



## **Infrastructure megaprojects as world erasers: cultural survival in the context of the interoceanic corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec**

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# **Title: Infrastructure Megaprojects as World Erasers: Cultural Survival in the Context of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec**

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## **Abstract**

This article explores the meaning of infrastructural changes resulting from the *Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (CIIT) infrastructure project for the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples resident in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region through the lens of ontological justice. The CIIT is being promoted as a multimodal road and rail transport corridor that will link the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean, speed up global trade and benefit local residents. Based on interviews with affected residents in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, this research found that there is a strong desire for the continuity of existing, collective life projects, Indigenous languages, cultural identities, beliefs, spirituality, established political and legal systems, and solidarity economy. De facto, the CIIT infrastructure project functions as a technology of erasure of other lifeworlds, imposing integration into the One-World World (Escobar, 2016) and assimilation of Indigenous peoples and Afrodescendant communities. Contemporary legal frameworks are not sufficient to guarantee alterlivability (Hamraie, 2020). Therefore, infrastructural megaprojects based on modern/colonial-extractivist-developmental premises continue to threaten the futurity of Indigenous and Afrodescendant life projects.

## **Keywords**

territory, cultural survival, ontological justice, megaprojects, infrastructure

## **Introduction**

The research that this article is based on scrutinised and accompanied ethnographically implementation processes of a mayor infrastructure project in Mexico, the *Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (CIIT). The CIIT is being promoted as a multimodal road and rail transport corridor that will eventually link the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. It is projected as a viable alternative to the Panama Canal that will increase and speed up the global trade. Central components of the CIIT infrastructure project are: the modernisation and expansion of the ports of Coatzacoalcos in the Gulf and Salina Cruz in the Pacific; the improvement of the railway connection between both harbours; the development of a new highway and widening of an existing one; the laying of optic fibre; the construction of a new gas pipeline; the improvement of the regional airports; the installation of logistics centres and the development of industrial parks along the Isthmus (Secretaría de Gobernación, 2020). The ten planned industrial parks are expected to receive industries from sectors such as the automotive, agribusiness, manufacturing, as well as transportation and logistics, among others.

An increasing number of infrastructure corridors, such as the *Corredor Interoceánico*, are currently being built across the globe (e.g. the Belt and Road Initiative/China, *Corredor Bioceánico/Paraguay*; *Corredor Interoceánico/Chile-Bolivia-Brazil*; The Northern Transport Corridor in East Africa/Kenya-Ethiopia-South Sudan – just to name a few). These projects are directed at reducing ‘economic distance’ –i.e. speeding up the transport of goods across geographical distance whilst lowering the cost (Hildyard, 2016: 20). In the process, infrastructure megacorridors restructure whole regions into purpose-specific zones for export, logistics, transit, housing development, resource extraction, manufacturing etc. Thereby, they fragment geographic space, generating a distinctive reterritorialisation of the space to develop sites of capitalist growth. Megacorridors connect what Lerner (2010) called “sacrifice zones” – geographic areas where processes of natural resource extraction cause permanent environmental damage – to global circuits of capital. Across Latin America the social and environmental impacts of extractive megaprojects and resistance against them has been widely documented (Aguilar Rivero & Echavarría Cango, 2019; Domínguez, 2015, 2017; Domínguez & Corona, 2016; Ibarra García & Talledos Sánchez, 2016; Pérez Negrete, 2017; Rodríguez Wallenius, 2015). This article explores the meaning of infrastructural changes resulting from the CIIT project for the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples resident in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region through the lens of ontological justice.<sup>1</sup>

### **Being territory and cultural survival in the face of the CIIT infrastructure megaproject**

One of the most serious impacts of infrastructural megaprojects in contemporary Mexico is the threat to the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples and Black communities. Twelve Indigenous peoples plus Afrodescendant communities reside in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, where this research was carried out between 2019 and 2022.<sup>2</sup> In the course of this research, several respondents emphasised that economic progression and social mobility required participation in the contaminating, petrochemical industries established in the area. As respondent Sofia<sup>3</sup> describes: “The schools and universities we have here train people up to work for local companies such as CFE [*Comisión Federal de Electricidad*/Federal Energy Commission], Pemex and Monsanto as administrators, scientist or engineers. For your family to live well, you have to participate in an activity that destroys nature. This is very naturalised here [in the state of Veracruz].” Achieving social mobility is hence closely tied to participation in and complicity with the ‘extractive-assimilation system’ (Betasamosake Simpson, 2017). The harbour city of Coatzacoalcos in the state of Veracruz hosts Latin America’s largest

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<sup>1</sup> This is not a representative study. Over 130 interviews were carried out for this research, including affected residents in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, activists, civil servants, politicians, Indigenous scholars and campaigners among others.

<sup>2</sup> The initial ethnographic and participatory approach of this research project had to be significantly adapted during the Covid-19 pandemic. Apart from several months before and after the pandemic, the research was realised through virtual, remote research methods, and made possible through the work of four research assistants based in Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> All names of the respondents of this research were changed to guarantee their anonymity.

petrochemical plant, La Cangrejera, a petroindustrial complex where products such as plastics, piping, chlorine, and agrofertilisers are made. The isthmian cities of Minatitlán (State of Veracruz) and Salina Cruz (State of Oaxaca) have oil refineries that function as important local employers since their installation in the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century and late 1970s respectively. Respondent Carmen points out what the establishment of petroindustries has meant for local Indigenous populations : “Those who go to Coatza and Mina return with other habits. They forget the language. It changes everything. Young people don’t identify as Indigenous anymore. If they want to study, they must move to the city. There they stop buying in the local market and small shops, instead they buy cheaper at Chedraui and Soriana. They become workers and say ‘I better sell my land’.”

In some parts of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, the processes of industrialisation, the development of extractive economies and integration into the global market have a long established history (Coronado Malagón, 2009; Moreno Andrade, 2009; Prévôt-Sehapir, 2009), however, each new ‘development’ project involving largescale infrastructure construction or natural resource extraction implemented in the region intensifies this process of cultural assimilation to a modern/colonial-extractivist <sup>4</sup> system. Our respondents were often conflicted over their own involvement with local extractive industries, like Diego who used to work for Pemex, the Mexican state-owned petroleum company. Despite having always been critical of capitalism, which he considers an ‘exploitative death system’ (*un sistema explotador, de muerte*), he studied chemistry with the idea to obtain a better life and became an industrial, chemical engineer. When asked to assess the possible impacts of the CIIT infrastructure project in the region he says:

“The problem is that our people settle for a sweet. They would be happy to have a job in those companies [that will populate the planned industrial parks], even if they earned a pittance. This is the serious impact on the people here. Having a steady job, a small salary that is just enough for them to eat makes them happy and feel great because they have a job and a salary. [...] Workers begin to feel part of the company, they even feel that they are partners of the company, they feel capitalist. So that is another impact that it [the CIIT infrastructure project] would have on the population in terms of social and cultural impacts. The capitalist mentality continues to grow.”

Megaprojects, such as the CIIT infrastructure project, generate profound changes to existing relationships both between humans, and between humans and non-humans. They both create as well as destroy ways of being, in the regions where they settle. What Diego describes as ‘capitalist mentality’ is tied into emerging new values and ways of living that come along with integration into local extractive industries, and which begin to replace an established pride in traditional and Indigenous systems of reproducing life. Over time, such changes result in a gradual loss of knowledges and skills related to traditional agriculture, housing construction, crafts, food preparation, and herbal medicines, as those practices are currently

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<sup>4</sup> Extractivism can be understood as an economic model that involves the largescale extraction of natural resources commonly destined for export (Gudynas, 2013). The term emphasises a local perspective, drawing attention to affected communities and altered ecosystems.

part of a system of relationship and world-making. Central to what Diego describes as ‘capitalist mentality’ is a ‘worker mindset’, which stands in stark contrast with autonomy, food-sovereignty, *tequio*<sup>5</sup> and self-governance, values that different Indigenous communities of the region uphold strongly. Workerisation implies an adjustment to set working hours and conditions, and a dependency on employers and the contractual framework they set. Such dependency contrasts with established trading practices of the region, which promote independent traders, small businesses and a solidarity economy (Castro Rodríguez & Reyes Méndez, 2019; Consejo Dueñas, 2021; López Bárcenas, 2019; Martínez Luna, 2021; Morales & Esteva, 2019). Diego decided to change his career after his dismissal from Pemex in the 1990s. He worked in the US for four years, and then, realising the urgent necessity of legal expertise for land defence in Indigenous communities, decided to study law. As he did not inherit land from his parents, he bought a small plot upon his return from the US and began to work the land in addition to practicing as solicitor. Revaluing and relearning his Indigenous heritage, he now learns Zapotec and Nahuatl. Over the course of this research we heard multiple stories of cultural alienation and assimilation to the modern/colonial-capitalist-extractivist one-world system,<sup>6</sup> sometimes as a result of outward-migration or involvement in extractive industries, as well as narratives of ‘returning to the roots’ or own perceived cultural origin. In some cases, parents were fully immersed in the local petrochemical industries, but youth craved for a way out of this predicament, seeking more sustainable types of work that allowed to maintain cultural survival whilst simultaneously improving their standard of living.

Isabella who is from a Huave community in the southern Isthmus, told us how they have been affected by the refinery since the 1970s. For a long time they even resisted the construction of a paved road to their village. She says, “the people here are very protective of their culture.” But with the road people began to commute to Salina Cruz to work in the refinery. “Now they are workers. Many don’t identify as Ikoots anymore. It led to a loss of identity. The refinery led to a loss of identity.” Like many others we spoke to, Isabella is worried that the changes that accompany a largescale infrastructure project in the region will ultimately lead to the cultural extinction of the Huave: “I have been very worried that one day the Ikoots will no longer be here, firstly because we are a very small people, here on this strip of land, and we are threatened by the sea getting in. Right now with all these megaprojects as well, we might not survive.” Isabella goes on to detail how Ikoots identity is closely entangled with different aspects of the nation’s territory:

“So, I am very worried that our language will be lost, that our culture will be lost, that our land will be lost. If an Ikoots does not live in this territory, well, they are not Ikoots anymore. To be true Ikoots, we need the wind, this strong southern wind, we need the smell of the hibiscus flower in the rainy season, we need all these flavours that we have, these smells here in the village. To be Ikoots one has to live and be on this land. If an Ikoots goes and lives in Salina Cruz, or lives in another place, well, they are not

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<sup>5</sup> That is community work expected by each member.

<sup>6</sup> By using this term I merge conceptual work of Ramón Grosfoguel (2002), Blaser & De la Cadena (2018) and Escobar (2016).

going to have all that we have here. Losing all this feels very ugly. The truth is, I feel very sad that they loose all that, because that is what marks us as Ikoots.”

A concept such as *cuerpo-territorio*<sup>7</sup> that considers a specific geographical space as part of the (extended) body of human beings is alien to western philosophical and legal categories, therefore, addressing such grievances requires an expansion of Eurocentric justice categories and associated conception of possible harms resulting from intrusive infrastructures. The harm decried by Isabella here refers to the violent termination of a ‘world’, meaning a particular (co-constituted) set of conditions of being and relating to both other humans and the nonhuman world. This territorial identity and sense of connectedness with the territory, and the social life and sensory experiences in it is reinforced through recurring ritual practices, as Isabella describes: “We know exactly the limits of our land in relation to the neighbouring communities, because of the rituals that are carried out every year to request rain.” Knowledge of the territorial extension is practiced through going there and collectively walking the outer limits of it in ritual procession. Isabella is an educator who, working with youth, hopes to be able to generate and maintain consciousness and connection with the land and Ikoots culture among the next generation. The CIIT project promises residents work opportunities, but Isabella strongly contends that “Work is not development! How many people have a permanent position in Salina Cruz? Maybe two or three. Most have one month-long contracts only.” Unlike common assumptions when thinking of infrastructural industries, in reality, they provide few long-term and well-paid positions (Anand, Gupta & Appel, 2018; Cowen, 2019; Flyvbjerg, 2014; Hildyard & Sol, 2017; LaDuke & Cowen, 2020). When attending information meetings about the CIIT organised by the federal government in 2020, it became clear that available work opportunities would be mostly fixed-term construction work resulting from the harbour expansion, trainline modernisation, and the construction of the highway, gas pipeline and industrial parks, followed by low-paid factory work in those future industrial parks. Considering the historic deprivation of the local population from opportunities for professional training and higher education in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, it is to be expected that jobs in logistics, administration, management and engineering will be allocated to trained incomers from other regions.

Having access to land, Elena – a daughter of *ejidatarios*<sup>8</sup> – has noticeably ended up having an entirely different relationship to land compared to other young people of her age group. Her village, located in the state of Veracruz, came to be in the media spotlight in 2022 regarding conflicts about the installation of one of the planned industrial parks for the CIIT project. Arguments spiralled high on Facebook, where village youngsters without access to land complained about the stubborn resistance of the local *ejidatarios*, opposing the installation of the industrial park. The landless youth had hopes that the industrial park would bring valuable work opportunities to the region, which would generate a better life for them. They saw their hopes to a good life destroyed by the *ejidatarios*’ resistance against selling the land to the federal government. Elena who engaged with those youths on social media explains:

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<sup>7</sup> On elaborations of *cuerpo-territorio* discourses see, for instance, Leinius (2020) or Cruz Hernández & Bayón Jiménez (2020).

<sup>8</sup> People who have access to social property.

“They do not know the value of the land (*el campo*) and they don’t understand the value that working the land has for us. Getting up at three in the morning to check your *milpa*, the land you cultivated. They are persons who do not know the value of the land nor the love for it.”

It is this affective connection through being and working on the land that distinguishes those who find it alienable and those who find it too precious to sell. Elena insists that *ejidatarios* like her father do want progress for their village, but “you cannot progress at someone else’s expense.” In the case of this village in the state of Veracruz, the *ejidatarios* felt that the federal government’s offer for the land was too low. They wanted a ‘just price’ for it. The disputes on social media became quite offensive and the fronts hardened. Elena explains the confrontations that they had online:

“To be honest, the discussion got very annoying because they are kids who, since they have never dedicated themselves to working anything, they talk just in order to talk. And they cannot be compared with us who get up early as their provider, planting the sugar cane, making the honey, the molasses, the *panela* that tastes so good. It is hard for me to sow whilst being bitten by ants and to stay up all night preparing the *panela*. How am I going to sell this *panela* to you for three pesos? I had to look after the sugar cane plant and protect it from being eaten by little creatures, I got bitten by ants, I had to cut the sugar cane and take it to the stream to wash it, then I had to return it on a pack animal and mill it with the help of the animal. The three pesos you want to pay for the *panela* violates me and the mule who is also working hard. You will not understand me if you have not done what I do. This is why you just talk. I know what I do and I know what I suffered, but it is not me who is wrong here.”

It is important to understand that Elena does not complain about the hardness of living of the land here, but rather about the low economic value that is given to her product and the lack of appreciation for her work. This was a common theme among respondents from different Indigenous communities who make a living from their territories as farmers, flower sellers, *totoperas*<sup>9</sup> or fishermen. Among many *istmeños* there was a strong desire to maintain established livelihood practices – oftentimes relying on uses of common land–, but a simultaneous demand for an appropriate remuneration and recognition. We could identify three factors that contributed to the defence of land and resistance against integration into the CIIT and its projected development through extractivism, industrialisation, urbanisation, and workerisation: 1. the land and natural world was still intact (i.e. not contaminated or destroyed) to provide for survival; 2. the knowledge of how to live of the land or sea was still present; 3. collective land rights and forms of political organisation existed.

Part of the CIIT infrastructure project is also the construction of more housing alongside the new industrial parks. Vice President Kamala Harris has publicly pronounced financial support for housing construction in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Infobae, 2021), a region which was severely affected by the 2017 earthquake. When asking Alba, a Zapoteca who has now moved to live in the city of Oaxaca, about her notion of infrastructure, she initially relates it to all

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<sup>9</sup> Women who make *totopos*, a clay oven-baked *tortilla* with holes; a food specialty in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

built constructions: houses, markets, municipal buildings, hospitals, health centres and schools. However, she repudiates the idea that infrastructure is “brought to people” and “improves their lives”. Instead, she raises the issue of the communities’ infrastructural needs, perspectives and worldviews, which are rarely asked for and talked about. She tells us how she visited the Isthmus after the 2017 earthquake and saw that all of the concrete houses had suffered some kind of damage, and many had become so damaged that they became uninhabitable. The traditional *adobe* (sun-dried brick) houses with roofs made of palm leaf either outlasted or could be repaired or reconstructed by the communities themselves. These houses, constructed in the traditional way, made sense to her in relation to both the geological and climatic conditions of the Isthmus region. She says,

“when you entered, you knew why they had been constructed in this way. They had a logic. You enter and immediately feel the cool under the high roof tops. In the case of an earthquake, the structure collapses, but the material can be reused to reconstruct the house, unlike cracked concrete walls that need to be replaced. This logic demonstrates how the native peoples understood their territory and context. If one of those houses collapsed, it wouldn't hurt anyone, because it's just some wood and palm. If a concrete ceiling falls on top of you, of course that will do more damage. The notion of progress refers to an infrastructure that is modern – spacious castles made up of two floors, with architectural design, right? And we aspire to this nowadays, but if we look at the way our peoples built on their territory, the logic is very different.”

Indigenous construction methods took the frequent movement of the earth in the Isthmus regions into account. Alba laments that the traditional ways of building houses have almost become extinct: “People don’t build like that anymore, because it is more expensive, it takes more time, because it requires another type of knowledge, and therefore it is a form of construction that has been lost.” Those methods were based on in-depth knowledge of the local climate, geographic and geological conditions, and adjusted to the human needs resulting from those. Best about their design is their decomposability: Eventually, strong rain will make the adobe disintegrate and turn back into mud. Concrete, the most common construction material in western societies, becomes garbage after use. Infrastructures as we know them today, constitute key drivers of deterritorialisation and cultural assimilation, threatening Indigenous world-making and cultural survival, as Alba confirms:

“It certainly is *mestizaje* that applies to this cosmovision. Why aspire to have a concrete house, when in the territory there are other forms of construction that are more ecological, more accessible, and cheaper and that have much more to do with our own cosmovision? They sold us this notion of progress, of having a concrete house or building. In 2017 in Juchitán, the market, hospital and houses all fell because everything was concrete. They did not stand a chance in this territory, where it always trembles. We have come to aspire to build based on a logic that does no longer respond to our own needs; it is a colonial vision of construction.”

Earthquake-adapted and climate-resilient homes are not on the federal government’s agenda regarding the CIIT infrastructure project. In Mixtequilla, a village in the southern Isthmus, where another industrial park is planned, new homes have been constructed to house

workers for the highway construction. However, the cheap concrete buildings with low ceilings won't be appropriate in the future when the Isthmus might experience even higher temperatures due to climate change. Additionally, many respondents deplored the anti-social dynamics that accompany these kinds of modern infrastructures. They bemoaned the incremental lack of the traditional *solares*, houses with large vegetated patios that allow greater numbers of people to gather and socialise in the cool. For Luna, infrastructure has to be culturally appropriate and aligned with the cosmovision of the native peoples:

“...an infrastructure that is adequate or rather that coincides with the cosmovision of the isthmian peoples. I do not believe that it can be homogeneous, I believe that it has to be diverse because we are diverse. Whilst we share many things, we are in the same territory and in the geographic area, we share the environment, certain elements of food and culture, it is diverse here and we are very different. So, I believe that an infrastructure that is adequate for the cosmovision of the peoples of the Isthmus has to be diverse, it cannot be homogeneous or imposed, but rather according to the needs of each community and must work according to their environmental, cultural, and social characteristics, whatever they might be.”

Luna highlights how infrastructures ultimately influence the ways in which we relate to each other in our environment. Western housing developments, based on a private property regime and a nuclear family model, tend to thwart broader, communal relationship dynamics. Many of our respondents emphasised the value of the *solar*, which with its ample space around the house allows for a variety of sustenance activities (fruit trees, chickens, flowers), as well as the development of a conviviality. She says, “It plays an important role for our social relationships, we go out there to get some fresh air in the afternoon, right? And it makes you want to play, and if you want, even have a little beer or whatever, and that creates an important sharing space that contributes to forging relationships with our neighbours.” Architectural forms can help build and maintain relationships, and on the other hand, if those infrastructures change or cease to exist, due to the modernising logic of state ‘development’ policies, those forms of relating based on the spontaneous seeing each other and gathering with others, will also likely come to an end.

### **Dissociation from territory as basis for infrastructural invasion and extractivism**

Under the administration of Andrés Manuel López Obrador, the modern/colonial-progressivist logic reified through the implementation of the CIIT infrastructure project is accompanied by a decisive complementary programme called *Sembrando Vida* (Secretaría de Bienestar, 2020)<sup>10</sup>, which, in official jargon, seeks to “address the problem of rural poverty” and “contribute to the social well-being of growers through the promotion of food self-

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<sup>10</sup> *Sembrando Vida* promises to support those who own 2.5 hectares and make them available for cash crop production with 5,000 pesos a month. Additionally, it includes in-kind support for production (plants, fertilisers, tools) and technical support throughout its implementation.

sufficiency.” Respondent Javier explains how he considers *Sembrando Vida* relates to infrastructure megaprojects such as the Maya Train<sup>11</sup> and the Transisthmian Corridor:

“It is planned as a counterinsurgency program even if that is not said. They want to fragment the community, cancel mountain agriculture, and erase the territorial memory of the native peoples, because what they want is to break the resistance. [...] And then what do they tell them? No, you are no longer going about your territory. Your 2.5 hectares are going to be geopositioned for me, and I am going to be controlling you from the air, so that you plant in that plot, which must be enclosed [i.e. privatised], and that it is now individual and no longer part of the *ejido*, that does not belong to the community anymore, instead, it is now yours. And at the same time, we are going to see how you can maximise the cultivation of timber and fruit trees with that.”

There is increasingly evidence that the *Sembrando Vida* programme has led to environmental damages and community disintegration. In the southern states of Mexico, *Sembrando Vida* also led to a surge in slash-and-burn agriculture to make way for cash crop production (Sandoval Vázquez, 2020), some of which was left to rot, because the processing systems and export logistics were not in place for the produce to be shipped internationally. Most detrimental for the cultural survival of Indigenous peoples in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec are the social dynamics generated through the programme, which Javier describes in the following:

“It is a program that of course is buying people, even if they don’t really buy their conscience, but it’s horrible because it takes advantage of the urgent need, the urgency that people in the communities have for cash which of course solves a lot of things for them. However, it drives them away from the core of their community, distances them from the decisions of the assembly, alienates them from the will of their friends who begin to see them with suspicion. And they themselves begin to view all those who are not in the same position with suspicion, because suddenly they have a privilege that the others do not have.”<sup>12</sup>

In a sense, *Sembrando Vida* lays the foundation for the CIIT infrastructure project, which at its core intends to generate economic growth through industrialisation and urbanisation. The creation of the Interoceanic Corridor therefore relies on disconnecting people from land and its collective stewardship, on cutting existing affective ties with both land and social relations (human and nonhuman), and on dismantling established collective forms of organisation. In *Sembrando Vida*, growers are conceptualised as individual land holders who obtain a monthly grant for producing cash crops on their plot. Hence, contrary to the programme’s officially

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<sup>11</sup> An ongoing infrastructure project that is intended to boost the economy of the Yucatán peninsula through the establishment of conditions suited to mass tourism. Approximately 1,500 km of train tracks will be built which interconnect the states of Tabasco, Campeche, Chiapas, Yucatán and Quintana Roo.

<sup>12</sup> The monthly stipend that *Sembrando Vida* participants receive for the cultivation of cash crops generates a certain basic security for them, but also subjects them to a regime of private land ownership and terminates their self-determination over agricultural production.

stated focus on the ‘promotion of food self-sufficiency’, *Sembrando Vida* effectively functions to dissociate growers from traditionally established land practices in the region, installing a new, individualist logic, which prepares growers to become suppliers of the global agroindustry. Most importantly, over time this can be expected to lead to a decline in the diversity of agricultural knowledge, as well as to the deskilling of growers. Overall, the programme contributes to a workerisation of growers, incrementing their dependency on the global dynamics of food supply chains, and weakening community’s abilities to achieve food sovereignty.

The affective connection to land and the meaning of territory tend to be difficult to understand for those who have lost or never had access to them. Indigenous Futures activists Rosa Marina Flores Cruz describes the meaning of territory:

“It is having been shaped by the wind and the sea. The Isthmus is sea, it is dust, it is strength, it is music, it is dance, it is a lot of life everywhere. In the Isthmus there is life even in the most damaged spaces that were hit hardest, and life emerges and the resistance of being a people arises. Even though they have tried to take it away from us, we are a people and we are unity. All our ways of interacting, of responding to what happens in our own context tell us this. And this is the Isthmus, and this is what has also given us strength to resist to everything that keeps coming. And this is also territory. Territory is not just the land, it is not just the place you are standing on. Territory is going to the *fiesta*, and knowing that you have to cooperate to be at the *fiesta*, and that they will receive you, and that you will be there enjoying yourself, and that it is part of your own being. Territory is listening to the sound of the words that link you to a certain place, an accent, a tone of voice, the language. [...] I told a friend that, when I was studying in Mexico City, and I got on the bus that was going to take me back to Juchitán. Just by listening to a lady who got on the bus, she began to speak in Zapotec, I already felt at home. The distance shrivelled and I got already connected to my territory, I was already taken to that space. Territory is what you eat, it is what you wear, it is what you feel. [...] It is what happens when there are catastrophes. What happens when there is an aggression that changes the life that you are developing. When a megaproject comes along that wants to set up and wants to do away with all that. This is territory. [...] It is the close circle that you establish with everything that makes you who you are. And I think we all have that. It’s only colonialism and racism that have intervened in us breaking those ties, and it’s about trying to heal them little by little.”<sup>13</sup>

### **Infrastructures, developmentalism and anti-Indigenous racism**

There appears to be a strong link between largescale infrastructure construction, a championing of progressivist modernity and anti-Indigenous racism. Indigenous cosmovisions

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<sup>13</sup> Infrastructure (Re)Worldings Podcast, episode 12, Climate Crisis, Wind Energy and Community Resistance, <https://infrastructureworldings.podbean.com/e/climate-crisis-wind-energy-and-community-resistance/>

oftentimes clash with progressivist-industrial modernity, expressing strong affective links with land, water, landscape, nonhuman beings and territory, and demanding self-governance and food sovereignty. Infrastructure megaprojects, operate by means of an immense number of experts, politicians and bureaucrats that invade a region to first promote and then implement a project, in the process of doing so, installing a new rationality, value system, economic practices, and ultimately, changing existing, established lifeworlds. The interconnectedness of infrastructures, developmentalism and anti-Indigenous racism was evident in some government officials' discourses, civil servants' speeches and engineers' ways of interacting with local communities in the course of planning and implementation processes observed during this research. This might not be surprising, considering that both experts and politicians have generally been trained in educational institutions that have historically developed under Eurocentric, industrial-progressivist premises and influence.

Talking to women who are or have been employed in Coatzacoalcos' petrochemical-industrial complex, which will be integrated into the CIIT project, a pattern of patriarchal violence and general carelessness in the treatment of workers emerged. Basic necessities such as drinking water, toilet paper or canteens to purchase food, were not provided at their workplace. We were told of past stories of workplace discrimination, bullying, and cover-ups and hindered policy investigations of sexual violence, including femicide. These industries, part of the hydrogen-extractive-infrastructure complex, appear to be a sector that is deprived of practices of care. It does not surprise then that such industries disregard and construct on top of what already exists, including established lifeworlds. During a conversation over lunch with Señor Lalo, an engineer involved in the CIIT infrastructure project, his unwillingness to understand and accept that local Indigenous communities have established valuable life systems came to the fore. Indigenous resistance to infrastructures was a mere nuisance to him, requiring strict responses by the authorities to get the job done. In his eyes, infrastructures equalled progress and wellbeing, as well as constituted the only possible way to those attributes. To my surprise, when leaving the premises of his company, Señor Lalo revealed to me his adoration for Adolf Hitler, who, according to him, "was not *all* good", because "he got carried away by his power", but regardless "was an admirable man with a vision." Such a "visionary for his people," Señor Lalo wished for Mexico as well. This eery encounter demonstrates the anti-Indigenous racism that lies at the bottom of the realisation of largescale infrastructures and that it operates as a *de facto* politics of erasure, as it relies on overriding local ways of living and destroying other lifeworlds. Because many megaprojects fall short of benefitting a local majority of residents in the long term (Azamar Alonso & Rodríguez Wallenius, 2021; Ceceña, 2019; Cowen, 2016; Dunlap & Acre, 2022; Gasparello & Núñez Rodríguez, 2021; Montalvo Méndez, 2019; Pérez Negrete, 2017; Von Borstel Nilsson, 2012), their realisation, time and again, must be accompanied by authoritarian governance, repressive legislation and state force. Thus, the subordination of other ways of being and world-making lies at the core of largescale infrastructure construction, which tends to be designed, planned and financed by political and economic elites in distant institutions and corporate headquarters.

Both classism and anti-Indigenous racism became evident in the following vignette that was told by several participants of a neighbourhood meeting with CIIT bureaucrats and politicians

in the city of Salina Cruz. In the meeting, residents of the neighbourhood were told that their houses were built too closely to the trainline that was going to be modernised and had to be removed. Whilst promises of resettlement were made, no detailed information was given regarding how, when and with what compensation scheme this process would happen. Señora Lucia recounts an incident that is indicative of how the community was treated in the course of the negotiations:

“Yes, it is violent, because they have treated us in a bad way. I arranged in on one occasion to meet this person, supposedly a government employee, and he told us that we talk nonsense, and that, because it is very hot in the Isthmus, that's why our neurons didn't work. And on another occasion, an elderly lady said, ‘Where am I going to go if they throw me out of my house?’, and this person answered: ‘Don't worry, you can build another chicken coop elsewhere and settle in there.’ I think that's violence. That's where the dialogue that we were supposedly going to have with this person broke off and most of the people from the neighbourhood group said: ‘No, we don't want anything anymore.’ It was then that the decision to block the road was made, to demand that they send us an earnest person who provides useful information and explains the project to us in a clear way: What are the real benefits and to what extent will it harm us? We just want information.”

The community rightfully resisted being treated in such a denigrating, discriminatory and disrespectful way by state actors in charge of implementing the CIIT infrastructure project, and subsequently decided to go for more confrontational methods based on collective organisation, in order to be heard. Since taking power in 2019, president Andrés Manuel López Obrador has made sure to generate a media image of himself as someone who is on the side of the Indigenous peoples of Mexico. When travelling across the country, even when visiting infrastructure construction sites, he is frequently dressed in Indigenous apparel, adorned with flower wreaths around his neck, and accompanied by an Indigenous leader. However, simultaneously, it has become commonplace that the president's speeches stigmatise those Indigenous actors who criticise or confront his position and political project as “left-wing radicals” and “conservatives” (Sin Embargo, 2019). Participants in the “*Sélvame del Tren*” campaign that opposes the Maya Train megaproject in Yucatán, for instance, he downgraded as “conservatives” and “hippies” (Infobae, 2022).

### **Ontological justice claims or protecting unique worlds**

The justice claims brought forward by participants of this research extend beyond harm to human beings or material losses, to include harm done to a collective lifeworld that cannot be reduced to component parts, such as the individual or the environment. How can such demands for justice that condemn the loss of a unique world be addressed in the face of infrastructure megaprojects? Political ecologist Audra Mitchell's (2014) concept “mundicide” describes the “destruction of worlds and of the conditions of worldliness”: Mundicide “is an ontological concept, which refers to the dissolution of irreducible, heterogeneous collectives, in whatever specific forms they emerge. Moreover, it is ontological in the sense that it

conceptualizes harm in terms of the loss not just of particular beings, but rather of entire, *unique ways of being-together* [my emphasis]" (Mitchell, 2014: 16). Worlds, however, are not currently considered bearers of harm or subjects of rights in most national legal systems, and therefore, mundicides of horrendous scope are occurring in the context of the construction of infrastructure megaprojects worldwide. An emblematic case of mundicide was denounced (as 'Indigenous ethnocide') by Brazilian state attorney Thais Santi Brum (2014), which occurred as result of the construction of the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam in state of Pará.

The Indigenous peoples of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have fought historic struggles against invading colonial forces (Manzo, 2006; Zarauz López, 2018). It remains present in local oral history, that they had to purchase their own land from the Spanish crown, in order to maintain control over their territory. Members from the Jaltepec de Candayoc community of today, for instance, remember that their ancestors paid 800 gold pesos to obtain 108 square miles of land. Respondents also remembered how, in the late 1950s, their grandfathers experienced the expropriation of 18.000 hectares of land for the construction of the Miguel Alemán dam, and subsequent forced displacement to the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region. Communities were relocated about 200 km southeast.<sup>14</sup> The incident was a cruel harbinger of the modernist developmentalism dominating governance and policy making for decades. Respondents deplored that until now, there had been no compensation for the land that was lost.

Ayuujk researcher, Carolina María Vásquez García, writes that in cosmovisions of Mixe and Zapotec –cohabitant nations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec – a broader notion of land exists. Land is conceptualised not as a passive object, but as something palpable, that is lived, worked, sensed and felt. It also includes a spiritual, emotional and symbolic dimension, and the sensual stimuli of tastes, smells and colours. Through living on, with and of the land, it becomes part of people's body and collective life. Vásquez García points out that Ayuujk women's everyday work and crafting, such as garment embroidery, represents an interaction with the elements of the land, and is part of a continuous dialogue with it (Vásquez García & Ramos García, 2019). In doing so, an awareness is maintained that land is the source of food and knowledge that guarantees human survival. According to Mixe thought, land is considered living philosophy of life, and humans learn the meaning of equality from living on it, because human beings are neither more nor less than other living beings that exist in the territory. Each one of the elements of the living world (what Euro-American cultures reduce to 'nature') fulfils a necessary function within the whole, and this 'wholeness' is core to all other aspects of human life. For the Mixe, it is therefore not possible to separate the atmosphere from the soil, nor the soil from the subsoil, Vásquez insists. This idea of "land-life" (*tierra-vida*) she contends,

"is expressed in practice, in the work for food production –the planting of corn–; in individual and collective rituals and ceremonies, in gratitude to the land-mother as life-giver [*la tierra-madre como dadora de vida*]. For this reason, a large part of the

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<sup>14</sup> See the website of the *Bachillerato Integral Comunitario* No. 14/Jaltepec de Candayoc that recounts this history: <http://bicjaltepec.cseiio.edu.mx/milocalidad/historia.php>.

manifestations of the rites and ceremonies are visible in the symbolic geographical places within the territory, what we call *Tunääw kojpkääw* (mountains or sacred geographical places)” (Vásquez García & Ramos García, 2019: 59/60).

Departing from the notion of land-life – a space beyond the material that it is inhabited by humans and non-humans, as well as other beings that sustain and contribute to the reproduction of life – Indigenous nations in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have defended their territories (Castañeda Olivera, 2020; Cruz Rueda, 2011; Jiménez Maya, 2011; Flores Cruz, 2018; Manzo, 2006; Sánchez, 2016; Vásquez García, 2021; Zaraus López, 2018) from the intrusion of modern/colonial-capitalist ontology,<sup>15</sup> which considers land as a commodity, an inert object to be exploited. Different Latin American scholars have denominated this non-instrumental relationship with land and what is in or on it, ‘relational ontologies’ (Escobar 2020) or ‘extended ontologies’ (Gudynas, 2015). Following the idea of land-life, the seizure of land through the imposition of megaprojects is an attack on existing ways of life. The fact that mountains, rivers, lagoons and everything that inhabits the territories are seen as inert objects that can be moulded or destroyed, interrupts the cycles that allow the reproduction of life in its multiple forms (Cariño Trujillo, 2019). In the current civilisational crisis, which is characterised by incremental construction of invasive megacorridors, intended to facilitate intensified natural resource extraction, it is key to begin a debate about ontological justice.

Breaking with the anthropocentric approach of modern/colonial-western ontology that attributes superior value to humans, relational ontologies recognise the existence of worlds in relation. This means that the biophysical, human, nonhuman and supernatural worlds are not considered as separate entities, but establish links of continuity between them that are complex and non-hierarchical. Hence, to destroy the land-territory is to destroy the intricate web of life that sustains the pluriverse. Beyond that, to destroy the land-territory implies not only the destruction of other worlds that already exist in those territories, but also the denial of the possibility of the existence of other worlds yet to come. As Escobar (2018: 73) points out, territories are “vital spaces” that “ensure survival as a people and living culture”. Hence, territories are collective spaces, in which the cultural existence and modes of subsistence can be reinvented time and again, and are therefore vital for the r-existence<sup>16</sup> of Indigenous peoples and their life projects.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> I use the word ‘ontological’, following Mario Blaser’s (2019) term of ‘political ontology’, which refers to the power-laden practices involved in bringing into being a particular world or ontology. The concept gained particular relevance at our current historic moment, in which destructive anthropocentric practices, such as intensified extractivism and the expansion of long-distance infrastructure construction advance forcefully to erase the possibility of a pluriverse (i.e. a world in which many worlds exist). Furthermore, the term political ontology illustrates the mouldability of worlds that are constructed by human design and practices, as well as emphasises existing resistance against ontological occupation.

<sup>16</sup> This neologism (a fusion of resistance and existence) was coined by Carlos Walter Porto Gonçalves to emphasise the existential affirmation that inhabits all forms of resistance (Porto Gonçalves & Pereira Cuin 2016).

<sup>17</sup> A life project is an idea of a collective way of life based on a shared cultural history and principles. A life project generally includes guidelines for the stewardship of the natural world and the ordering of the territory that a particular nation inhabits. Core to Indigenous life projects across the Americas are principles of balance and reciprocity between the beings that make up the territory, as well as the striving for conditions that generate

Escobar has sensitised us to understand that territorial and commons defence is in fact an ontological political practice. Resistance against the prescription of a One-World World (Escobar, 2020) that subjects all other worlds to its own terms or to non-existence is motivated by imagining and struggling for the conditions that will allow to persevere as a distinct world.

“The perseverance of communities, commons, and the struggles for their defense and reconstitution – particularly, but not only, those that incorporate explicitly ethno-territorial dimensions— involves resistance and the defense and affirmation of territories that, at their best and most radical, can be described as ontological. Conversely, whereas the occupation of territories by capital and the State implies economic, technological, cultural, ecological, and often armed aspects, its most fundamental dimension is ontological” (Escobar, 2020: 73).

Hence, by preventing intrusion of developmentalist, globalising infrastructure projects into own territory, rejecting the dominant ontology of capitalist modernity, and resisting integration into the One-World World, many Indigenous, Afrodescendant, and peasant communities are currently advancing ontological struggles. The erupting land defence struggles against incrementing invasive infrastructural and extractive projects are in fact a struggle against “ontological occupation” (term by Escobar, 2020). The defence of territory, life, and the commons are therefore the same thing, they signify an insistence on the futurity of other ways of world-making.

In her work and organising, Canadian scholar Shiri Pasternak explores Indigenous law and jurisdiction. Having accompanied the Algonquin first nation’s struggle for recognition of their land-based jurisdiction (Pasternak, 2017), she highlights the distinction between Eurocentric forms of land tenure based on exclusive usage rights, and Algonquin notions of property based on a legal order of care that is committed to all existing creatures that live on the land. She further emphasises that legal property regimes are generative of specific ontologies, in particular when relating to land. The Algonquin jurisdiction of care could not be replicated through the bureaucratic regimes of ownership, as Eurocentric legal orders disrupt communities from their established relations of reciprocity on the land.

There are very few examples, in which Indigenous peoples have achieved to have their relations with the nonhuman world recognised and upheld in law, within a western, liberal, democratic legal systems. In New Zealand, for instance, the Maori view that the natural environment should be treated as a person – indeed, as *a relative* –rather than simply as a resource has become integrated into national law in the 1980s (Iorns Magallanes, 2015). We have seen similar attempts to incorporate Indigenous cosmologies into national law in Latin America (Apaza Huanca, 2019; Tola, 2018). Since 2006, the rights of nature have been recognised by the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia. However, it has also become clear that Ecuador and Bolivia have continued to pursue an extractivist economic development

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collective benefit and shared abundance. Furthermore, a life project includes established forms of political organisation, jurisdiction and authority.

model, and that assertions of national sovereignty over natural resources have tended to override Earth jurisprudence and environmental conservation (Humphreys, 2016).

Undertaking a critical genealogy of the international legal order, and inspecting its ideological foundations, legal scholar Anna Grear (2015, 242) highlights that “aggressive anthropocentrism” was one of the core features of international law, designed to secure the hegemony of European imperial powers. Subsequently, it does not surprise that contemporary legal orders (both national and international) are ill suited to protect multiple, existing worlds. Available international mechanisms enshrined in the ILO Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention No. 169 and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (the latter not legally binding) have proven insufficient for effectively protecting the different life projects and territories of Indigenous peoples from encroaching largescale infrastructure projects or resource extraction (Åhrén, 2014; Scott, 2020, Cruz & Flores Cruz, 2013; Dunlap, 2018; Baker, 2013; Fontana & Grugel, 2016; Franco, 2014; Rangel Gómez, 2020; Zarembek & Torres Wong, 2018). In the context of substantial political and economic asymmetry between state, corporate and elite interests, and Indigenous and peasant communities, the FPIC instrument has been susceptible to multiple legal and procedural infringements. FPIC consultations about previous megaprojects in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have at times been carried out as “regional consultative” or “citizen” assemblies, which are not recognised normative instruments in Indigenous communities, the “general community assembly” being the only legitimate decision-making instance (see Cruz & Flores Cruz, 2013; Rangel Gómez, 2020). Subsequently, the FPIC consultation process helped create an illusion of dialogue and negotiation, simulating Indigenous participation and consent, thereby de facto undermining true Indigenous self-determination. In a context of the coloniality of contemporary, extractivist capitalism, full sovereignty of Indigenous peoples over their traditional territories clashes with forceful national and international interests in exploiting available natural resources.

Countering the alluring promise that accompanies the construction of largescale –often now labelled “critical”– infrastructure projects, Canadian First Nation scholar Anne Spice emphasises that they “destroy Indigenous life to make way for capitalist expansion”. Such infrastructure installs new epistemological and ontological relations to land, nonhuman beings and the natural world. Rather than being “creative/productive”, largescale and extractive infrastructure is “regressive/destructive” and “embedded in a capitalist system that is fundamentally at odds with the cycles and systems that make Indigenous survival possible” (Spice, 2018: 41). Current largescale infrastructure projects, such as the CIIT, Maya Train and many more around the world, make alterlivability<sup>18</sup> impossible, instead, such invasive megaprojects act as world erasers<sup>19</sup>. A recuperation of the possibility of multiple

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<sup>18</sup> By using the term ‘alterlivability’ I follow the conceptual groundwork of Maria Puig de la Bellacasa, Michelle Murphy (2017) and Aimi Hamraie (2020). The term emphasises that ontology is a product of design and political choice, and that therefore there are alternatives to the current extractivist, colonial world-making.

<sup>19</sup> See also LaDuke & Cowen’s (2020) legendary figure of the “Wiindigo”, a giant monster and cannibal, and Dunlap & Jakobsen’s (2019) term of the “capitalist worldeater” as attempts to describe the destructive capacities of an economic system based on accumulation and dispossession.

ways of world-making, and with it a fundamental change of relations with the nonhuman world, will only emerge through the recognition of Indigenous jurisdictions and the return of full authority over land and territories to Indigenous peoples.

## **Conclusion**

This article demonstrated that residents in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec desire infrastructures that are culturally appropriate and aligned with the specific collective life projects and relational models of the different native peoples and Afrodescendant communities. Largescale petroindustrial and infrastructural projects impose integration into the One-World World, leading to the erasure of other lifeworlds, and assimilation of Indigenous and Afrodescendant peoples. A core element of the imposition of the CIIT infrastructure project was the companion programme, *Sembrando Vida*, which initiated peasants' detachment from land and dissociation from their communities, turning them into individual players in the global agroindustry. Land and territory are the fundamental elements within which collective identity is inscribed for isthmian peoples. Beyond guaranteeing physical survival, territories are spaces, in which complex symbolic relationships are formed that constitute collective identity. Respondents of this study desired continuity of their collective life projects, language, cultural identity, beliefs, spirituality, established political and legal systems, and solidarity economy. In both bureaucratic processes and outcomes, the CIIT infrastructure project has de facto functioned as a technology of erasure of other lifeworlds. Ontological justice should be a core consideration in all development and infrastructure projects. Considering the history of colonial oppression that peoples in Abya Yala have experienced, it must be paramount not to perpetuate circles of extractivism, ontological occupation and erasure, but to reestablish the conditions for alterlivability, that is the futurity of Indigenous and Afrodescendant life projects, permitting place-based connections based on principles of mutuality and stewardship.

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