractivism, Resistances, and Ecoterritorial Conflicts

The harsh emergence of neoliberalism globally has rekindled and revitalized the debate on accumulation forms in the current phase of capitalism, characterized by the prominence of financial capital in the mechanisms of expropriation of common goods. Authors like David Harvey (2005), drawing from Rosa Luxemburg, argue that the role of financial capital, in the contemporary moment of accumulation by dispossession, is due to the prominence of buying and selling of stocks, credit and debt within the economic framework of countries, along with the speculative activity it entails (Harvey, 2005).



Thus, financial capital exerts strong pressure for a series of social and natural common goods (understood as “assets” in economic terms) to be appropriated by private actors and even become objects of speculation.

It is in this context of the transformation of contemporary capitalism that the debate on extractivism emerges in Latin America. The classic reference driving the contemporary debate is the conceptualization by Gudynas (2015), who understands extractivism as a particular type of extraction of “natural resources,” distinguished by three fundamental elements: volume, intensity, and more than 50% of what is extracted destined for export. An important aspect of this definition is that it does not restrict the idea of extractivism to mining or hydrocarbons (as initially understood) but also recognizes forest monoculture, agribusiness, salmon farming, intensive livestock, among others. While Gudynas’ reference contributes to pushing this field of discussion, other works have expanded and complexified the concept of extractivism. Recently, Ye et al. (2019) argue that it is necessary to consider other constitutive components of extractivism, such as: i) the creation of monopolies on extracted resources, ii) the close interrelationships between state agents and private actors (national or international), iii) the existence of “operational centers” managing a series of connections allowing extracted products to be transported from places of poverty to places of wealth, iv) deepening inequalities between those who concentrate the benefits of production and those negatively affected by extractive activities, and v) it is a type of economic process resulting in the “sterility” of territories, destruction of landscapes and biodiversity, widespread pollution, and degradation of the ways of life of its inhabitants (Ye et al., 2019).

Acknowledging the contributions of the expanded notion of extractivism, two key discussion axes have emerged from Latin America that seem crucial to emphasize to understand the depth of the extractivist matrix in the region. The first axis is the recognition that it is not a recent phenomenon, and the current situation has a neocolonial emphasis. In this direction, extractivism is an accumulation practice that began with the colonization of Global South countries more than 500 years ago (in America, Africa, and Asia), a condition for the formation of the capitalist system “forged in the exploitation of raw materials essential for the industrial development and well-being of the Global North” (Acosta, 2016, p.2). Based on this, Svampa (2019) emphasizes that extractivism, at present, functions as a neocolonial model focused on the appropriation and destruction of nature. This author argues that we find ourselves at a moment when neo-extractivism is at the center of contemporary accumulation, shedding light on the crisis of the modernity project and more generally on the current socio-ecological

crisis (Svampa, 2019). The reference to neo-extractivism has been used especially to refer to partial state participation in the wealth produced by extractive activities for redistributive purposes and developmental investments, as seen in the so-called “progressive governments” in Latin America (Gudynas, 2013; Svampa, 2019).

The second axis, which we find important in the extractivism debate, is the multidimensional character of this form of accumulation. While Gudynas’ works mention cultural and political components as supports for legitimizing the actions of extractive companies and the policies that support them (Gudynas, 2013; 2018), his theorization of extractivism does not delve into the symbolic mechanisms that drive its advancement as a form of accumulation.

In this scenario, contributions pointing to the impacts of extractivism on the subjectivation processes of those involved in extractive activities are interesting. For example, Machado (2012) draws attention to the “biopolitical expropriation” that operates as a “material and symbolic disposition, disposition of their labor power; of their emotions and feelings; of their skills and knowledge; and of their ideas, values, and desires” (Machado, 2012, p.63). Thus, extractivism not only expropriates the material conditions of life in territories but also seeks to deactivate resistance in bodies, breaking community fabrics and our own rootedness in the territory, to achieve habituation and legitimation of dispossession. As Machado summarizes, ending with “dismembered territories and disaffected populations” (2012, p.63).

Resuming this discussion on extractivism in Latin America is particularly important in Chile. Regarding this country, we agree with authors like Maillet et al. (2021), who, in a review of scientific articles on the reality of Chile, note “a conceptual routinization or inertia that suspends independent theoretical questioning of the communicative power of the concept” (Maillet et al., 2021, p.68). Except for works like those of Romero-Toledo (2019) and Bolados (2016), this routinization can also lead to the analytical emptying of the concept of extractivism.

In summary, and taking into account the contributions of Svampa (2019) and Machado (2015), in this research, we understand extractivism as: 1) a type of capital accumulation pattern but simultaneously a political-cultural practice of colonial origins and shaping the social issue in Latin America, 2) based on the geopolitical subordination of sacrificed territories and the exploitation of human and non-human life, and 3) evolving in its mechanisms of territorial and body control to deny and/or deactivate the increase

in ecoterritorial conflicts generated by its activities (Uribe and Panez, 2022). Extractivism results in a series of social issues directly linked to the work of Social Work, such as: the increase in social inequalities and injustices, the intensification of material impoverishment, patriarchal violence in its different expressions, and the violation of human rights in general.

Resistances to Extractivism

The processes of dispossession associated with extractivism are not passively accepted in many territories across the continent. Thousands of inhabitants are engaged in significant resistance processes. The term “resistance” has been widely used to refer to forms of organization that oppose systems of domination (Zibechi, 2003). In this debate, it is essential to highlight three aspects of its relationship with extractivism.

Firstly, we understand that resistance arises from opposition to power concentrations and/or the exercise of domination relationships underlying the implementation of extractive projects. Secondly, a key element of resistance is the affirmation of territoriality by organized movements and communities. Peasant communities, indigenous people, Afro-descendants, and inhabitants in general of rural areas assert, through their resistance, a different way of being in the territory, which is affected by the processes of territorialization and deterritorialization caused by extractivism (Haesbaert, 2013). Thirdly, in these resistance processes, there is also a questioning of the hierarchy of knowledge existing in capitalist, patriarchal, and colonial structures. These structures have tended to deny the capacity of subalternized groups to produce knowledge based on their ways of life. Concerning territorial resistances, these are related to popular knowledge embedded in daily practices (Porto-Goncalves, 2015) and are recreated when confronting extractive activities. Finally, it is relevant to recognize that many of these resistances go beyond anti-extractive positions or rejection of specific projects. In part, these struggles affirm alternative ways of understanding the world and one’s own existence, challenging the rationality that instrumentalizes nature and weakens other forms of human and non-human life for the accumulation of capital (Porto-Gonçalves, 2015).

Having outlined the theoretical references through which we understand the concepts of extractivism and resistance, the following section explores how these discussions have been linked to the current debate within Social Work in Latin America.

Social Work and Extractivism

An initial observation is that, in the face of the extensive and growing Latin American discussion on extractivism, Social Work has maintained a less active role in relation to the contributions it can make in contexts of ecoterritorial conflicts related to extractive activities in the region. This has meant refraining from promoting methodological, epistemic, and practical discussions within the profession about these territories.

To delve deeper into the insertion of this discussion into the profession, we conducted a review of recent academic literature that includes these themes. In Latin America, in the 1990s, pioneering works on the connection between Social Work and the socio-environmental crisis in Colombia and Brazil were registered (Closs 2015; Quintana-Ramírez, 2019). This predates the Anglo-Saxon debate of the second decade of the 2000s, in which concepts such as “Green Social Work” (Dominelli, 2012) or “Environmental Social Work” (Gray, 2013) emerged, both related to understanding the fundamental role of environmental issues in structural inequities. While these discussions open new horizons for debate and involvement of the profession, the predominant environmental approach does not delve into the conflicts currently taking place in Latin American countries, experiencing intensive exploitation of natural common goods, as well as productive and reproductive work. These absences are also evident in spaces like the 2018 Global Social Work Conference, which had a focus on “Environmental Linkage and Sustainable Development.” There were 84 presentations related to climate change, socio-natural disasters, socio-environmental conflicts, and community education and participation (Sepúlveda, 2018). However, these did not delve deeply into issues related to the autonomy of territories or the struggles and resistances against the installation of mega-projects. In our opinion, discussing the environmental dimension of Social Work in Latin America without considering extractivism as an accumulation pattern is limited in scope.

Particularly in our continent, socio-environmental issues have seen a gradual increase. Sepúlveda’s review (2018) of the Latin American Social Work Schools Seminars, covering 17 years of disciplinary history (since 2012), found only 30 presentations directly addressing socio-environmental issues. However, most of the socio-environmental content is linked to theoretical reflection, not based on concrete experiences related to this and does not address the professional contradictions experienced in the face of extractivism-induced territorial conflict. In terms of academic production, particularly on extractivism, territorial conflicts, and Social Work, there is a scarcity of literature



on these processes. A review of the academic landscape at the continental level reveals that most productions are concentrated in Argentina, Colombia, Mexico, and Brazil (Sepúlveda and Úcar, 2017; Pineda, 2014; Liévano, 2013; Sepúlveda, 2018;2019; Marro, 2022; Etcheverry, 2018). In Chile, the few discussions that have taken place have focused on mining conflicts, energy issues, and environmental injustice due to polluting industrial complexes (Arellano, 2017; Mora et al., 2017; Jerez, 2015).

An emerging field of discussion emphasizes the importance of professional practice in extractive contexts to facilitate mediation and social dialogue processes (Tobar and Velásquez, 2021; France and Pollicardo, 2022). For instance, Tobar and Velásquez (2021) reveal the professional practices and knowledge of Social Work in environmental management and interventions in Antioquia and Caldas, highlighting the mediating role that professionals play in prior consultations before the implementation of extractive projects. They emphasize the importance of “establishing communicative codes that allow us to advance in the generation of agreements with ethnic groups” (Tobar and Velásquez, 2021). Similarly, France and Pollicardo (2022) address this mediating role from Chile, as an attempt where the State has tried to generate strategies for facilitating dialogue and citizen participation in conflicts socio-environmental. They position Social Workers in conflicts as mediators between companies and communities, a role that, from their perspective, can be part of a “disciplinary resistance” (France and Pollicardo, 2022).

This mediating view of Social Work differs from a second group of studies that pose a critical discussion on extractivism and Social Work (Liévano, 2013; Marro, 2022; Mora et al., 2017; Jerez, 2015). The contributions of Liévano (2013) are particularly relevant, as they place the relationship between society and nature at the center of the discussion concerning the emerging concept of “environment” in the profession. Liévano points out that, along with unequal power relations, spatial and temporal dynamics have configured specific forms of social, cultural, political, and economic organization—power relations that occur over territories, as spaces of conflict. What the author mentions regarding directing attention to reducing impacts on nature and territory without addressing their root causes promotes the perpetuation of conditions of inequity and conflict (Liévano, 2013).

We find works such as those by Jerez (2015) and Marro (2022) particularly interesting, which challenge Social Work from a broader understanding of extractivist dynamics. In the case of Jerez (2015) and Mora et al. (2017), the authors present professional po-



sitions that promote practices where the importance of territory and non-hierarchical, non-fragmented society-nature relationships is highlighted as a relevant field of the profession. This includes fostering spaces for discussion, strengthening social organizations, and revaluing cultural, environmental, and heritage diversity and identity as an essential part of this alternative approach to intervention in eco-territorial issues (Mora et al., 2017; Jerez, 2015).

In the case of Marro (2022), there is an interrogation regarding the need to broaden professional reflection on the foundational role of social struggles in shaping the social issue. From this perspective, she suggests that in the contemporary scenario of Latin America, much of the expressions of the social issue, which form the basis of professional demands in Social Work, “are inseparable from the neo-extractivist dynamic that is reshaping the economies of Latin American countries” (Marro, 2022, p.1).

Based on this literature review, we find it problematic that extractivism is not yet considered a relevant aspect for thinking about current and emerging scenarios for our profession, understanding it as a fundamental pillar to comprehend the current socio-environmental crisis that involves a conglomerate of eco-territorial conflicts in Latin America. However, there has been a significant increase in works (especially in the last decade) that have sought to elucidate the characteristics of the environmental issue in Latin America, marked by extractivism as an economic strategy and by ongoing socio-environmental conflicts in the region (Saravia and Panez, 2022).

These proposals address the environmental issue from “popular ecologism,” which has emerged in countries of the Global South, positioning itself more explicitly as a criticism of the socioecological impacts of the capitalist system and colonialism (Jerez 2015; Mora et al., 2017; Liévano 2013). These research efforts are linked to the discussion of Latin American critical thinking regarding a redefinition of the concept of “environment”—such as the contributions of Escobar (2014) with “relational ontologies” or Svampa (2019) with her description of an “ecoterritorial turn” in social struggles—drawing attention to a thought matrix emerging from indigenous peoples, peasants, and Afro-descendants in Latin America, questioning the foundational pillars of modern rationality, particularly the Eurocentric view of the “environment.”

Despite these contributions, we believe it is necessary to advance the reflection on how we can deepen the incipient critical perspectives on extractivism and eco-territorial



conflicts in specific territorial processes and how, from these concrete practices, we can elucidate professional contributions to resistances against the dispossession processes generated by extractive activities. To do this, we will analyze the experience of action-research conducted as a research team.

Expansion of agribusiness and the Ñuble region in Chile

*“Agriculture has its question, its question
The potato is sold to us by various nations
When it is originally from the south of Chile
In front of the emblem of three colors
Mining has many nuances, many nuances
The miner generates good money
But for the pocket of the foreigner”
In the center of injustice, Violeta Parra.*

In order to seek horizons that broaden the discussion on Social Work, extractivism, and eco-territorial conflicts, the team from the Agribusiness and Socio-ecological Inequalities department at the School of Social Work of the University of Bio-Bio has been conducting an action-research process since 2020. We have developed an experience of accompanying communities and organizations resisting the installation of infrastructure projects that deepen extractive activities in the Ñuble region, Chile. Established in 2018, Ñuble has its capital in Gran Chillán (with 215,646 inhabitants). It is one of the regions with the highest rural population in Chile (30.6%), and its geographical configuration, consisting of valleys, fields, mountains, and the rivers Itata, Diguillin, and Ñuble, has positioned the region in the spotlight of agro-export production. Between 1997–2018, the cultivated area with fruit trees in this region increased by 155%, with American blueberry being the most cultivated species (National Institute of Statistics INE, 1997; Office of Agricultural Studies and Policies ODEPA, 2006; 2019). This shift is attributed to water availability and climatic projections in the southern regions of Chile, making them more resilient to the climate crisis.

It is essential to recall that agro-export is one of the pillars of raw material exports in Chile, driven by the civic-military dictatorship from 1973 to 1990. Following a process of “agrarian counter-reform,” which involved transferring land to national and foreign private hands, the previous agrarian reform aiming for greater land redistribution was completely abandoned (Panez et al., 2018). This situation resulted in a country where development aimed at privatizing natural and public assets, such as water. With the creation of the Water Code in 1981, water exploitation rights were freely and “perpetua-



lly” granted to private entities. Within this framework, fruit exports became a renewed source of business, capitalizing on comparative advantages in the globalized agricultural market, such as climatic conditions and counter-seasonality against central capitalist countries (Panez et al., 2018).

In this context, the “Punilla Reservoir” project is currently underway in the commune of San Fabián de Alico, Ñuble. This project has led to conflicts with the community due to expropriations and evictions, which show irregularities in compliance with the mitigation plan and social development plan. Similarly, the initiative for the “Zapallar Reservoir” project remains active, submitted by the Ministry of Public Works to intervene in the Diguillín River.

It is within the Diguillín River where our action-research experience is situated. The Diguillín River originates in the Andes mountain range, at the foot of the Chillán volcano, and is characterized by its turquoise waters and abundant vegetation of native forests, flora, and aquatic fauna. The panoramic view of the territory is sublime from the perspective of any observer (Figure 1).



Figure 1 - Diguillín River. Photograph taken by Claudia Mendoza during fieldwork on September 26, 2021.

This is where the Zapallar Reservoir project aims to be installed, consisting of the construction of an irrigation reservoir that will store excess winter water rights granted by the General Directorate of Water (DGA) to the Hydraulic Works Directorate (DOH). These rights will be used to irrigate new areas during dry periods. The reservoir would be geographically located at the narrowing of the Diguillín River valley, 12 km downstream from its confluence with the Renegado River, both belonging to the Itata River basin in the communes of Pinto and El Carmen, Ñuble region. The proposed dam height is 100 meters, with a projected total intervention area of 385.5 hectares. The reservoir's capacity is estimated at 80 hm³, with an indefinite lifespan (approximately 50 years). The project is promoted as a benefit for local farmers, providing an 85% irrigation security to around 54,630 hectares (currently 44,630 ha) and supplying new irrigation to 10,000 ha in the communes of San Ignacio and El Carmen.

The residents directly involved in this conflict belong to the San Vicente Bajo sector. Those living in this rural area value their local culture and subsistence through small agricultural, livestock, and harvesting activities. About 10 families in this sector would face expropriation if the project were to proceed. Despite being considered minimal by the project promoters, this number of families has been used to construct a hegemonic discourse about the “common good,” emphasizing the benefits for local farmers by increasing irrigated hectares. However, evidence suggests that the majority of beneficiaries are not small farmers but rather agribusiness. During the research team's support process in the Diguillín River community, a review of water exploitation rights (DAA) data in the influence communes of the Zapallar Reservoir (Pinto, El Carmen, and San Ignacio) was conducted. In these communes, the panorama is problematic because the Diguillín River basin was declared depleted in 1993. However, in the last five years, the amount of liters per second delivered through water exploitation rights has significantly increased. Most applicants for rights exceeding 150 lt/s are agricultural societies owned by participants in private organizations managing water rights in the area, such as the “Junta de Vigilancia del Río Diguillín” (a major proponent of the Zapallar Reservoir project). This unequal concentration of water ownership, coupled with the numerous socio-ecological impacts of dam construction, questions the supposed “minimal” impact claimed by the project's proponents. Many human and non-human inhabitants will be affected by the reconfiguration of socio-ecological relationships that the reservoir construction would entail (Panez and Barraza, forthcoming).

Simultaneously, with the increasing water consumption for agribusiness, the region experiences worsening access to drinking water, leading a considerable portion of rural



communities to receive water from tanker trucks. Approximately 30,000 people in the Ñuble region receive 50 liters of water per day per person through tanker trucks (Meleán, 2021).

In summary, the Ñuble region witnesses a contradictory scenario regarding water and nature appropriation. On one hand, the region faces precarious access to water for human consumption and small-scale agriculture, exacerbated by prolonged drought. On the other hand, there is a growing business interest and public-private investment to secure water for agribusiness. While agribusiness actors, with state support, have sought to construct a hegemonic discourse of general well-being and progress for the region, this unequal context has triggered conflicts among those opposing these megaprojects and their promises of progress, pointing towards alternative ways of being and living in the territory.

Building Social Work Experiences in the Face of Extractivism

Understanding the unequal power relations among conflicting actors (State, agribusiness companies, irrigation organizations, affected families, socio-environmental groups, etc.), the research team's experience of accompanying the community from the "Agribusiness and Socio-ecological Inequalities" department at the School of Social Work, University of Bio-Bio, involves various forms of support to collectives and organizations currently resisting the conflict. One of the most significant is the "Diguillín Union Committee," a group formed by residents directly affected by the project.

The history of these families dates back several decades, most of them since the early 20th century, indicating a long-standing presence in the territory. They are mainly engaged in caring for their animals, small-scale livestock activities, wheat cultivation, and the collection of fruits, particularly traditional activities in the area (harvesting red fruits like blackberries and rose hips for jam production). Despite the opposition of the territory's residents to the project, it remains a constant threat to the community, impacting the physical and mental well-being of the inhabitants and causing feelings of distress and desolation due to the potential physical degradation of the landscape or family environment (Mendoza et al., 2021).

However, within the territory, various resistance actions have been taken in response to the conflict. Some of this resistance predates the reservoir idea, starting with the degradation of the territory due to the installation of forestry plantations that have negatively impacted the area, especially concerning water flow, over the last 40 years. Resistances manifest as an "everyday form of life," as Sousa Santos (2021) describes it, referring



to the underground ways of resisting that don't often manifest as open confrontation but deploy strategies to face the material and ideological domination of extractivism in daily life. This resistance materializes in the presence and persistence of families in the territory, resisting despite the widespread threat. This resistance is not a conservative opposition. Organized inhabitants have taken it upon themselves to self-educate on the issue, conducting promotion, information, and organization activities to make visible the implications of the reservoir installation. This leads to more explicit resistances against the reservoir, such as demonstrations confronting project authorities in citizen consultation contexts and meetings, and the creation of a committee to defend their territory. Additionally, other organizations like "Somos Diguillín" and "Diguillín Aguas Libres" have emerged as the conflict becomes more visible in the region.

In this context, the research team built a collaborative relationship with territorial organizations opposing the reservoir. In this collaboration, the central objective of the Social Work team was defined as supporting community protagonism in the resistance process to the project, beyond momentary institutional instances (such as the project's processing in the Environmental Evaluation System [SEA]). From there, specific objectives were established: 1. Strengthen knowledge about the territory through sharing perspectives, knowledge, and experiences related to the territory and the river, and 2. Prepare the work of citizen observations in the Environmental Evaluation System (SEA) by the Diguillín inhabitants, identifying the main threats that the project poses to their lives. With these definitions, the main actions included:

- Social mapping workshops to recognize the knowledge and daily activities of the locals and the ecological and social characteristics of the territory (Figure 2).
- Information activities on the functioning of the Environmental Evaluation System and workshops for the collective construction of observations against the project within the citizen participation process.
- Participatory collection of information on potential socio-ecological impacts of the reservoir construction, forming the basis for the preparation of citizen observations in the Environmental Evaluation System by the community.
- Open virtual discussion on "Agribusiness and Reservoirs in Chile: Socio-ecological Impacts on Territories," as a space of convergence between researchers and activists from different territories who shared their views on the socio-ecological impacts of reservoir projects and how these projects are linked to the predominant agribusiness model in Chile.
- Virtual socio-educational working meetings on water legislation in Chile and the research team's processed information analysis on water exploitation rights used in the area.



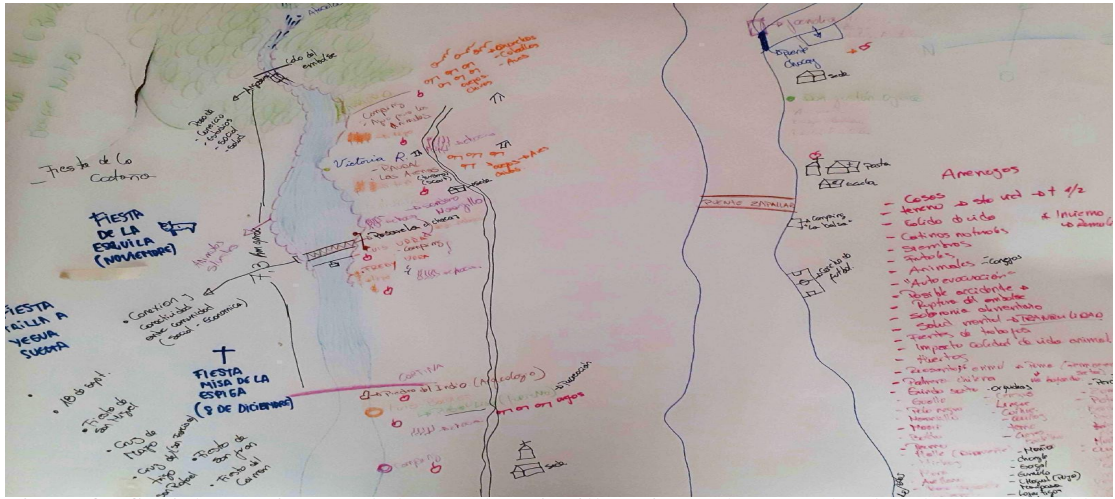


Figure 2 - Social Mapping Workshop at the Diguillín River. Photograph taken by Rocío Valdés during fieldwork on November 29, 2020.

In this way, the work primarily focused on contributing to community processes to confront the reservoir project. Regarding the research work, priority was given to seeking documents and information that would provide theoretical content and empirical support regarding the implications of the reservoir project on the territory. This was also done as a way of collectively understanding the installation of this project not in isolation but in the context of water privatization in Chile and its use for the expansion of agribusiness in different parts of the country.

In light of the actions taken, several reflections emerge from our experiences as a team of academics and students, particularly regarding the engagement in these territories. Firstly, such experiences are deemed significant to enhance professional reflexivity about the standpoint from which we position ourselves, reclaiming our own territorial trajectories and articulating ethical-political convictions based on specific conflicts. Secondly, it is essential to consider the ability to listen to territorial voices, observe their dynamics and relational patterns. This is crucial because it challenges conventional research and prompts us to deeply understand community timelines (distinct from academic timelines) and to genuinely recognize the territorialities of the inhabitants and their particular ways of coexisting in the territory.

Lastly, the focus on community protagonism is seen as a key contribution component that Social Work can make in processes of resistance to extractivism. Far from paternalism or empowerment visions that diminish agency within communities, the emphasis on the communal and the common addresses an often undervalued aspect in opposition



processes to mega-projects. Particularly in Chile, based on our experiences in these issues, we believe that most of the time, when considering professional support, only legal areas (for legal advice to communities regarding environmental institutions) and physical-natural aspects (for surveys of flora, fauna, and water quality supporting the impacts of mega-projects) are viewed as relevant disciplines. However, the communal aspect appears highly relevant, especially in the face of institutional participation processes (such as the SEA in Chile) that are highly restricted and even simulative collaborations to legitimize the installation of extractive projects (Pelfini and Mena, 2017).

Conclusions

In this journey, we have mapped existing connections and possible bridges between Social Work and ecoterritorial conflicts in the face of extractivism. Based on the reviewed literature and the authors' research-action experience, we can summarize three areas for deepening the professional debate on extractivism in Latin American territories: 1) epistemic, 2) investigative, and 3) methodological.

Epistemic contributions aim to broaden the understanding of knowledge in Social Work by starting from territories resisting extractivism. We have previously emphasized the importance for Social Work to perceive territory as a living space, recognizing the multiple relationships that sustain it (Panez, 2020). This involves relationships among different human beings but also with non-human entities. For example, in our experience, considering rivers as living entities (even with memory) has been a fruitful approach to re-center the place of the social (and Social Work in particular) in territorial dynamics. This is relevant for the Social Work discipline because prevailing intervention logics, based on instrumental rationality and a colonial notion of development and progress, conceive nature as an object to be appropriated and manipulated by humans for their own material well-being, with legitimizing or non-problematizing views on resistance processes to extractivism.

This aligns with Jerez's proposal to construct a "territorial ecopolitical rationality" in Social Work, aiming for "the incorporation, valuation, and horizontal participatory dialogue among the diverse cultures and territorialities existing in the areas in question, integrating citizen-ecological perspectives with indigenous-community-ancestral matrices for professional action" (2015, p.6). Ultimately, it is crucial to question the position we occupy as a profession in these contexts, recognizing and challenging the interests in the territory, with a vital emphasis on listening to living beings and other biosphere entities relevant to people inhabiting threatened environmental territories (Jerez, 2017).



Secondly, research in Social Work becomes important as a relevant instrument that can support the construction of collective reflective processes in the face of advancing extractivism. Investigative challenges are diverse, so we will only point out some possible directions. On one hand, conducting research on this topic would substantiate the socio-community impacts caused by extractivism in the territories where it is implemented. In a context where the environmental or biophysical dimension (impact on water sources, soil erosion, specific ecosystems like wetlands, mangroves, etc.) is usually privileged, highlighting the social dimension is a component that requires legitimacy and research support. On the other hand, an important area is the analysis of the multiple experiences and lessons of resistance that emerge against extractivism. Lessons and knowledge put into action in different territories often remain scattered, without further systematization or analysis beyond the specific conflict. Research on these conflicts enables more general analysis to reflect on common and divergent elements among ecoterritorial conflicts and contributes to designing new forms of socio-environmental action and interaction for ongoing resistances.

Beyond these research paths, it seems essential not to lose sight of the ethical-political questioning of what we do with the generated knowledge and information. How do the results of these investigations contribute to resistance processes and political advocacy seeking scenarios beyond extractivism? These questions confront us with the need to transcend the academic scope of research towards challenging political actors and, particularly, the communities opposing extractive projects.

Regarding the methodological realm, the trajectory of certain Social Work, especially that inspired by popular education and/or action research, has generated a rich and diverse range of tools for socio-educational work with communities. This legacy can be a significant professional contribution to territorial resistance processes against extractivism. In addition to this, there is an enriching journey that can be made towards other methodologies relevant to territorial work, seeking to go beyond the divisions between the social/environmental and human/non-human. In the shared experience of resisting the Zapallar reservoir, the social mapping tool allowed us to understand (and recognize) how the territory is configured based on the experiences of its inhabitants. This approach, from subalternized territorialities, legitimizes other knowledge as the foundation for professional action and even as a challenge to public policy. It also allowed us to gather compelling qualitative information about the potential socio-ecological impacts of the reservoir's construction, which the community used to substantiate their rejection of the project in the citizen participation process conducted by the Environmental Assessment System (SEA).



However, the methodological discussion is not limited to the acknowledgment of territorial knowledge or gathering information to confront extractive projects. As socio-environmental devastation caused by extractivism intensifies, the discussion about how to restore the socio-natural cycles that enable territories becomes increasingly necessary. The classic call in Social Work to “contribute to the reconstruction of social fabric” becomes more complex, as there must be material conditions of existence for both humans and non-humans to proliferate community fabrics. This directly connects with discussions in the scientific and political world about socio-metabolic restoration or socio-environmental recovery, understood as actions to recover a degraded territory from a holistic perspective that understands the complexity of community and ecosystem interactions.

These challenges to the profession arise from the conviction and urgency demanded by the socioecological crisis affecting the planet, where extractivism has been one of the causes of deepening this crisis. We are at a moment when the gravity of socioecological issues in different parts of the world is evident. Issues that decades ago were discussed in terms of future risk projections (mega-fires, prolonged droughts, massive species extinction, floods, etc.), we are already experiencing. We agree with those who affirm that the current socioecological crisis is part of a crisis of the hegemonic civilizational pattern (Machado, 2015; Svampa, 2019, among others). It is the dominant conception of our being/being on the planet that is profoundly questioned, for its impacts on Earth’s socio-natural cycles. In this scenario, it is also necessary to question the meaning of Social Work at this crossroads and to question its current direction.

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