

Globalising sustainable development: Decolonial disruptions and environmental justice in Bolivia

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The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the new global development goals guiding the work of mainstream development actors until 2030. The shift to “sustainable development” marks a response to climate change and constitutes a rebranding of international development as global development, prominently by the UN, World Bank, and IMF. In this paper, I draw from recent fieldwork in Bolivia to question what is being globalised. In response to calls for northern geographers to better attend to new forms of coloniality and knowledge production, I take seriously indigenous agendas for development, land, and sovereignty to critique Agenda 2030 with decolonial territorial agendas and theories of environmental justice. I argue that the implementation of Agenda 2030 has reconfigured the borderlands between international development and indigenous territorial agendas. In a drastic reworking of the “boomerang effect,” development infrastructure is being disconnected from anti-extractive indigenous territorial politics, as the modes of engagement between states, the private sector, and NGOs are reconfigured by the unifying agenda of sustainable development – weakening both indigenous struggles for territorial sovereignty and the environmental remit of the SDGs. An environmental justice perspective locates the case of the *Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro (TIPNIS)* *Secure* case within a bigger struggle between local claims to land and global extractive capital, foregrounding that decolonial agendas for territory are entangled with contemporary extractive capitalism. In seeking consensus between states, the private sector, and civil society, the SDGs minimise the sites of conflict that instruct “sustainable development,” revealing both a critical weakness of the SDGs and a pathway towards their greater effectiveness.

KEYWORDS

Bolivia, decolonisation, extractivism, global development, sustainable development, territory

1 | INTRODUCTION

The 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the new global development goals guiding the work of mainstream development actors until 2030. Seventeen SDGs form a part of Agenda 2030, which unites states, development banks, multilateral and bilateral institutions, international non-government organisations (INGOs), civil society

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organisations, and, increasingly, private sector actors in balancing social, economic, and environmental arenas within a “plan of action for people, planet and prosperity” (Mawdsley, 2018a; United Nations (UN), 2015, p. 3). The shift to *sustainable* development marks a response to climate change and the environmental remit of the SDGs is welcomed by mainstream development actors as an important step in addressing environmental degradation (UN, 2015). The SDGs also constitute a rebranding of international development as global development, prominently by the UN, World Bank, and IMF. Although development geography and development studies have long investigated the global dynamics of international development – for example, continuities from the colonial period (see Kothari, 2005; McEwan, 2008, p. 1) – the SDGs constitute a marked shift in the orientation and language of mainstream development actors. In this paper, I question what is being globalised.

To further a critique of Agenda 2030, I draw from recent fieldwork on indigenous territorial movements' experiences of resource extraction and the early uptake of the SDGs in Bolivia. I combine the decolonising agendas of these socio-territorial movements with theories of environmental justice to analyse the global sustainable development agenda. Following Tuck and Yang (2012), my engagement with decolonisation (as a white, female scholar in the global North) involves taking seriously indigenous agendas for development, land, and sovereignty, and investigating how these are treated by the sustainable development agenda. I argue that in Bolivia (a country where socio-environmental agendas have proved conflictive, historically powerful development actors have been recently rejected, indigenous alternatives proposed, and extractive-led development mainstreamed) the uptake of the SDGs strengthens partnerships and consensus between capital, states, and international development actors, at the expense of the decolonial territorial agendas that are proving key to challenging frontiers of resource extraction. In a drastic reworking of the “boomerang effect” (Keck & Sikkink, 1999: p. 2), development infrastructure is being disconnected from anti-extractive indigenous territorial politics, as state- and growth-friendly interpretations of sustainable development are incorporated into global development discourse – weakening both indigenous struggles for territorial sovereignty and the environmental remit of the SDGs.

To make this argument, I first introduce the SDGs, sustainable development, and environmental justice. Second, I introduce decoloniality, primarily through Bolivian decolonising agendas. Third, I analyse a recent conflict over the *Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Secure* (Isiboro Secure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS)), reading TIPNIS territorial agendas with environmental justice to critique the SDGs. I analyse how development has been negotiated in the TIPNIS, in interactions with the government and with international NGOs to question how shifts to global development impact decolonial agendas and bids for environmental justice.

2 | SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The 2015 UN SDGs incorporate a response to climate change into development targets, comprised of 17 goals, quantified by 169 targets and measured by 230 indicators (UN, 2015). They require, by UN estimates, US\$90 trillion of funding over the 15 years (UN, 2017). The SDGs create a framework of poverty reduction + the environment. This summary, however, is cautionary because increasing partnership between development institutions and the private sector have led Mawdsley (2018b) to argue that poverty reduction is (once again) being reframed as secondary to economic growth. For Banks (this issue), these new partnerships are consolidating the financialisation of development.

As an environmental initiative, the concept of sustainable development is old and much critiqued. Since its mainstreaming by the 1987 Brundtland Commission, the concept has been repeatedly found to be an ineffective resolution to tensions between development and the environment (Redclift, 2005; Svampa, 2012). New theories and agendas for socio-environmental change (and development) have since emerged, such as proposal for planetary boundaries (Rockström et al., 2009), degrowth (Kallis, 2011), half earth conservation (Wilson, 2016), whole earth conservation (Büscher et al., 2017), and environmental justice. The concept of environmental justice emerged from North American struggles against the unequal distribution of environmental ills (and intersections with dynamics of race, gender, or class (Bullard, 2018)) but has developed into a much broader field. Schlosberg (2004, 2009) defines environmental justice as distributive justice (the ills and benefits of interventions), recognition (whose experiences and values are heard and included), procedural justice (who shapes decision making), and capabilities (to include the structuring inequalities between capital and civil society). Environmental justice has been promoted as important to sustainability by ensuring that no one group is disproportionately disadvantaged by public policy (Agyeman, 2002; Agyeman & Evans, 2004). More recently, environmental justice conflicts have been viewed as struggles “over the kinds of worlds ... people want to create and the types of ecologies they want to live in” (Scheidel et al., 2018, p. 573) and thus crucial for defining sustainability. When combined with decolonial agendas, we attend to the structural conditions of coloniality, to the ways that land underpins politics, culture, livelihoods, and socio-environmental trajectories, and link individual territorial campaigns to wider trends of resource-related land grabs and conflict.

3 | DECOLONISATION

In Latin America, thinkers of the modernity/coloniality/decoloniality (MCD) collective have explored the many legacies of European colonialism – for example, modern institutions (such as the nation-state), capitalism, and the logic of Eurocentric science (see Mignolo, 2000; Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Combined, such legacies enforce and continue “coloniality,” defined as the “long-standing patterns of power that emerged as a result of colonialism, but that define culture, labor, intersubjective relations, and knowledge production well beyond the strict limits of colonial administrations” (Maldonado-Torres, 2007, p. 243). Coloniality has been well-identified in the development project, which has long been forcefully critiqued for its emergence from Empire and for various neo-colonial practices (Escobar, 2005; Escobar, 2010), for example, foregrounding “the significance of language and representation, the power of development discourse and its material effects on the lives of people subject to development policies” (McEwan, 2008).

Mignolo, however, argues that there is now “epistemic disobedience and de-linking from the magic of the Western idea of modernity, ideals of humanity and promises of economic growth and financial prosperity” (2009, p. 161). Decolonial praxis is growing as a response to modernity/coloniality, evading neat theorisation (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018) to promote multiple ways of knowing, living, and world-making in attempts to reverse colonial histories, hierarchies, and knowledges (Tuck & Yang, 2012). Calls to decolonise knowledge, however, recognise knowledge as “deeply imbricated in power” (Noxolo, 2017) and tied to place, time, and location – namely the political, material, and structural contexts of knowledge production (Noxolo, 2017). Decolonising knowledge, therefore, involves a radical restructuring of resources and land (Esson et al., 2017; Tuck & Yang, 2012).

In Latin America, territory is uniquely (and broadly) defined as “the appropriation of space in pursuit of political projects” (Halvorsen, 2019, p. 1) with conceptualisations and practices of territory enabling ways of life and being (Escobar, 2008). Demands for territory, however, have been hampered by continuing state control. Recognition of communal property and land rights for Afro-descendent and indigenous peoples during the 1980s and 1990s, for example, largely strengthened and extended neoliberal governance (Hale, 2002; Wainwright & Bryan, 2009). Territorial autonomy and borders have also never been impenetrable to development. Rather, indigenous territories have been understood as a buffer for market economies (Li, 2010), as an ethno-environmental fix (Anthias & Radcliffe, 2015), and as hybrid spaces that have disciplined indigeneity with conservation (Hope, 2017). I draw on the concept of “critical border thinking” to analyse the inter- or intra-subaltern mediations of knowledge production in such a context (Mignolo, 2000), to trace the emergence of radical difference in a world where no one sits outside of coloniality (Mignolo & Walsh, 2018). Rather than pitching the development project as separate (and opposite) to decolonial territorial agendas, this approach foregrounds how both interact, enabling an examination of how sustainable development reconstitutes these borderlands.

In Bolivia, decolonising agendas were central to the 2005 election of Evo Morales, following social movement demands for a radical restructuring of society, land, and the state. The country became a plurinational state with the 2009 Constitution, recognising multiple nations, histories, knowledges, and cosmologies, and constituting a process for “territorial resignification and demographic occupation of state territory by multiple social movements” (Mamani, 2011, p. 32). A political process to strengthen indigenous territorial autonomy was introduced, extending existing debates about indigenous territorial rights and citizenship (Gustafson, 2002; Radcliffe, 2012).

Decolonisation by the state also involved replacing Eurocentric notions of development with indigenous knowledges and ideas. *Vivir Bien* (*Buen Vivir* or *sumak kawsay* in Ecuador) roughly translates as “good living.” Drafted by contemporary indigenous scholars in critique of hegemonic logics and practices of development, *Vivir Bien* emerged from multiple indigenous cosmovisions, socio-natures, and ontologies, decentring economic growth to promote living well within your community and in harmonious relationships with the non-human (Gudynas, 2011; Walsh, 2010, 2011). Its implementation and uptake, however, has been contentious, with significant differences in how it has been operationalised by states and understood by indigenous communities (Gudynas, 2016; Radcliffe, 2015). In Bolivia, *Vivir Bien* has been partly constituted by state commitments to resource extraction.

Extractivism has proved a determining force across Latin America (Galeano, 1997), constituting an extractive imperative that has reworked progressive agendas (Arsel et al., 2016). In Bolivia, this has limited decolonisation (Anthias, 2018), shaped territorial rights (Bebbington & Bury, 2013; Laing, 2012, 2020), and disciplined indigenous environmentalism (Hope, 2016). Commitments to extractivism intensified after Morales' election and “post-neoliberalism” was increasingly understood in relation to neoextractivism (Andreucci & Radhuber, 2017; Veltmeyer & Petras, 2014). Extractive-led development has enabled significant reductions in poverty, yet such successes have not equated to the advancement of indigenous rights, participatory development, or land reform and the agro-industrial elite has retained power (and land) (McKay, 2019; Radhuber, 2012; Webber, 2017).

“Progressive neo-extractivism” was enabled by maintaining the institutional arrangements established during neoliberalism, though the renationalisation of the sector gave Bolivia a higher percentage of royalties (US\$3.7 billion in 2015) (Fabricant & Postero, 2015, p. 273; Kaup, 2010). The Morales administration contracted transnational firms within a nationalised hydrocarbon framework; for example, Brazil’s Petrobras, Spain’s Repsol, the UK’s British Gas, and France’s Total (Fabricant & Postero, 2015). This has entailed new sites of extraction, new infrastructure and rises in sites of conflict (Gonzales, 2014). Aggregate figures for poverty reduction mask the complex and divergent experiences on neo-extractivism, which created opposition to the MAS [Movimiento al Socialismo] party and contributed to their loss of power in 2019 (argued as both a far-right coup and result of government fraud). In 2015, the Bolivian government signed up to the SDGs, aligning the goals to their interpretation of *Vivir Bien* and within the parameters of extractive-led development (Hope, forthcoming).

The entry point for analysing how indigenous socio-territorial agendas are treated by the sustainable development agenda is a long-running conflict over road building in the TIPNIS, which spans 1.2 million hectares of the Amazon basin and sits at the Andean–Amazonian interface (part of an oil- and gas-rich arc spanning Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador, Colombia, and Venezuela) (Hindery, 2013). In the 1990s, the national park was recognised as the historical territory of *Tsimané*, *Yuracaré*, and *Mojeño-Trinitario* communities, following the 1990 lowland indigenous March for Territory and Dignity. In 2011, the government started building a road, planned to run past two large hydrocarbon pools within the territory. TIPNIS communities were not consulted, despite legal commitments to ILO 169 Right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent. A later government consultation was discredited by an independent review and road building was postponed (Caritas Boliviana, 2013). In 2017, plans for the road resurfaced as Morales retracted the “untouchable” status of the TIPNIS in Law 969.

The TIPNIS dispute is seminal to understanding intersections between resource extraction and both post-neoliberalism and plurinationalism. It has been studied for being as much about development as the environment (McNeish, 2013), as a long-running decolonial struggle (Laing, 2020), as rooted in historical lowland land politics (Fabricant & Postero, 2015), for how TIPNIS environmentalism challenged extractivism (Hope, 2016), and in regards to indigenous organisational politics (Hirsch, 2019). Here, a closer look at negotiations of “development” in the TIPNIS extends our understanding of sustainable and global development. This analysis is based on fieldwork since 2011, primarily two recent fieldtrips in 2016 (two months) and 2019 (one month), when I carried out 23 interviews with TIPNIS leaders and other socio-territorial indigenous leaders and activists, nine with international and national NGOs, one with a bilateral institution and three with key government ministries. I carried out participant mapping with interviewees and undertook participant observation at protests and meetings.

4 | NEGOTIATING THE BORDERLANDS I: THE STATE

In 2011, road building into the TIPNIS began. This incursion into the territory was seen as the latest in a long line of threats to the TIPNIS. A previous leader, for example, remembered conflicts from when he was a child:

The first time that we stopped a tractor ... entering the TIPNIS was in 1989. I was a child at school and we were leaving school when the tractor passed by our community. We made two columns and crossed into where the tractor was passing. We did not allow them to enter and this is where I can remember my first fights for the TIPNIS. ... So my fight for the TIPNIS started when I was a boy and continues now. (Pablo)

Many of the TIPNIS protesters had not only marched to secure indigenous rights in the 1990 March for Territory and Dignity but later campaigned for Evo Morales. Some leaders played a role in his early government, as part of the Unity Pact and Constitutional Assembly (2006–2007). However, the road-building project foregrounded the multiple (and disparate) articulations of indigeneity in Bolivia (see Canessa, 2014) and their different alignments to the extractive project (see Hope, 2016). A uniting force of the TIPNIS conflict, linking this conflict to other lowland indigenous territories, was the belief that “first they will come to the TIPNIS and later they will start with the other indigenous territories” (Ernesto). In a 2018 meeting of lowland indigenous leaders, the TIPNIS was given as an example of the wider undermining of indigenous territorial rights in the face of megadevelopment projects and new transport infrastructure.

A central argument for the road was that it would bring economic benefits and growth to the region. This would happen in two ways: by securing market access for TIPNIS communities and by securing new sites for hydrocarbon mining, thus increasing state budgets for development. Both the road and the planned exploration were backed by transnational capital and interests. The road was initially funded by the Brazilian National Bank of Economic and Social Development (BNDES) which agreed to loan 80% of the US\$415 million construction cost (Webber, 2012); contracted to the Brazilian engineering and infrastructure conglomerate OAS; and linked to the regional infrastructural project, IIRSA (which funds the transport

infrastructure needed for resource extraction and export). The gas pools were already contracted for exploration, to the state oil company YPF, Petróleos de Venezuela, Brazilian Petrobras, and Total (CEDLA, 2012). The conflict can therefore be located on the Environmental Justice Atlas as one of many conflicts between a community and global capital.

The narrative of development became central to the TIPNIS conflict early on, before the government signed up to the SDGs in 2015. The government used promises of development to secure support for the road and, despite *Vivir Bien*, these pledges were akin to modernisation approaches. In January 2013, US\$14 million was promised for basic services, such as water, electricity, and health, as well as for transportation, telecommunications, and disaster prevention (Achtenberg, 2013). Walter Delgaillo, Minister of Public Works, Services and Living (*Obras Públicas, Servicios y Vivienda*) explained this as

a big opportunity for (indigenous communities) to be integrated, in an autonomous manner, into the process of national development, supported by the government (and) nation. (*La Razón* 11 July 2011, <https://www.la-razon.com>)

Government proposals were challenged by TIPNIS leaders, however, who wanted to negotiate how their territory and communities would be developed. Surprisingly, at times very similar arguments ideas of development were used to reject the road. As illustrated below, the road was rejected precisely because it would bring no such benefits:

Without doubt roads bring progress. But they also bring problems, no? We do not want this road, instead we want roads that will be useful to the people of these communities ... Where they want the road now is of no benefit to TIPNIS communities. (Elena)

We don't want a road because it will not benefit anyone here. It's going to benefit businesses, ranchers... (Angelo)

Underpinning all discussion was concern for territorial rights. A significant reason for rejecting the road was because of the new claims it would bring for land, primarily from coca growers and small-scale farmers (*cocaleros*). The southern cone of the park, named Polygon 7, was reterritorialised for *cocaleros* in 2009. Polygon 7 was explained by TIPNIS leaders as “where the narco traffickers have entered the park” and where they “grow nothing apart from coca” (Benicio). Many TIPNIS leaders thought that the road was being built to help *cocaleros* enter the park, relevant to wider debates in Bolivia about land use and productivity. In interviews, health care, schools, and electricity were not outright rejected. Instead, “development” was sought in ways that would both complement and support the TIPNIS as territory – with development understood within the parameters of territorial autonomy. Rather than wanting better access to the nearest city, for example, they wanted healthcare and schooling within the TIPNIS. Some people spoke of building a university so that young people would no longer leave their communities, as quoted below:

[the government] never respond to the requests of indigenous pueblos, so young people go in search of a better life, they're going to migrate, to the capital, to the cities, it is already happening and it spells the loss of the indigenous pueblos in the TIPNIS. (Alejandra)

Interviews, informal discussions, and observation of indigenous community meetings gave a sense of how development was defined within the TIPNIS – by a better river system and ports, small-scale agriculture projects, the harvesting of wild cacao, and by a university and education system located within the territory. Leaders and communities were not rejecting the broad concept of “development” but wanted to influence, shape, and plan a future rooted in their territorial autonomy and ambitions for future generations. Requests to have the road re-routed nearer the TIPNIS and around the perimeter of the protected area, however, were refused because the road would no longer bypass the pools of natural gas (see SERNAP, 2012).

The arrival of the sustainable development agenda brought subtle but significant changes for the politics of the TIPNIS. In 2015, the MAS government aligned the SDGs to their existing development plan. Although *Vivir Bien* was created as an alternative to growth-focused theories of development, its alignment with sustainable development has legitimised state interpretations of *Vivir Bien* and merged *Vivir Bien*, extractive-led development, and sustainable development (Hope, forthcoming). The UN prioritises partnership with states and Agenda 2030 seeks consensus between states, the private sector, and (some parts of) civil society. As the sustainable development agenda has assembled, government partnerships with transnational mining companies have been consolidated – the same companies that have been invited to “shape and lead”

on trajectories of sustainable development since the planning stages (UNDP, 2016). For the TIPNIS campaign, as argued below, the most significant consequence has been the reorientation of development infrastructure and priorities.

5 | NEGOTIATING THE BORDERLANDS II: NGOS

There has been a long history of NGOs supporting indigenous development in Bolivia. International NGOs have played an important role in the lowland indigenous rights movements in Bolivia (Andolina et al., 2009). Indigenous movements in the Andes have been identified as increasingly “transnational, multi-ethnic and institutional” and as “beneficiaries” of development intervention and economic globalisation (2009, p. 1). A “boomerang effect” has also been recognised, explaining how groups use global networks to negotiate with national governments (Keck & Sikkink, 1999). What is often less explicit in writing about decolonised socio-natures, however, is that international NGOs have been key supporters of the indigenous organisations and platforms that developed key decolonising initiatives in Bolivia, for example, the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth. Guided by commitments to indigenous political participation, NGOs have provided training, capacity building, and funding to indigenous organisations (interviews). This has included supporting indigenous leaders in the TIPNIS, for example, to become leaders (interviews). As indigenous politics have become more divided, however, international NGOs have become tentative about where to offer support. They have been disciplined in their take-up of the SDGs to suit extractive and state interests, retreating from state/society conflicts (Hope, forthcoming). International NGOs thus balance their own targets with government interests.

Crucially, the SDGs are inaccessible for those without an entry point within government or the UN. It is hard to jump scales or bypass the national context, for example, to join global forums for indigenous peoples. Boomerang politics are not accessible to TIPNIS leaders, as growth-friendly interpretations of indigenous development are brought into global (sustainable) development networks and discourse. Participant mapping revealed that those campaigning for territorial rights (and against extractive-led development) are now networking with other territorial campaigns and with small activist *colectivos* in Bolivia. They seek the support of international NGOs but want commitments to “the needs of indigenous groups” and “to reducing the environmental risks” (Carlos, indigenous activist).

The environmental wellbeing of the TIPNIS has been repeatedly raised by activists, both in appeals to the global value of biodiversity conservation and as the basis of communal life within the territory. Attempts to make claims for both the environment and development in the TIPNIS, however, have repeatedly stalled. The government has dismissed environmental concerns as due to the meddling of NGOs, despite a lack of open involvement (Hope, 2016). Government interpretations of *Vivir Bien*, as strengthened by the UN, have reduced its utility for territorial campaigns that discuss its appropriation as “a discourse of hydroelectricity, mining, extraction, hydrocarbons” (Berta). When asked about their visions of sustainable development, a TIPNIS leader was clear that sustainable development was an imported term and that they were committed to territorial autonomy.

6 | CONCLUSION

In this paper, I have critiqued the global claims of Agenda 2030 with TIPNIS decolonial territorial agendas and theories of environmental justice. In response to calls for northern geographers to better attend to new forms of coloniality and knowledge production (Clement, 2020; Elliott-Cooper, 2017; Noxolo, 2017), I have investigated how the global sustainable development agenda encounters and impacts indigenous territorial agendas.

Following Mignolo and Walsh (Mignolo, 2000; Mignolo and Walsh, 2018), I have argued that the implementation of Agenda 2030 has reconfigured the borderlands between international development and indigenous territorial agendas. Though very different in orientation, on-the-ground indigenous territorial movements and development actors have long interacted in negotiations of funding, training, and political recognition – but the politics and partnerships of sustainable development are reworking access to development infrastructure for particular territorial agendas. In a drastic reworking of the “boomerang effect” (Keck & Sikkink, 1999), development infrastructure is being disconnected from anti-extractive indigenous territorial politics, as state- and growth-friendly interpretations of sustainable development are incorporated into global development discourse. Territorial movements are losing their ability to articulate with development discourse, as the modes of engagement between states, the private sector, and NGOs are reconfigured by the unifying agenda of sustainable development.

In Bolivia, the territorial agendas and movements excluded by global sustainable development are those that challenge neo-extractivism. An environmental justice perspective links the TIPNIS case to a bigger struggle between local claims to land and global extractive capital, foregrounding that decolonial agendas for territory are entangled with contemporary

extractive capitalism. In seeking consensus between states, the private sector, and civil society, the SDGs minimise the sites of conflict that instruct “sustainable development,” revealing both a critical weakness of the SDGs and a pathway towards their greater effectiveness.

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DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The data that support the findings of this study are available on request from the corresponding author. The data are not publicly available due to privacy or ethical restrictions.

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