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Water disputes in Argentina. Analysing environmental movements against the mining industry in Mendoza, Argentina

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Abstract

During the last decades, social environmental movements (SEM) and protests have been arising in response to emerging social environmental conflicts that have been occurring across the globe. In contrast to the globally predominant neoliberal economic system, they fight for an alternative way of living and coping with nature and its goods and criticize persisting postcolonial power relations between countries of the Global North and South. This paper explores the claim for a right to water in terms of the right to nature, within the context of postcolonial and neoliberal structures in Mendoza, Argentina. Drawing on qualitative semi-standardized interviews with local activists and environmental experts from Mendoza as well as participatory observation and media compilation, we analyze key tools and strategies of the socio-environmental movements. The investigation points out how neoliberal restructuring processes since the end of the 20th century have triggered water conflicts in the province and in what way those are embedded in postcolonial structures.

Zusammenfassung

In den letzten Jahrzehnten sind soziale Umweltbewegungen und Proteste als Reaktion auf die weltweit auftretenden Umweltkonflikte entstanden. Im Gegensatz zum weltweit vorherrschenden neoliberalen Wirtschaftssystem fordern sie eine alternative Art zu leben und mit der Natur und ihren Gütern umzugehen. Außerdem kritisieren sie die fortbestehenden postkolonialen Machtverhältnisse zwischen Ländern des globalen Nordens und Südens. Dieser Artikel untersucht die Forderung nach einem Recht auf Wasser im Sinne des Rechts auf Natur im Kontext postkolonialer und neoliberaler Strukturen in Mendoza, Argentinien. Auf der Grundlage von qualitativen, halbstandardisierten Interviews mit lokalen Aktivist*innen und Umweltexpert*innen aus Mendoza sowie teilnehmender Beobachtung und Medienanalyse untersuchen wir die wichtigsten Instrumente und Strategien der sozio-ökologischen Bewegungen. Die Untersuchung zeigt auf, wie neoliberale Umstrukturierungsprozesse seit dem Ende des 20. Jahrhunderts Wasserkonflikte in der Provinz ausgelöst haben und in welcher Weise diese in postkoloniale Strukturen eingebettet sind.

Keywords social movements, water protection, right to nature, extractivism, Latin America

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1. Introduction

Since the 1970s, neoliberalism has reshaped the world's political and economic system. These changes have led to forms of accumulation by dispossession of nature, especially in countries in the Global South (*Boden* 2011; *Harvey* 2004). The commodification and privatization of natural resources is commonly accompanied by environmental destruction in these countries (*Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* 2018). Consequently, disputes arise over access to natural resources and their distribution and management (*Merlinsky* 2013; *Armas-Díaz* and *Sabaté-Bel* 2022). In response to these disputes, environmental movements (EMs) have been formed since the early 21st century (*Perreault* 2008). These movements uphold alternative forms of economic and political development. Through their numerous different types of protest activities, they have moved these disputes into the public arena (*Motta* and *Nilsen* 2011; *Merlinsky* 2013). The fight to prevent the destruction or deterioration of natural resources is a powerful source of opposition to neoliberalism (*Heynen* et al. 2007) and a new source of possible future alternatives (*Smith* 2010).

One natural resource that has sparked off many different environmental disputes in countries in the Global South is water (*Bakker* 2007; *Bakker* 2013; *Büscher* and *Fletcher* 2020; *Magdahl* 2022; *Tippin* 2022). Even though it is crucial to the survival of any living organism, half the population of the Global South's megacities still suffers from insufficient access to safe, affordable water. This lack of access is aggravated by water use in numerous economic production activities, such as agriculture or the mining industry, leading to its commodification and privatization (*Swyngedouw* 2007; *Leão Bordalo* 2019; *Schmidt* et al. 2022).

The consequences of all this can be observed in the province of Mendoza, in western Argentina, close to the Andes mountains. In particular, large-scale mining projects in the province in the early 21st century have boosted disputes over the limited available water and the regulation on water pollution. Concretely, Act 7.722 on the protection of water in Mendoza has given rise to much debate, with numerous attempts to amend it in order to permit the use of a variety of chemical substances in mining processes. Above all, attempts by the local government to replace Act 7.722 (*Ministerio de Justicia y Derechos Humanos* 2007) with Act 9.209 prompted big protests in the capital of Mendoza on December 23rd, 2019 (*Wagner* 2014; *Wagner* 2020).

These protests were headed by the EMs that have emerged all over the province since the early 21st century. They strongly criticize attempts to amend Act 7.722, striving to protect water resources and to guarantee their fair distribution (*Wagner* 2019). A study of these disputes from a postcolonial perspective sheds further light on the analysis by incorporating important issues, such as cultural identity, changing access to land and nature, and why this change in access has come about (*Valiente* 2010; *Ensabella* and *Valiente* 2019).

In previous research on EMs and water disputes in South America, the issue has been explored from varying perspectives. For example, *Wagner* (2014) studied the historical evolution of water disputes in Mendoza, analysing the political background, whereas *Bragatti* and *Telarolli de Almeida Leite* (2020) concentrated on the importance of coordinated actions by South American countries at a regional level. *Valiente* (2010), on the other hand, focused more closely on the relations between postcolonialism and large-scale mining, taking the example of the province of Catamarca in Argentina. What is clearly missing in existing research in this field is a closer insight into the perspective of environmental activists and their strategies in tackling socio-environmental water disputes (*Laroque* 2020; *Rodríguez-Labajos* and *Martínez-Alier* 2015). Hence, this paper aims to offer a better understanding of the perspectives of the local population – and environmental experts and activists in particular – in order to analyse the role of EMs in the province of Mendoza and their potential in triggering political change. We will also discuss how they are embedded in processes of neoliberalism and postcolonialism.

Access to water resources and their management are a central focus of debate in Latin America. Related struggles can open up new opportunities for populations who traditionally go unheard in the formulation of water policies (*Dupuits* and *Mancilla García* 2016). Academic discourse and political practice in Latin America are triggering debate on the exploitation of populations and nature, on how to narrow economic and social inequalities, and on the creation of new legal bodies (*Christel* and *Gutiérrez* 2017). Consequently, on the one hand, we analyse how postcolonial and neoliberal contexts have given rise to water disputes in the province of Mendoza and, on the other, we explore what kinds of spatial, social and political strategies have been designed and used by movements to halt changes to Act 7.722.

The paper starts by explaining the theoretical background to the emergence of EMs in Latin America in the context of neoliberalism and neoextractivism. A description of the methodology used in the research study is then given, followed by a discussion of the main outcomes. Lastly, a summary is made of the key results, outlining any further research that will be needed.

2. Neoliberal extractivism in Latin-American countries and the resulting disputes

Since the 1970s, world economic structures have been modified by neoliberal policies. The growing importance of transnational corporations has boosted trade and transactions worldwide. This change in the world economy has accentuated the asymmetry of power relations between the Global North and the Global South. While the Global North profits from these new international transactions and from natural resources harvested in countries in the Global South, the latter is faced with important repercussions, from the exploitation of its natural resources and the destruction of agricultural land and biodiversity to the disruption of local communities and their way of life. This has given rise to the emergence of socio-environmental disputes, particularly in countries that are a source of key natural resources (*Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* 2018). Discussions and protest demonstrations on access to natural resources and their management and distribution bring the local population in different Latin-American countries into confrontation with their respective governments and with transnational corporations (*Svampa* 2019).

Since the 1990s and early 21st century, these tensions have prompted the creation of EMs (*Motta* and *Nilsen* 2011; *Merlinsky* and *Wagner* 2019; *Merlinsky* 2013), driven by deep discontent and frustration with political parties (*Adler Hellman* 1992). Although these movements were formed in response to a specific environmental problem that causes "extreme forms of dispossession, poverty and inequality" (*Motta* and *Nilsen* 2011: 2), they also propose alternatives to current political and economic structures.

Apostolopoulou and *Cortés Vázquez* (2018) define the emergence of EMs as a shift from the "right to the city" (*Lefèbvre* 1968) to the "right to nature". They describe it as:

> […] the right to influence and command the processes by which nature-society relationships are made, remade and disrupted by generalized urbanization and economic development […]. (*Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* 2018: 6)

The said authors argue that people affected by the environmental costs of the exploitation of natural resources have a right to demand environmental justice and the protection of nature. In order to do so, they must intervene in economic and political decision-making. *Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* (2018) point out that the *right to nature* turns the spotlight on what kind of people are in charge of the economic use and exploitation of nature and *who profits* from this. By defending the *right to nature,* the pathway to new forms of emancipatory politics can be paved (idem: 6-7).

In a similar vein, *Clark* (2013) continued to explore this right, associating it with the right to spatial justice – that is, the deepening of democracy and the decommodification of space and nature –, with these concepts being transposed to the specific framework of islands (*Armas-Díaz* et al. forthcoming). Other authors developed the idea of "southern thought" (*Cassano* 2012: 1, cited by *Kallis* et al. 2022): a way of thinking contrary to Western values that takes a specific form in island regions, aimed at sustainability through degrowth, coexistence, and a respect for nature. In Latin America, these rights are referred to as *Otros saberes.* They are innovative approaches to resource use, associated relations between humans and the local environment, values, the control and management of specific resources by the local population, grassroots knowledge production, and people's potential to organize themselves into groups for more socially, economically and ecologically just purposes. Spatial justice also encompasses seeking ways for historically marginalized communities subject to extractivism and colonial practices to combat uneven development and to imagine and create alternative futures.

3. Postcolonial trends in Latin America and the commodification of nature

With the beginning of the Capitalocene, the relationship between society and nature was disrupted, leading to a shift in the perception of natural resources over the following centuries, with them coming to be regarded not so much as communal natural assets but

more as commodities (*Moore* 2015). Today, the view tends to prevail that natural resources are commodities with a certain economic value. As *Smith* (2007) argues, our relationship and understanding of nature has been transformed into "nothing less than a major strategy for ecological commodification, marketization, and financialization, which radically intensifies and deepens the penetration of nature by capital" through the emergence of new ecological commodities that "embody the appropriation of nature as an accumulation strategy" (*Smith* 2007: 2, 18).

This "commodification of nature" (*Harvey* 2004; *Cortés Vázquez* and *Apostolopoulou* 2019,; *Sabaté-Bel* and *Armas-Díaz* 2022) is leading to forms of neoextractivism and to the consequent overexploitation of natural resources – often of a non-renewable kind –, especially in various Latin-American countries (*Merlinsky* 2013; *Svampa* 2019). The neoliberalization of nature has transformed non-human nature into an interchangeable good that can be quantified, bought and sold in parts, and reduced to ecosystem environmental services (*Büscher* et al. 2012).

In critical research, the negative effects of neoliberal reforms have been highlighted (see *Castree* 2010), including both the environmental impacts and different forms of accumulation by dispossession (*Harvey* 2004). Opponents of the commodification of the non-human world react in different ways to dispossession. In particular, neoliberal management of the environment upon which people's livelihoods or well-being depend has resulted in protests by civil society, such as communing practices and protest demonstrations (*Bakker* 2012; *Castree* 2010; *Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* 2018).

Debates on the neoliberalization of natural resources are particularly prevalent in the water sector. Increasingly, water grabbing has been expanding to encompass the mining, hydropower, energy, and urban water supply sectors. The type of threat to the quality of water resources will depend on the sector that is using it (i.e. the mining, hydrocarbon or hydropower sectors) (*Duarte-Abadía* and *Boelens* 2016).

In academic literature on the subject, the right to water's potential has been highlighted in both improving the material conditions of marginalized communities and in challenging underlying processes of dispossession in contextually specific ways (*Sultana* and *Loftus* 2020), while also emphasizing the key role played by social movements in securing access to water or water justice for indigenous and disadvantaged sectors of the population in the Global South (*Wagle* 2022).

The resulting economic, social and environmental asymmetries between the Global North and the Global South (*Svampa* 2019) are not only embedded in neoliberal economic structures, since they are also rooted in new dependencies and forms of postcolonialism or neo-colonialism that should be taken into account in analyses of EMs (*Escobar* 1992).

With the purchase of territories and the imposition of technologies on the local population for the extraction of natural resources (for example in the mining industry or agriculture), capitalist logic takes precedence over the protection of the local population and their territory (*Machado Aráoz* 2011). Many local governments support these developments by pointing out that foreign direct investment will boost the local economy (*Svampa* 2019; *Castro* et al. 2022).

Given the above, it makes sense to analyse these disputes from a postcolonial perspective. This could also help to highlight asymmetries in power relations between dominating and dominated states (*Svampa* 2019), hence contributing to the analysis of EMs and their demands for changes to current scenarios. The key role of indigenous communities and rural populations in the mobilization of EMs (*Wagner* and *Walter* 2020) further emphasizes the interest of analysing the issue from a postcolonial perspective.

This paper focuses on water as it is not only crucial to agricultural production and the mining industry among other sectors, but also to the survival of all lifeforms (*Swyngedouw* 2007). The viewpoints of socio-environmental activists in the province of Mendoza (Argentina) are analysed in order to gain an insight into how they have managed to continue mobilizing the population and keeping the issue of water on the political agenda. We also demonstrate the significance of legal frameworks in socio-environmental disputes (in the case of Mendoza, Water Protection Act 7.722).

4. Methodology

The methodological approach to this investigation was a three-part one. First, we based our research on participatory observation of assemblies, protests, and other events organized by the EMs. This helped us to identify the main stakeholders, as well as key strategies and tools.

To find out the viewpoints of members of the local population who participate in the EMs, we organized five semi-structured interviews with local activists and environmental experts. These lasted for approximately one hour. The selection criteria for the interviewees was based on the findings of the participatory observation process, choosing people who appeared to be representative of different key dispossessed groups and stakeholders in the water dispute.

The interviews included some introductory questions on the interviewees' backgrounds and their role in the EMs in combatting changes to Act 7.722 in Mendoza. The origins of the dispute, the EMs and the protests were also discussed to find out the interviewees' vision of the dispute. In particular, the potential of EMs was focused on, together with important tools that had strengthened them in the past. In the final part of the interview, the interviewees were asked to explain their own ideas on how to improve water management in the province in order to investigate possible solutions to the dispute.

The interviewees are all involved in different initiatives aimed at combatting changes to Water Protection Act 7.722 and at demanding greater protection of water resources. The first person to be interviewed was Ludmila[1] (I1). She takes part in "Les Pibes de San Carlos", an environmental youth assembly that organizes events and protests in order to protect water resources in Mendoza and Act 7.722. She represents the younger generation's view of the dispute and she became an environmental activist at a young age.

Eduardo (I2) worked for the NGO "OIKOS Red Ambiental", an environmental organization based in Mendoza, and for different bodies in the field of spatial planning and environmental assessments. From 2015 to 2017, he was employed by the Mendoza Environmental Secretary. Consequently, he has a broad understanding of environmental issues in the province and how they are tackled within different institutions.

Daniel (I3) was one of the first people to promote discussion and debate in 2003 on activities by the large-scale mining industry in the province and their possible negative impacts on the environment. Since then, he has taken part in the "Asambleas Mendocinas por el Agua Pura" (Mendoza Assemblies for Uncontaminated Water) and, in particular, in "Vecinos Autoconvocados de San Carlos", an assembly that acts as an umbrella group for people living in the department of San Carlos, in the centre of the province, who uphold the protection of Act 7.722 and water in the region. As he has participated actively in EMs against large-scale mining activities and in favour of Act 7.722 since 2003, he has a broad understanding of the historical development of the dispute and of local EMs through to today.

Érica (I4) forms part of the *Huarpe* community from Lagunas del Rosario, in the Lavalle department of the province of Mendoza, where the population does not have permanent access to safe drinking water, and they depend on deliveries of water supplies. The indigenous *Huarpe* community defends access to water and the right to their land, protesting against the government and private stakeholders (*Saldi* 2013). The community has been struggling with a lack of proper water supplies for a long time. Consequently, Érica can put forward the viewpoint of this community in matters concerning water disputes in the province. She also gave speeches on December 20th and 23rd 2019 during the main protests against changes to Act 7.722.

Pilar (I5) is from General Alvear, a department in the south-east of the province of Mendoza. She was one of the first people to be involved in the water disputes and protests over large-scale mining in General Alvear. At a professional level, she has worked in agriculture and education, teaching from pre-school level to higher education. Like Daniel, she was contacted because of her broad understanding of the origins and development of the EMs that were formed in order to protect water resources. Having a professional background in agriculture, she was able to talk about the water disputes from this perspective.

The findings of the participatory observation process and the interviews were rounded off by analysing media coverage in the local and regional press from 2019 to 2022. This was crucial to the investigation as it provided an overview of the portrayal of the disputes in (local) newspapers and the social media, contributing to a better insight into the historical evolution of water disputes in Mendoza since 2003 and a broader picture of the stakeholders that were involved.

5. Water disputes in Mendoza

The province of Mendoza, in the west of Argentina close to the Andes mountains (*Secretaria de Ambiente y Ordenamiento Territorial* 2018), is characterized by

a semi-arid to arid climate. With an average rainfall of 200 mm per year (*Grosso Cepparo* 2015), the province is highly dependent on water from melted snow from the mountains in springtime (*Rodríguez Salas* 2020). Consequently, due to the hot, dry climate and poor annual rainfall, there is increasing competition for the scanty available water by groups such as the local wine industry, the tourism and agricultural sectors, the energy sector, the mining industry, and the population for their own consumption (*Secretaria de Ambiente y Ordenamiento Territorial* 2018). As for the impacts of climate change, water shortages will grow as rainfall levels and the flow rates of water from the Andes decline (*Mussetta* et al. 2018; *Boninsegna* and *Villalba* 2006). The region – which is highly dependent on the wine industry and is already under stress environmentally, economically and at a social level – is likely to be especially vulnerable to climate change in the course of the 21st century (*Castex* et al. 2015). In fact, Mendoza has been facing a water emergency since 2010 (*Mussetta* and *Barrientos* 2018; *Rodríguez Salas* 2020). Even though water shortages in the province of Mendoza might be explained by its natural and climatic conditions, this does not fully account for them. According to *Grosso Cepparo* (2015), in official debates on the region's lack of water, its climatic conditions are the main factors used to justify the problem, and asymmetries in its use and distribution are concealed. She argues that water shortages in Mendoza are a multifaceted issue, involving biophysical factors as well as economic, political, cultural and social ones (idem).

Increasing pressure on the available water resources in the region can be traced back to the end of the 20th century. With the arrival of the first mining corporations in the province in the 1990s (*Wagner* 2019), the prospect of economic growth sparked off hope for new employment. Given the local population's lack of information on the possible negative consequences, these mining corporations seemed to offer new opportunities for the region and its citizens (I3). However, the people quickly learned about the possible negative environmental consequences and, in particular, the impact on water, leading to the first assemblies in 2003, which united concerned citizens who discussed how to take action against the mining industry's activities in the province (*Wagner* 2019). In the following years, several organizations and assemblies were formed, such as the Mendoza Assemblies for Uncontaminated Water ("Asambleas Mendocinas por el Agua Pura", AMPAP), the self-convened San Carlos Assembly ("Asamblea de Vecinos Autoconvocados de San Carlos"), the Tupungato Assembly for Civic and Environmental Rights ("Asamblea por los Derechos Cívicos y Ambientales de Tupungato", ADECAT) and the "Les Pibes de San Carlos" Youth Assembly (*Wagner* 2020; *Collado* 2021, I1 to I5). The Union of Citizens' Assemblies (UAC, "Unión de Asambleas Ciudadanas") was also founded in 2006 as an umbrella organization for all types of environmental organizations and movements (*Collado* 2021).

Growing mobilizations and protests gathered together more and more activists, finally culminating in the adoption of Act 7.722 on June 20th, 2007 for the protection of water in the province by banning the use of different chemicals in all steps of mining processes (Section 1 of Act 7.722, *Rodríguez Salas* 2020; *Bernabeu* 2020). Hence its main aim was the restriction of the mining industry's activities (*Wagner* 2014).

Several appeals were filed by twelve different mining corporations, alleging the unconstitutionality of the act. These corporations included "Minera San Jorge" (now part of the Russian company "Aterra Capital and Solway Investment"), "Minera Río de la Plata", and "Barrick Gold" (a Canadian mining company) (*Torrez* 2021; *Flores Isuani* 2015). Their appeals failed when the Supreme Court of Justice finally announced the constitutionality of the act in December 2015. With the failure of these appeals, the mining corporations developed a new strategy: the amendment of Act 7.722 (*Rodríguez Salas* 2020), trying to change its most restrictive sections (*Wagner* 2020). Consequently, on December 20th, 2019, Act 9.209 was adopted by the government of Mendoza. This replaced Act 7.722 and allowed for the use of certain chemicals (cyanide and sulphuric acid) in mining processes (idem, *Rodríguez Salas* 2020).

In response to this, the following days were marked by protests that culminated in the protests on December 23rd 2019 when over 50,000 people called for the repeal of Act 9.209 and the re-establishment of Act 7.722 in the city centre of Mendoza, finally leading to the suspension of the former on December 30th, 2019 (*Lag* 2020; *Redacción El Agrario* 2019; *Sedano* 2020).

In the first half of 2022, there were new incentives to start up mining projects in the province of Mendoza, focusing particularly on Malargüe, a department in the south. For example, the Canadian company "Pan American Silver" acquired the gold mining project

"Don Sixto" in that area (*Villatoro* 2023). Local mayor Juan Ojeda is working toward excluding parts of the department from the coverage of Act 7.722 arguing there would be a so-called "social license".[2] Argentina's National Mining Secretary approves of the expansion of the mining industry, especially given the growing demand for copper and other metals (*Gajardo* 2022a). However, this is strongly criticized by local opposition groups, such as the AMPAP (*Gajardo* 2022b; *Redacción Los Andes* 2022; *Imazio* 2022), who are fighting for the protection of water and against the implementation of large-scale mining projects.

6. Results and discussion

In this section, we will present the combined results of the interviews and the media analysis that was conducted for this research study. In the first part, we will put forward evidence of the postcolonial and neoliberal background to the water disputes in Mendoza. In the second part, we will focus on the tools and strategies used by the EMs.

a) The postcolonial and neoliberal backdrop to the disputes

The water disputes analysed in this paper are illustrative of ongoing debate on climate justice, and consequently they are closely tied in with climate change and the shift in relations between humans and nature (see *Schoon* and *Van der Leeuw* 2015). *Matthews* (2023) states that it is important to understand water disputes for two reasons: first, because of the increasing complexity and entanglement of relationships between humans and nature, and second, because water itself is coming to play a key role in debates on environmental protection. Thus, it is crucial to consider the economic and political circumstances behind the emergence of water disputes in Mendoza in order to identify patterns that can be recognized in other environmental disputes around the globe.

The neoliberal shift that has been taking place in Mendoza since the end of the 20th century mainly began with the arrival of the large-scale mining industry in the province (*Wagner* 2019). All the interviewees confirmed that this development triggered the water disputes (for example I1, I2, and I3). The use of hydraulic fracturing – known as "fracking" – in the province since 2017 (*Salomone* 2021) has sharply intensified disputes over water resources (I1, I4, I5). As for the continuing drought that the province has suffered from since 2010 (*Wagner* 2020), Pilar criticized changes in the distribution of water among the different economic sectors, with increasing impacts on the agricultural sector (I5). Ludmila, on the other hand, pointed out the role of transnational corporations from the wine industry, whose vineyards consume high amounts of water (I1).

In relation to the increase in the number of economic sectors that compete for water, the interviewees said that they did not feel that political bodies in Mendoza had a clear idea of how the province should develop economically in the long term (I2). For example, Eduardo argued that the political sector in Mendoza fails to focus on sustainable development or a development model that promotes human well-being (I2), relying instead on promoting the mining industry and fracking (idem). Pilar (I5) and Daniel both noted that this might be connected with trying to find quick solutions to economic development. This highlights the contradiction between the political bid for economic investment in the region and calls by the local population for guaranteed rights to water (see *Rofmann* 2023; *Harvey* 2012).

With regard to Argentina's colonial history, it can be argued that the presence of transnational corporations in various different sectors involving raw materials can be viewed from a postcolonial perspective (see *Machado Aráoz* 2011). For example, Pilar pointed out that the mining projects in Mendoza would not help to improve the economic situation of its citizens. Instead, she explained that:

> [...] [T]hese megaprojects are actually aimed at meeting the needs of the "first world". They exploit all our raw materials, take them at ridiculous prices, and leave us with the contamination and destruction of the local land and water shortages. (I5)[3]

This clearly points to persisting postcolonial domination by the Global North, strongly reflected by extractivist strategies and the accumulation of raw materials (or more generally, wealth) by countries from the Global North (*Svampa* 2013; *Svampa* 2019; *Machado Aráoz* 2011).

To sum up the views put forward by the interviewees, it can be argued that economic changes in the province, particularly since the beginning of the 21st century, are embedded in neoliberal restructuring

processes (*Merlinsky* 2013; *Machado Aráoz* 2011). Transnational corporations have dominated economic developments, especially in the mining and energy sectors, but also in the wine industry (*Wagner* 2014; *Escolar* and *Saldi* 2016). With their arrival, there has been increasing pressure on available water resources, reflected by water shortages, for example, in the agricultural sector. As mentioned above, Mendoza's political institutions have fostered and prioritized the development of the energy and mining sectors in the province. This has led to the formation and growing strength of EMs, turning the spotlight on the importance of environmental protection and, particularly, the need to protect water resources, since the local population fears that water supplies will be contaminated and the environment destroyed by the mining industry and fracking techniques (*Martín* and *Wagner* 2013). Furthermore, the limited availability of water has boosted debate on access to water and its distribution in the region.

Several statements by the interviewees show that the water disputes in Mendoza are an example of the "right to nature" (*Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* 2018). The local population's deep discontent with the political sector (I3) and its willingness to make its voice heard in order to protect the environment and, in particular, water resources have resulted in its active engagement in political decision-making. This is proven by numerous examples of the population's mobilization, culminating in the protests of December 23rd 2019 against changes to Act 7.722.

In addition to highlighting matters such as how to define water and access to supplies, the interviewees also drew attention to questions like "Who is the water for?" and "What is the water used for?" (I5): issues that are clearly evident in the underpinnings of the theory put forward by *Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* on the "right to nature" (idem 2018). For example, Ludmila (I1), a member of the "Les Pibes de San Carlos" youth assembly, talked about the mural with the words "Act 7.772 belongs to the people". This was a wall painting created in the city of San Carlos in reaction to the start of fracking activities in the province authorized by former governor Alfredo Cornejo (I1):

> […] After 2018, […] fracking ativities started in Mendoza, so a big roadblock was made here at Eugenio Bustos [bus terminal], which also belongs to San Carlos […]. After the roadblock, there was a huge assembly at the bus terminal. I participated in it, and some guys who were there announced through the microphone that they wanted to paint a mural in the bus terminal, so I decided to join them that day […]. (I1)

Numerous different types of mobilizations, such as roadblocks, festivals, speeches in town halls, artistic and cultural events, and protests for the protection of water in the province, show how the population in Mendoza has upheld the "right to nature" (I1 to I5).

Érica highlighted the importance of taking part in political decision-making:

> […] [I] think we need to intervene in these spaces because only we know what the people want, because we are the people. So, I, as a representative of the indigenous community, believe that we should have space and political places for decision-making so as to be able to criticize [certain decisions] and defend [our beliefs]. (I4)

Érica also emphasized the importance of incorporating alternative knowledge into debates on the water disputes. Indeed, she criticized the lack of visibility and recognition of the indigenous *Huarpe* community. She pointed out that their conservationist cosmovision of nature could contribute significantly to understandings of the relationship between nature and society (I4). Her vision reflects the efforts of the EMs to redefine nature and its products, together with critical opinions of the commodification of nature and the neoliberal understanding of water as a commodity. In this context, the interviewees highlighted the importance of defining water as a human right and a public natural resource (I1, I3). Érica elaborated specifically on the use of roadblocks and the collection of signatures in Lavalle in order to protest against fracking activities in Mendoza (I3):

> In Lavalle, we organize different anti-fracking activities. For example, […] we go to the traffic lights and show posters […]. We collected signatures against the start […] of fracking activities in Mendoza, and a lot of signatures were gathered. (I3)

Lastly, all the interviewees agreed on the importance of the local population's participation in political decision-making and the fact that it should be an essential part of the political system in Mendoza (e.g. I3).

b) The tools and strategies of the EMs in Mendoza

The second main aim of this research study was to identify important spatial, social and political tools that bolstered the movements in their protests against changes to Act 7.722.

In the early days of the formation of the Mendoza EMs, as much information as possible was gathered for its dissemination at meetings and through speeches and events (*Wagner* 2014). Thanks to this strategy, more and more people started to join the movements (I1). By choosing central meeting points (e.g. "Eugenio Bustos" bus station in San Carlos), deeper discussions could be fostered, making people feel more comfortable and at ease (I1).

With the rising number of participants, another social tool gained in importance: the organization of provincial assemblies. As a result, the "Asambleas Mendocinas por el Agua Pura" (Mendoza Assemblies for Uncontaminated Water, AMPAP) was formed in 2006 (*Wagner* 2019), unifying assemblies from all over the province in defence of water resources and against changes to Act 7.722, fracking activities and the large-scale mining industry (I3; *Wagner* 2014). This provincial umbrella organization offered big advantages for the EMs as shared initiatives could be organized with many people from all over the province (I5; *Martín* and *Wagner* 2013).

Social networks were a substantial aid in organizing the assemblies at a provincial level. According to Ludmila, they helped to raise a better awareness of the fight by the EMs (I1). *Wagner* (2019) also emphasizes the role of the alternative media in drawing attention to the EMs that oppose the mining industry (idem), and Daniel highlighted the significance of using plain language and avoiding specific technical terms in order to facilitate a better understanding of the issue by all sectors of the population:

> As teachers, we were able to simplify the technical, scientific, and sometimes political language, which is sometimes not intelligible to a large part of the population […]. (I3)

This was also emphasized by Ludmila in reference to the flyers that were handed out in the streets, summarizing important facts about the mining industry and the protection of water (I1).

Finally, art and music were another important social tool for the movements. For example, Ludmila explained that her interest in water protection started with her participation in the creation of a mural painting (I1). Daniel also confirmed the importance of "music, […], art, paintings [and] songs" (I3) in the continuance of the movements. Consequently, art and music could well have encouraged young people in particular to start participating in the movements.

Besides the meetings, speeches and assemblies, the EMs grew in size through a number of spatial tools which were frequently combined with different communication tools. First, the mural painting in San Carlos shows how the participants of the EMs altered the conception of a public space. By appropriating it (see *Lefèbvre* 1968), they could convey a political message which would be seen by many people in an artistic way. This was therefore a key spatial tool in strengthening the movements and raising people's awareness of the issue of water protection.

Second, roadblocks can be considered to be another important spatial tool. In San Carlos, they were organized along National Route 40 in combination with the distribution of flyers on water protection and environmental issues related to the large-scale mining industry's activities in the province. As National Route 40 crosses Argentina from north to south, the information spread across the country and prompted a response in many different places in Argentina (I1). Hence, it was definitely a key strategy in spreading information about the EMs and their concerns. Érica explained that people in Lavalle started to show posters on the subject of water protection at traffic lights (I4), while Pilar talked about blocking roads over a period of up to 15 days in wintertime, with the distribution of flyers (I5).

Third, the organization of local protests and marches also played a fundamental role for the EMs. For example, people from the "Vecinos Autoconvocados de San Carlos" assembly organized an over 100km march from San Carlos to the capital of Mendoza two days before the main protests on December 23rd 2019 against changes to Act 7.722 (I1). The march attracted the attention of the media, helping to spread the work of the EMs in Mendoza, even to other Latin-American countries such as Venezuela and Mexico (I1).

Fourth, the EMs in Mendoza used different political and legal tools and strategies. The numerous different mobilizations, including protests, marches, events and the distribution of flyers, aimed to put the issue

of environmental protection on the political agenda. According to Daniel:

> No political campaign for any election since 2005 has been able to exclude debates on water. This is something […] that was excluded from political campaigns before the year 2000 [because] in Mendoza, we talked about other things. No one ever talked about environmental issues, and neither did they talk about the water crisis or about droughts. The people of Mendoza were not conscious that we are living in a […] desert. We managed to change [public discourse and bring these issues to the fore] […]. (I3)

The visibility of environmental issues in political debate was also boosted through annual protests at the Wine Fair, the most important fair in the province of Mendoza to mark the grape harvest (I5). Furthermore, Ludmila, Érica and Pilar emphasized the importance of dialogue with political representatives and local municipalities (I1, I4, I5). Érica also mentioned gathering signatures to protest at fracking projects in the Lavalle region (I4). Lastly, Ludmila explained how the environmental movement in San Carlos took advantage of legal tools to bring about political change:

> The last thing we did was after Act 7.722 was restored, when we wrote a municipal ordinance, approved with the help of some local representatives, for the creation of a socio-environmental observatory […]. (I1)

The San Carlos Socio-Environmental Observatory monitors the evolution of important projects in the department so as to contribute to local public policies on measures to adapt to and mitigate climate change (*El Cuco Digital* 2021).

Ludmila's comment illustrates the EMs' awareness of the need to combine numerous different strategies and approaches at both a political and social level in order to trigger political change. Thus, it highlights the need for the diversification of protest methods and strategies in the fight against the dispossession of communal natural resources like water (see *Heynen* et al. 2007; *Armas-Díaz* and *Sabaté-Bel* 2022). Consequently, strategies and protest methods have clearly evolved across time, moving from assemblies and gatherings in the past to active forms of political involvement by the EMs in the present.

7. Conclusions

In conclusion, the investigation shed light on several key aspects of the significance of EMs in neoliberal contexts. Neoliberal restructuring processes have led to important economic and political changes in the province of Mendoza. The arrival of transnational corporations, related in particular to the wine industry and large-scale mining projects (*Wagner* 2019; *Larsimont* 2019), and the start of fracking activities from 2017 onward are two outcomes of these changes (*Salomone* 2021). It can be argued that they form part of a persisting situation of postcolonial dominance by countries in the Global North, which harvest resources in countries in the Global South despite the ensuing environmental repercussions (*Merlinsky* 2013). Consequently, the EMs in Mendoza have not only drawn political attention to environmental protection, but they have also prompted debate on persisting postcolonial dominance and its consequences for the local population and the environment. They have also fostered a growing environmental awareness among the population, culminating in the protests over changes to Act 7.722 in December 2019, which led to the abandonment of the said changes and the act's maintenance (*Rodríguez Salas* 2020; *Wagner* 2019).

Although managing to save certain paragraphs of Act 7.722 may seem to be a rather "small victory", it actively contributes to limits on the expansion of the large-scale mining industry in Mendoza. All this shows that the strategies of EMs are changing. They no longer address the roots of neoliberal and extractivist systems, but instead they are fighting to change neoliberal systems on a smaller scale by changing them from the inside (*Arcilla* 2022; *Armas-Díaz* et al. 2020).

The multitude of protests and interventions in political decision-making illustrate the population's willingness to cultivate a system of participatory politics and to defend the "right to nature" (*Apostolopoulou* and *Cortés Vázquez* 2018; see also *Svampa* 2019). In this context, in particular, the movements called into question asymmetries in access to water and its distribution, demanding that water be regarded as a public natural resource as opposed to commodifying nature (idem 2018). This is especially evident in the vision of the indigenous *Huarpe* community. As *Svampa* and *Toledo* explain (cited in *Pleyers* 2019), it is indigenous people, small farmers and rural communities who are at the forefront of opposition to land grabbing, mining and other extractive industries in Latin America.

Moreover, the EMs made use of different tools and strategies to strengthen their movements and the visibility of the dispute in the province. Music and art played a central role in encouraging people to take part in the protests, emphasizing that it was a peaceful movement. Social tools, including speeches and meetings by the population to discuss issues like water protection and the possible negative environmental consequences of the mining industry in the province, were combined with the creation of a provincial umbrella network for the different assemblies (*Wagner* 2019). Using plain, simple language to explain complex issues encouraged more people to join the movements. In addition, different spatial tools, such as roadblocks, helped the movements to spread their message all over the country. Furthermore, having a common space to discuss future mobilizations, like "Eugenio Bustos" bus station in San Carlos, definitely helped to attract large numbers of people and to build trust. Dialogue with the political sector and protests at important events such as the annual Wine Fair also made the dispute more visible. Finally, gender, minorities and ethnic groups were incorporated in debate on access to water and its distribution through the participation of the indigenous population and younger generations, contributing new perspectives to the discussions (*Wagner* 2020; *Swyngedouw* 2007).

To sum up, the EMs in Mendoza demonstrate the impact that the local population can have on political decision-making. Much perseverance was needed by the movements in Mendoza to ensure the maintenance of Act 7.722 and the protection of water. The extent to which the local government and mining companies actually take this law and its implications into account remains unsure.

This research has highlighted the important role that EMs can play in environmental protection. It leaves the gateway open to exploring what form emancipatory politics might take and what conditions are required to bring about a change in interactions between society and nature in order to create economic systems based on sustainable strategies and the well-being of the local population and local environment. In the case of Mendoza, further research should be conducted into the strategies of the political and economic sectors to promote the use of chemical substances in the mining industry in order to understand the underlying neoliberal mechanisms.

Notes

[1] All interviewees were asked to use a pseudonym but they explicitly wanted to be called by their clear names.

[2] A "social license" or "social license to operate" in the context of the mining industry in Mendoza refers to the need for an agreement between the mining companies and local society and other stakeholders in order for companies to be able to operate (*Raufflet* et al. 2013).

[3] All of the following citations have been translated from Spanish to English.

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