

# WATER IS WORTH MORE THAN GOLD: NETWORKED ACTIVISM AND TRANSNATIONAL RESISTANCE TO EXTRACTIVISM IN THE CERRO BLANCO MINING CONFLICT

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**L' AIGUA VAL MÉS QUE L' OR: RESISTÈNCIA TRANSNACIONAL I LA LLUITA PER LA JUSTÍCIA HÍDRICA EN EL CONFLICTE MINER DE CERRO BLANCO**

**EL AGUA VALE MÁS QUE EL ORO: RESISTENCIA TRANSNACIONAL Y LA LUCHA POR LA JUSTICIA HÍDRICA EN EL CONFLICTO MINERO DE CERRO BLANCO**

## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the Cerro Blanco mining conflict in Asunción Mita, Guatemala, as a pivotal case of networked activism in Central America. On September 18, 2022, 89% of Asunción Mita's residents voted against the Cerro Blanco metallic mining project, citing concerns over water contamination and environmental degradation. This decisive referendum was met with resistance from Bluestone Resources, the Canadian mining company, and the Guatemalan government, which challenged the legitimacy of the vote, exposing tensions between community sovereignty, state policies, and corporate interests. Using the "Not In Anyone's Backyard" (NIABY) framework and water justice principles, the paper explores how the Cerro Blanco case represents grassroots resistance to transnational extractivism, particularly in relation to shared water resources in the Lempa River basin, which connects Guatemala and El Salvador. The study highlights how networked activism, involving local, regional, and international actors, fosters opposition to extractivism and advocates for sustainable governance. Framing water as both a human right and a shared common good, the paper underscores the importance of collective action and transboundary cooperation in safeguarding ecosystems and advancing environmental justice. The study calls for stronger legal protections, such as the Escazú Agreement, to ensure inclusive decision-making in natural resource management. By positioning the Cerro Blanco conflict within broader regional struggles for water justice, the paper emphasizes the transformative potential of networked activism in resisting extractive industries and promoting equitable resource governance.

**Key words:** Networked Activism; Water; Transnational Extractivism; NIABY; Guatemala.

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## RESUM

Aquest article analitza el conflicte miner de Cerro Blanco a Asunción Mita, Guatemala, com un cas clau d'activisme en xarxa a Amèrica Central. El 18 de setembre de 2022, el 89 % dels residents d'Asunción Mita van votar en contra del projecte miner metàl·lic de Cerro Blanco, al·legant preocupacions sobre la contaminació de l'aigua i la degradació ambiental. Aquest referèndum decisiu va ser rebut amb resistència per part de Bluestone Resources, l'empresa minera canadenca, i el govern de Guatemala, que van impugnar la legitimitat de la votació, exposant tensions entre la sobirania comunitària, les polítiques estatals i els interessos corporatius. Utilitzant el marc "Not In Anyone's Backyard" (NIABY) i els principis de justícia hídrica, l'article explora com el cas de Cerro Blanco representa la resistència popular a l'extractivisme transnacional, particularment en relació amb els recursos hídrics compartits a la conca del riu Lempa, que connecta Guatemala i El Salvador. L'estudi destaca com l'activisme en xarxa, que involucra actors locals, regionals i internacionals, fomenta l'oposició a l'extractivisme i defensa una governança sostenible. Enmarcant l'aigua com un dret humà i un bé comú compartit, l'article subratlla la importància de l'acció col·lectiva i la cooperació transfronterera per protegir els ecosistemes i avançar cap a la justícia ambiental. L'estudi fa una crida a enfortir les proteccions legals, com l'Acord d'Escazú, per garantir una presa de decisions inclusiva en la gestió dels recursos naturals. En situar el conflicte de Cerro Blanco dins de lluites regionals més àmplies per la justícia hídrica, l'article emfatitza el potencial transformador de l'activisme en xarxa per resistir les indústries extractives i promoure una governança equitativa dels recursos.

**Paraules clau:** activisme en xarxa; aigua; mineria transnacional; NIABY; Guatemala.

## RESUMEN

Este artículo analiza el conflicto minero de Cerro Blanco en Asunción Mita, Guatemala, como un caso clave de activismo en red en América Central. El 18 de septiembre de 2022, el 89 % de los residentes de Asunción Mita votaron en contra del proyecto minero metálico de Cerro Blanco, alegando preocupaciones sobre la contaminación del agua y la degradación ambiental. Este referéndum decisivo fue recibido con resistencia por parte de Bluestone Resources, la empresa minera canadiense, y el Gobierno guatemalteco, que impugnaron la legitimidad de la votación, lo que puso de manifiesto las tensiones entre la soberanía comunitaria, las políticas estatales y los intereses corporativos. Mediante el uso del marco "Not In Anyone's Backyard" (NIABY, por sus siglas en inglés) y los principios de justicia hídrica, el artículo explora cómo el caso de Cerro Blanco representa la resistencia popular al extractivismo transnacional, particularmente en relación con los recursos hídricos compartidos en la cuenca del río Lempa, que conecta Guatemala y El Salvador. El estudio resalta cómo el activismo en red, que involucra a actores locales, regionales e internacionales, fomenta la oposición al extractivismo y aboga por una gobernanza sostenible. Al enmarcar el agua como un derecho humano y un bien común compartido, el artículo subraya la importancia de la acción colectiva y la cooperación transfronteriza para proteger los ecosistemas y avanzar hacia la justicia ambiental. El estudio hace un llamado a fortalecer las protecciones legales, como el Acuerdo de Escazú, con el fin de garantizar una toma de decisiones inclusiva en la gestión de los recursos naturales. Al situar el conflicto de Cerro Blanco en el contexto de luchas regionales más amplias por la justicia hídrica, el artículo enfatiza el potencial transformador del activismo en red para resistir a las industrias extractivas y promover una gobernanza equitativa de los recursos.

**Palabras clave:** activismo en red; agua; minería transnacional; NIABY; Guatemala



On September 18, 2022, the residents of Asunción Mita, a town in Guatemala near the Salvadoran border, voted decisively against metallic mining in their municipality (Ferrucci and Cabezas 2022). “Do you agree with the installation and operation of metallic mining projects in any modalities that impact natural resources and the environment in the municipality?”— in response to the ballot’s question 89% of residents voted “no” (Ferrucci and Cabezas 2022). Opposing the Canadian company Bluestone Resources’ Cerro Blanco mining project, henceforth Bluestone, the community of Asunción Mita reaffirmed its demand for self-determination over its land and natural resources. Supported by 150 national and international observers, especially from El Salvador, the vote highlighted grassroots resistance to extractivism and its broader socio-environmental implications<sup>1</sup>. Right after the consultation, Bluestone’s stock price plummeted to a year-low within two days, signaling the economic impact of the decision (Karim 2022). However, the Guatemalan government, led by President Alejandro Giammattei at the time, and Bluestone challenged the referendum’s legality, citing concerns over the jurisdictional authority of local governments in decisions regarding mining projects (Bluestone Resources 2022).

Adding complexity, this struggle resonates with broader regional movements for water justice, particularly in neighboring El Salvador, the first country to enact a national ban on metallic mining in 2017 (Broad and Cavanagh 2021). Yet, this hard-fought victory faced a setback in December 2024, when El Salvador’s government reversed the ban, citing economic pressures and the challenges of balancing environmental protection with national economic

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<sup>1</sup> National environmental social movements included the Salvadoran Ecological Unit (Unidad Ecológica Salvadoreña, UNES), the Ecofeminist Movement of El Salvador (Asociación de Mujeres Ambientalistas de El Salvador, AMAES), Cáritas El Salvador, a catholic relief and development foundation, the Association for the Development of El Salvador (Asociación para el Desarrollo de El Salvador, CRIPDES) the Association for the socioeconomic development of Santa Marta (Asociación de Desarrollo Económico Social de Santa Marta, ADES), the National Alliance Against Water Privatization, the National Roundtable against Metallic Mining (the Mesa Nacional Frente la Minería Metálica), and the Participatory Broadcast Association of El Salvador (Asociación de Radios y Programas Participativos de El Salvador, ARPAS).

interests (Corbett 2024). The policy reversal has rekindled fears of environmental degradation and transboundary water contamination, jeopardizing the Lempa River—a vital water source shared by both nations. Meanwhile, in October 2024, Bluestone sold the Cerro Blanco project to Aura Minerals, a company that has faced scrutiny over its environmental and human rights record in Honduras, adding complexity to concerns about the mine's potential impacts on regional water security (Crúz 2024; Gómez 2024).

This paper situates the Cerro Blanco conflict within the broader context of anti-extractive movements in Central America, exploring how networked activism and solidarity challenge transnational extractivism which refers to the large-scale extraction of economically valuable natural resources, then exported for processing and integration into higher-value products (Acosta 2013, 62). In this context, water emerges as both a material resource and a symbolic element of resistance, central to the “water over gold” narrative that frames this conflict as a struggle for environmental justice and regional survival (Aráoz 2009). Drawing on frameworks such as “Not In Anyone’s Backyard” (NIABY) and networked activism, this analysis highlights the transformative potential of anti-mining actors in advocating for sustainable development and equitable governance. The case of Asunción Mita exemplifies the profound risks posed by metallic mining, including water contamination from cyanide and arsenic, which threatens health, livelihoods, and cultural practices deeply tied to the land (Cartagena 2015; Gudynas 2009; OCMAL 2019). Research has already shown that industrial activity near water sources contributes to severe public health crises, including chronic kidney disease outbreaks (García-Trabanino et al. 2016). The impacts extend beyond environmental harm, disrupting social and economic structures and necessitating both human and ecological healing (Martínez-Alier et al. 2014, 2016; Ramos 2012).

In this paper, I argue that networked activism—linking local communities, environmental organizations, and international actors—plays a critical role in resisting transnational extractivism and reimagining water governance. Compared to transnational



activism, which often uses localized grievances to inform global campaigns or vice versa, as seen in movements like anti-globalization protests, climate change advocacy, or campaigns against transnational corporations (Keck and Sikkink 1998; Tarrow 2005), networked activism emphasizes the role of digital networks, decentralized organizational structures, and fluid connections among actors (Rhoden 2016). It leverages technology to enable horizontal, participatory, and real-time collaborations across geographies and issues (Bennett and Segerberg 2012; Castells 2015). Networked activism emphasizes inclusive knowledge co-production, encouraging collaboration between local communities and academics (Gerbaudo 2012; Juris 2016). Furthermore, by framing water as a shared common good and fundamental human right, activists challenge extractive policies that prioritize profit over people and natural resources (Rodríguez-Labajos and Özkaynak 2014). Ultimately, this paper calls for strengthened legal frameworks and collaborative governance models, such as community consultations and the Escazú Agreement, to ensure more inclusive decision-making processes. By situating local resistance within a transboundary context, this analysis underscores the importance of solidarity and collective action in shaping equitable and sustainable approaches to resource management across Central America<sup>2</sup>.

This paper opens with an introduction that situates the Cerro Blanco conflict within the global struggle against extractivism, emphasizing the centrality of water as a human right and a cornerstone of environmental justice. It then provides a detailed background of the mining project, exploring its historical, legal, and socio-environmental dimensions, including the broader regional implications of mining resistance in Central America. A review of the theoretical frameworks follows, integrating perspectives on environmental justice, networked

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<sup>2</sup> In reference to the Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters in Latin America and the Caribbean, better known as the Escazú Agreement (Spanish: Acuerdo de Escazú), the Government of Guatemala informed the UN Secretary-General in a communication sent at the end of 2022 of the following: “The Republic of Guatemala officially informs you, as depositary of the Escazú Agreement, that it does not intend to become a party to the Agreement. Its signing of the Agreement shall not, therefore, give rise to any legal obligations for the Republic of Guatemala, in accordance with international law” (UN 2022).

activism, and transnational solidarity to contextualize the resistance. The methods section outlines the interdisciplinary approach, combining a review of literature, non-participant observations from the 2022 municipal consultation planning, and analysis of legal and procedural documents. Empirical findings highlight local resistance strategies, such as grassroots organizing, community-led consultations, and the framing of water as a shared common. The analysis further explores the role of cross-scalar activism in connecting local movements with regional and global networks to challenge extractivist paradigms. Finally, the conclusion underscores the critical importance of inclusive decision-making, legal protections like the Escazú Agreement, and collaborative approaches in fostering equitable resource governance. It argues that the Cerro Blanco conflict demonstrates the transformative potential of grassroots movements in redefining environmental governance and advocating for sustainable development, making the case for integrated, community-centered alternatives to extractive practices.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Water, a life-sustaining resource, stands at the center of the global fight against extractivism. Nowhere is this struggle more evident than in the town of Asunción Mita, Guatemala, where residents in 2022 overwhelmingly rejected the proposed Cerro Blanco project, citing grave concerns over water contamination and environmental degradation. This decision, however, transcends local opposition, embodying a broader battle for environmental justice that connects communities, nations, and global movements. At the heart of this resistance is the recognition of water not merely as a resource but as a human right and a cornerstone of social and ecological well-being.

This paper examines the Cerro Blanco conflict through the lens of territorial struggles and networked activism, advancing the Not In Anyone's Backyard (NIABY) philosophy as a demand for structural change, not just localized resistance. The analysis draws the frameworks

of Thomas Sikor and Peter Newell (2014), who explore the intersection of environmental governance and political power, and Leire Urkidi and Mariana Walter (2011), who underscore the transformative potential of grassroots mobilization in mining conflicts. Additionally, Chris Ballard and Glenn Banks (2003) provide critical insights into the socio-political dynamics of mining, offering a lens to understand how extractive industries shape state-community relations. Together, these frameworks provide a comprehensive foundation for analyzing the Cerro Blanco conflict and its implications for environmental governance and social justice.

Building on the foundational work of Margareth Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998), this paper situates Cerro Blanco within the broader dynamics of transnational advocacy networks. Their concept of “boomerang politics” illuminates how local resistance movements strategically mobilize international networks to exert pressure on states and corporations, bypassing local political constraints. Similarly, Donatella Della Porta and Mario Diani’s (1999) analysis of social movements underscores the importance of framing processes, resource mobilization, and collective identity in sustaining transboundary activism. These theoretical perspectives are crucial for understanding how networked activism in Cerro Blanco aligns with broader environmental justice movements, connecting local struggles to global advocacy frameworks. Through these scholarly contributions, this paper argues that the resistance to the Cerro Blanco mining project transcends traditional “Not In My BackYard” (NIMBY) narratives, reflecting a deeper demand for structural change in resource governance. The conflict underscores the role of networked activism in challenging extractive industries, advocating for transboundary water treaties, and fostering sustainable and equitable governance models (Colectivo Madreselva 2006).

This discussion is further enriched by Stuart Kirsch’s (2014) exploration of how extractive projects redefine community identities, emphasizing the centrality of shared cultural and territorial values in resistance movements. Finally, Andrea Ballester’s (2019) work on water governance highlights the deeply interconnected nature of struggles over water

resources, such as those involving the Lempa River, with broader questions of equity, rights, and sustainability. This analysis not only highlights the importance of community-driven resistance but also demonstrates the transformative potential of “networking” local territorial struggles with global environmental justice efforts. Mining engineer Robert Robinson (2012) has highlighted that the Cerro Blanco mine, with its toxic discharge of thermal waters, poses significant risks to local ecosystems and the Lempa River potentially disrupting regional water supplies and exacerbating vulnerabilities for communities reliant on these ecosystems for survival. The 2022 consultation in Asunción Mita, while a powerful act of local resistance, also exposed the structural violence embedded in socio-political systems that prioritize corporate profits over environmental and human well-being.

Framed within the environmental justice movement (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016), the resistance to mining in Asunción Mita aligns with a broader “water over gold” narrative. This ethos resonates with transnational movements, such as El Salvador’s historic 2017 mining ban, which showcased the power of grassroots organizing in transforming policy. Yet, the recent repeal of this ban in 2024 underlines the fragility of environmental protections in the face of neoliberal pressures, threatening transboundary solidarity and regional efforts to protect vital water resources.

In a world increasingly threatened by extractive industries, the Cerro Blanco case offers a compelling lens to understand the potential of networked activism to redefine environmental governance. It challenges us to reimagine water as a shared common, more precisely river commons in this case, and to advance sustainable development paradigms that value ecosystems and human rights over short-term economic gains. By redefining water as a shared resource integral to regional and transboundary ecosystems, the Cerro Blanco conflict highlights how grassroots movements are increasingly embedding their struggles within a global narrative of environmental justice and sustainability (Martinez-Alier, 2003). This evolution also signals a broader critique of the systemic inequalities inherent in extractivist



practices. Rather than opposing mining solely to protect their immediate environment, Salvadorans and their allies challenge the extractivist model itself, advocating for alternative frameworks that prioritize the collective governance of natural resources and reject the commodification of essential ecosystems. The NIABY approach thus positions water governance as both a site of resistance and a transformative pathway to reimagine socio-political relationships with the environment, linking local actions to global demands for equity, justice, and sustainability. This interconnected framework not only amplifies the voices of marginalized communities but also demonstrates the strategic integration of localized struggles into transnational environmental justice networks, further contesting the legitimacy of extractive industries on a global scale.

## 2. METHODS

This study employs a comprehensive methodological approach to analyze the resistance and identity formation in the context of the Cerro Blanco mining conflict, incorporating the role of transnational collaboration and networked activism in reshaping environmental governance. Drawing from the Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) and the Juridification of Resource Conflicts research project, the research is supplemented by a thorough examination of non-governmental publications, scientific articles, government records, and expert analyses<sup>3</sup>. These sources provide a nuanced understanding of the relational dynamics between grassroots resistance movements and global environmental justice frameworks.

Informed by my extensive expertise in Central American mining conflicts and my work with the Central American Alliance on Mining (ACAFREMIN) since 2017, this research incorporates a regional perspective that situates the Cerro Blanco case within broader trends

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<sup>3</sup> The Juridification of Resource Conflicts, funded by the British Academy, explores legal strategies in violent resource conflicts in Central America and Mexico, focusing on minerals and water through political anthropology, socio-legal studies, and political ecology. The Environmental Justice Atlas (EJAtlas) maps global environmental conflicts, documenting resistance movements and the socio-environmental impacts of extractive industries.

in extractive industry resistance which I also analyzed in my doctoral dissertation (2024)<sup>4</sup>. Key insights are also drawn from the 2023 report, “*The Cerro Blanco Open Pit Mine in Guatemala: Experts and Citizen Groups Challenge Safety of Canadian-Owned Mining Project*,” which I co-authored with academics from Canada, Spain, and the UK and that the community of Asunción Mita and ACAFREMIN commissioned to us. This report integrates empirical data and expert perspectives to contextualize the socio-environmental risks posed by the mining project. The study is further enriched by non-participant observations I conducted during organizing meetings for the 2022 consultation in 2021 and early 2022, providing qualitative insights into how local resistance in Asunción Mita intersects with broader global environmental justice movements (Martínez-Alier et al. 2014). The integration of local voices and community-driven initiatives is central to understanding how networked activism transforms both governance and resistance practices, reinforcing demands for water governance rooted in equity and justice.

The methodological approach emphasizes critical engagement with legal and procedural documents to unpack the connections between local struggles in Asunción Mita and networked activism. As I argue, the resistance in Asunción Mita goes beyond the NIMBY mentality (Conde 2017), reflecting a demand for structural changes such as the establishment of a transboundary water treaty for the Lempa River (Robinson 2012). Inspired by Veena Das and Deborah Poole's (2004) exploration of the margins as critical spaces for understanding power dynamics, this study adopts their theoretical lens to investigate how mining practices are both enacted and contested in everyday life. Their focus on the interplay between state practices and localized resistance provides a vital framework for analyzing the nuanced ways in which marginalized communities navigate and challenge the socio-political structures surrounding extractive industries. This perspective guides the analysis of the networked anti-

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<sup>4</sup> Ferrucci, Giada. “Networks of resistance: a regional analysis of extractive conflicts in Central America” (2024).

mining coalition in Asunción Mita, highlighting the intersection of state practices with the lived experiences of marginalized communities.

Frameworks such as NIABY positions water governance as both a site of resistance and a transformative pathway to reimagine socio-political relationships with the environment, linking local actions to global demands for equity, justice, and sustainability. The conflict highlights the relational aspect of cross-scalar water activism, where local struggles for water as a human right are interconnected with national and international environmental justice efforts (Kojola and Pellow 2021; Pellow 2001). Anti-mining movements increasingly use legal and procedural tools, drawing on international frameworks such as ILO 169, UNDRIP, and IACHR to assert rights to self-determination and water governance (Martinez-Alier et al. 2016; Sieder 2013; Xiloj 2016). Transnational coalitions—uniting activists, defenders, farmers, Indigenous communities, and environmental advocates—link both local and global resistance to challenge extractivism and advocate for sustainable governance. The Asunción Mita consultation exemplifies the potential of networked activism to influence mining policies and reshape environmental governance, emphasizing water as a shared resource and fundamental human right.

### 3. CERRO BLANCO: THE MINE THAT WAS BORN DEAD

The Cerro Blanco mine, located 14 kilometers from El Salvador's border in the Northern Triangle region, exemplifies the environmental and social complexities of transnational extractive projects. The mine poses significant threats to the Ostúa and Lempa rivers, vital for agriculture, hydroelectric power, and local livelihoods in both countries. These rivers, central to socio-natural systems, face contamination and overuse due to extractive activities, necessitating cross-border cooperation to safeguard water resources (Broad and Cavanagh 2021; Boelens et al. 2016, 2023). The mine lies within the ecologically sensitive Trifinio-Fraternidad Transboundary Biosphere Reserve, a tri-border region of 148,482-hectare which

spans Guatemala, Honduras, and El Salvador<sup>5</sup>. Established in 1987 with support from the Organization of American States, the reserve symbolizes international cooperation for sustainable development but has struggled with limited resources and a lack of comprehensive water management policies (Holder 2016; Montoya 2021; Miranda et al. 2010). Despite its initial promise as a symbol of South-to-South cooperation, the biosphere reserve's impact has been constrained, focusing primarily on the Upper Lempa area while neglecting broader ecological challenges. The Cerro Blanco project exemplifies how extractive industries undermine such regional initiatives, threatening key water bodies like the Ostúa and Lempa rivers and Güija Lake, which are critical to local livelihoods and ecosystems (Schlesinger et al. 2017).

The mine's complex history began with Mar-West Resources in 1998, followed by acquisitions by two Canadian mining companies, Glamis Gold in 2000 and then Goldcorp in 2006. From the outset, the project was marred by environmental controversies, including initial rejections of its Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) by Guatemala's Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (MARN) in 2004 and 2005. Civil society organizations, grassroots movements, and affected communities consistently criticized the project for its lack of transparency and inadequate consideration of environmental and health impacts (Ferrucci et al. 2023; Montoya 2021). Despite these criticisms, the MARN approved Cerro Blanco's EIA in 2007 under new leadership, paving the way for further investments and operational expansion. Since then, the mine has involved significant Canadian transnational investments, including Goldcorp's tunneling and thermal water extraction, and later Bluestone's plans to convert the mine into an open-pit operation (Bluestone Resources 2021; Energy N.S. 2021).

Resistance to the Cerro Blanco mine has transcended national borders, involving local communities, international NGOs, and even religious institutions. El Salvador became actively

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<sup>5</sup> The Lempa River Trinational Border Association, comprising 29 municipal governments in the border area, often raises worries about Cerro Blanco. In a statement dated June 7, 2022, mayors from this association showed solidarity with Asunción Mita (International Allies Against Mining in El Salvador 2022).



involved in 2013 when its Attorney for the Defense of Human Rights raised concerns about the mine's environmental risks, particularly its threat to the Lempa River. The Salvadoran Catholic Church, including the Episcopal Conference, has played a key role in opposing the project, framing water protection as a moral and ethical imperative (Conferencia Episcopal de El Salvador 2021; Karunanathan 2015; Montoya 2021). Local organizations such as the Colectivo Madreselva, alongside international environmental and human rights groups, have been pivotal in raising awareness, filing legal challenges, and pressuring regional governments to halt the project<sup>6</sup>. The 2022 municipal consultation in Asunción Mita, which overwhelmingly rejected the mine, exemplifies the power of local governance in resisting extractive projects and asserting territorial sovereignty (Pérez 2024).

The mine's environmental risks, including cyanide-based gold extraction and toxic tailings storage, have prompted widespread concern. Open-pit mining, proposed by Bluestone, poses significant threats to water quality, biodiversity, and human health due to the potential for long-lasting contamination (Franks et al. 2021; Earthworks 2022). Incomplete EIAs, inadequate consultation processes, and administrative anomalies have further undermined the project's legitimacy (Emerman 2022; Pérez 2024; Ventura Cortes 2019). Legal challenges against the project have highlighted systemic failures in Guatemala's regulatory framework. In 2015, a petition filed with Guatemala's Supreme Court, supported by the Colectivo Madreselva, called for the revocation of the Cerro Blanco exploitation license due to non-compliance with environmental standards. However, the court dismissed the case, citing insufficient evidence of personal injury and rejecting community-based rights claims (CLACS 2016).

Recent developments have further eroded the project's viability. In June 2024, Guatemala's MARN identified several administrative anomalies in Bluestone's environmental license, including missing documents, improperly assigned file numbers, and changes in

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<sup>6</sup> The Colectivo Madreselva, a well-known Guatemalan environmental NGO, has been active in denouncing the detrimental environmental impacts of the Cerro Blanco extractive operations since 2010 (Yagenova et al. 2013).

mining methods from underground to open-pit without proper approvals (Pérez 2024). Mining consultant Martín Carotti noted that Cerro Blanco, still in its advanced exploration stage, is easier to cancel than active mining projects, making the current opposition a critical turning point for environmental justice advocates (BNAmericas 2024).

Situated in a region that embodies ecological sensitivity and international cooperation, the conflict surrounding the Cerro Blanco project has highlighted the shortcomings of regulatory frameworks, the critical role of networked activism, and the importance of inclusive and transparent environmental governance. Moving forward, initiatives like the Escazú Agreement, which promotes public participation and protects environmental defenders, are essential to address the systemic issues revealed by the Cerro Blanco case.

#### 4. NETWORKED ACTIVISM IN THE CERRO BLANCO PROJECT

Central America has a long history of resisting extractive industries such as mining, oil extraction, and land disputes tied to biofuels and plantations. These environmental justice struggles are deeply connected to broader issues of sovereignty, human rights, and the protection of collective resources, particularly water (Álvarez et al. 2015; Boelens et al. 2016; Zoomers 2010). The expansion of pro-mining policies and investments following Guatemala's 1996 peace process ignited widespread opposition, drawing attention to the profound environmental and social impacts of extractive industries (Aráoz 2009; Spalding 2023).

Water has emerged as a central focus of resistance movements against mining, given its essential role in supporting agriculture, livelihoods, and ecosystems. As a water-intensive industry, mining intensifies conflicts over water rights by transforming it from a shared communal resource into a privatized commodity. The contamination of critical rivers like the Ostúa and Lempa, vital for agriculture, hydroelectric power, and local communities, highlights

the pressing need for advocacy and action (Martinez-Alier et al. 2014)<sup>7</sup>. These movements frame water not just as an environmental issue but as a human rights concern, challenging the commodification and privatization of essential resources (Escobar 2010; Rodríguez-Labajos and Özkaynak 2014)). River commons, as conceptualized by Rutgerd Boelens et al. (2023), are socio-ecological networks rooted in shared livelihoods and collective stewardship, emphasizing the interconnectedness of human and non-human actors. This framework is particularly relevant in the case of the Cerro Blanco mine and its impact on the Lempa River basin, a critical transboundary waterway sustaining millions across Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. The Cerro Blanco project threatens this shared river system through potential contamination with heavy metals and other pollutants, undermining the livelihoods, ecological systems, and cultural ties of downstream communities. The Lempa River exemplifies a contested territory, similar to other environmental conflicts where grassroots movements, Indigenous organizations, and transnational coalitions resist extractivist practices that prioritize profit over ecological and social integrity (Boelens et al. 2023). These efforts align with the principles of river commoning, advocating for the recognition of rivers as inalienable communal assets and challenging neoliberal governance models that commodify water and marginalize local knowledge systems (Vos et al. 2020). Grounded in collective stewardship, these movements highlight the multi-scalar governance complexities and the urgency of addressing socio-ecological justice. The case of Cerro Blanco underscores the need to reimagine river governance, recognizing the interdependence of communities and ecosystems while resisting extractivist paradigms to promote equitable and sustainable futures.

Mining conflicts in Guatemala, such as those surrounding the Marlin Mine (Walter and Urkidi 2011) and the El Escobal Mine (Yagenova et al. 2013), have spurred the emergence of diverse coalitions at both local and transnational levels (Cartagena 2015). These coalitions,

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<sup>7</sup> Over the past 50 years, heavy deforestation has reduced forest cover to just 5% in El Salvador leading to increased soil erosion (Bensen 2023) while the Trifinio area is so contaminated that 20% of it may dry up by 2050, according to a U.N. IPCC report (Bofill 2022).

comprising NGOs, churches, and grassroots organizations, have united in opposition to extractive projects, highlighting the collaborative resistance against the socio-environmental impacts of mining. These coalitions amplify the voices of affected communities and foster pathways for collective action across multiple scales (Bebbington et al. 2007, 2008; Walter 2014). Networked activism plays an indispensable role in mobilizing resistance, highlighting the importance of community engagement in countering the power of transnational corporations (Rhoden 2016).

Networked activism in El Salvador's anti-mining movement adopts a networked approach, recognizing the interconnected local, national, and global dimensions of resistance. The historic 2017 mining ban, driven by grassroots efforts opposing projects like Pacific Rim, exemplifies how community mobilization intersects with national campaigns and transnational solidarity networks (Rodríguez-Labajos and Özkaynak 2014; Spalding 2023). By leveraging international frameworks such as ILO 169 and UNDRIP, Salvadoran activists have amplified their demands for water protection and environmental justice on the global stage (Xiloj 2016). Despite the current difficulties, this multiscale strategy empowers local communities to defend vital ecosystems like the Lempa River while influencing national policy and holding corporations accountable through global advocacy (Spalding 2018, 2023).

Michael Méndez (2020) defines scales as the spatial and social reach of actions, encompassing geographic regions, class identities, and subject positions. This perspective transcends simplistic binaries—such as local versus global or state versus community—by exploring the complex dynamics of mining conflicts (Dupuits et al. 2020). Maritza Paredes (2016) captures this interplay through the concept of “glocalization,” (Swyngedouw 1997) where local claims are globalized, and global norms are localized, expanding the reach and impact of grassroots struggles (1047). By linking local environmental burdens to global narratives of justice and sustainability (Hilson 2012), activists create more cohesive and impactful movements as we witness in Asunción Mita. By framing water as a collective good



constructing anti-mining campaigns on the Ostúa and Lempa river commons and emphasizing interconnected scales of activism for the human right to water (Angel and Loftus 2019, 206), these movements challenge extractive paradigms and advocating for sustainable, community-centered approaches. This multiscalar perspective, which integrates the global and local dimensions of activism, not only amplifies the visibility of grassroots struggles but also reshapes the discourse around resource governance and justice to contrast the extractive hegemon dominating in Guatemala. Guatemala.

## 5. EXTRACTIVE HEGEMON IN GUATEMALA

The legal framework governing mining in Guatemala reveals deep tensions. While constitutional provisions ostensibly ensure community participation, these rights are often overridden by multinational corporations and state priorities favoring economic growth over environmental and social protections (Sieder 2013; Cartagena 2015). Following the 1996 peace process which ended 36 years of armed civil conflict, Guatemala adopted a pro-mining development trajectory that significantly increased investments in the extractive sector, particularly during the commodity boom (Spalding 2023). These policies, framed as economic opportunities, often exacerbated violence, environmental degradation, and displacement, eroding social and ecological resilience (Pedersen 2018). Historical tensions in mining governance and revenue distribution have contributed to instability in resource-rich regions, where national sovereignty is often undermined by transnational capital and state-backed extractive interests (Bebbington 2013; Dadabaev, Shering, and Djalilova 2023, 3, Emel, Huber, and Makene 2011).

At the same time, this gap between legal rights and extractive practices highlights the systemic marginalization of local communities for corporate profit, deepening cycles of environmental injustice and social resistance (Ávila 2015). Extractivism—the large-scale exploitation and export of natural resources—threatens ecosystems, livelihoods, and social

structures in Guatemala (Gudynas 2013; Willow 2019). Water, deeply embedded in territorialization processes driven by extractive industries, becomes a site of contestation in mining conflicts (Laing 2020). Driven by global political economies, extractivism then commodifies rivers and natural resources, intensifying environmental inequities (Boelens et al. 2016, 2023). Political ecological perspectives emphasize the intertwined political and natural dimensions of such conflicts, highlighting how extractivism commodifies rivers and undermines communal stewardship (Acosta 2013; Robbins 2012; Bridge 2004). These dynamics intensify environmental challenges such as deforestation, land overuse, and water scarcity, disproportionately affecting marginalized communities (UNEP 2007; Bebbington and Bury 2013).

The resistance to Cerro Blanco demonstrates the power of local, national, and international coalitions in confronting extractivism. Local communities in Asunción Mita, primarily composed of farmers and Indigenous Peoples, is at the forefront of this struggle, opposing the mine's environmental impacts on water quality and ecosystem health<sup>8</sup>. This localized resistance has gained traction on national and international stages, with critical support from national and regional civil society organizations like the Madreselva Collective and ACAFREMIN. Civil society organizations and international environmental groups of this kind are pivotal in pressuring the Guatemalan government and global institutions to halt mining operations. The Roman Catholic Church, through local leaders and the Episcopal Conference of El Salvador, has framed environmental defense as a moral imperative (Montoya 2021, Nadelman 2015). This religious dimension aims to amplify marginalized voices, fostering dialogue and solidarity across diverse networks.

Asunción Mita played a decisive role in organizing the 2022 municipal consultation, which overwhelmingly rejected the Cerro Blanco project. This initiative highlighted the potential

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<sup>8</sup> Asunción Mita has a population of 40,382 inhabitants, 0.44% is considered indigenous (Maya, Garifuna, or Xinca) (Guatemalan Institute of Statistics, 2018).

of local governance to assert sovereignty over natural resources, despite opposition from mining companies and state authorities. However, variations in municipal roles across the region, with some aligning with corporate interests, underscore the complex dynamics of local resistance (Sieder 2013). The convergence of local, national, and transnational actors highlights the critical role of networked activism in tackling the complex and interconnected challenges posed by extractive industries. These coalitions effectively link localized struggles with global narratives, leveraging international platforms to expose environmental and human rights violations and amplify the voices of affected communities. In the case of the Cerro Blanco mine, resistance movements strategically frame water as a socio-natural entity and emphasize the necessity of cross-border cooperation, directly contesting the hegemonic practices of transnational mining corporations. By advocating for inclusive frameworks such as the Escazú Agreement, this approach aims to prioritize human rights, ecological sustainability, and community well-being over corporate interests, fostering a more just and inclusive model of resource governance.

### 5.1 The Right to Consultation: Meaningful Stakeholder Engagement

The issue of meaningful consultation in Guatemala's extractive projects remained unresolved until the 2022 municipal referendum in Asunción Mita. This consultation was the first of its kind regarding the controversial Cerro Blanco mine, emphasizing residents' right to participate in decisions affecting their environment and livelihoods. Despite its importance, the referendum faced legal and political challenges that underscored the tension between extractive interests and community rights (Ferrucci and Cabezas 2022). The Guatemalan Constitutional Court's made a ruling that invalidated three articles of a draft regulation concerning municipal consultations, while also affirming the validity of the 2022 referendum, underscoring the ongoing legal and procedural debates surrounding local decision-making on extractive projects (Sandell-Hay 2023). This decision preserved the people's vote but exposed ongoing efforts to undermine public participation. Civil society organizations, including the Mujeres

Ambientalistas de El Salvador (AMAES), strongly condemned attempts to invalidate the referendum, framing these actions as an erosion of democracy and self-determination (AMAES et al. 2023). The coalition supporting the 2022 referendum cited Article 141 of Guatemala's Constitution, which places sovereignty with the people, requiring elected officials to seek public approval for major decisions through binding consultations (AMAES et al. 2023). They argued that ignoring these consultations undermines democratic principles and human rights, calling for national and international solidarity to resist extractive projects that disregard community input.

Furthermore, the Guatemalan Municipal Code, specifically Article 64, grants municipalities the right to initiate consultations on community-related matters, a provision endorsed by the Guatemalan Constitutional Court (Congreso de la República de Guatemala 2002)<sup>9</sup>. However, inconsistent interpretations of this right have created significant variability in consultation practices, often disadvantaging communities affected by extractive industries. Thomas Dietz et al. (2003) distinguish between top-down and bottom-up approaches, highlighting the sharp contrast in consultation dynamics and outcomes. In September 2022, the consultation was conducted despite challenges, including an injunction from the Constitutional Court to halt the vote<sup>10</sup>. Elevar Resources representatives on the Municipal Commission monitoring the referendum resigned, alleging bias in the process. Nevertheless, the referendum proceeded, with votes counted under the observation of international organizations such as the UN Human Rights Office, the Guatemalan Human Rights

<sup>9</sup> The Municipal Code in Guatemala permitted residents to organize consultations on community issues and hold binding referendums if requested by more than 10% of registered voters, with participation from at least 20% of registered voters.

<sup>10</sup> Of the 30,465 eligible voters, 8,503 voted, or 27.91% of the population, 10.63% voted YES for metallic mining in the municipality, 1.38% of votes were null or blank, and 87.98% voted NO. The Elevar Resources representatives part of the Municipal Commission monitoring the consultation voting day resigned shortly after claiming that the Commission was composed of “individuals with anti-mining agendas responsible for counting the votes” (Bluestone Resources 2022).



Ombudsperson, and the Roman Catholic Archdiocese's Human Rights Office<sup>11</sup>. The overwhelming rejection of the Cerro Blanco project highlighted local resistance to extractive activities (Bluestone Resources 2022). Efforts to declare null the referendum through legal maneuvers were viewed by the coalition as an infringement on citizens' rights to free expression, assembly, and self-determination (AMAES et al. 2023). They emphasized the need for meaningful and binding consultations, particularly in regions impacted by mining and environmental degradation (Ramos 2012).

The Cerro Blanco case reflects broader structural challenges in Guatemala's governance of extractive industries<sup>12</sup>. Companies such as Bluestone and Elevar Resources have used incentives like infrastructure investments, education programs, and COVID-19 vaccination campaigns to gain local support. While these measures aim to engage local communities, critics argue that they may not fully guarantee informed consent or address the complexities of community concerns (Bluestone Resources and Entre Mares de Guatemala 2020). Maristela Svampa (2019) describes this dynamic as part of a "continental extractive consensus," prioritizing economic growth over environmental and social justice. The coalition supporting the referendum emphasizes long-term governance strategies that integrate community perspectives and prioritize sustainability, advocating for the Escazú Agreement to enhance participation and protect environmental defenders (Espinoza 2024). However, Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras have yet to ratify it (López-Cubillos et al. 2022).

The Cerro Blanco referendum highlights the multifaceted nature of anti-mining resistance in Central America, where cross-border collaboration plays a pivotal role in

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<sup>11</sup> Observers included members of ACAFREMIN, the Central American Network for the Defense of Cross-border Waters (Red Centroamericana por la Defensa de las Aguas Transfronterizas, RedCAT) and the Mesoamerican Ecological Ecclesial Network (Red Eclesial Ecológica Mesoamericana, REMAM).

<sup>12</sup> The legal defense team, formed to uphold the consultation's results, cites previous Constitutional Court rulings recognizing the legitimacy and binding nature of referendum outcomes in the Guatemalan municipalities of Mataquescuintla, San Juan Tecuaco, and Jalapa (Cuffe 2015). The pro-mining group, Asociación Mita Avanza, obtained a temporary injunction halting the referendum. However, as the Commission and Municipality were not notified until September 21, 2022, the judgment lacks validity or enforceability.

advancing environmental justice (Ramos 2012). Through networked activism, Salvadoran and Guatemalan organizations have demonstrated the power of collective action in addressing shared environmental challenges. By framing water as both a common good and a fundamental human right, water justice movements challenge extractivist practices while advocating for inclusive and equitable governance frameworks (Boelens et al. 2023; Sadoff and Grey 2002). Despite legal and structural barriers, the coalition's demands for transboundary water governance and meaningful consultation offer a blueprint for addressing the systemic challenges of extractivism. By leveraging international solidarity and fostering alliances across borders, these movements can create stronger foundations for resisting extractive projects and promoting sustainable development (Rhoden 2016). The 2022 consultation in Asunción Mita marked a pivotal moment in advancing meaningful stakeholder engagement in Guatemala's extractive sector. However, the ongoing legal challenges and structural obstacles in this mining conflict highlight the urgent need for comprehensive reforms to ensure that consultations are substantive, binding, and genuinely inclusive, rather than merely symbolic. By advancing these goals, the Cerro Blanco case can serve as a model for promoting environmental justice and democratic governance in the face of transnational extractivism.

## 6. GRASSROOTS ORGANIZING AND CROSS-BORDER COOPERATION: THE PATH TOWARDS NIABY

Extractive development in Latin America spans diverse political ideologies and policy frameworks, deeply rooted in colonial and decolonial narratives (Arsel et al. 2016; Svampa 2019). Resistance to mining reflects widespread distrust toward both mining companies and state institutions, often stemming from communities' exclusion from decision-making processes (Aráoz 2009). Over time, anti-mining movements have evolved from contestations during the pre-mining phase to addressing post-mining impacts and exploring viable alternatives (Conde 2017). This evolution has been accompanied by a growing embrace of



radical socio-ecological philosophies such as Buen Vivir, which derives from Indigenous perspectives and challenges the growth-centric extractivism driving much of Latin America's development agenda (Acosta 2013; Broad and Fischer-Mackey 2017). Framing water as "more valuable than gold" or essential to life, underscores non-monetary values rooted in the holistic worldview of Buen Vivir (Acosta 2013; Broad and Fischer-Mackey 2017). These philosophies advocate for holistic approaches that prioritize ecological sustainability and community well-being over economic growth (Alvarez et al. 2017; Haarstad, Amen, and Clair 2014). A powerful example of this paradigm shift was El Salvador's ban on metal mining, a legislative milestone prioritizing water conservation and environmental protection over extractive profits (Broad and Cavanagh 2021)<sup>13</sup>.

El Salvador's anti-mining struggle has deep roots in the country's post-civil war neoliberal reforms. The resistance reached a critical turning point in 2009 with the murder of four activists opposing the El Dorado mining project in the department of Cabañas. At the time, the project was owned by Pacific Rim Mining Corporation, a Canadian-based company, and these events galvanized a nationwide movement (Broad and Cavanagh 2021). Salvadoran activists employed strategic discourse analysis to highlight the environmental and social risks of mining, emphasizing the importance of water as a fundamental resource. These efforts culminated in the country's groundbreaking metal mining ban, reflecting the power of grassroots mobilization and public advocacy (Corbett 2024). The Cerro Blanco conflict, similarly, has inspired networked activism as cross-border communities in El Salvador and Guatemala to protect shared water resources and challenge transnational extractivism.

Regional initiatives, such as Plan Trifinio and the Lempa River cross-border cooperation, serve as critical models for addressing shared ecological challenges and

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<sup>13</sup> The 2023 report by the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) urges El Salvador, Guatemala, and Honduras to ensure an environment free from abuses of fundamental freedoms, allowing defenders and activists to operate without hindrance in protecting water in this case.

advancing transboundary water governance, which is at the core of resisting projects like Cerro Blanco. In this context, regional initiatives such as Plan Trifinio aim to address shared ecological challenges by fostering cross-border cooperation on biodiversity management and resource governance (Norman 2014; Fox and Sneddon 2019). However, political and epistemological barriers often undermine these efforts, favoring top-down approaches that marginalize localized knowledge and community participation (Boelens et al. 2023; Holifield, Chakraborty, and Walker 2018). Furthermore, borders that delineate resource governance areas frequently reinforce colonial legacies, complicating efforts to establish equitable and collaborative solutions.

The Cerro Blanco conflict showcases the multifaceted resistance strategies employed by grassroots movements, deeply rooted in four keyframes. First, rivers are understood as shared commons. The interconnectedness of ecosystems across borders reinforces the necessity of cooperative resource management approaches, fostering shared responsibility for environmental protection. Second, participatory actions, such as the 2022 referendum in Asunción Mita, highlight the importance of bottom-up decision-making processes, enabling local populations to assert their rights and resist extractive practices (Conde 2017). Beginning with the Tambogrande consultation in Peru (2002), such initiatives have proliferated across the region, embedding local resistance within broader demands for justice (Urkidi 2011). Third, legal action has emerged as a critical strategy, as communities collaborate with NGOs and legal experts to challenge mining operations. By leveraging domestic and international legal frameworks, resistance movements have achieved significant rulings against extractive activities, setting important precedents (Temper and Martinez-Alier 2013). Fourth, grassroots movements also engage in scientific mobilization, working with scientists and researchers to counter corporate narratives about environmental impacts. In Cerro Blanco, scientific studies have exposed the mine's potential to contaminate the Ostúa and Lempa rivers, underscoring



the importance of evidence-based advocacy in bolstering grassroots efforts (Bebbington and Bury 2013; Conde 2017).

The evolution of anti-mining movements in Latin America, and specifically in the case study here analyzed, reflects a broader shift from localized resistance, often described as NIMBY, to a more expansive NIABY philosophy. This approach, supported by Colectivo Madreselva (2006), advocates for systemic changes that transcend individual communities and address the global implications of extractive industries. The path toward NIABY requires sustained efforts to confront entrenched power structures and promote alternative development models that prioritize ecological and social well-being. The collaborative resistance against Cerro Blanco demonstrates how grassroots movements can leverage regional initiatives, scientific evidence, and participatory governance to challenge extractivism and advance a shared vision of environmental justice. As diverse actors join anti-mining struggles, debates encompass the structuring of networked activism to maximize collective strength to mobilize at local, national, and transnational scales (Martinez-Alier 2023; Rootes 1999; Walter 2014). While significant obstacles remain, the resilience and adaptability of these movements underscore their potential to transform resource governance and promote sustainability across Latin America.

## 7. DISCUSSION AND FINDINGS

The Cerro Blanco mining conflict positions water as both a critical material resource and a potent symbol of environmental justice, linking local resistance in Asunción Mita to broader global networks that challenge the commodification of water and advocate for its recognition as a fundamental human right. In the Cerro Blanco case, river commons transcend environmental concerns to become a deeply political issue, intersecting with themes of national sovereignty, community rights, and security. These dynamics are particularly acute in

transboundary conflicts like those involving the Lempa River, where cooperative governance is essential. However, unilateral, state-centric approaches frequently exacerbate tensions, reflecting the broader challenges of managing Central America's cross-border basins (López 2002; Sadoff and Grey 2002). The environmental risks posed by the Cerro Blanco mine, such as cyanide contamination and acid mine drainage, are well-documented in Steven H. Emerman's (2022) report, which has been instrumental in galvanizing opposition. By validating community concerns, such scientific evidence strengthens grassroots activism and bolsters participatory mechanisms like Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) (Walter and Urkidi, 2017), exemplified by the 2022 municipal consultation in Asunción Mita.

The resistance to Cerro Blanco illustrates how local struggles are increasingly linked to global justice frameworks through transnational networks that amplify voices and influence policy. Concepts such as lateral transnationalism (Spalding 2014, 2018) and transnational activism (Tarrow 2005) reveal how activists collaborate across borders to address shared challenges and overcome power imbalances. These alliances frame water as a common good and a fundamental human right, countering its commodification by extractive industries. Cross-border activism has been particularly vital in defending ecosystems like the Lempa River basin, which spans Guatemala and El Salvador. Regional initiatives such as Plan Trifinio aim to coordinate biodiversity management but are often hindered by political and epistemological barriers (Montoya 2021). The Escazú Agreement offers a critical legal framework for advancing participatory governance and environmental justice, yet its ratification remains pending in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras (López-Cubillos et al. 2022).

Grassroots organizing has been central to the resistance, fostering inclusive knowledge production that integrates scientific evidence, local expertise, and Indigenous perspectives. This approach challenges corporate narratives of environmentally friendly mining while addressing broader socio-ecological concerns beyond the immediate mining site (Funke et al. 2011). NGOs, social movements, and the Catholic Church have played pivotal roles in this

effort, drawing on frameworks such as Pope Francis's *Laudato Sí* to articulate and amplify environmental justice demands (Walter and Urkidi 2017; Dougherty 2019). By weaving together local, regional, and global strategies, the Cerro Blanco resistance highlights the transformative potential of networked activism in reshaping resource governance and advocating for sustainable, community-centered alternatives<sup>14</sup>.

Participatory, community-led consultations have emerged as innovative accountability mechanisms, exemplified by the Asunción Mita referendum. These processes articulate public engagement and transparency, empowering communities to resist harmful extractive projects effectively (Vos et al. 2020). However, significant obstacles persist, as anti-mining ideologies and values often face marginalization in legal frameworks and policy dialogues (Boelens et al. 2016, 2023). The Cerro Blanco resistance demonstrates the centrality of water as both a tangible and symbolic resource in anti-extractive struggles. Framing water as a human right connects local efforts to broader environmental governance frameworks, emphasizing its role as a nexus for environmental justice (Ramos 2012). The study finds that networked activism, formed through coalitions of local communities, environmental organizations, and international allies, is essential in resisting extractivism and reshaping mining governance (Rhoden 2016).

The conflict underscores the importance of collaborative governance, inclusive decision-making processes, and legal frameworks like the Escazú Agreement in safeguarding shared water resources. By linking local struggles to transnational justice frameworks, movements challenge extractivist paradigms and advocate for a more sustainable, equitable future. The resistance further highlights the role of science mobilizing activism, as evidenced by Emerman's (2022) report, which provided the scientific backing necessary to strengthen opposition to the Cerro Blanco project<sup>15</sup>. These efforts specifically offer critical insights into

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<sup>14</sup> The encyclical is inspired by the song, "Canticle of the Sun," in which St. Francis of Assisi expresses our brotherhood and sisterhood with the universe, the earth, and all creatures. Advocating for environmental stewardship, the encyclical has become a rallying cry for many environmentalists.

<sup>15</sup> Similarly, the report "*The Cerro Blanco Open Pit Mine in Guatemala Experts and Citizen Groups Challenge Safety of Canadian-Owned Mining Project*" specifically draws on the assessment of three

how grassroots organizing, transnational collaboration, and participatory governance can drive meaningful change in mining governance and water management. As I argue, framing water conflicts as part of a broader struggle for justice enables movements to not only contest extractive projects but also redefine the meaning of land through processes of environmental reconciliation. The findings highlight how the intersection of water justice movements and territorial concerns demonstrates the transformative role of networked activism in fostering sustainable development. These movements effectively protect vulnerable ecosystems while addressing the detrimental impacts of mining activities, such as degraded water quality, health challenges, and restricted access to clean water for surrounding communities.

Recent developments in Central America underscore the complexities of mining governance and resistance. On December 23, 2024, El Salvador's government repealed its landmark 2017 mining ban, citing economic pressures and the perceived necessity of resource exploitation (Corbett 2024). Under President Nayib Bukele's administration, the new mining policy allows metallic mining while implementing certain environmental safeguards, such as prohibiting the use of mercury and restricting mining in ecologically sensitive areas (Corbett 2024). This shift represents a notable departure from El Salvador's previous stance, which had prioritized environmental protection and community well-being over extractive industry interests. In parallel, Guatemala continues to grapple with mining governance challenges, particularly concerning the Cerro Blanco mine (Rodríguez 2023). The mine has a long history of shifting ownership and operational setbacks due to the technical difficulties of extracting precious metals, coupled with strong grassroots resistance (Álvarez et al. 2015). In April 2024, Guatemala's MARN proposed revoking the mine's permit, pointing to procedural concerns and the increasing public demand for action in response to water shortages (Tico Times 2024). For

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experts: Dr. Vladimir Pacheco Cueva, a professor at Aarhus University, who specializes in socially responsible mining and safe mine closures, Dr. Dina Larios López, Professor Emerita at Ohio University expert in geochemistry and hydrogeology, and Dr. Steven H. Emerman, a geophysicist recognized for his work on tailings storage and responsible mining practices. Their assessments reveal critical flaws in Bluestone's proposal, including environmental risks and a lack of community consultation.





a time, it appeared that sustained activism and legal challenges had successfully revoked Bluestone's open-pit mining permit. However, the broader regional context remains precarious, as El Salvador's policy shift complicates transboundary water governance efforts, particularly concerning the Lempa River—a vital resource shared by millions in Guatemala, El Salvador, and Honduras. El Salvador's decision risks undermining the solidarity that has historically unified anti-mining movements across Central America (Spalding 2023). Activists now face a fragmented political landscape where state policies oscillate between protectionist and extractivist paradigms. This fragmentation threatens to weaken the cohesive “water over gold” narrative, forcing movements to recalibrate strategies to address the shifting dynamics of environmental governance and resource exploitation in the region.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The Cerro Blanco mining conflict encapsulates the intricate dynamics of local resistance, governmental policies, and global economic interests. Despite a 2022 referendum in which nearly 88% of Asunción Mita's residents opposed the mine, the Guatemalan government raised concerns about the legitimacy of the vote, questioning whether local authorities had the jurisdiction to make decisions on mining projects. In January 2024, Bluestone kept touting promises of economic growth and environmentally responsible practices, yet these assurances failed to quell rising concerns over environmental degradation and water scarcity (Bluestone Resources 2022). The U.S. embassy's support for the Cerro Blanco project, presenting it as a potential catalyst for rural development, contributed to the growing criticism and opposition (Fox 2024, Prensa Comunitaria 2024). Civil society organizations have criticized the project's lack of consultation and transparency, highlighting discrepancies in Elevar Resources' license transition from underground to open-pit mining (Pérez 2024; Tico Times 2024). Authorities have since clarified that mining activities cannot proceed without a new EIA and

comprehensive consultation, underscoring the importance of meaningful community participation in territorial decision-making.

The Cerro Blanco mining conflict illustrates the transformative power of grassroots, networked activism in resisting extractivist paradigms and promoting inclusive governance. This case highlights the necessity of integrating Indigenous knowledge, upholding environmental protections, and implementing frameworks like the Escazú Agreement to ensure development respects both human and environmental rights. Ultimately, the lessons from this conflict emphasize the critical role of collaborative approaches, meaningful consultation, and amplifying marginalized voices in shaping a more just and sustainable framework for environmental governance (Álvarez et al. 2015).

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