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**GOLDEN AMBIGUITY: EXTRACTIVISM AND
INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES ON GOLD MINING IN
NORTHERN LA PAZ**

Research Paper

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List of Acronyms

AJAM	Autoridad Jurisdiccional Administrativa Minera <i>(Jurisdictional Mining Administrative Authority)</i>
CECOMINAG	Central Local de Cooperativas Mineras de Guanay <i>(Local Central of Mining Cooperatives of Guanay)</i>
CIDOB	Confederación de Pueblos Indígenas del Oriente Boliviano <i>(Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Bolivia)</i>
CPILAP	Central de Pueblos Indígenas de La Paz <i>(Central of Indigenous Peoples of La Paz)</i>
CORDEPAZ	Corporación Regional de Desarrollo de LaPaz <i>(Development Corporation of the Department of La Paz)</i>
FOSPA	Foro Social Pan-Amazónico <i>(Pan-Amazon Social Forum)</i>
MAS	Movimiento al Socialismo <i>(Movement to Socialism)</i>
PILCOL	Pueblo Indígena Leco y Comunidades Originarias de Larecaja <i>(Leco Indigenous Peoples and Originary Communities of Larecaja)</i>
SERNAP	Servicio Nacional de Áreas Protegidas <i>(National Service of Protected Areas)</i>
TOC	Territorio Comunitario de Origen <i>(Communal Land of Origin)</i>
TIOC	Territorio Indígena Originario Campesino <i>(Indigenous Originary Peasant Territory)</i>
UMSA	Universidad Mayor de San Andrés <i>(Higher University of San Andrés)</i>
WCS	Wildlife Conservation Society
WHO	World Health Organization
YLB	Yacimientos del Litio Boliviano <i>(Bolivian Lithium Deposits)</i>
YPFB	Yacimientos Petrolíferos Fiscales Bolivianos <i>(Bolivian State Petroleum Corporation)</i>

Abstract

Most of my life I have been the only Bolivian in most of the places where I have lived, so I am used to people not knowing that Bolivia exists or for them to have a series of misconceptions about my country. So, since I was a child, I gave myself the task to show the world that Bolivia exists and that it is a very interesting country where a lot is constantly going on. For those who do know much about Bolivia, they usually mention Evo Morales, our lithium deposits or the mines of Potosí.

This research paper will focus on the effects of gold extractivism in Guanay, a municipality of northern La Paz with complex associations between Bolivian cooperatives whose members are lowland indigenous peoples foreign mining companies who use mercury for alluvial gold mining.

Even though this activity is a very important part for the local indigenous peoples of Guanay, these new mining dynamics has deteriorated their territory. Therefore, many communities now struggle to find an alternative source of income since their land is no longer suitable for agriculture. However, many of them do not want extractivism to stop due to the lack of alternatives to generate income.

Relevance to Development Studies

This topic relevant to Development Studies insofar as it highlights the contradictions of a country where indigenous peoples are supposed to be empowered but are the most affected by gold mining and in spite of being aware of that, indigenous peoples from the lowlands of Guanay do not want extractivism to disappear from their territory.

Keywords

Extractivism - gold mining - indigenous peoples – lowlands – Guanay – Bolivia

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1. Introduction

1.1. Miners blocking La Paz City

On November 6 and 7 of 2023, groups of miners blocked La Paz City¹ protesting for their right to enter protected natural areas to extract gold. Around fifteen thousand people were reported in the 39 blocking points around the city. 400 people headed to the premises of the Jurisdictional Mining Administrative Authority (AJAM) with stones, firecrackers, dynamite and other explosives, which resulted in the apprehension of seven miners (El Deber, 7 November 2023). In response, indigenous associations such as the Central of Indigenous Peoples of La Paz (CPILAP) and environmental activists questioned the miners' protests, accusing them of trespassing into indigenous territories and threatening protected areas. The disputes between the parts have generated a climate of unrest and other incidents of violence by members of mining cooperatives towards female officials of the National Service of Protected Areas (SERNAP). The miners assure that the blockings will not stop until the government listens to their demands (La Nube, 7 November 2023).

For someone with no background about the Bolivian context, the previous paragraph portrays two very well divided groups, namely the 'mean miners' who want to extract gold regardless of the social and ecological impacts this might bring to the territory and the local population and the 'good people' who oppose extractivism in protected areas. However, gold extractivism in Bolivia is more complex than portrayed by the media. That is why this research paper will look into the dynamics of gold mining in Guanay, a municipality in northern La Paz very well-known for gold mining. Despite being a known territory, the reality of Guanay tends to be looked at with a superficial lens, which neglects the significant differences between how gold mining is carried out there and in other territories of northern La Paz.

1.2. Why is gold so important right now?

If countries had nicknames, *Extractivism* would probably be a good one for Bolivia. Since colonial times, the extraction of natural resources has played a major role in the livelihoods of the population and even now, the Bolivian economy depends mostly on extractivism.

¹ Bolivia is divided into 9 departments. La Paz City is the capital of La Paz department and the seat of government of Bolivia. To avoid confusions, if there is no specification whether I am talking about the city, it is because I am referring to La Paz Department.

Furthermore, some scholars claim that collective imaginaries around the conceptualisation of natural resources and their extraction plays a role in Bolivian politics and economy (Cáceres Jerez, 2021: 11).

Between 2006 and 2014 Bolivia witnessed an exceptional economic bonanza. This was partly due to the contribution of the mining sector, where companies such as San Cristóbal had been investing for decades. Nonetheless, these investments did not have significant impacts in the employment opportunities and livelihoods of people outside the mining sector (Ferrufino, R., 2009: 7). But most importantly, this economic growth was possible because of the rise of commodity prices, which impacted on the revenues from the exports of minerals, gas and soy (Cunha Filho, 2014: 145). This bonanza period put productive diversification in the political agenda in order to build a diversified and more solid economy. However, no other economic sector has been developed in these years and the pattern of a primary resource export-led economy has intensified since then (Morales and Wanderley, 2021: 10), which increases the dependency on the volatility of the international market.

In past years the main resource of extraction and exportation were hydrocarbons but unfortunately the mismanagement of these reserves and the revenues stemming from them and the finite nature of natural resources, have pushed the Bolivian government to look for alternative resources to exploit (Separatas del CEDLA, 2023). So, since current project to industrialise lithium in Bolivia is still 'on the making', the Bolivian economy depends now mainly on gold. This has been promoted for instance by the passing of the 'Gold Law', which authorises the Central Bank to buy gold from Bolivian miners and sell it in the international market and obtain dollars without consulting the parliament as it was previously needed (El País, 5 May 2023).

However, this research will not focus on how the state manages gold but on how gold extractivism takes place under informal settings where the state seems to be absent and where the main actors are foreign companies and mining cooperatives, whose members are the Leco indigenous population from Guanay, a municipality in northern La Paz part of the Larecaja Province.

1.3. An 'indigenous government' promoting extractivism?

Bolivia is one of the Latin American countries with the largest indigenous population with 36 recognised indigenous peoples with their own language, culture and customs (The World Bank, 2016). In 2006 the Movement to Socialism party (MAS) came to power with the

election of Evo Morales, the first indigenous president of Bolivia and many people and indigenous and non-indigenous peoples across the country celebrated his victory. This was a milestone for the Bolivian society because despite its numerous indigenous population, power positions had mostly been occupied by the traditional *blancoide*² elites. This gave indigenous peoples hope for a fairer and more equal society in a country that since before its independence in 1825 had always excluded and limited the rights of indigenous peoples (Cunha Filho, 2014: 143). Between 2006 and 2012 poverty was reduced, the gross domestic product (GDP) grew by an average of 4.8 per cent, while between 1999 and 2005 it had grown by an average of 2.6 percent (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2012: 114).

In countries of the so-called pink tie, that includes Bolivia with the MAS administrations, there has been a notable inclination to encourage extractive industries as a means to boost economic growth, driven by elevated commodity prices and the belief that resource extraction in wealth-endowed nations will result in socioeconomic development (Arsel et al, 2016: 880). This brings us back to the discourse of *masistas*³ such as García Linera⁴ who affirm that extractivism is not an end in itself but a means to redistribute wealth and resources and therefore, reduce poverty.

A major change brought by MAS was the enactment of the New Political Constitution of the State in 2009. The preamble of the Constitution declares that the Plurinational State of Bolivia⁵ provides the opportunity to build a new way of life in a new state grounded in respect, equity, harmony, dignity at its core that will strive to live according to the concept of *Buen Vivir* or *Suma Qamaña (Good Living)*, that seeks to find a balanced relation between people and nature. However, as time passed, MAS began to have conflicts and disappointment from their political bases due to the contradictions between the government agenda and grassroots movements, causing the weakening of Evo Morales's political capital (BBC Mundo, 8 April 2014; Mongabay, 14 August 2017). Some of the most controversial conflicts between MAS and grassroots movements are linked to the extraction of natural resources in indigenous territories without the previous consultation stipulated in the constitution and the destruction and degradation of natural resources and territories. While MAS claims to rule following the concept of *Buen Vivir*, gold extractivism taking place in Guanay and other parts of the country, requires the dredging of tons of earth in order to extract a few kilos of gold or even

² Colloquial term to refer to fair skinned people

³ Members of MAS

⁴ García Linera was vice-president of Bolivia during all the Morales administrations

⁵ With the enactment of the New Political Constitution of the State, Bolivia changed its name from Republic of Bolivia to Plurinational State of Bolivia

less, considering that as many of the locals interviewed during fieldwork mentioned, “*finding gold is a matter of luck*”. Furthermore, as it will be presented later, gold extractivism brings with severe consequences for the health of the local population and for the use of land, making it often no longer suitable for agriculture.

1.4. Research questions

The prevalent shift from small-scale artisanal gold mining to large-scale mechanised gold mining has transformed the landscape and the lives of people in Guanay, who despite being aware of the negative social and ecological effects of large-scale mechanised gold mining, are embedded in these mining dynamics. Looking at the debates around indigenous peoples and their relation to nature with concepts such as decoloniality and *Buen Vivir*, this research will examine why the resistance to mechanised gold mining among the Leco population is not as widespread as expected and why people still want to be involved in this form of extractivism. Furthermore, it will try to understand why MAS is absent in this territory, which allows extractivism to expand with social and ecological consequences that could reach to a point of no return. If the party seeks to govern according to *Buen Vivir*, how can we explain the contradictions of their actions?

Main research question:

Why does gold mining persist in Guanay within indigenous communities?

Sub-questions:

- How has the introduction of large-scale gold mining changed people’s everyday in places where artisanal gold mining used to prevail?
- What stops the Leco population from resisting to large-scale mechanised gold mining?
- Why do communities in Guanay work together with foreign mining companies even if the profits they get are not fairly divided?
- What role does the State play in the dynamics of gold mining in Guanay?

2. Extractivism in Bolivia

2.1. History of extractivism in Bolivia

Bolivia is known for being a ‘mining country’, hence there is a significant amount of work about extractivism in the highlands of Bolivia throughout history. However, very little has been written about the history of gold mining in Bolivia, which could indicate that mechanised gold mining is a recent phenomenon. However, in the 16th century, the Spanish were aware of the existence of large gold deposits in what today is the department of La Paz (González Quint-Aranibar, 2021: 36). According to Santos (1994: 73) there is evidence of the existence of powerful families working in clandestine gold exploitation as well as large mining companies between 1782 and 1825. During the same period gold used to be smuggled to Lima (Peru), Arica (Chile) and Buenos Aires (Argentina).

2.1.1. The highlands: The Cerro Rico, the Tin Barons and when we found lithium

During colonial times, massive silver deposits were found in what today is the Department of Potosí in Bolivia. These mines were exploited by the Spaniards who forced indigenous peoples to extract the resources from the mines under inhumane conditions (Brown, 2012: 40). By the late 1800s, Bolivia had developed world standards in mining output and technology. Since then, the mining elites (whose members have transformed throughout time) have become a powerful pressure group that demands their interests to be met by the government (Klein, 2021: 141) and these are often fulfilled. Nowadays, the traditional elites have been partially replaced by mining cooperatives, who have become an important political force and as depicted in the introduction of this research, have the power to paralyse the seat of government.

In the late 1800s, tin ore deposits were found in Potosí and were owned and controlled by three men known as the Tin Barons (Brown, 2012: 123). By the 1930s, mine-workers had formed unions asking for better working conditions and higher wages and new political parties that endorsed the miners’ demands, emerged. This led to the 1952 National Revolution that resulted in the nationalisation of mines, more access to education in the rural areas, universal suffrage, that included women and indigenous peoples for the first time and the Agrarian Reform.

In the 1980s large lithium deposits were found in Uyuni Salt Lake in Potosí, making Bolivia the owner of some of the largest lithium reserves worldwide. The salt crust perimeter within this territory became a Fiscal Reserve, giving the State monopoly over resources through Bolivian Lithium Deposits (YLB), the State lithium mining company (Sánchez López, 2019: 1325). When MAS came to power in 2006, they prepared a proposal to extract and industrialise lithium. What makes this project different than the previous large-scale mining experiences, is that the government argues that unlike before, the lithium industrialization will help reduce poverty and not benefit only the elites as it happened with silver and tin in the past. There are groups in rural communities of Potosí that endorse lithium extractivism because so far it brought them basic services like water and electricity, making the lack of transparency from town representatives regarding extractive activities fade into the background (Revette, 2015: 158).

2.1.2. The lowlands: What was going on in Larecaja and Abel Iturralde provinces?

Between the 19th and 20th century, indigenous groups settled in northern La Paz, since the land they previously inhabited in other Amazon areas did not have property rights and was found to be rich in rubber, that land was taken over and exploited by other actors throughout time. With the endorsement of the national government, rubber and wood extraction became a business that attracted Bolivian and foreign entrepreneurs, who occupied the land without taking the native population into account. This caused the dispersion of indigenous groups, which weakened their family networks, cultural identity and practices (Fundación Tierra, 2022: 16). In 1971 the Development Corporation of the Department of La Paz (CORDEPAZ) was created. This was a state agency that sought to accelerate economic growth by, among other things, setting up a state-owned sugar company, building a hydroelectric dam and the hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation. Part of the programme was to take indigenous peasants from the highlands to these territories but none of the projects were executed at the time. However, a new highway that connected the highlands to the lowlands led to the voluntary migration of several indigenous groups to the lowlands, who were named and are still known as *colonizadores* (colonisers) or *interculturales*. Most of them settled in small communities near the main roads to carry out market-oriented family farming. This aligned with the government's economic interests because since the 1960s they were trying to increase agriculture for export while also meeting the needs of the internal market. To do so, more people were needed to work the land. During this period, the

colonizadores were not granted property rights over the land (Fundación Tierra, 2022: 17; Ormachea, 2021).

Throughout the years, the social differentiation among *interculturales* became evident. While some of them were and still are poor peasants, others were slowly becoming small capitalist agricultural producers and could afford to hire wage-workers, unlike their counterparts. Nowadays, many *interculturales* have strong ties and shared interests with medium and large businesspeople, for instance in mining and agro-industry, which distances them from other indigenous groups such as small farmers and indigenous peoples from the lowlands (El Deber, 12 April 2022). However, as it will be later explained, the *interculturales* in Guanay are not involved in gold mining and live in secluded communities where they farm.

The research of González Quint-Aranibar (2021: 37) proves that despite being limited, the historiography about gold extraction in northern La Paz, highlights that back in the 16th century, while the silver boom was taking place in Potosí, the Spanish knew that Larecaja was rich in gold. Moving forward in time, there is evidence of a monopoly of big gold mining companies in the region, which can be compared to the role of mining cooperatives nowadays. Similarly, Bakewell (1990: 62) tells us how in colonial times and later on nitric acid was used to separate gold and silver in Latin America.

In recent years large-scale mechanised gold mining has greatly expanded in northern La Paz, making municipalities like Guanay known for illegal gold extraction (El Deber, 8 September 2023). Therefore, there is a common belief that this is a new phenomenon. However, the historic data previously presented refutes this narrative. But it could suggest that throughout time, the large-scale gold extraction has taken place during specific time frames and interruptedly.

The sociologist Pablo Mamani (2017: 206) draws on to the role of language to assess the low visibility and decreased recognition of indigenous cultures. According to him, the use of a dominant language covers up reality. Mamani refers to the use of Spanish to tell the stories of pre-Columbine cultures and of indigenous peoples in the 21st century. Despite the fact that Article 5 of the 2009 Constitution claims that all languages of indigenous and native peasant nations and peoples are official languages, there is a hegemonic relation, where Spanish prevails over indigenous languages. As previously stated, much of the historiography of gold mining comes from foreign travelers who probably had no or very limited knowledge of Spanish and the indigenous languages from the territories they wrote about. Following Mamani's reasoning, this implies a double covering of the historical processes of gold mining, since those imposing the dominant language do not tell what does not serve their interests.

2.2. MAS and the Process of Change

With the victory of Evo Morales in the 2005 elections, the expression ‘Process of Change’ linked to MAS and promises of hope was forged. Multiple scholars have studied what the Process of Change actually meant for Bolivia. For instance, it could be regarded as the encounter between two worlds: Evo Morales, an indigenous president representing indigenous peoples and the grassroots movements joint forces with Álvaro García Linera, a middle-class urban intellectual with a Marxist background (Ramos, 2016: 44). Even though Bolivia had had indigenous peoples in important power positions before, like Víctor Hugo Cárdenas who served as vice-president between 1993 and 1997, Cárdenas did not have the same charisma and leadership as Morales, nor did he hold on to his indigenous origin as fiercely as Morales did at least in the initial stages of his presidency.

Since MAS came to power in 2006, some sectors of indigenous people and from indigenous descent have gained greater access to education and other spaces previously occupied mostly by the traditional elites. An interesting group is the so-called *chola bourgeoisie*, prominent mostly in the cities of La Paz and El Alto. These are indigenous people or from indigenous descent who were informal traders and had the ability and eagerness to enter the market. They started trading between the rural and urban spaces, saw their capital increase and are now very wealthy (often more than the traditional elites) and do business with big Chinese companies. Even though their actions are market-oriented, they make use of logics of community and reciprocity of indigenous cultures (Toranzo, 2020: 171). However, it must be stressed this group represents a minority among the Bolivian indigenous population and their ‘social ascension’ cannot be attributed to MAS being in power, as this process started decades before MAS.

Racism is far from eradicated in Bolivia but some scholars argue that despite that, there has been an empowerment of indigenous peoples, even if they are poor (Molina, 2013: 9). Nonetheless, this argument needs to be grasped with caution because a lot still needs to change in Bolivia before we can say that all indigenous peoples are truly empowered. For instance, in 2010, the Law Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination was enacted, which recognises that the concept of race is a social construct that has served to assign status of superiority and inferiority among the population and to give privilege, power and wealth to some groups. Nevertheless, 90 out of 100 reported cases of discrimination in 2023 were filed away and the proper investigations did not take place (La Razón, 23 May 2023). Leaving aside the

fact that the reported cases were low in numbers, this highlights that having legal instruments is a good first step for change but not enough to empower marginalised groups.

The level of responsibility assigned to MAS regarding the changes that Bolivia has undergone in the past two decades hides the fact that many of the changes did not start with MAS and Evo Morales. With the Agrarian Reform of 1953, the state restituted land to indigenous peoples. Before that, land in rural areas was administered in a nearly feudal system called *pongueaje*, where indigenous peasants (also known as *pongos*) worked the land of the landowners in a nearly serf-master relationship. However, the Agrarian Reform did not recognise common land property, so little changed for indigenous peoples who were used to work the land on a communal basis. This forced them to work on an individual basis to which they were not used to and restricted their access to technology and machinery to increase their production (Heredia, 2014: 72). During the military dictatorships (mainly 1970s and 1980s) land that had been given to the indigenous in 1953 were taken away from them and given to the sympathisers of the government(s) in power at the time. This stirred up discontent among the rural population and eventually led to a New Agrarian Reform⁶ in 1996, which recognised the rights of common land property (ibid:77). The Popular Participation Law implemented in the 1990s that decentralised 20% of national resources to the municipal level, made intermediate cities, towns and villages more participant in decision-making processes regarding the use of resources, also played a role in the victory of MAS in the 2005 elections.

Throughout time, MAS has been very clever in portraying the Process of Change. As García Linera (2011: 8) puts it, this process is supposed to thrive towards a strength and unity with social, indigenous-peasant and workers organizations as main actors, who were not taken into account prior to MAS. Moreover, he also argues that the MAS administrations have defeated neoliberalism through actions such as the nationalization of now strategic state-owned companies that in the past used to be controlled by foreign companies, which seeks to enhance the livelihoods of all Bolivians. But looking at how Bolivia approaches and depends on extractivism, the words of García Linera clearly do not depict the reality.

Conversely, the Process of Change has been described as rather symbolic but with a revolutionary potential with discourses of *Buen Vivir* (Good Living), that strives for a balanced relation between people and nature and the enactment of a new constitution in 2009. Some scholars hold that despite the limitations, turning the previous Republic of Bolivia into the

⁶ There are discussions on whether calling this an Agrarian Reform since it did not have the same impact on the landless like the 1953 Agrarian Reform did

Plurinational State of Bolivia has reinforced the self-esteem and empowered indigenous peoples in Bolivia. Along this line, the indigenous identity used to operate as a strong detrimental stigma prior to the plurinational state but being indigenous now provides powerful political capital even when indigenous peoples oppose the government (Cunha Filho, 2014: 143; Wanderley, 2013: 21). Even though that is true, we must also acknowledge the limitations of the idea of being a plurinational state⁷ such as the risk of homogenising the category ‘indigenous’, which ignores the fact that the diversity of indigenous peoples in Bolivia, also means that different groups have experienced the Process of Change differently. For instance, Bolivia has a large urban and peri-urban indigenous population, but also indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation, meaning that they do not interact and generally avoid contact with other groups that are not their own (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2013: 4) and in initial contact, meaning that they have sporadic or intermittent contact with non-indigenous peoples (ibid: 5).

2.3. Limitations of the Process of Change

Despite the positive changes that MAS has brought for indigenous peoples such as the revalorization of indigenous languages and traditions, MAS has shown to have fallen in the same colonial and capitalist dynamics they criticise. While the contradictions of the MAS administrations are reprehensible, they are to some extent understandable when it comes to extractivism. Natural resources have been spotted as a way to reduce poverty in a country like Bolivia where no other significant sources of income other than extractivism have been developed. Therefore, projects such as the extraction and industrialisation of the large lithium deposits in Potosí has indeed the potential to bring positive changes to the country, hence opposing it might not be the most sensitive option. However, it would also be insensitive not to be critical towards extractivism considering that despite the anti-colonial and anti-imperialist rhetoric of the MAS administration, land distribution remains uneven, disproportionately benefiting established and emerging elites, as well as foreign investors involved in soybean production and other agricultural activities. In the Department of Santa Cruz, the landholding pattern is dominated by large-scale landowners, also referred to as agroindustrialists. Although they own approximately 70% of the land, they constitute only 2% of the

⁷ The reality faced by the Esse Ejja population, which will be described later on, is a good example of such limitations

total farm units. Conversely, small farmers possess less than 2% of the land but make up 80% of the farm units. While the state contends that the soybean industry contributes to job creation and enhances food security for farmers, the existing land distribution challenges equity of these benefits (McKay and Colque, 2015: 204). It would also be insensitive to support gold extractivism with eyes closed because currently it is important for the economy, when large-scale mechanised gold mining requires the use of mercury, which has terrible health consequences for many indigenous peoples.

MAS has partly addressed the criticism regarding the role of extractivism in current politics, considering how this form of resource extraction is embedded in capitalism. MAS has portrayed extractivism as a technical system of processing nature that if handled properly, can allow Bolivia to enter the international division of labour of the capitalist world we live in. Thus, extractivism is not an end in itself, but rather a tool to manage and fairly redistribute resources in order to reduce poverty (García Linera, 2013). As a response, the left-wing opposition accuses the MAS administrations of moving away from the party's initial dreams and aspirations by falling into an extractivist developmentalism. Moreover, the efforts to combat social inequality fell behind initial expectations. These delusions turned MAS into another traditional party with a vertical, demagogic and 'caudillo-like' mindset (Molina, 2013: 5).

Similarly, the work of Pablo Mamani (2017: 200) describes Bolivian political history as a 'republican paradox', that keeps repeating itself over the centuries. He argues that throughout the history of major events of the Bolivian indigenous upheavals, there has always been a shift on who benefits from these events. This occurs by the estrangement and alienation of the grassroots movements who make the upheavals possible and the appropriation of the struggles by old and new power groups, who do not represent the grassroots movements and are of '*criollo*'⁸ origin. Both scholars agree on the fact that the leadership of Evo Morales in Bolivia turned into a paradox. MAS was born from the fight of indigenous grassroots movements (mostly Aymara and Quechua), nevertheless their main leader, an Aymara indigenous has stepped away from the anti-colonial and anti-neoliberal discourse that brought MAS to power.

As Silvia Rivera argues, criticising MAS and Evo Morales can be problematic, especially if we discuss with someone who sees the Bolivian context with foreign eyes. Outside of Bolivia

⁸ This term was coined during the colonization of America and used to refer to someone born in America whose parents were European. Currently it more broadly refers to population with close ties to their European origin.

Evo Morales has a lot of popularity and the actions of MAS are often seen as revolutionary and favouring the most vulnerable sectors of the population (Rivera Cusicanqui, 2018: 8). This perspective, other than lacking information and being too idealistic, shadows big issues of the MAS administrations such as the fact that many of the legal instruments that should protect nature, indigenous peoples and their territories, are not enforced. In places like Guanay, legal mining often overlaps with illegal mining and what has been labelled as unregulated activities. Unregulated activities refer to the 'traps' identified by mining companies, enabling them to engage in illegal mining without facing sanctions by exploiting legal loopholes (ANF, 22 August 2018). Some scholars label this kind of activities as 'alegal', meaning that they appear as legal practices because they do not break any legal requirements, but their consequences are illegal (Gudynas, 2013: 11). The informants contacted in Guanay were aware of these legal loopholes and often referred to these alegal activities with the saying '*hecha la ley, hecha la trampa*'⁹.

2.3.1. Extractivism for a fairer society?

To understand the political economy of the Andes and Amazon region, the development of the extractive industry needs to be understood (Bebbington, 2012: 3). Extractivism is expanding worldwide and right as well as left Latin American governments aim to expand their extractive economies. The so-called turn to the left Latin American countries such as Bolivia, depict extractivism as a new path to development that prioritises poverty reduction. Since their first administration, MAS has driven a three-pronged extractivist development model, which includes mineral and hydrocarbon extraction and agrarian extractivism. However, with the passing of time, MAS began to depict opposition to extractivism as fascist and pro-imperialist, because they claim that this development model enables Bolivia to manage their resources freely without being withheld by Global North countries (McKay, 2017: 201).

However, these governments and their depiction of extractivism have been criticised for not having achieved a substantial transformation in the extractive industry, nor ameliorated the social and environmental impacts of resource extraction through a new kind of development as they claim. In fact, some scholars argue that extractivism keeps these countries subordinated to the international market (Burbach et al, 2014:41). On the other hand, *masistas* have argued that if the state does not engage in extractivism, this would only give the floor to

⁹ A close translation would be 'as the law goes, so goes the trap'

other actors to exploit natural resources (García Linera, 2013). In the case of Bolivia, MAS introduced the so-called post-neoliberal model as an alternative form of resource extraction. By doing this, the extraction and industrialization of natural resources should benefit the local population, redistribute wealth, as well as reduce poverty and inequality (Sánchez-López, 2019: 1322).

On another note, there has been a shift in the perception of extractivism by left-leaning governments in Latin American countries. While the left used to criticise extractive practices, there is now a different discourse surrounding extractivism. As previously mentioned, it is seen as essential for economic growth and a means to achieve equitable resource distribution. Moreover, the negative social and environmental consequences are acknowledged but framed as unavoidable yet manageable, or something that must be accepted. This acceptance stems from the belief that the income generated by extractivism will benefit society as a whole through a trickle-down effect (Gudynas, 2009: 213), which does not seem that anti-neoliberal. Progressive governments aim to harness surplus from extractive activities to finance social programs, ensuring social legitimacy while defending the continuation of extractive practices. The post-neoliberal model is characterised by an extractive imperative, aiming to address poverty and inequality. In this economic transformation, the emphasis is on intensified extraction and a shift toward exporting value-added goods rather than primary commodities (Arsel et al., 2016: 881). This model mirrors the dynamics observed in other Latin American nations, such as Ecuador and known as neo-extractivism. Neo-extractivism is often associated with left-wing governments and it requires an active role of the State. It also encompasses policies oriented towards enhancing people's well-being through income generated by natural resources and it tends to be associated with left-wing governments (Svampa and Viale, 2020: 171).

A recurrent critique to MAS is the low investment in education during their administrations. A study about the reading and writing competences of first semester enrolled university students in a private university in La Paz City showed very worrying results (Paz Soldán, 2011). The study comprehended areas such as reading comprehension and spelling and only 17 percent of the students who took part had good results in the spelling part, while more than half were not able to write paragraphs with coherent arguments. Even though this was a small-scale study and did not consider students from public universities or universities in rural areas, it gives an idea of the deficiencies in the Bolivian education system. The study was carried out in 2011 (therefore probably outdated) and was targeted to a very small sector. Furthermore, in 2017 Bolivia participated for the only time in an UNESCO international test

applied to Latin American school students in reading and understanding; the results show that 87% of 3th grade cannot understand what they read what is. This is by far a very low performance compared to students from other Latin American countries who participated in test and in maths the results were even worse (Oporto, 2023: 19). This is somehow consistent with the worry expressed by the current President Luis Arce in November 2023 (Infobae, 8 November 2023). More up-to-date data could show the general dissatisfaction towards education quality such as the recurrent upheavals of rural and urban teachers asking for basic working conditions such accessing tap water and internet, which has become very necessary especially after the COVID 19 pandemic (Página Siete, 5 June 2023). Even though this could seem off topic, the interest towards extractivism in left-wing Latin American governments such as the MAS administrations in Bolivia could explain why despite their political positioning, MAS has not invested in education considering the economic bonanza during Evo Morales's first terms. Since much of the labour required for extractivism does not need broad-based human capital, the expansion of extractive economies could lead to an underinvestment in education (Bebbington, 2012: 7).

In the context of Northern La Paz, conflicts related to socio-environmental issues are intertwined with extractivism. These conflicts don't solely arise from areas abundant in resources but stem from the political and economic interests of various actors. Understanding the dynamics of power relations, as well as access and utilization of land and natural resources, is crucial in this context (Fundación Tierra, 2022: 13). An essential factor explaining why many segments of the population do not oppose extractive activities is the non-Aymara-centric narrative employed by Evo Morales. This broader approach garnered more acceptance nationwide compared to other indigenous leaders, enabling widespread support for significant changes such as the nationalization of hydrocarbons (Lucero, 2007: 229)

In terms of politics, the *interculturales* were and are still very connected to MAS because they were key actors in the foundation of the party. MAS was conceived in the 1990s with the aim to be a space for peasants, small-farmers and indigenous movements in politics. The initial bases of MAS were coca growers (*cocaleros*), many of them had been miners before that had been previously displaced because of closing of state-owned mines in the highlands (Bebbington et al, 2018: 83). Looking at land conflicts in northern La Paz (but not in Guayanay), the strong ties between *interculturales* and MAS grants this groups land rights quite easily. As a consequence, they are often responsible for land use change and extractivism. Some of the people interviewed claim that this is due to the fact that they are migrants in that territory and therefore relate differently to land, as they do not see it as something to take care of but

as a source of income (accumulation by dispossession). The right-wing opposition claims that the redistribution model brought by MAS is only a means to favour sectors aligned with the government, which burdens the private sector and does not tackle the country's structural problems (Mamani, 2017: 201; Molina, 2013: 6).

2.3.2. The law is valid as long as the party agrees

Extractivism has been a source of conflicts in Amazon Andean societies by creating new institutional forms and behaviours as well as political changes. Adaman et al. (2019: 517) argue that authoritarian populism and extractivism are interconnected phenomena. Charismatic leaders such as Evo Morales and Rafael Correa¹⁰ have utilised extractive practices to stimulate economic growth and maintain their grip on power. This tactic is exemplified by MAS, that has been in power in Bolivia with Morales since 2006 and with Luis Arce since 2021¹¹. This means that for nearly twenty years, the same political party has ruled Bolivia almost uninterruptedly and has resulted in consolidating their power and suppressing the opposition, even when the opposition are indigenous peoples from the lowlands demanding for their territory to be safeguarded.

Despite the need for a previous consultation to the local population before exploiting natural resources according to the Constitution, MAS has shown a contradicting attitude in this regard more than once. Between 2009 and 2010 CPILAP, requested the previous consultation to take place in rural areas of La Paz where MAS had already given concessions for hydrocarbon exploitation. Consequently, CPILAP was accused of being a right-wing separatist organisation for going against the Process of Change. Moreover, the then head of the Bolivian State Petroleum Corporation (YPFB) stated that previous consultations should not be needed since they block extractive projects (Bebbington, 2012: 10). The Bolivian state has also been criticised for its contradictions and for not learning from the experiences of neighbouring countries like Peru when it comes to extractivism (ANF, 22 August 2018). On the one hand, MAS critiques globalization and capitalism, on the other, people like García Linera states that Bolivia should enter the global mineral trade, which is clearly capitalist. This entanglement makes us question to what extent can MAS be considered an anti-capitalist and anti-imperialist party if they play by the rules of capitalism.

¹⁰ Former president of Ecuador

¹¹ In October 2020 new elections were held and Luis Arce Catacora from MAS, who had previously been the Ministry of Economy during Morales's government, was elected president.

2.3.3. Buen Vivir, Decoloniality and Extractivism

Buen Vivir translates to the Aymara concept '*suma qamaña*'. '*Suma*' means warm and welcoming and looking to secure the best possible conditions for everyone without establishing any form of hierarchy. '*Qamaña*' translates to rest, dwell and care for others, where people and nature are included (Albó, 2011: 134-136). Following this way of thinking, harming nature also means harming people, since we are all part of the same unity people will not be able to 'live good' if others and nature are suffering.

Buen Vivir is a concept under construction, but it provides an alternative to the classic view of development, with a deep involvement of the environment due to its non-anthropocentric nature. It seeks to break the notion of development as something self-absorbed, lineal and perpetual (Gudynas, 2011: 232). Other than that, it provides new ways to live and rule a country from the perspective of indigenous peoples, who have been marginalised for centuries. Furthermore, it is a first step to dismantle the colonial power that has shaped our societies (Acosta, 2011: 189). This can be linked to the concept of coloniality that refers to the way in which even though there are no formal colonies, the principles of colonialism prevails nowadays and control global politics (Quijano, 2000: 217; Rutazibwa and Shilliam, 2018: 4). In fact, coloniality is about erasing, un-naming and forgetting what happened before (Vázquez, 2020: 162). In Bolivia we can observe this differentiation with the Aymaras and Quechuas, mostly from the highlands, who have managed to preserve their language and traditions to a greater degree than the Lecos, the main indigenous group in Guanay, whose language is now spoken by very few. Likewise, the Esse Ejja indigenous group show a different reality, they have kept their language and traditions intact for being a group in initial contact, which means that they are not very familiar with the rules of the dominant society (Inter-American Commission on Human Rights, 2013: 5; Mamani and Sanjinés, 2022: 9).

Decoloniality has been presented as a way to counteract coloniality. Vázquez (2020: 169) labels decoloniality as a field of practice rather than a study that aims to make justice for those silenced by coloniality and allow them to heal. Bolivia is a good example to witness the limitations of decoloniality and *Buen Vivir* as practices in the world we live in and little is said about how to be decolonial. Coloniality is also linked with capitalism, therefore *Buen Vivir* could be a way to decoloniality but as Bolivia has shown, it is very difficult to turn the theory of *Buen Vivir* into practice even in a country where there are indigenous peoples in power positions.

Buen Vivir has been used by governments from the so-called pink tie as an alternative to capitalism. Considering that ecological destruction is embedded in the system of production

and distribution and that marginalised groups like indigenous peoples tend to face the consequences harder than others (Magdoff and Bellamy Foster, 2011: 30). *Buen Vivir* is supposed to change how resources are used because human rights and the rights of nature are seen as complementary. It also critiques what is considered progress such as the over-reliance in science and technology as a means to balance the uncontrollable extraction of natural resources. In order to reinforce these rights, a redistribution of wealth and income that do not jeopardise the environmental balance is needed (Acosta, 2011: 205).

The empowerment of indigenous peoples in Bolivia has not resulted in a decolonial shift, but quite the opposite, it could be claimed that entering the market by becoming prominent businesspeople and establishing links with foreign companies has empowered some indigenous people in Bolivia. If we compare how gold mining is handled by the Leco and the Esse Ejja population, even though both groups are negatively affected by mechanised gold mining, the Esse Ejjas are the most affected indigenous group in northern La Paz. The greater closeness to Western culture and awareness regarding the dynamics of gold mining where the cooperatives and foreign companies are involved as well as their better command of Spanish may contribute to the Lecos benefitting from gold mining, unlike the Esse Ejjas. It should also be noted that the Lecos (especially older generations) chose to get involved in gold mining while being aware of the degradation to their livelihoods, land and natural resources caused by extractivism due to the lack of sustainable livelihood alternatives. Factors such as the draughts caused by climate change made farming an uncertain source of income and self-consumption. Other than that, people in Guanay mentioned that the money that gold mining brings to the population has allowed more families to send their children to university. On the other hand, the Esse Ejjas see no benefit from gold extraction in their territory but bare only the negative consequences of this activity. Bearing in mind that the Esse Ejjas from Eyiyoquibo village stopped being nomad about twenty years ago, they have other achievements to look forward to such as for the first generation of Esse Ejja students to graduate from their local high school. This contrast opens the discussion of to what extent staying distant to capitalism and the Western world makes indigenous peoples have a better life. By comparing how both groups experience gold mining, it is difficult to be completely against extractivism when there are no other alternatives. Natural resources are finite, but their exploitation has at least provided opportunities to some. Those who have profited want to keep doing it until there is gold in their territory, why wouldn't they if despite the negative consequences extractivism helps them make ends meet?

The idea of getting back in touch with pre-Columbian ways of thinking to rule a country, is regarded as going backwards in terms of development for some of the critics of *Buen Vivir*, who are often part of a traditional *blancoide* elite. Nevertheless, other critics like the Indianist Carlos Macusaya (2020: 66) criticises the idea proposed of ‘going back to the roots’ as a form of empowerment for indigenous peoples. According to him, the existing domination relation between the indigenous and non-indigenous is possible because of the notion of a cultural virginity. This implies the existence of a true indigenous identity, that was imposed by the non-indigenous and expects indigenous people to preserve their culture by not being exposed to or assimilate Western culture. Furthermore, the idea that there is one indigenous identity does not consider that ‘indigenous identity’ is a very complex category for it to be reduced to one group (Cunha Filho, 2014: 143).

Ruling a country according to *Buen Vivir* seems inviting but being not realistic. Considering that this is an ancient concept, governments claiming to follow *Buen Vivir* seem not to acknowledge the likelihood that some of core aspects of this concepts might have gone lost in translation and with the passing of time. If that is the case, having it written in our constitution by people who most likely have only read about *Buen Vivir* but not practiced it in their everyday, is not a form of cultural appropriation?

3. Justification and Methodology

3.1. Why this topic?

It is often said that Bolivia is a mining country since it is a crucial part of our history and identity. A lot has been written and researched in a number of disciplines about mining in Bolivia, novels such as *Metal del Diablo (The Devil's Metal)* by Augusto Céspedes (1946) and *Potosí 1600* by Raúl Rocha Monroy (2002) are some of the must-reads of Bolivian literature. Furthermore, mining is also in our music (Savia Andina, 2003)¹², folkloric dances¹³ and our Coat of Arms displays an image of the Cerro Rico of Potosí. Most Bolivians I know have direct or indirect links to the mines, just to name a few examples: some of my relatives (including my great-grandfather) worked in the mines as engineers, with the current gold boom, some of my friends have tried to join a mining cooperative in northern La Paz and I found out that some people I met in La Paz city have family members who are members of mining cooperatives in Guanay. However, very little has been written about gold mining, despite the fact that gold has been extracted for centuries. In fact, Santos (1994: 3) shows that in 1571 the Spanish already knew that Larecaja was rich in gold.

Indigenous peoples all over Bolivia are those mostly affected by extractivism and the degree to which they benefit is questionable. Coming from the highlands, I decided to explore the effects of extractivism among indigenous peoples from the lowlands, in order to learn about groups I knew little about. In recent years gold mining has been largely debated in the Bolivian news and academy focusing mainly on the environmental degradation caused by large-scale mechanised gold mining and how the use of mercury for alluvial gold mining affects people's health.

Data of 2020 displays that Bolivia is the largest mercury importer in the world, in that year Bolivia imported 147 thousand kilograms of mercury. This corresponds to an expense of 7.69 million US dollars. On the other hand, India, the second largest exporter of mercury in the world spent 2.3 million US dollars the same year (Statista, 2020). The use of mercury for alluvial mining has negative socioeconomic and socioecological consequences for the local

¹² El Minero, song by Savia Andina. DOI: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xdfu1_TII2E

¹³ The dance “mineritos” tries to depict the lives of the miners and their experience in the tunnels. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JzcgpOsPuJ4>

populations. Indigenous peoples from the lowlands¹⁴ of Bolivia face these consequences because of the alarming mercury contamination of their rivers. Indigenous peoples like the Esse Ejjas of Eyiyoquibo are heavily affected because fishing is core to their livelihoods. In contrast, according to articles 30 and 352 of the New Political Constitution of the State, enacted in 2009 during the first term of Evo Morales, non-renewable natural resources in indigenous territories will only be extracted after previous consultation and approval of the local population. Other than that, extractivism should always benefit local indigenous communities living in resource-rich territories (Nueva Constitución Política del Estado, 2009).

When I started reading about gold mining in Bolivia, I realised that when it comes to right violation of indigenous peoples due to large-scale mechanised gold mining and other forms of extractivism, it was easier to find information about how the Tsimanes and Tacanas¹⁵ experienced extractivism than about other indigenous peoples. Nonetheless, the newspapers were full of articles about gold mining in Guanay and how foreign companies are polluting the rivers with mercury. However, the word 'Leco' came up quite rarely and mostly just to mention sociodemographic data of Guanay and other municipalities. Also, the literature about extractivism in northern La Paz tends to focus on the conflicts between lowland indigenous peoples and the so-called *interculturales* or *colonizadores* that migrated from the highlands to the lowlands. Due to its location, I imagined that the clash between local and highland indigenous peoples could be different in Guanay and this proved to be the case when I conducted fieldwork for this research there. The gaps about the Leco population in the gold mining literature and the easier access to Guanay than to other municipalities of northern La Paz were encouraging enough to focus on this group and territory.

After being in Guanay, I had the opportunity to take part in the Pan-Amazon Social Forum¹⁶ (FOSPA) in Rurrenabaque and San Buenaventura¹⁷, where I could listen to the experiences and worries of indigenous leaders from other groups such as Esse Ejjas and Uchupiamonas,

¹⁴ The Bolivian lowlands, constituting a vast expanse encompassing 64% of the country's territory, emerge as Bolivia's most extensive region, spanning a substantial surface area of 703,040 km². Stretching from the Andean foothills to the Paraguay River, which marks the nation's lowest elevation, this region maintains an average altitude of less than 400 m above sea level.

¹⁵ Tsimanes and Tacanas are indigenous peoples from the Amazon (there are more)

¹⁶ FOSPA is a space for reflection with a variety of actors from different parts of Bolivia and from the other Amazonian countries, namely Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Colombia, Venezuela, the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, French Guyana and Surinam. FOSPA aims to raise awareness about the threats that Amazon Forest faces and find ways to protect the life in the Amazon

¹⁷ Rurrenabaque and San Buenaventura are two Amazonian municipalities, in the Department of Beni the former and in the Department of La Paz the latter, home of several lowland indigenous peoples including the Esse Ejjas, Uchupiamonas, Tsimanes and Tacanas

as well as Tsimanes¹⁸ and Tacanas and leaders from the highlands. Even though this research focuses on gold mining carried out in Guanay, FOSPA enriched my understanding regarding the diversity of experiences among different lowland indigenous peoples regarding extractivism and more specifically gold mining. Therefore, data collected during interviews, discussions, seminars and informal conversations about how other lowland indigenous peoples experience gold mining will serve to compare and contrast the experience faced by the Leco population interviewed in Guanay.

Looking at the historiography of mining in Bolivia, I noticed that very little has been written about gold mining and a lot about other minerals such as silver and tin. As González Quint-Araníbar (2021: 42) points out, a significant share of what we know about the history of gold mining in Bolivia comes from the writings of travelers from the United States, France and Germany. However, we should keep in mind that these travelers wrote from their positionality: Western foreigners whose first language was not Spanish or any of the indigenous languages spoken in Larecaja.

Since we do not know to what extent those travelers had contact with the local population or were genuinely interested in knowing what gold mining meant for them, now that gold mining is a 'hot topic' in Bolivia, the research on this topic should prioritise the perspectives and experiences of indigenous peoples from the lowlands and migrants who have become part of the local community. During my fieldwork in Guanay, I visited some communities that have been negatively affected by gold mining and had the opportunity to interview indigenous authorities. I also talked to other actors who were very knowledgeable about extractivism and particularly large-scale mechanised gold mining but prioritised giving space to people who lived in territories affected by extractivism in northern La Paz and therefore talked from their own experience.

Given the limited information available about the Leco population within a topic that is part of the Bolivian identity as a mining country, how large-scale gold mining impacts the lives of minority indigenous peoples such as the Lecos in Guanay should be researched. Going back to the agrarian question, it is evident that throughout history, the mining booms in Bolivia share similarities in terms of who gets what and what do they do with it. In an age of great awareness regarding climate change and the limited natural resources we have and keep exploiting irresponsibly, we should research extractivism from all possible angles and from

¹⁸ In Bolivia the Esse Ejjas, Uchupiamonas, Tsimanes and Tacanas live mostly in the Abel Iturralde province and in the Beni department.

all sides of the world if we want to try to change things. Due to my life and family history, personal interests and what I have learnt in this master's, I chose gold mining in Guanay in the hopes of building a steppingstone for a broader understanding about a fascinating but also devastating topic. Given the large array of social, economic and environmental implications of large-scale mechanised gold mining in Guanay, I would like to continue researching other areas of this phenomenon in the future.

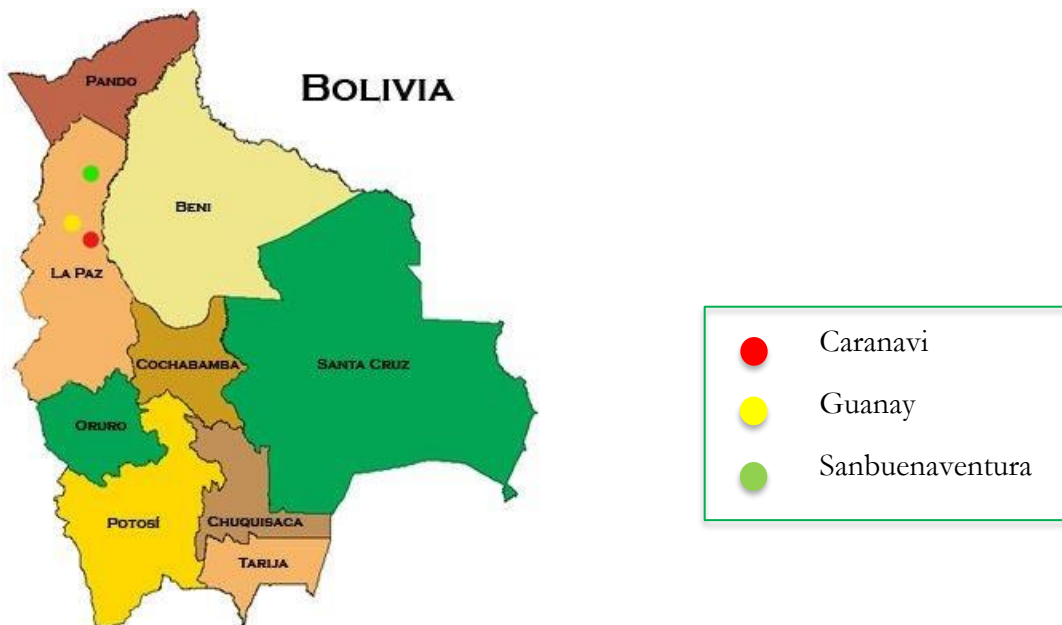


Figure 1 Map of the Plurinational State of Bolivia

3.2. Considerations prior to data collection

Despite the time limitations conducting fieldwork rather than using secondary data was a better option because:

- 1) I had not visit this part of Bolivia prior to this research and I knew that perspectives can change drastically once you are on the field because it allows you to get closer to the context. Furthermore, talking directly to the people from Guanay would also give them the space and time they deserved.
- 2) Gold mining in northern La Paz takes place in areas that are usually not of easy access. Moreover, there are communities in the countryside of Bolivia with no internet access or where internet is often of bad quality. Internet is also expensive for many people in rural and

urban areas because it is common for them to use their phone's data, which limits internet access even more when not everyone in the household owns a smartphone. Bearing that in mind, staying in the Netherlands would have limited data collection to online interviews with people working in NGOs and research centres, who despite being very knowledgeable and helpful for this research, are not directly affected by gold mining. Additionally, indigenous peoples from the lowlands understand the implications of extractivism more than anyone else because they are directly affected.

3) Bolivia is a small country in terms of population, so it is relatively easy to get in touch with people you do not know because usually someone among your contacts will know someone who knows someone. Social capital is key when conducting research and I had the feeling that in Bolivia I would have had to cross fewer bridges than in other parts.

4) Before travelling I contacted people who could help me gain access to the field. *Cáritas Caranavi*, *Cáritas Guanay* and *Fundación TIERRA* were very supportive.

3.3. Access to the field

Most of the fieldwork took place in Guanay (urban area and rural communities). However, due to my participation in FOSPA I could also visit Sanbuenaventura and Eyiyoquibo in the Abel Iturralde province. Given the long distances between La Paz city and these places, I also spent two nights in Caranavi¹⁹ (one night on the way La Paz-Guanay and another on the way Guanay-Sanbuenaventura).

Visiting the communities with someone from *Cáritas Guanay* was key to build trust with the authorities I interviewed. Furthermore, I was warned about Guanay not being very safe, so it was better to be always with someone.

I was able to visit Eyiyoquibo, the community where the *Esse Ejjas* live, because that visit was part of the programme of FOSPA. Hence, the organising team was in charge of all the logistics. Since FOSPA had a busy schedule, it was not possible to return to Eyiyoquibo afterwards, which would have been ideal because it would have allowed me to interact with the *Esse Ejjas* population in a more informal and personal setting. However, the group discussions that took place in Eyiyoquibo were very enriching for this research and that is why

¹⁹ Caranavi is a municipality and the capital of the province of Caranavi in La Paz Department. It is an intermediate city

what I learnt helped me to compare and contrast the reality of the Leco and Esse Ejsa population.

3.4. Sampling

The people interviewed were selected through snowball sampling: Fundación TIERRA put me in touch with Cáritas Caranavi who then gave me the contact of Cáritas Guanay. Cáritas Caranavi and Cáritas Guanay helped me with the logistics to carry out fieldwork in Guanay. I had long conversations with people from Cáritas. Furthermore, they gave me access and accompanied me to the communities in Guanay because they were the link between me and the people I interviewed (they had projects in those communities). However, I am aware of the fact that by going to the communities where Cáritas works, I probably missed the opportunity to see other contexts but since I was an outsider to Guanay, this was the most convenient and safest option.

While I could not ‘choose’ so much who to interview in Guanay. I did have the freedom to have informal conversations with whoever was open to it about gold mining especially in the urban part of Guanay where I slept and spent the days I did not visit any communities. This was valuable data because it allowed to double check some of the topics that emerged during the interviews and it confirmed that gold is at the core of people’s everyday in rural and urban areas of Guanay.

3.5. Methods

Considering the different perspectives and realities of the people I did research with, qualitative methods were more suitable (O’Leary, 2017: 272). Moreover, since the consequences of gold mining for the population is a sensitive topic for those affected by it, it was better trying to start a conversation first and build some trust before the interviews. Once they felt comfortable, they talked also about topics I was not expecting, so the use of qualitative methods allowed me to deepen in what was more interesting and relevant to this research paper.

15 semi-structured interviews were carried out, two of them were online and the rest in-person. 13 interviews were recorded with the participants’ consent. The interviews recorded had prior consent of the interviewees, for the non-recorded interviews, notes were taken.

The interviews in the communities of Guanay were group interviews and the indigenous authorities from the community took part in them. This is very common in Bolivian rural communities when an outsider visits the community. Having group interviews was also convenient because in all cases at least one of the authorities had to leave in the middle of the interview because they had to take care of other endeavours. The leaders of one community asked not to mention their names or the name of their community in my research, therefore pseudonyms will be used.

Besides interviews, informal conversations with hotel managers, informal traders, *barranquileros* and people working in the touristic sector and restaurants took place, as well as participant observations in the main square of Guanay (urban area) when there were no interviews scheduled for the day.

If I had had more time in the communities of Guanay, I would have tried to conduct some one-on-one interviews. However, the time constrains, difficult access to the communities, safety and being on the field on a bank holiday²⁰, limited my possibilities to move more freely. On the other hand, interviews in Sanbuenaventura and Rurrenabaque were one-o-one. Due to the nature of FOSPA, I had longer conversations about extractivism in general but particularly large-scale mechanised gold mining and indigenous peoples' rights with highland and lowland indigenous leaders, researchers from different Bolivian cities, activists and other people interested in extractivism.

3.6. Difficulties and solutions

After a week in La Paz City and not being able to make any fixed arrangements, I decided to go to the field anyway. I started the journey in Caranavi, because it is on the way from La Paz city to Guanay. There I talked to the director of *Cáritas Caranavi*, who gave me all the contacts and information needed to conduct fieldwork in Guanay.

Initially the research was supposed to compare how indigenous peoples from the lowlands and the *interculturales* experienced large-scale mechanised gold mining. However, once in Guanay, I found out that the *interculturales* in Guanay lived in secluded areas and were farmers, whereas in other parts of northern La Paz they have more control over gold mining than indigenous peoples from the lowlands. Furthermore, in more than one occasion I noticed

²⁰ On July 16 we celebrate the anniversary of La Paz. In 1809 indigenous, mestizo and criollo revolutionaries stood against the Spanish. This date was very important for the Bolivian independence and it is celebrated with big festivities all over the department of La Paz.

that especially in Guanay, it was not always easy to distinguish who was from the lowlands and who from the highlands due to the recurrent migration of people from the countryside. That is why when referring to people from the lowlands, this also encompasses people born in other parts of the country but who felt home in Guanay.

3.7. Positionality

How we position ourselves in relation to the people we do research with is influenced by our background, life experiences, and context, including social, political, and historical factors (Rose, 1997: 309). Despite being Bolivian, I was aware of the existing differences between my context and the context of the indigenous peoples I wanted to interview. For instance, I am not indigenous, I lived abroad for many years and I do not have all the knowledge they have about gold mining and commercialization in the formal and informal sector.

Before going to the field I was worried that people in Guanay would make assumptions about me and my political stand. This can be a big issue in Bolivia because having different political affiliations or opinions can hinder a good interaction among the parts. However, I was surprised by how little the participants and people in Guanay in general talked about politics.

Being and looking young was an advantage, especially with some of the women of the communities. They liked the idea of a young woman doing a master's abroad being interested in understanding their reality. Some of the respondents also valued that I went all the way to their communities to talk to them. I was told that they do not appreciate it when outsiders talk about Guanay without visiting and talking to the locals.

3.8. What could be done differently in the future?

After having a first encounter with the context of gold mining in northern La Paz, future research would benefit from spending more time on the field in order to conduct more one-to-one interviews and also to include more indigenous peoples who are not authorities. The indigenous leaders I talked to, knew a lot about their communities but research about this topic would greatly benefit from the perspectives of other actors such as people who are not part of a mining cooperative or who have recently moved to Guanay and to be able to expand

on topics that throughout history have shown to be very problematic such as gender inequality in mining. However, two one-o-one interviews provided an insight to this topic.

Regarding the visit to Eyiyoquibo, it would be advisable to do multiple visits to the community and make the effort to talk mainly to women and children if their parents allow it, since they are more affected than men by mercury contamination of the rivers. Finding a translator within the community would also be a good idea because it was evident that unlike the other indigenous peoples I interacted with, some Esse Ejjas struggled communicating in Spanish.

Another issue that arised during the visit to Eyiyoquibo was that women struggled more than men to speak Spanish. After a discussion with someone who had done research in Eyiyoquibo, they shared that many women in Eyiyoquibo are victims of domestic violence and my first reaction to that was to feel anger towards all men in Eyiyoquibo and therefore I did not make as much effort to talk to them as I could have (the women were not part of the conversations that were taking place). However, in a future visit I would not get carried by my emotions as I did on this occasion, or generalise what might be the reality of only a few members of the community.

4. Findings

A lot is being discussed and written about gold mining in northern La Paz at the moment. However, this is a vast territory that encompasses a range of cultures and ecosystems. Therefore, the impacts of gold mining and how the local population relates to it is not homogeneous. Furthermore, the data about gold mining in northern La Paz tends to focus on the Amazon and the Madidi National Park. Whereas gold mining also occurs in the transition areas between the highlands and the Amazon like Guanay, as well as in the highlands of Bolivia.

This section will present the data collected during fieldwork, emphasising the impacts of gold mining in Guanay. However, a short overview about the Sanbuenaventura and the Esse Ejja population will also be provided.

4.1. Sanbuenaventura and the Esse Ejjas of Eyiyoquibo

San Buenaventura is a municipality in La Paz at the border with Beni Department, in fact a bridge connects Sanbuenaventura with Rurrenabaque, that is part of Beni Department. San Buenaventura is part of the Abel Iturralde province, which encompasses 34 per cent of the territory of La Paz Department. This is the largest province of the Department and the one with the lowest population density (Gozálvez Kreuzer, 2014). Two large rivers mark the borders of this province, the Madre de Dios and the Beni rivers. This territory is known as the door of the Bolivian Amazon, that is why FOSPA takes place there.

The Esse Ejjas is one of the indigenous groups living in this province. This group is known for being fisher people and nomad. About twenty years ago a group of Esse Ejjas (30 families) settled in Eyiyoquibo, a small village given to them by a group of missionaries who had bought that land. This territory was uninhabited prior to the arrival of the Esse Ejjas.

Despite their nomad nature, these two reasons were key factors for the settlement of this group in Eyiyoquibo:

- 1) This group faces a lot of racism and discrimination by other groups. They are referred to as '*chamita*', which is a derogatory way to call someone who lives far away. During FOSPA I witnessed that discrimination when I saw Esse Ejja families begging in the streets of Rurrenabaque. The Esse Ejja leaders also mentioned that due to the discrimination that their

children face at school (for instance in Rurrenabaque and Sanbuenaventura), it is not uncommon for them to quit their studies.

2) The increasing mercury contamination of the rivers due to gold extractivism hindered them from finding fish as easily as before. It should be mentioned that the Esse Ejjas eat fish in all their meals. During one of the discussions regarding the impacts of mercury contamination, an Esse Ejja leader stated that unlike before, now there are days in which they cannot find fish to eat in the river and therefore they do not eat when that happens.

4.1.1. Eyiyokuibo: home of the Esse Ejjas

In the past decades this group of Esse Ejjas have made Eyiyokuibo their home. However, this territory and the history of this group brings them some downsides:

1) Eyiyokuibo is small and the Esse Ejjas often have large families. Due to the space restriction, several families usually live together in the same house.

2) The restricted space also hinders the inhabitants of Eyiyokuibo to find an alternative way to generate income and eat other than fish, which has high levels of mercury. For instance, agriculture is not an option for them because there is no space for crops and other than that, the Esse Ejjas are not experienced in this activity. When asked why they keep eating fish an Esse Ejja man said: *"No tenemos qué más comer, que el gobierno nos dé una alternativa, que ponga la carne si tanto insisten en que dejemos de comer pescado."*²¹

3) By being indigenous peoples in initial contact, not everyone is fluent in Spanish. None of the nine school teachers in the community speak the Esse Ejja language, which makes the studies difficult for the students. Other than that due to the high mercury contamination in their bodies, many of the Esse Ejja children have learning difficulties. However, in 2024 the community is expecting for the first generation of high school graduates to finish their studies in the school of Eyiyokuibo. The leaders of Eyiyokuibo hope that some of the students will continue their studies and become school teachers, so that in the future the students of Eyiyokuibo will be able to study in their native language.

4) The worrying levels of mercury in the river puts pregnant women at risk and causes malformations among the children. Other than that the Esse Ejjas who were part of the

²¹ Translation: *"There's nothing else for us to eat, the government should give us an alternative, they should give us meat if they are so insistent on us to stop eating fish"*.

discussions at FOSPA mentioned that many of them tend to have other symptoms such as headaches and dry tongue at night, which they believe is caused by the mercury in their bodies.

4.2. Indigenous peoples and mercury contamination

A major concern among indigenous peoples from northern La Paz is the use of mercury for gold extraction due to the consequences this brings to their health, which affects mostly Esse Ejja women in Eyiyoquibo. In light of studies carried out by the International Pollutants Elimination Network (IPEN), this population presents extremely high levels of mercury in their bodies and the study carried out by CPILAP highlights that they are the most affected indigenous group in the region. However, due to the lack of information regarding the effects of mercury, this has not always been their main worry (Mamani and Sanjinés, 2022: 102).

The abandonment of the state in this region is evident by the lack of information regarding the effects of gold mining in people's health. CPILAP together with Wildlife Conservation Society Bolivia (WCS) and the Higher University of San Andrés (UMSA) published a study about the effects of the use of mercury in gold mining on indigenous peoples in northern La Paz. The study was carried out between 2022 and 2023 and included six indigenous peoples from northern La Paz including the Leco population (Fundación TIERRA, 13 June 2023). The study gathered data from 302 people in 36 communities and it showed that 74,5% of them had high levels of toxicity in their bodies caused by mercury. All participants from 18 out of the 36 communities included in the study presented higher levels of mercury in their bodies than the limit considered safe by the World Health Organization (WHO).

MERCURY CONTAMINATION IN INDIGENOUS GROUPS OF NORTHERN LA PAZ-BOLIVIA 2022-2023							
INDIGENOUS GROUP	ESSE EJJA	TSIMAN	MOSETEN	UCHUPIAMONA	TACANA	LECO	AVERAGE
MERCURY CONCENTRATION (WHO allowed limit= 1 ppm*)	6,9	6,8	4,0	2,5	2,1	1,9	3,93
Percentage of people who exceeded the allowable limit of mercury: 74.5%.							
Number of communities where 100% of their population exceeded the allowable limit of mercury: 18							
*ppm=parts per million							
Source: Universidad Mayor de San Andrés (UMSA). 2023. <i>Impact of gold mining on indigenous communities</i> . Research conducted by CPILAP for 36 communities of 6 indigenous groups.							

At FOSPA, a CPILAP representative explained that they conducted the study because other organizations who study the effects of mercury do not share this information but also because the lowland indigenous communities requested this information. The Leco population presented lower mercury levels compared to the Esse Ejja population, who presented the highest levels of mercury in their bodies out of all indigenous groups included. Paradoxically, the Esse Ejja do not engage in gold mining, while for the Leco gold mining is part of their everyday. The difference in mercury contamination among both groups is most likely due to the fact that the Leco population has a lower fish consumption, while the Esse Ejja population eats fish in all their meals.

4.3. Guanay: land of gold

Guanay is a municipality in the northern part of the department of La Paz in the Larecaja province with an area of nearly 343 thousand hectares, its capital is also called Guanay. This municipality is organised into four districts: Guanay, San Juan de Challana, Santa Rosa de Challana, encompassing 56 communities.

It is located in the foothills of the mountain ranges of the Eastern Cordillera of the Andes. There are two ecological zones: 1) Andean and Inter-Andean Valley 2) Tropical. The altitudes range from 620 m above sea level, 1,200 m above sea level and up to 6,000 m above sea level in the high plateau zone. These features make Guanay a transition zone between the Bolivian Andes and Amazon.

The communities are located in the confluence of the Mapiri, Tipuani and Coroico rivers, which lead to the Kaka River, a branch of the Beni river in the Amazon basin. Other rivers in the area are the Sañiri, Achina, Chillappu, Quenasani, and Uchupampa. The mining camps are located in the proximity of the rivers.

According to the last census²², Guanay has a population of nearly 15 thousand inhabitants and its main economic activities are agriculture and mining (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012) but as it will explained later, the prevalence of mechanised mining has displaced agriculture as the main economic activity in the communities visited.

²² This data might have changed since the last census took place in 2012

4.4. Indigenous peoples in Guanay

The population of the municipality is ethnically diverse. In ancient times, the region was inhabited by the Lecos and the Muchanes. With the migration of the Aymaras and the Spanish colony, a cultural mix was produced transforming the region.

The indigenous peoples are currently distributed in the four districts as follows: Guanay with settlements of Lecos and interculturales communities, San Juan de Challana with Leco, originary²³ and intercultural communities of Aymara descent, Santa Rosa de Challana with Leco and Chacapa communities.

The Lecos are the majoritarian group in the municipality of Guanay and most of them do not speak the Leco language anymore but only Spanish. In an interview with a young Leco woman living in La Paz City, she mentioned that the Leco language is mostly spoken by the elderly and not by the younger generations. During one of the discussions at FOSPA, an elderly Leco leader narrated his experience of being violently forbidden to speak the Leco language at school by his teachers who were indigenous from the highlands.

At the end of the 20th century, decades after the Agrarian Reform and at the height of the indigenous peoples' demand for territorial rights, the Lecos requested their land titling as an Indigenous Originary Peasant Territory (TIOC)²⁴ in order to reaffirm their identity and dominion over their territory and natural resources. The communities of San Juan de Challana and Chacapa, that self-identify as indigenous, have preserved ownership and possession of the land because of their customs, organisation, use and distribution of the territorial space, and have collective agrarian communal property titles.

The Lecos settled along the Mapiri, Challana, Coroico and Kaka rivers have structured themselves organically and territorially in the organisation Leco Indigenous Peoples and Originary Communities of Larecaja (PILCOL), created in 1998, through which they have an important representative political participation and local and regional influence. At departmental level, PILCOL is affiliated to CPILAP and at national level they are part of the Confederation of Indigenous Peoples of Eastern Bolivia (CIDOB).

²³ Originary (originario): It is said of the indigenous native peasant nations and peoples. They are all human collectivities that share cultural identity, language, historical tradition, institutions, territoriality and cosmovision, and whose existence predates the Spanish colonial invasion (Constitution of Bolivia, art. 30)

²⁴ The TIOC category is part of the strategy and platform of fight against the subjugation and indiscriminate exploitation by economic groups with national and international capital that covet mineralogical, hydrocarbon and timber resources. The demand for titling as a TCO (later named TIOC) was presented in August 1998, for an area of 168,000 hectares.

PILCOL and the Local Central of Mining Cooperatives of Guanay (CECOMINAG) are key actors for the local population and often work together, which could seem contradictory given the fact that large-scale mechanised gold mining has also negative effects over the Leco population. On the field I understood that this collaboration is very prudent because small and large-scale gold mining is deeply embedded in the livelihoods and identity of the Leco population.



Figure 2 Headquarters of PILCOL. Source: own elaboration

4.5. Artisanal gold mining vs. large-scale mechanised gold mining

Small-scale artisanal gold mining in tunnels and in rivers has been central for the livelihoods of people in Larecaja over generations according to the conversations held with indigenous authorities in Guanay. However, in recent years large-scale, mechanised mining has become more prominent. This form of doing gold mining uses mercury in alluvial mining and leads to the deterioration of agricultural land and the contamination of rivers.

Being aware of the consequences to their health by eating fish from contaminated rivers, the Lecos I interacted with affirmed to have significantly reduced their fish intake. However,

even who no longer eats fish, is exposed to mercury because artisanal gold mining in the rivers is still a common practice among the population.

Before going into more detail about the implications of artisanal gold mining for people, how those people I talked to relate to gold mining will be introduced. Due to the limited literature about the Leco population, the information presented in this section comes from my interaction with Lecos from or living in Guanay.

Firstly, it should be mentioned that unlike other indigenous peoples such as the Esse Ejjas, the Lecos are usually experienced in artisanal gold mining. This lines up with the brief historical overview of gold mining in Larecaja previously described. In fact, most of the people I interviewed and had informal conversations with, shared childhood and youth stories about them going to the river to look for gold artisanally, that is with a basket and with no chemicals that contaminated the river. Some of the interviewees added that when they were children, getting gold from the river used to be a task of the children of the household while their parents worked in agriculture. This form of division of labour within a household converges with how Alfred Sauvy (1969: 248) describes the transformation of the economic support that family members transforms as they age. Initially children are mostly consumers of what the family produces and as they grow up, they produce more than they consume. Following the work of Sauvy and considering that factors such as mechanised agriculture and climate change have made agriculture for self-consumption and income generation less reliable than before, it makes sense that working age adults look for livelihood alternatives. This explains why according to the people interviewed in Guanay, becoming member of a mining cooperative is now more desirable than farming.

Artisanal mining is also known as *barranquilla*²⁵ is an activity people from different ages still do because being ‘in charge’ of large-scale mechanised mining is extremely difficult for the local population (the reasons for that will be discussed later). However, usually more women than men work as *barranquilleras* because it allows them to also take care of the household.

Since alluvial gold extraction in Guanay is mostly carried out by Chinese and Colombian companies who own big machinery, they are the ones in control of large-scale mechanised gold mining (extractivism). But why do they have so much power and the state is almost absent in Guanay when it comes to gold mining? Article 351 of the Constitution declares that the Bolivian state will control de exploration, exploitation, transportation and

²⁵ Barranquillar is the practice of taking gold from the river manually, also referred to as artisanal mining. People engaging in this activity are known as barranquilleros/barranquilleras

commercialization of natural resources through public, cooperative or communitarian entities and cooperatives will be allowed to hire private companies and set up public-private companies. Hiring a private company to extract gold would entail a work relation where the communities had power over the company hired. However, being on the field showed otherwise because:

1) The mining companies hired by the communities own the machinery used for gold exploitation. Due to the high costs of the dredges needed for large-scale mechanised gold mining, for most of the communities I visited it was unconceivable to think of buying that machinery. Only one community owned the machinery and had established a local mining company.

2) Since the foreign companies are much wealthier and powerful than the communities where gold is exploited, they usually keep around 80 percent of the gold extracted, leaving 20 percent for the communities. The communities agree to this unequal distribution because the income they can generate from that 20 percent is greater than what they would generate with artisanal mining and farming.

3) The state seems to be very absent in this territory, therefore, the indigenous leaders are the ones responsible for aspects such as improving or building new infrastructure for the community.

4) There is a transaction between the communities and the mining companies. Given the limited resources of the communities, they often come to agreements with the mining companies such as letting them exploit their territory in exchange of some infrastructure improvement that the state should take care of. Other times the companies give the communities money in exchange of permission to explore and exploit their territory.

5) The mining companies and not the cooperatives are the ones extracting gold. The cooperatives are the ones coming to agreements with the companies, which also involves artisanal gold mining. Usually, the local population is allowed to do *barranquilla* while the company workers are on a break, which gives the people from Guanay very limited time for an activity that used to take them longer. Furthermore, they dive into the water which is polluted with mercury with no sort of protection and putting their health at risk. It should also be noted that people doing *barranquilla* often are not members mining cooperatives. This puts them in a more vulnerable situation, since they are not safeguarded by any legal instruments such as the 356 General Law for Cooperatives (*Ley 356-Ley General de Cooperativas*).

6) Unlike private mining companies, cooperatives do not have to pay taxes, other sectors have to pay the Transaction Tax (3 per cent), Value Added Tax (13 per cent) and Corporate Income Tax (up to 37.5 per cent) (Los Tiempos, 4 August, 2023). Hence, coming to the mentioned agreements with the communities is very convenient for the Colombian and Chinese mining companies, these agreements allow them to operate without being formally registered, almost as if they were hiding behind the rights of the mining cooperatives. On the other hand, allowing these companies to explore and exploit their territory also brings advantages to the communities because unlike agriculture *“gold is quick money”*.



Figure 3 Group of *barranquillerxs* in Tipuani. Source: Foto exhibition at FOSPA

Out of all the communities visited, one stood out for being where people were doing better. The houses were nicely painted and had decorative plants, the school infrastructure was neat and the children even had music instruments and a nice uniform. What made this community different to the rest was that they had managed to buy the machinery needed to extract gold from the river. This made them feel empowered because they have absolute control over when, how and for how long gold exploration and extraction takes place. They were also against the use of mercury (despite they using it) but assured that they were way more careful than the companies, who tend to ‘overuse and over-do’ when it comes to gold mining. Like people in other communities, the authorities of this community said that extractivism was detrimental. However, they also claimed that having control over how to extract allowed them to think of alternative options to generate income such as tourism, sector they wish to

develop in the near future. They were already growing cacao and producing chocolate and according to them, this was also bringing money to the families. Furthermore, they had a common saving fund to be used when someone from the community needed it.

4.6. Impacts in the territory

Large-scale mechanised gold mining has negative effects on the land where it takes place. The dredges used for alluvial gold mining are visible from afar. Once you approach Guanay, it becomes evident that the water of the river has a different colour: a sort of turquoise that signals that the water has been contaminated with mercury. Other than that, it is impossible to ignore the strange shapes that the riverbed forms, this is caused by the stirring of the dredges, which results in the deviation of the rivers.

This might not look threatening at the beginning, but after interacting with the locals, this turns into a horror scene. The first words that came out from one of the interviewees regarding this was *“los ríos desvían a su querer”*²⁶ followed by a sad expression on his face. He was talking about the mining companies, owners of the dredges that work 24/7. The stirring of the earth causes floods, which are sadly becoming common in Guanay and people have gotten used to it. In 2021 the floods covered about 80% of the urban area of Guanay and at least 2500 families were affected (La Razón, 18 January 2021). This incident was mentioned by all the people I interviewed in Guanay.

The information regarding when these companies arrived to Guanay is confusing. Some people claimed that the presence of Colombian and Chinese companies increased in 2020, while others assured that the dredges belonging to Bolivian companies have been in Guanay for at least two decades. However, all participants agreed on the fact that in recent years, large-scale mechanised gold mining has taken over artisanal gold mining.

The mining companies also look for gold in the surface anywhere they think there might be gold. Thus, crops and public spaces in the rural areas of Guanay are also removed. At first I did not understand how this was possible if some of the people I talked to fiercely expressed their anger towards gold extractivism despite having their land destroyed and made unsuitable for agriculture. The problem here lies in the form of land property of some communities in Guanay and many other rural parts of Bolivia.

²⁶ This translates to “they divert the rivers at their will”



Figure 4 Dredges removing soil in the proximities of Guanay. Source: Own elaboration



Figure 5 Water pond contaminated with mercury Source: Own elaboration

Some of the communities have the status of Communal Land of Origin (TCO). These are areas where indigenous peoples have historically had access and continue to sustain and evolve their distinct economic, social, and cultural structures to secure their survival and progress. From this standpoint, TCOs are recognised as shared indigenous heritage, safeguarded as inviolable, indivisible, irreversible, immune to dispossession and exempt from the

passage of time²⁷. While this is a form to safeguard land property for the communities, the fact of it being of communal property allows for the majority to decide what is to be done with the land. One of the interviewees, a known and respected coffee grower in the region, who fiercely opposes the presence of foreign companies for gold mining, shared the story of how he lost part of his crop because once a mining company asked the community permission to explore that land, most people agreed and there was nothing he could do to stop the exploration and subsequent exploitation.



Figure 6 Walking with a Leco interviewees in a community of Guanay. Source: own elaboration

4.7. Impacts in people's livelihoods

Although some participants believed that the only way to save Guanay from extractivism is to go back to agriculture despite the uncertainty of it, which has incremented with the accelerated effects of climate change, none of the interviewees took a completely 'anti-gold stand'. All the locals I talked to in Guanay grew up doing artisanal mining and mentioned that this

²⁷ This legal framework is outlined in Law No. 1715 dated October 18, 1996.

activity was an important source of income for their households. Many of them agreed on the fact that what should be stopped is not mining but the use of mercury and the destruction of the soil.

The participants were also aware of the negative impacts of the use of mercury and dredges to extract gold and that these impacts might be irreversible. However, some of them argued that the presence of mining companies was needed in their communities because in the absence of the state and of social and infrastructure investments, they were the only ones with enough resources to meet some of the urgent needs of the communities. This feeling is clearly expressed in the following quote of one of the interviews: *“Este río era una belleza antes, cristalina el agua pero ya lo hemos destruído. Nosotros somos culpables por permitir que vengan las empresas... No ha valido la pena ¿pero qué vamos a hacer? Ahora por ejemplo estamos esperando que venga una empresa para pedirles que tapen el hueco que la anterior empresa ha dejado en la plaza cuando han explorado. Lo peor es que no había habido oro ahí”*²⁸

Furthermore, one interviewee who was worried and upset because the river was not what it used to be worked at some point with a Chinese company. According to him, despite the long working hours and unsafe working conditions he was exposed to, this was worth it because the pay was pretty good. Also the member of PILCOL interviewed showed a paradoxical but understandable stand on large-scale mechanised gold mining. They claimed that this form of mining is beneficial because it brings more money than artisanal gold mining and agriculture, thus *“it allows people to eat”*. However, the finite nature of gold is a source of worry for the Leco population and when thinking about the future many of the interviewees agreed that Guanay is likely to turn into a deserted land. On the other hand, a few optimists argued that once there is no more gold in Guanay: *“Los que tengan que irse se habrán ido a la ciudad y los que hemos cuidado nuestras tierras vamos a poder vivir tranquilos con nuestro chaco y trabajar por volver al equilibrio de antes”*²⁹

²⁸ Translation: *“This river was beautiful before, the water was crystal clear, but we have destroyed it. We are to blame for allowing the companies to come... It wasn't worth it, but what are we going to do? Now, for example, we are waiting for a company to come and ask them to fill in the hole that the previous company left in the square. The worst part is that there was no gold there”*.

²⁹ Translation: *“Those who have to leave will have moved to the city and those of us who always took care of our land will be able to live in peace farming and return to the balance we had before”*.



Figure 7 Square of a community destroyed due to the exploration to find gold mining. Source: own elaboration

4.8. And the youth?

A common worry linked to extractivism was how large-scale mechanised gold mining has impacted the youth in Guanay. Many participants worried about their children staying in Guanay because with the arrival of the foreign mining companies, delinquency has increased significantly. In fact, on my first day there I was warned not to go to certain areas such as a street that was referred to as the “*k’enchá calle*”³⁰ because of the prostitution and human trafficking linked to that place.

³⁰ K’enchá means something that brings bad luck, calle translates to street

Other than that, it was claimed by many participants that the recent gold boom has turned young people lazy because they have seen their parents working hard in agriculture and often not making ends meet, while joining a mining cooperative or doing *barranquilla* makes ‘quick money’. Even though the higher income generated by gold allowed many families to send their children to university, most people interviewed expressed their worry because according to them, most young people do not want to study either. It was also mentioned that it is hard to condemn the youth for not wanting to study or work in agriculture because their reasoning is very practical, observing the high unemployment rates among young professionals in Bolivia.

4.9. A pro-indigenous party neglecting lowland indigenous peoples

Extractivism usually takes place in indigenous territories and northern La Paz is not an exception. It has also been established that extractivism has negative consequences for the locals, which has also been observed to be the case for the Lecos of Guanay and the Esse Ejjas of Eyiyoquibo. If MAS is the party of indigenous peoples, how can we explain that the Leco population does not rebel against the mining companies or demands MAS to intervene when the Process of Change has empowered indigenous peoples?

In an interview, Eduardo Gudynas (ANF, 22 August 2023) argues that some of the economic, social and environmental consequences of gold mining in Bolivia are due to the weakening or absence of the state. For instance, the lack of an appropriate control of the environmental effects of gold mining is a result of the link between the state and the mining cooperatives. Since this sector is protected by the state because of their political inclination, MAS tolerates the way mining is carried out despite it not being environmentally friendly and opposed to the concept of *Buen Vivir*, which MAS is supposed to endorse. Furthermore, the absence of the state also allows for violence linked to gold mining to increase in these territories. However, after long conversations with indigenous leaders from the lowlands and listening to the testimonies of representatives of CPILAP, this argument appears to be unconvincing.

Probably we should start changing the predominant narrative of an absent or a weak state to a narrative of a strategically absent state. Not endorsing the regulations that the Plurinational State introduced and pretending not to know or at least not acting upon the a legality of the

mining companies in Guanay, allows MAS to not take care of that territory because at the end of the day, extractivism ends up being a better alternative than agriculture for the population. Since people are used for the State to not care about them, having someone who can help meet at least some of the needs of these communities (in this case the mining companies) is better than nothing. This was clearly explained to me by an Uchupiamona indigenous leader:

“En todas estas comunidades el Estado no ha hecho nada desde que entró Morales, ni escuelas, ni centros de salud, ni nada. Estos [masistas] son unos vivos porque saben que la gente no tiene opciones y los comunarios terminan diciendo: hermano, le metamos a la minería, dice que así al menos vamos a poder autofinanciar nuestras necesidades...Desde que está de moda lo comunal no nos hemos beneficiado en nada, seguimos siendo pobres e incluso estamos peor que antes. Si el Estado conociendo la realidad de estas comunidades no crea alternativas para que no exploten los recursos, lógicamente los comunarios vas a interesarse en la minería cuando no tienen para comer.”³¹

³¹ Translation: “[The state] hasn't done anything in all these communities, since Morales came to power, no schools, no health centres, nothing. These [masistas] are very clever because they know that the people have no options and the community members end up saying: brother, let's get into mining, they say that this way at least we will be able to fund our own needs... Since the communal has become trendy with this government, we have not benefited at all, we are still poor and we are even worse off than before. If the State, being aware of the reality of these communities, does not provide alternatives so that they do not exploit the resources, logically the community members will be interested in mining when they do not have enough to eat”.

5. Conclusions

Gold extractivism is a fascinating topic because of its complexity, variety of actors involved and the consequences it brings to the territory and society. I am aware that there are many aspects that this research could not dig into such as the gender inequality within the *barranquillerxs* and the mining cooperatives, which were mentioned during the interviews or the indirect influence of gold mining in other economic sectors such as trading (formal and informal) and transport just to name a few.

Gold extractivism has become a popular, strategic and controversial topic in Bolivia in recent years and probably most of the population knows that Guanay is an important mining hub where foreign companies use mercury for alluvial gold mining. As a country, we are aware of its negative social and ecological effects. However, not enough is being said about the reasons that keep indigenous peoples from the lowlands of Bolivia like the Lecos of Guanay so deeply involved to this activity. Why do many Lecos want mining companies to keep extracting and destroying their territory when at the end of the day they think that despite the income they generate from it, extractivism is not worth it? Having the example of the social movements of indigenous peoples from the highlands that have changed the country more than once throughout history, why isn't there a stronger resistance to gold extractivism in Guanay? And finally, why does MAS, the party who empowered indigenous peoples and transformed the country allows this to happen?

Guanay shows that having diverse ecological zones, biodiversity and being surrounded by rivers is not enough to have a decent life in some rural areas. Only 32,5% of people in Guanay are considered non-poor and 67,5% is poor (Instituto Nacional de Estadística, 2012). Considering that agriculture is one of the main economic activities in Guanay and due to climate change and other factors, cannot guarantee that their crops will be able to feed them and generate income, gold mining has become more appealing for many people in Guanay. In fact, it is common that the younger generations do not even know how to work the land, unlike their parents and grandparents. Indeed, why would anyone want to learn something that requires more work and generates little income if gold can make them earn significantly more? That is why the youth (but not only) of Guanay tend to choose becoming members of a mining cooperative over agriculture, even if the resources that extractivism brings to the cooperatives are not equally or fairly distributed and benefit mining companies much more than them.

Furthermore, contrasting the living conditions between communities in Guanay where the local population owned the machinery (only one of all the communities visited) and those where foreign mining companies 'are in charge' of gold extractivism, it seems like extractivism could actually lead to a better quality of life. The community that had managed to buy the machinery had control over extractive activities, the resources were channeled to improve the school infrastructure and the conditions of the village in general. Whereas the other communities depended on the resources of the mining companies to meet some of their basic needs and ironically also to fix what mining companies that had been in their land before had destroyed. This could signal that the discourse of *masistas* according to which extractivism can be a tool to reduce poverty and distribute wealth equally, has the potential to become more and more convincing. However, we should see whether these communities manage to develop other economic sectors such as tourism that allows them to stop depending on extractivism and keep the quality of life that large-scale mechanised gold mining has provided them, as they hope it will happen in the near future.

Another aspect that should be analysed in the community owning their machinery, is the fact that the indigenous authorities interviewed assured that one of the keys of their success is that the government is nowhere to be seen, which enables them to look after the wellbeing of their community. This statement is quite shocking considering that MAS is supposedly a party that prioritises the rights and inclusion of all indigenous peoples in Bolivia.

Extractivism allows people in Guanay to meet some of their needs and despite the negative effects of gold mining, thinking strictly on economic terms, this ends up being better than not being able to meet any of their needs, , although there are a number of environmental and social aspects that should also be considered and that so far do not show positive prospects. Comparing the experiences of gold extractivism of the Lecos and the Esse Ejjas, suggests that the more a community is involved in extractivism in gold-rich territories, the better off they can be, although it still needs to be seen to what extent this is sustainable in the long run. Therefore, the abandonment and/or weakening of the State should be seen as such but rather as a benign neglect and a rational strategy that allows the party to keep their bases and political influence and power in the countryside.

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