

Title: Security Meanings and Land Defence in the Context of the Interoceanic Corridor Infrastructure (CIIT) Megaproject

Author: Susanne Hofmann, s.hofmann@lse.ac.uk

Abstract

This article examines the meanings of security in the context of the upheaval that an infrastructure megaproject can entail. In the centre of this article is the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (CIIT) project, one of the Mexican president's most ambitious megaprojects. The CIIT is being promoted as a multimodal road and rail transport corridor, linking the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. It is projected as a viable alternative to the Panama Canal that would contribute to speeding up the global circulation of goods, as well as simultaneously stimulate the local economy. Megaprojects, be they for natural resource extraction or infrastructure construction, often change everything: the landscape, the population, the local economy, often with detrimental impacts to the environment, but also to communities' established ways of living and their sociality. Based on interviews with local residents, the study shows that many of our respondents desired a *horizonte seguro*, a secure horizon, wishing for a foreseeable future, including certainty of their livelihoods, preservation of their natural world, stability of their social relations, and continuity of their established mode of living and being. The article explores how the production of the commons (*lo común*), a process that purposefully organises interdependence between humans and the natural world, is considered generative of security for alter-lifeworlds. Harm can therefore not be conceived as accruing to one being or set of beings in isolation. Subsequently, the article proposes an understanding of security as entangled or relational.

Keywords

Territory; land defence; infrastructure; communality; security; Mexico; anthropology

1. Introduction

This article examines the meanings of security in the context of the upheaval that an infrastructure megaproject can entail. Megaprojects, be they for natural resource extraction or infrastructure construction, often change everything: the landscape, the population, the local economy, often with detrimental impacts to the environment, but also to communities' established ways of living and their sociality. When researching the impacts of the multimodal transport corridor in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (CIIT), southern Mexico, I was struck by some of the responses obtained in the interviewing process in relation to perceptions of security. Answers given seemed to be very distinct from the concepts and vocabularies commonly discussed in security studies.

Megaprojects are large-scale, complex ventures that typically cost more than one billion US dollars, take many years to build, involve multiple public and private stake-holders, and often impact millions of people. Megaprojects can include the mining, tourism, energy, hydrocarbon, agro-industrial, and energy sectors, and the construction of transport infrastructures, among others. Generally, a large number of experts, politicians, and companies are involved in the planning and construction of a megaproject. International organisations and planners of public or private institutions tend to promote megaprojects under the premise of modernisation and economic progress. Their construction is

usually justified with the local benefits for its inhabitants with a vision based on economic development: jobs and roads for the inhabitants, access to medical and educational services, such as the expansion of terrestrial networks to boost the regional economy and global integration, for instance.

In the centre of this article is the *Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (CIIT) project (Secretary of the Interior, 2020), one of president Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (AMLO) most ambitious megaprojects, aside from the Dos Bocas refinery, the Mayan Train and the Santa Lucía Airport. The CIIT is being promoted as a multimodal road and rail transport corridor that will link the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. It is projected as a viable alternative to the Panama Canal that will contribute to speeding up the global circulation of goods, as well as simultaneously stimulate the local economy. The project has the following central components: modernisation and expansion of the ports of Coatzacoalcos in the Gulf and Salina Cruz in the Pacific; improvement of the railway connection between both harbours; development of a new highway and widening of an existing one; laying of optic fibre; construction of a new gas pipeline; improvement of the regional airports; installation of logistics centres and the development of industrial parks along the isthmus. The ten polygons (sometimes called 'development poles' or 'welfare poles') are expected to receive industries from sectors such as the automotive (auto parts, transportation equipment), agribusiness (food, beverages and tobacco), manufacturing (leather, textiles, clothing), as well as transportation and logistics. Similar to the US-Mexico border, the CIIT is planned to operate as a Free Trade Zone, granting businesses fiscal incentives to stimulate private investment for the region (El Economista, 2022). The Mexican government will contribute 120.000 million pesos for the realisation of the Interoceanic Corridor; the rest is projected to come from the private sector (Government of Mexico, 2022).

In the official discourse, the *Programme for the Development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec* "will generate jobs and decent living conditions to attract and anchor those fleeing poverty." (Government of Mexico, 2019). In the long term, the programme promises the development of urban infrastructure, educational services and human capital training, housing, mobility, as well as infrastructure for research and technological advancement. Critics of the project fear that the Interoceanic Corridor will boost the expansion of other extractivist and predatory megaprojects in the region, such as mining, wind farms, hydroelectric dams, and commercial forest and agro-industrial plantations (GeoComunes, 2020). It is expected that, in the long term, the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project will generate a myriad of secondary impacts in an area encompassing 79 municipalities in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. Almost 2.3 million people live in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region, of which more than half a million are Indigenous from 12 different peoples, plus Afro-descendants (Sandoval Vázquez, 2020).

2. Critical security studies, Indigenous worlds and anthropocentrism

Unlike security discourses that circulate in the national and international policy arenas, much of critical academic work in security studies has upheld intrinsically negative notions of security itself, linking the concept with the nation-state and militaristic threat-defence thinking. Some scholars assert that security can never be good or emancipatory, as it is itself part of a statist ideology, and thus, can only function to accomplish the state's objectives. Security has become closely connected to violent liberal state practices (Aradau, 2008; Aradau and Van Munster, 2011; Neocleous, 2008). It is perceived as inherently exclusionary, generating practices that reproduce inequality (Aradau, 2008). Because, in this line of thinking, security is meaningless without a "threatening other", there can never be security for all (Lipschutz, 1995). Securitisation theory then, as one branch of critical security studies, highlighted

the importance of language in security politics, explaining how actors employ security vocabulary (such as in/security, threat, danger, existence, survival etc.) in order to elevate a perceived issue to the highest level of priority, thus mobilising political and material resources to defend a specified 'referent object' (Buzan et al., 1998).

As a consequence of that focus on state behaviour, security studies in general (both mainstream and critical) have taken little account of Indigenous peoples or other sub-altern actors (Tuhiwai Smith, 1999; Barkawi and Laffey, 2006). An exception is Wilfrid Greaves (2016), who discusses securitisation in the context of Arctic Indigenous peoples, highlighting that the enunciation of the existential threat they face has not led to immediate or prioritised action, neither to the provision of material resources. This, he relates to the fact that securitisation occurs in a context of unequal social power, emphasising that security claims are only successful when accepted by an authoritative audience with the power to respond to the threat. Indigenous and other subaltern actors have identified and articulated threats to their collective future, but they have not been able to securitise their matters of concern. This is, in part, to do with the lack of appreciation of their issues and concerns by the authoritative audience that has the power to respond to the threat, and with different 'referent objects' (i.e. the thing or issue to be secured) that remain outside of the cognitive and value framework of this audience.

Feminist security studies adopted the concept of human security that highlights the seven dimensions of security: personal, political, economic, community, food, health and environmental, thereby challenging the earlier state-centred approaches to security focused on adversarial nation-states and war as primary threats to security (Tripp et al., 2013; Shepherd, 2008, 2013). The concept opened up scope for a broader understanding of the insecurities suffered by many, particularly in the world's poorest countries, and of the ways in which these populations feel unsafe. Feminist scholars subsequently expanded the traditional state security framework to include not just war, but also interpersonal violence, rape, poverty, and environmental destruction. They have also questioned how safe women are *as a result of* state protection.

In the Latin American context, actor-focused approaches to security gained traction, such as "security from below" (Pearce and Abello Colak, 2009), referring to a people-centred or citizen-led security provision, in which communities are actively involved in thinking about and constructing security. Built on agreed norms and shared values, and responding to the contextualised needs of particular communities, this approach intends to democratise security provision, whilst not rejecting public delivery.

However, all of these approaches to security share in common that they are radically anthropocentric. In the context of large-scale infrastructure construction, human-centric approaches do not do justice to the complex and interactive economic, social, cultural, environmental and spiritual systems that are becoming radically transformed and often irreparably damaged. It is clear that Western justice categories and existing security frameworks do not give attention to this kind of grievance, where *entire worlds*, that is specific conditions of being-together, become harmed or destroyed. Only more recent approaches scrutinising the ethics of security conceptions and practices (Burke and Nyman, 2016), drawing on posthumanism and emphasising how humans coexist within heterogeneous, co-constituted worlds, have pointed out that security studies must begin to grasp how harm is distributed across beings, and how it not only impacts them, but also the relations between them.

3. AMLO's security governance: armouring megaprojects against resistance

Public infrastructure projects are increasingly termed ‘critical infrastructures’, which are generally defined as systems and services essential to the health, safety, security and economic well-being of the nation. Disruptions of critical infrastructures are perceived to cause significant harms to the nation state and population. In his first year of office, president Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO) created a new, civil armed force, the National Guard, an institution that now has 120.000 elements deployed all over the country. Central motive for its generation was to get the military off the streets, which had played a crucial role in his predecessor’s “war against drugs”, but had committed grave abuses against civilians, with widespread impunity. The National Guard was to be a civil force, administered by the Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection, and dedicated to preventing and combating crimes, in particular, organised crime, the mafia and drug trafficking.

Driven by the argument that organised crime gangs were operating in the Isthmus area, 13.000 members of the National Guard were deployed in 2020 to guarantee investor security, which effectively meant a militarisation of the region (Azamar Alonso and Rodríguez Wallenius, 2020). In March 2021, president Andrés Manuel López Obrador announced that the Interoceanic Corridor project would be administered and managed by the Secretary of the Navy (SEMAR), with the motive of guaranteeing that it would never be possible to privatise the project (Milenio, 2021). In a statement, the chief of the Navy, José Rafael Ojeda Durán, announced that the profits from the project would be used to pay the pensions of retired Navy personnel (Lopez Obrador, 2023). All this received strong critiques by civil society and security specialists: Not only has AMLO’s government allocated larger budgets to the armed forces, but he has also given them now an “autonomous financial source” and therefore effectively more power than ever before (Tirado, 2021: 11).

In October 2022, the transfer of Isthmus Railways (Ferrocarril del Istmo de Tehuantepec – FIT) to SEMAR was formalised, and in the following month Admiral José Rafael Ojeda Durán assumed directorship of the company. From that moment on, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec complex – including airports, railways, highways, wind parks, pipelines and 10 industrial parks –and the ports of Salina Cruz and Coatzacoalcos, were given into the custody of the Secretary of the Navy. Social movement organisations deplored the harassment of communities by armed forces deployed to protect federal megaprojects. In March 2023, elements of the Navy, the State Police and the National Guard forcefully evicted an encampment and road block that Mixe residents had maintained for 60 days in the town of Mogoñé Viejo, in the municipality of San Juan Guichicovi (in the state of Oaxaca), stopping ongoing work on the rail tracks in protest against the damages caused to their lands by construction work related to the CIIT (La Jornada, 2023). Protesters denounced that the officers in riot gear intimidated them with their weapons and equipment, as well as threatened them with revenge. Human rights organisations expressed their discontent over this aggression by the state security forces (ibid.).

In May 2023, the Mexican president issued a decree in which the facilities of the Mayan Train, the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and the international airports of Palenque (Chiapas), Chetumal and Tulum (Quintana Roo) were declared as matters of strategic priority, public interest and national security. A previous attempt to classify infrastructure megaprojects as an issue of national security had been invalidated by the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN). To the public, AMLO explained that his government made the decision to turn these infrastructure projects into actions of national security, “because those who are promoting injunctions against them receive financing from the United States government and we can prove that.” (Capital 21, 2023). This decree, could effectively prevent members of the judiciary from responding to the interests of opposition groups and their injunctions favourably.

Oppositional social movements, human rights organisations and the critical left were in alert and concerned about AMLO’s changes to the security apparatus, deploring an emerging militarism and

widespread militarisation of the country. However, on a local level, talking to residents in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, this research found a broad diversity of positions vis-à-vis the deployment of the National Guard in the region. Some people were indifferent, some troubled about the arrival of the force, and others embraced their arrival with the hope that their presence might lead to positive security effects in relation to delinquency and organised crime. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec area, unlike other regions of Mexico such as Chiapas or Michoacán, has never been comprehensively militarised before, but is indeed a region that has the reputation of strong, organised resistance against the implementation of interregional development projects,¹ as well as fending off foreign intruding forces (Manzo, 2008; Zarauz López, 2018).

From its initial stages, the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project caused security-related impacts among certain communities and actors. Oppositional actors and leaders of social movements we interviewed for this research project have been verbally threatened, intimidated and insulted, both on social media and in *asambleas*.² Some were discredited as ‘terrorists’ and marginalised within their own communities, causing emotional stress and feelings of isolation, especially when combined with threats of community expulsion. A small but incrementing number of individuals interviewed has made experiences with armed actors, who made repeated threatening phone calls, followed them around or damaged their personal property (see also Avispa, 2023).

This research found a pervasive perception of insecurity across the north-south axis of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec that stretches across the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca. The metropolitan area of the harbour city of Coatzacoalcos in Veracruz has been particularly affected by the dynamics of organised crime over the past decade; the location being a hub for both drug trafficking, as well as a crossing point for migrants who travel up north.³ For most people, insecurity did not increment as a result of the CIIT project, but many noted an overall surge of security incidents related to the expanding and intensifying activities by drug trafficking groups. For instance, many lamented that the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (Cartel Jalisco Nueva Generación – CJNG) had begun to take hold in the area, emphasising the recent arrival ‘*cobro de piso*’ – that is the practice of charging businesses a regular bribe– in small towns and even rural areas of the isthmus.

What did stand in relation to the CIIT infrastructure project were accounts of arrivals of northerners from Michoacan with the intent of purchasing land, including *ejido* land, in the region. Some narratives articulated that pressure on individual land holders and threats were made in the course of these land speculation activities. Other accounts expressed their worries that the best strategic locations inside the planned industrial parks and near the future train stations would go to incomers and foreigners, leaving locals behind. Another aspect mentioned in narratives of insecurity was the involvement of organised crime in the construction sector, as well as delinquent groups illegitimately extracting natural resources for private profit from communities that had not agreed to that, such as, for instance,

¹ A range of development projects similar to CIIT were proposed by previous presidents: e.g. *Programa Alfa-Omega* in 1977 by José López Portillo; *Programa Integral de Desarrollo Económico para el Istmo de Tehuantepec* in 1996 by Ernesto Zedillo; *Plan Puebla Panama* in 2001 by Vicente Fox; *Plan Istmo Puerta de América* in 2013 by Enrique Peña Nieto. Forceful Indigenous, *campesino* and civil society organisations were able to prevent their implementation.

² Assembly, the mayor decision making body in Indigenous communities.

³ Migrants used to and still do take *La Bestia*, the dangerous freight train, that passes near downtown Coatzacoalcos, to travel northwards to the United States. However, migration controls in Mexico have become very intense during AMLO’s administration, and practices of criminal gangs and traffickers extremely abusive with frequent reports of exploitation and disappearances, which makes migrants increasingly attempt travels by bus or other means.

stone required for parts of the project (e.g. the breakwater to be constructed in the harbour extension of Salina Cruz).

4. Expanding understandings of security

Security is a notoriously difficult topic to research, because the term itself is, on the one hand so enigmatic and unbounded – subject to individual feelings and perceptions, yet on the other hand so overlaid by an alien and impersonal, state-centric perspective and related terminologies. In fact, one of the initial insights gained in the research process was that there was a tendency for respondents to replicate the security discourse that circulates in the local and contemporary public sphere that they have access to (including the media and social media). In order to get to an understanding of individual accounts of *experienced in/security*, it became necessary, firstly, to train the research assistants to be vigilant on this issue, as well as secondly, to provide respondents with the possibility of an expanded notion of security.

This research was carried out between 2020 and 2022, that means, it continued through the Covid-19 pandemic, and was carried out by the principal investigator and four Mexican research assistants, three of whom lived locally in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The assistants were from Afro-Mexican and Mestizo backgrounds and had a differing degree of academic training. I devised a specialised interview training video for the research assistants (myself having been restricted to remote research from the UK at the time), which ensured that the assistants understood and were able to distinguish between A) personal knowledge, such as perception, feeling, thinking, opinion, experience, and B) secondary knowledge, such as media discourse, events reported in the news, common sense, and rumour. This research sought to investigate the former. I also provided them with a example definition of an expanded understanding of security, that they could use, should they notice that the interviewee continued to replicate common perceptions and discourses of security, rather than referring to own understandings, feelings, perceptions and experiences.

The example definition of expanded security proposed a conception, outlining that security can mean not just the absence of harm and injury, but include the realms of the economy, food, health, environment, personhood, community and politics. Security therefore can also comprise of a sense of thriving, that goes beyond the mere absence of fear and misery, but encompasses a life with dignity. Such an understanding of security is therefore inseparable of the social and symbolic status of a person and their ways of sustaining their lives. Our example definition highlighted the necessity to move beyond Eurocentric notions of individual wellbeing, emphasising interconnectedness, and including the relationships between people and the land, rivers, mountains, rocks and other living beings, as well as access to collective decision-making and community reciprocity.

5. Meanings of security in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

5.1. Care/work as security

Often, respondents related security to the structural conditions of poverty and marginalisation, which were considered responsible for the level of insecurity that they currently experienced in the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Subsequently, the generation of conditions of wellbeing for the entire population was seen as the only way to remedy the current situation of insecurity. Amaia⁴, a *Mestiza*

⁴ All names of persons have been exchanged with pseudonyms.

woman with an urban background who currently supports a women's land defence project in the state of Veracruz, explains: "Security is not done just with more police, but by creating the material conditions of wellbeing, so that there are opportunities; other life opportunities that are not delinquent. Improving living conditions, generating alternatives, resources. All that is a matter of security." Amaia highlights the interconnectivity of security that links the dimensions of the personal, with the collective, the material and the natural environment. Therefore, solutions to conditions of insecurity inevitably have to address all of those interconnected dimensions. She says,

"We must break this individualistic logic, and instead promote mutual aid, community self-organisation, and cooperativism. Produce, but not at nature's cost. Have a decent life, but not get rich. Search for alternative ways. Not all through money, but for instance through barter or exchange. Security for me would mean having a harmonious coexistence, a way of life where rights are respected, where the wellbeing of the integrity of people are taken care of. It would be promoting a culture of care and respect. Taking truly an interest in other people, not just to care for our own wellbeing. This individualistic, capitalist system tells us that all is fine; as long as I am good, it does not matter if others are unwell. The fact that there is someone who is having a bad time in the community is also part of me, it affects us all. We cannot say that we are well when there is someone who has just been murdered, it is a question of common wellbeing. I also think of the question of care in every sense. In other words, I take care of myself, but at the same time I also take care of you, the community, and nature, so that we all have security, can live well, in harmony and for a long time. If we finish off the mountain, the water and everything else now, then what will happen? We must recognise that we are part of this territory, we are not owners of this place, it is an inheritance. We have to take care of it, so that others and others who come afterwards, the other generations, can also enjoy that and have a good life."

Security, as Amaia conceives it, is based on reciprocal social practices and mutual aid, and productive activities that do not consider nature as expendable. Hence, community-driven and land-based forms of local, social organisation constitute the starting point for building security for all. Care has been an essential feature of transformative politics and alternative, non-state forms of organising in particular within feminism and disability activism (Clement, 1993; Piepzna-Samarasinha and Lakshimi, 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993). According to Tronto (1993: 103), care includes all activities to "maintain, continue, and repair... a complex life-sustaining network." Such an understanding of care recognises the inevitable interdependence that exists between human bodies, people, and the environment (Kittay and Feder, 2002; Engster, 2005). If we look at security through the perspective of care, concerned with the maintenance, cultivation and repair of a complex and heterogeneous network of life, security acts must be oriented towards generating the conditions for the flourishing of untamed life and of various life projects or lifeworlds. To address security as an expanded care relationship, which allows the persistence of multiple life projects or coexisting lifeworlds (i.e. co-constituted ways of being and relating to others), we need an expansion of both Western categories of justice and security frameworks, and their associated conceptions of potential harm.

Amaia's account resonates with narratives from different members of Indigenous communities we spoke to, including Zapotec/Binniza, Mixe/Ayuuk, Nahuatl/Popoluca, Ikoote/Huave and Zoque. When inquiring for notions, experiences and perceptions of security and insecurity, the ideas of 'being well' (*bienestar*) and 'living well' (*buen vivir*) were commonly mentioned. Ester, for instance, translated the Nahuatl term for security into the Spanish *bienestar*, wellbeing, emphasising, that it is a collective term that means "hopefully we will all be well" (*ojalá todos estemos bien*). This expanded notion of security implies many things, such as being safe at home, on the street, that people have what they need to

eat and live. All that is included in the Nahuatl conception of what security means. Rosa translated security for us from Ayuuk, referring to ‘the care that you make from the heart’ (*el cuidado que haces del corazón*) or ‘caring what is inside’ (*cuidar lo de adentro*). The Zoque meaning of security integrates the notion of ‘collective work’ (*trabajo mutuo*) in conjunction with ‘mutual care’ (*cuidado mutuo*) as Alejandro, a Zoque speaker from the Chimalapas region in the isthmus, explained to us: “I feel safe, protected, because I know that I can count on the care of others.” Interesting here is the connection between security, care and activity or practice. Hence, security can never just come about through a discourse or disposition of the mind or attitude, it is always related to concrete, active and collective practices of care. Care is generative of security and inseparable of community, as Ximena, a land defender from Veracruz, pointed out: “We say we are safe, where we take care of ourselves, where we are in community, where we are well.”

When asked how to secure their territory in the context of the encroaching infrastructure project, Casimiro, an elder from an Indigenous community of the southern, Oaxacan part of the isthmus, refers to the *cargo* system⁵ as essential to territorial defence: “The issue of *cargos* is one of the pillars of our community, of the community life system (*systema de vida comunitaria*), to which also the assembly, the *fiestas*, the earth, the water – all that is common – belong. These are our tools that give us the strength and capacity to maintain and defend our way of life (*forma de vida*).” Another significant element for community reproduction and safeguarding ways of life or lifeworlds practiced widely across the state of Oaxaca is *tequio*, a practice that refers to the work that all members of the community are expected to contribute for the collectivity. This can comprise of activities such as construction work, food preparation, collection of firewood, and harvesting among others. In the context of organised collective opposition against the CIIT megaproject, *tequio* plays an important role in resisting the infrastructure project, and defending the community against attacks. The Zapotec community of Puente Madera that opposes the transformation of their communal forest into an industrial park, and its subsequent integration into the CIIT project, has developed organised resistance since 2021, when they detected irregularities with the minutes of the assembly of community members and demanded their annulment (Sin Embargo, 2021). After one community member had received death threats and had his firewood stolen when exiting the communal forest, the community assembly (*asamblea comunitaria*) decided to hold *tequio* in the Pitayal Forest to carry out the work of demarcating and clearing the boundary markers, as well as removing fences from illegal pastures of the corrupt and self-declared owners of the common land (Tierra y Territorio, 2023).

5.2 Harmony and unity as security

The notions of peace and harmony were integral to concepts of security, as becomes clear in Ximena’s account: “To live safely is to live peacefully, in harmony with the community, in an organised way, and with the confidence that we are in a region with many assets, with a lot of natural and cultural wealth, and for that to be maintained, for all of this to remain, that is to live safely.”⁶ Ximena is a leader of a land defence organisation that aims to defend their natural resources from being extracted for the industrial parks integral to the CIIT project. Their territory is fertile, biodiverse and has rich water resources. Water is scarce in the isthmus, and many of the settling industries will require a steady

⁵ *Cargo* means burden or obligation and denominates a task or post that a person is chosen for. The election of the person is accomplished through a collective decision-making process. The *cargo* system is part of customary forms of governance (*usos y costumbres*) in many Indigenous communities of Abya Yala. See González de la Fuente (2011) for a detailed analysis of the cargo system.

⁶ It must be noted that in Spanish there is not distinction between security and safety.

supply of water, as well as likely generate wastewaters that need to be managed. Some in Ximena's community oppose the project and fear the depletion of their natural wealth in favour of this federal industrial infrastructure project. According to Ximena, security lies in the preservation of both cultural and natural wealth. A destruction of the existing natural wealth would inevitably lead to a loss of established ways of living, sustainable livelihoods and eventually to emigration, resulting in degrees of cultural change and possible loss of cultural identity. Harmony has already been threatened by the arrival of the infrastructure project that has divided many communities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

The CIIT infrastructure project has generated polarisation and conflicts among the resident population. There has been a conflict over which village will receive the Government contract to provide rocks for the construction of the breakwater to be built in the Salina Cruz harbour (El Universal, 2022), for instance. The resulting road blocks and protests then affected the truckers who lost out on work and pay because they could not deliver the materials (Corta Mortaja, 2022). The most intricate conflicts have emerged among proponents and opponents of the project, in particular, around the issue of land use. The development of ten new industrial parks in the region is realised by the Government through a transformation of the applicable property regime, which implicates a change from social or collective to private property. The prospects of individual gains then have led to conflicts within the decision-making assemblies, the designation of false *comuneros* (persons with access to collectively held land titles) and the falsification of land titles, among others. There has also been discontent regarding the power of collective land holders (*comuneros, ejidatarios*) over the destiny of a community; those with land titles holding power over whether and where the project will be implemented. Furthermore, there has been discord over whether to negotiate with the Government and accept the pay-outs offered for improvements of local roads or schools, for instance. There have been reports of oppositional *ejidatarios* who got assaulted and even threatened with exclusion from their community.

Whilst Ximena's organisation has not been physically attacked so far, they had experienced more support from the community in the past, and more recently, they faced a discreditation campaign, led by the municipal president, suggesting that her organisation would take people's money so that members could enrich themselves, and that they would use the campaign signatures obtained for other purposes. The municipal president warned the population not to associate and meet up with them. This smear campaign has weakened their organisation and its status in the community; subsequently they had to restart a process of articulation of their concerns and community building in order to generate sufficient support for defending the land and its natural wealth.

When asked about what could be generative of security, different respondents referred to 'unity' or 'being united', as Aurelia delineates here: "Well, I have sometimes seen cases where people are united and take care of each other. Here in the neighbourhood it has always been like that in the past, but really at this point I believe that right now, the truth is that we have let ourselves down a lot. Sometimes I feel that it is no longer the same." Umberto, member of a coastal Ikoots community in the south of the isthmus that was affected by the construction of large-scale wind farms in the early 2000s, recounts how through unity they were able to fend off previous megaprojects and state intrusions. "Before 2012 everything was perfect, everything was normal here. It was like one single man (*era como un solo hombre*) from X to Laguna Y it was one single man.⁷ The promoters of the project and the military came in, but they couldn't do anything because the people was just one man. From there, I think the state realised that it cannot enter, it cannot dominate, but it already had plans to carry out the project here. What it did is divide, start dividing people."

⁷ The place names have been omitted here to guarantee the speaker's anonymity.

So far, there have not been any land acquisitions for the CIIT infrastructure project in Umberto's community, however, there has been a request for a land donation for a new military base in the community. They said no, because they oppose the militarisation of their region. Until now, the community has not been directly affected by the CIIT project, but the harmony in the community has become fragile and the current political climate divisive. Overall, president Andrés Manuel López Obrador enjoys considerable support across the region of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. The president's promises to transform the country, and generate a state and an economy that truly serve the people convince many members of Indigenous communities. In past conflicts about the implementation of infrastructure and development projects in the region, the frontlines were clearer. The openly neoliberal agenda of previous presidents generated a united opposition against these invasive projects that would serve private interests rather than benefit local communities. Now, even the Indigenous are divided between alleged 'traditionalists' who want to preserve customary ways of living and being, maintain control over the territory and protect the land and biodiversity, and those who believe that benefits will incur from the federal project in the form of lucrative work and business opportunities or social programmes.

When asked about how communities could protect themselves from being divided over the implementation of infrastructure megaprojects, it was noticeable that in particular members of Indigenous communities placed a strong emphasis on information and dialogue. Most explicitly Umberto brings across this point: "What can be done to unite people again is raising awareness. Making people see how this project does not benefit our community in any way. What we are experiencing is the generation of political division and the tearing of our existing social fabric. [...] Little by little, I think it is necessary to talk, to raise awareness with people, and analyse why we are having this conflict over this program. If everyone does their own thing, we won't be able to move forward. There has to be a single idea to be able to move forward." Community cohesion, or what Umberto above calls 'ser un solo hombre', being a single man, is crucial for cultural survival in the context of land defence and resistance against invasive infrastructures. The question of which direction to take, to either embrace the CIIT project or to insist on the continuation of ancestral ways of sustaining life have to be discussed and decided collectively in the assembly, involving all members of the community. Community assemblies (*asamblea comunitaria*), as sole, legitimate decision-making instrument of a community, however, therefore frequently become target of influencing or manipulation attempts by external, powerful actors with vested interests in infrastructure projects (see also Dunlap, 2018, 2020, 2021). Respondents made us aware of absentee *comuneros*⁸ shuttling in from the capital city to instigate the sale of communal land to the Government for the CIIT project, for instance, and of falsification of assembly minutes to declare a vote in favour of the sale of communal land (see the Puente Maderas case mentioned above).

5.3 Territorial and cultural knowledge as security

In recent years, there has been a boom in the provision of 'territory and security' workshops and trainings offered by international NGOs, as well as a range of publications of 'security manuals' or

⁸ A *comunero* is a person who has rightful access to communal land (*tierra communal*). The early agrarian provisions and legislations in Mexico have been protective of communal land by determining that communal land was unseizable, imprescriptible and not alienable, in accordance with articles 52 and 75 of the Federal Agrarian Reform Law (valid from 1962-1992), and article 99 of the current Agrarian Law. Communal lands comprise of a territory that may belong to one or several communities, and control of the land is exercised and governed by the assembly of commoners, which is elected by the traditional authorities (governors, principals, *tatamandons*, councils of elders) (Morett-Sánchez and Celsa Cosío-Ruiz, 2017).

handbooks to serve as guidelines for communities facing external threats resulting from land defence or other territorial conflicts. Many of those manuals are to some extent derivatives of Frontline Defenders' *Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders* (2005; revised edition from 2009), which is still used and distributed by Peace Brigades International (PBI). It is a detailed and comprehensive guide that addresses risk assessment, security incidents, prevention, security strategies and plans, and the role of communication and information technology among other security-relevant aspects. Other, more specialised manuals have been produced by ProDesc, *Community security and territory* (2018); Aluna, *Risk assessment in the defence of human rights – Methodological guide* (2021) and Consorcio, *Holistic Feminist Protection* (2021).

We talked to Elena, an experienced NGO worker who has a long trajectory of carrying out territorial security workshops with communities affected by land conflicts related to resource extraction, environmental destruction or contamination, monoculture plantation and infrastructure projects. Over many years she has accompanied land defenders in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, including the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region. She suggested that some of the approaches developed by or under the influence of organisations from the Global North were inadequate, because their protection measures focused exclusively on the individual, thereby separating leaders and land defenders from their communities and contexts. She said, "I repeat an important issue, which is that defenders in territorial contexts are not individual defenders, they are defenders within the framework of a collective defence, of a community. That means the threats, the risks that a defender experiences are transferred to their collective and community environment and most mechanisms do not consider any type of precautionary or protection measures for collectivities and communities." What is instead frequently offered are technological solutions for threatened land defenders, such as satellite phones or the panic buttons, for example, which tend to be ineffectual in structurally disadvantaged contexts and rural areas, where there is no signal, or the respective individual cannot afford the costs of non-intermittent phone data. In addition, many land defenders don't trust the telecommunication providers and object to transmitting their location to them at all times. The provision of bodyguards is another measure that the state offers for extreme cases of risk, upon a lengthy bureaucratic procedure, however, there have been cases in which the bodyguards themselves have harassed the person at risk or became perpetrators, which is why female land defenders, in particular, tend to not confide in this state-approved protection measure.

Elena's account placed emphasis on how territorial knowledge – and the secrecy of it – is core to self-protection in conflict. Generating maps of the locations of megaprojects, of related resistances and threats is one of the methods her organisation has used to safeguard territories and people in contexts of socioterritorial conflict. The role of teachers or elders who pass this knowledge on to the younger generation, so that it becomes part of a collective memory, is thereby essential. Elena continued, "In other words, they told us, well, there are things that we can share, but there are things that we cannot share, either in this space or in any other, because it makes us vulnerable, and this is not a question of trust. It is a question of the code of practice that we follow to safeguard ourselves from an acute threat, that the route that we take is a route that only we know. And that also seems very interesting to me, because at the end of the day; there are things that are only said in communities and that is part of their own security mechanism."

Viviana, from an Ikoots community in the southern isthmus talked to us about how language has helped their resistance. The fact that her community consists still largely of Ombeayiiüts speakers, has meant that their community assembly remained free from external influencing or manipulation, giving them the chance to discuss and decide about invasive infrastructure projects on their own terms. She delineated, "...because we speak the language, because we know how to take care of the sea, perhaps,

or as fishermen we know what the sea is. It is life, life itself: from there we eat, from there we live. Our assembly is a success. Not every community has achieved that. We speak the language, which at times helped us a lot, the fact that the people from outside did not understand what the people were saying, but in the end, they were told what the people's decision was." As a translator, Viviana is acutely aware of the importance of cultural understandings for generating and protecting a distinct lifeworld. In our conversation, she lamented that in negotiation meetings with government representatives about infrastructure or development projects the interpreters employed were often not good enough. As an interpreter, she emphasised, one needs to know the context, and people's rights, and have a sensibility to grasp what people really want to say. She recalled events where interpreters drowned the voice of community members through literal translation that could not be understood by outsiders. In order to translate a person's cosmivision correctly, an interpreter must know the history, the context and what is happening inside that person's community in the present, so that cultural meanings don't get lost in intercultural communication. Hence, language and cultural knowledge, and the capacity to maintain and communicate those, are part of an existing security mechanism that some communities have preserved to guarantee cultural survival.

What these examples show is that elaborate risk assessment, security strategies and protection measures developed on the basis of external viewpoints and analyses tend to fail if they are not grounded in inhabited perspectives from the territories concerned. In contrast, culturally grounded knowledges tend to be extremely effective in the context of land defence.

5.4 Fiesta as security

The two aspects generative of security in the context of land defence already addressed, *tequio* and territory, form constitutive elements of the concept of *comunalidad*. *Comunalidad*, or communality⁹ in English, a notion (albeit with different interpretations and practices) shared across the peoples present in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Zapotec, Chontales, Huaves, Zoques, Mixes, Mixtecs and Chinantecos), is a way of generating a collective life or lifeworld. The four fundamental pillars of *comunalidad* named by Indigenous intellectuals are territory, *tequio*,¹⁰ *fiesta* and assembly (Díaz Gómez, 2003; Manzo, 2015; Martínez Luna, 2013, 2021). In this section, I want to address the *fiesta*, or community festival, as a mode of generating security.

In 2022, I interviewed Lucia, a young Zapoteca who sells flowers at the Juchitán market. I visited her in her home, in a village located in the Oaxacan part of the isthmus, where she also offers clients healing flower baths in her garden. Having requested my interview questions beforehand, Lucia had thought carefully about her answers and was one of the few people who had thought in-depth about how to translate and communicate cultural notions of 'security' and 'being safe' into Spanish. "I have not heard that the word security exists in Zapotec itself, not translated. I think it's a different notion. For me it is important that it would mean that together with those who live around us, those who are closest to us, we know how to find a balance, in the form of taking care of the joy of others (*cuidar de la alegría de los demás*), right?" She explained the idea of "*el don de la fiesta*" or "*el don de la alegría de todos*" (the 'gift of the festival' or 'the gift of everyone's joy'): "When you lose your security, you lose your creativity, your smile, your emotions. So, for me, that can be an approximation of security."

⁹ Communality must be regarded as a category in motion (not in terms of a fixed ontology or identity), since it is grounded in the lived practices and subjectivities shared by a group of people.

¹⁰ Related practices of community solidarity are *faena* and *mano vuelta*.

The *fiesta communal*, or community festival, is a space for coexistence and redistribution. The main community festivals of major Zapotec municipalities of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, such as Juchitán, Tehuantepec, Ixtaltepec and Unión Hidalgo, for instance, are called *velas*. They are celebrations that take place every year and have great drawing power – they usually have thousands of attendees. The *fiestas comunales* are not comparable to festivals in a US or European context, in which individuals decide to purchase entry for a particular social or entertainment experience. The community festivals in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have a specific role in relation to the generation of a specific way of life (*modo de vida*) or community life system (*sistema de vida comunitaria*): firstly, they enhance social cohesion; secondly, they contribute to the functioning of the local economy; and thirdly, they reaffirm culture. They encourage the value of community organisation to be reproduced, from which bonds of friendship and kinship are woven, reinforced and repaired, allowing dynamics of exchange and reciprocity. Likewise, they activate the economy with the increase in demand and supply of services related to preparations (food, decorations, traditional costumes etc.). Finally, they are spaces where identity is reaffirmed through the reproduction of customs and traditions, which stimulate cultural survival.

Comunalidad is a lived practice and a system of reproducing life collectively. As such, *comunalidad* did not exist as a written document or theory, but was passed on within communities. The drive to conceptualise it emerged out of a series of cultural dialogues that were realised in the late 80s/early 90s in Mexico with participation of peoples from Juchitán, the Zona Mixe in San Juan Guichicovi, and the Sierra in Oaxaca. The first to produce written work about *comunalidad* were Juan José Rendón, Jaime Martínez Luna, Benjamin Maldonado, and Floriberto Díaz, who had worked with the coalition of teachers and Indigenous promoters from Oaxaca, and felt the need that without a conceptual body of writing about *comunalidad*, Indigenous perspectives could not be heard in educational contexts, in particular in academia. Martínez Luna defined *comunalidad* as follows: “The ‘communality’ —as we call the behaviour resulting from the dynamics of the institutions that reproduce our ancestral and current organisation— rests on work, never on discourse; that is, the work for decision-making (the assembly), the work for coordination (*cargo*), the work for construction (*tequio*) and the work for enjoyment (*fiesta*).” (Martínez Luna, 2013: 251)

Gustavo Esteva, founder of the University of the Earth, described *comunalidad* as an expression of a “stubborn resistance” against own ways of living becoming destroyed or dissolved through external influences or impacts (Esteva and Guerrero Osorio, 2018). *Comunalidad* is the means to persist, to continue being in a particular way, despite external pressures on a mode of life to become dissolved, reduced or converted into something else. Aim is not to never change or become stagnant, but to *determine* what from outside is incorporated into own ways of being and living and what not. Raquel Gutiérrez and Mina Navarro (2019) characterised *comunalidad* as a dedicated “effort to produce the commons” and “a collective way of managing interdependence”, which places the defence and affirmation of life in the centre of joint striving. Indigenous scholar Gladys Tzul Tzul (2019) points out that historically, Indigenous peoples in Abya Yala had to confront colonialism and economic liberalism, i.e. projects of worlding or world-making that aimed to wipe out existing communal governance and land structures. She highlights that the power of *comunalidad* resides in people’s service for the collectivity. It is, in fact, the service – the joint working towards community wellbeing – that generates the conditions for material self-determination, as well as produces the ability to disrupt and sabotage projects of domination.

As part of a comprehensive community life system, the *fiesta* or ‘everybody’s joy’, hence, contributes to generating the conditions for security by reinforcing and repairing relationship bonds through exchange and reciprocity, as well as redistributing economic wealth and reaffirming cultural identity.

The repeated and conscious effort of producing ‘everybody’s joy’ – together with the other elements of *comunalidad* (land, *tequio*, and assembly) – allows the construction of an alternative and an own means of regenerating life, avoiding the submission to a particular (colonial, Western, capitalist etc.), prescribed way of life. In Floriberto Díaz Gómez’ (2003, reprint) words: “You can’t be dominated if you can regenerate life.”

5.5 Assembly, communication, networks and cooperative projects as security

When asked what they considered the best route to safeguard their territories in the context of the development of infrastructure megaprojects, such as the CIIT, many respondents made reference to own cultural heritage and practices, but also to self-determination and self-governance. How Javier’s telling remarks demonstrate: “I believe that the only way we could half-shield ourselves from an impact like this would be by returning to our culture first. Taking back the knowledge of our ancestors, knowing exactly who we are. But of course, also putting action into it. Well, because many times with knowing who I am and what I consider myself to be within a territory, which is my territory and what is a Zoque or Zapotec territory? Well, what do I want to do? At least, being well aware of all of this. That’s how I see it. Regaining the consciousness that only by practicing our ancestral knowledge, only by producing our food, by governing ourselves again by means of our assemblies of elders, our community assemblies, in this way we could half-shield ourselves, so that we can once again regain the rights of our territory.” Javier pointed out that even though self-determination is a right of Indigenous peoples, mentioned in international agreements, it is not a reality. “It turns out that this is not the case, so we have to return to our foundations of government, we have to return to our ancestral knowledge, we have to return to the pedagogy of the cornfield (*milpa*), we have to return to producing our medicines, then remove the shackles of submission, the colonisation, which continues to exist.”

Different respondents emphasised that the self-organisation of Indigenous peoples gave them hope in the context of the destruction that the CIIT infrastructure project could entail, and members of Indigenous communities highlighted that the continued practice of an assembly bolstered their community in this time of intensified conflict. The community assembly is a mechanism for articulation, debate, opinion-formation and consensus-based decision-making. As such, it has the highest authority in the Indigenous communities, in which it is practiced. Sofia who has been supporting Indigenous communities in territorial defence against megaprojects for seven years explains the function and value of the assembly: “I believe that the recovery and preservation of traditional forms of organisation, which on the one hand are the assemblies, helps them a lot to resist, because it is a collective entity, it is not just so-and-so defending his territory and they can come and blow up his home, it is already an articulated or collective framework that is committed not only to joint decision-making, but also to speak up: ‘If one of us is threatened, we will all respond’, and of course the strengthening of all these community logics and perspectives is very positive, I think.” The achievement of security, in an emancipatory sense, is intrinsically connected with political self-determination or self-governance. The practice of the consensus-based assembly enables communities to take control of their lives, so that they can make decisions and pursue courses of action beyond mere survival.

When megaprojects arrive and threaten to disrupt established lifeworlds, the communities affected often find themselves short of resources and struggling with a myriad of issues, including economic survival, drug consumption, internal conflicts and division, violence, delinquency, corruption, and emigration among others. They don’t necessarily have a fully formed own project ready to be proposed,

countering the federal development project, elaborated by policy and industry experts, which promises a wide array of benefits to the communities (benefits that often never materialise), skilfully downplaying impacts such as environmental contamination, loss of biodiversity, and cultural identity. The community assembly¹¹ provides a space for ongoing dialogue, allowing the articulation of doubts of a particular project proposal, but also the discussion of and insistence on alternatives. Hence, it is a core instrument for both maintaining and generating alter-lifeworlds, protecting communities from cultural assimilation and erasure. Developing alternative community visions takes an enormous amount of time and effort. Through processes of extended dialogue, desires and necessities must be articulated, and diverging interests and intergenerational conflicts overcome. Methods such as community diagnosis (*diagnóstico comunitario*) and life plan (*plan de vida*), have gained traction in recent years, and helped some communities to elaborate, write up and fix their own collective vision of a prosperous and culturally desirable future (Consejo Dueñas 2021; Castro Rodríguez & Reyes Méndez 2019; La Jornada 2021; Morales and Esteva 2019). Most importantly, the assembly is the means by which opposition can be organised and coordinated effectively. In the words of Tomás, “And it will be our last resort to tell people that only by mobilising can we achieve our objective.”

Respondents made us aware of the importance not only of internal dialogue, but also with other communities affected by megaprojects regarding the security of their alter-lifeworlds. Worlds are collectively generated conditions of being together, involving humans, nonhumans and elements of the natural world (e.g. forests, mountains, rivers etc.). Currently, however, existing accounts of security – both statist and critical – cannot account for world(s) because they frame humans and property as the only conceivable loci of harm. Mitchell (2014) calls ‘mundicide’ the destruction of worlds and conditions of worldliness, referring to the dissolution of irreducible, heterogeneous collectives, in whatever specific forms they have emerged. In this context of possible erasure of a lifeworld, our respondents have emphasised that communication strategies and forging ties with others were core pathways to securing lifeworlds. Communities that had experienced long-standing processes of division and conflict had to start with very basic processes of articulation that involved mobilising and bringing together different community members to speak about own concerns, perspectives, fears, needs and desires, before even beginning to develop security strategies or measures.¹² As Xóchitl’s account illustrates here: “I also think that sometimes we no longer even listen to each other. Listening to each other is a very valuable experience, knowing how the other person thinks, even though they may be your lifelong neighbour. Maybe you’ve never listened to them closely and you don’t know what they really think. It ends up being something super valuable, and you might end up saying: ‘Of course, I notice this too, I also think similarly’. All this we can do straight away, using this tool of visualising yourself, seeing yourself and mirroring yourself in the other. So in short, it is super important, right here and works very well to strengthen and reaffirm what we are as a whole, what we don’t want and what we need.”

In the face of the encroaching CIIT infrastructure project, many respondents saw a necessity to establish lasting ties with other Indigenous communities affected by megaprojects across the country, but also to build alliances with urban resistance movements. A broad network of allies – mutually

¹¹ The community assembly can by no means be romanticised. There are known issues with the equality and participation of women, as many of our female respondents have highlighted who fought all their lives for being heard and taken seriously in the community assembly. See also Zoque scholar Josefa Sánchez Contreras (2019) on women and access to land and the assembly.

¹² We found this the case in particular in communities in the state of Veracruz, where there are communities that have experienced processes of community disintegration resulting from a wide array of causes, such as displacement, poverty, emigration, environmental catastrophes, resource conflicts and cartel violence, to name a few.

strengthening each other and each other's cause – was seen as core means of protection against fragmentation and division, one of the biggest threats to community cohesion in times of conflict. In addition, the production of audio and audiovisual material (e.g. community radio and documentaries) about own experiences with state-sanctioned megaprojects, and the social media dissemination of those materials played an important role for building wider alliances, thereby enhancing the chances to secure an existing lifeworld. Linking up with other communities, and broadening own networks, furthermore, was a strategy to improve their ability to assess the viability of certain forms of resistance and alternative community projects.

In particular, young, female participants saw the initiation of productive, cooperative business projects as an approach to generate long-term resilience and security for their communities. Examples mentioned were ecological tourism or organic agriculture grounded in the respective community's way of living, and the nurturing of women's collective economies through the generation of cooperatives for *totoperas* (women who produce *totopos*, a local kind of tortilla), for instance, thereby simultaneously promoting their economic independence. Sofia explains, "It seems to me that it is a new approach that has been developed by the *compañeras*, to turn their knowledge into a collective process, and then generate independence and economic self-sustainability through that collective process. I think that this is a new approach that is beginning to emerge, and it is vital for beginning to manage these scenarios of violence." In her work with women land defenders, she has noticed that women, in particular, seem to prefer generative approaches to security over mere territorial defence through means such as the establishment of community guards, access checkpoints, security rounds and community self-armament in spaces where communities are threatened by organised crime groups that have become emboldened in contexts of development megaprojects. There was a deep conviction that local, land-based productive projects, grounded on the communities' established ways of life reinforce their security, because they strengthen the community through enhancing available capabilities and knowledge.

The assembly is articulation and concerted expression of collective will, and hence, an exercise of collective power. As such, it challenges the state's governance institutions limited to the means granted by Western representative democracy (principles of representation, party politics and municipal/national elections). Extensive processes of communication and the forging of networks with other affected communities allow the pooling of knowledge, acting to an extent as a shield from defamation, attacks and silent erasure. Cooperative business projects geared towards auto-sustainability promote skills in the community, thereby contributing a secure existence.

6. Conclusion

The interviews with residents in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec have shown how the autonomous capacity to sustain life is considered core to security. Ultimately, *comunalidad* is a life system that structures the collective reproduction of life by enabling the formation of collective will and decision-making (assembly), through community work (*tequio*), by lifting everybody's spirits and creating a structure for the repair of relations, as well as the distribution of wealth (*fiesta*), all based on the territory that forms the basis of life itself. Summed up poignantly by Carlos Manzo (2015), founder of the Communal Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UACO) in Union Hidalgo: "There are some peoples who live in the mountains and have not seen any element of their communality compromised. Their forms of resistance are more hardcore." Where *comunalidad* is practiced, communities have greater chances to protect their lifeworld than in those, in which it became disrupted or unhinged.

It is core to understand the serious impact of reworlding through largescale infrastructure construction. Projects, such as the CIIT, transform the landscape and social life profoundly and irrevocably, in particular through absorbing and converting commons (land and natural wealth) into private ownership schemes, hence, making common wealth unavailable to communities. This implies the dispossession of the means of the reproduction of life (which refers to everything that is in a collectively held in territory, such as water, forest, pathways, and sacred places). In addition, everyday life is disturbed or interrupted, existing emotional bonds with landscapes may be torn permanently, and local modes of subsistence, lifeways and social relations become hugely altered. Hence, entire lifeworlds become transformed, social peace destabilised and the security, in particular, of communities in opposition often seriously deteriorated. The insecurity that oppositional communities that aim to protect an alter-lifeworld face is a multifaceted condition that is result of a network of oppressive relations and structures (economic, social, political, and symbolic) that determines their current and sometimes future lives. This kind of lifeworld-insecurity is a legacy of cultural imperialism embedded into contemporary legal systems, which do not envisage the protection of alter-lifeworlds.

Many of our respondents desired a *horizonte seguro*, a secure horizon, meaning they wished for a foreseeable future, including certainty of their livelihoods, preservation of their natural world, stability of their social relations, and continuity of their established mode of living and being. Additionally, they aspired personal flourishing and culturally relevant education for their youths, in particular. Ultimately, security refers to the community's ability to have control and predictability their life and surroundings. Obtaining the rights to self-governance of their territory based on a life system that encourages and organises solidarity and reciprocity was seen as core to the communities' security as well as to cultural survival. Security, as envisioned by many of our respondents, lies in the continued ability to generate communal horizons (*construir horizontes comunales*) and is ultimately built on the principle of care among all (*cuidado entre todos*).

It is important that we begin to understand security as entangled or relational. Worlds are co-constituted by humans and their relationships with other species and the natural world. It is therefore impossible to think of harm accruing to one being or set of beings in isolation. One hegemonic form of the reproduction of life – namely extractivist 'racial capitalism' (Robinson, 2021) – interrupts previous forms of social reproduction of life and means of existence, attacks the collective reproduction of the community, reinforces the expropriation of traditional knowledge and food sovereignty, and weakens or denies any form of local self-government, all of which together would guarantee the material and symbolic reproduction of collective life, as well as the durability and balance of the relationships produced. Attempts to retain or reconstitute *comunalidad* based on collective governance are part of a strategy for the defence and care of the community fabric, its social and affective ties, including the range of goods and services that are produced, managed and shared. The production of the commons (*lo común*) is precisely a process that organises interdependence, the connections between the human and non-human, placing the defence and affirmation of life at the centre (Tzul Tzul, 2019). Through the practice of *comunalidad*, communities reconnect, recompose and reappropriate what multiple processes of dispossessions have sought to destroy, erode, fragment or alter. In this sense, the protection of an alter-lifeworld is grounded in a practical and concrete exercise of the type of sociality and relationship formation that a community wishes to retain and secure for the future.

Acknowledgements

I am deeply grateful to all those who supported this research project. Special thanks to Prof. Jenny Pearce and Dr Natalia de Marinis, and the research assistants Rita Valencia, Astrid Chavelas, Gemaly

Padua Uscanga, and Mayra Nohemi Zeferino García for their commitment and valuable comments. This research was approved according to London School of Economics and Political Sciences Ethics Research Protocol, project no. 105225.

Funding information

This article is an output of the research project “Gender Violence and Security in the Interoceanic Industrial Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec: A Critical Examination of Policies and Practices”, and has received funding from the European Union’s Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 844176.

Bibliography

- Aluna (2021) Valoración del riesgo en la defensa de derechos humanos [Risk assessment in the defense of human rights]. June. Available at: https://536db96f-7878-40e0-8ceb-7224890ce49c.usrfiles.com/ugd/536db9_df1a32c6369c4f9a93579907d708e1cb.pdf (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Aradau C (2008) *Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Aradau C & Munster RV (2011) *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Avispa (Mexico City) (2023) Aumenta violencia contra activistas que se oponen al Corredor Interoceánico. 16 August. Available at: <https://avispa.org/aumenta-violencia-contra-activistas-que-se-oponen-al-corredor-interoceanico/> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Azamar Alonso A & Rodríguez Wallenius CA (eds.) (2020) *Conflictos sociales por megaproyectos extractivos, de infraestructura y energéticos en la Cuarta Transformación [Social conflicts due to extractive, infrastructure and energy megaprojects in the Fourth Transformation]*. Mexico City: Rosa Luxemburg Foundation.
- Barkawi T, Laffey M (2006) The postcolonial moment in security studies. *Review of International Studies* 32(2): 329–352.
- Burke A & Nyman J (eds.) (2016) *Ethical Security Studies A New Research Agenda*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Buzan B, Wæver O, de Wilde J (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder: Lynne Rienner.
- Capital 21 (Mexico City) (2023) AMLO blindo obras de infraestructura - las declara de seguridad nacional. 19 May. Available at: <https://www.capital21.cdmx.gob.mx/noticias/?p=41574> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Castro Rodríguez A & Reyes Méndez N (2019) *Diagnóstico: Alternativas comunitarias en defensa de los territorios en Oaxaca. Sembrando dignidad, reivindicamos lo común [Diagnosis: Community alternatives in the defence of territories in Oaxaca. Sowing dignity, we claim the commons]*. Oaxaca: EDUCA.

- Clement G (1996) *Care, Autonomy, and Justice: Feminism and the Ethic of Care*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Consejo Dueñas JJ (2021) *El Istmo que queremos II: Hacia un plan común [The Isthmus we want II: Towards a community plan]*. Oaxaca: Universidad de la Tierra.
- Consortio (2021) *Protección Integral Feminista [Holistic Feminist Protection]*. November. Available at: <https://consorciooaxaca.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/LIBRO-PIF-CONSORCIO-OAXACA.pdf> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Corta Mortaja (2022) Transportistas los más afectados por el bloqueo que provoca la obra del rompeolas [Transporters the most affected by the blockade caused by the work of the breakwater. 21 April. Available at: <https://cortamortaja.com.mx/el-istmo/15172-transportistas-los-mas-afectados-por-el-bloqueo-que-provoca-la-obra-del-rompeolas> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Díaz Gómez F (2003) Principios comunitarios y derechos indios [Community principles and Indian rights]. In: Rendón Monzón JJ *La comunalidad modo de vida en los pueblos indios [The communal way of life of Indian peoples]* Vol. 1. Mexico City: UNAM, 70-77.
- Dunlap A & Correa Arce M (2021) 'Murderous energy' in Oaxaca, Mexico: wind factories, territorial struggle and social warfare. *The Journal of Peasant Studies* 49(2):455-480.
- Dunlap A (2018) Insurrection for land, sea and dignity: resistance and autonomy against wind energy in Álvaro Obregón. Mexico. *Journal of Political Ecology* 25(1): 120-143.
- Dunlap A (2020) Wind, coal, and copper: the politics of land grabbing, counterinsurgency, and the social engineering of extraction. *Globalizations* 17(4): 661-682.
- El Economista* (Mexico City) Habrá incentivos fiscales en Corredor Interoceánico [There will be tax incentives in the Interoceanic Corridor]. 30 June. Available at <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/empresas/Gobierno-federal-impulsara-incentivos-fiscales-para-atraer-inversiones-en-el-Istmo-de-Tehuantepec-20220630-0051.html> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- El Universal* (2022) Bloquean pescadores ingreso de camiones de volteo a obra de rompeolas en Salina Cruz [Fishermen block the entry of dump trucks for the breakwater work in Salina Cruz, Oaxaca], Oaxaca. 9 June. Available at: <https://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/municipios/bloquean-pescadores-ingreso-de-camiones-de-volteo-obra-de-rompeolas-en-salina-cruz-oaxaca> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Engster D (2005) Rethinking care theory: The practice of caring and the obligation to care. *Hypatia* 20 (3): 50–74.
- Esteva G & Guerrero Osorio A (2018) Usos, ideas y perspectivas de la comunalidad [Uses, ideas and perspectives of communality]. In: Gutiérrez R (ed.) *Comunalidad, tramas comunitarias y producción de lo común [Communality, community plots and production of the common]*. Oaxaca: Pez en el Árbol, 33-50.
- Frontline Defenders (2005) *Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders*. Brussels: Frontline/PBI. Available at: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/sites/default/files/protection_manual_-_english.pdf (accessed 6 October 2023).

- GeoComunes (2020) *Análisis general del proyecto de Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec*. April. Available at: http://geocomunes.org/Analisis_PDF/GeoComunes_Trans%C3%ADstmico_22Abril2020.pdf (accessed 6 October 2023).
- González de la Fuente I (2011) Comunidad, sistema de cargos y proyecto social: Una propuesta analítica de sociedades locales en Mexico [Community, cargo system and social project: An analytical proposal of local societies in Mexico]. *AIBR – Revista de Antropología Iberoamericana* 6(1): 81-107.
- Government of Mexico (20149) *Plan Nacional de Desarrollo [National Development Plan]*. June. Available at: <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PLAN-NACIONAL-DE-DESARROLLO-2019-2024.pdf> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Government of Mexico (2022) *Presidente anuncia inversión de 120 mil mdp para Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec [President announces investment of 120 thousand million pesos for the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*. 11 June. Available at: <https://www.gob.mx/presidencia/prensa/presidente-anuncia-inversion-de-120-mil-mdp-para-corredor-interoceanico-del-istmo-de-tehuantepec> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Greaves W (2016) Arctic (in)security and Indigenous peoples: Comparing Inuit in Canada and Sámi in Norway. *Security dialogue* 47 (6): 461–480.
- Gutierrez R & Navarro M (2019) Producir lo común para sostener y transformar la vida [Produce the commons to sustain and transform life]. *Confluências* 21(2): 298-324.
- Kittay EF & Feder EK (2002) *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.
- La Jornada* (Mexico City) (2021) Plan de vida de la comunidad lacandona [Life plan of the Lacandon community]. 8 July. Available at: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/notas/2021/07/08/politica/el-plan-de-vida-de-la-comunidad-lacandona/> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- La Jornada* (Mexico City) (2023) Desalojan a campesinos que bloquean obras del tren transístmico en Oaxaca [They evict farmers who block works on the trans-isthmus train in Oaxaca]. 29 April. Available at: <https://www.jornada.com.mx/ultimas/estados/2023/04/29/desalojan-a-campesinos-que-bloquean-obras-del-tren-transistmico-en-oaxaca-5591.html> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Lipschutz R (1995) On Security. In: Lipschutz R (ed.) *On Security*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1–23.
- López Obrador (2023) Secretaría de Marina es un pilar del Estado mexicano [Secretary of the Navy is a pillar of the Mexican State]. 1 June. Available at: <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/2023/06/01/secretaria-de-marina-es-un-pilar-del-estado-mexicano-presidente-institucion-estara-a-cargo-del-corredor-interoceanico-del-istmo-afirma/> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Manzo C (2008) Asimilación y resistencia: raíces coloniales de la autonomía indígena en el sur del Istmo de Tehuantepec [Assimilation and resistance: colonial roots of indigenous autonomy in the south of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec]. *Estudios Sociales: Universidad de Guadalajara-CUCSH* 3: 107-124.

- Manzo C (2015) *La comunalidad como modo de vida [Communality as a way of life]*. *Fractal* 20(75): 95-111. Available at: <https://www.mxfractal.org/articulos/RevistaFractal75CarlosManzo.php> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Martínez Luna J (2013). *Textos sobre el camino andado [Texts about the path taken]*. Vol. 1. Oaxaca: CMPIO/CAMPO/CEEESCI/CSEIIO.
- Martínez Luna J (2021) *Eso que llamamos comunalidad [What we call communality]*. Guelatao de Juárez: Editorial Comunal.
- Milenio (Mexico City) (2021) Corredor Interoceánico se va a escriturar a la Marina y cuatro estados, dice AMLO [Interoceanic Corridor will be deeded to the Navy and four states, says AMLO]. 19 March. Available at: <https://www.milenio.com/politica/amlo-corredor-interoceanico-se-va-a-escriturar-a-marina-y-a-estados> (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Mitchell A (2014) Only human? A worldly approach to security. *Security Dialogue*. 45 (1): 5–22.
- Morales A & Esteva G (2019) *El Istmo que queremos [The Isthmus We Want]*. Oaxaca: Universidad de la Tierra.
- Morett-Sánchez CJ & Cosío-Ruiz C (2017) Panorama de los ejidos y comunidades agrarias en México [Panorama of the ejidos and agrarian communities in Mexico]. *Agricultura, Sociedad y Desarrollo* 14(1): 125-152.
- Neocleous M (2008) *Critique of Security*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Pearce J & Abello Colak A (2009) ‘Security from Below’ in Contexts of Chronic Violence. *IDS Bulletin* 40(2): 11-19.
- Piepzna-Samarasinha LL (2018) *Care Work: Dreaming Disability Justice*. Vancouver, BC: Arsenal Pulp Press.
- ProDesc (2018) *Seguridad comunitaria y territorio [Community security and territory]*. September. Available at: https://prodesc.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2022/03/Book-PRODesc-2019-V_espan%CC%83ol_WEB_compressed.pdf (accessed 6 October 2023).
- Puig de la Bellacasa M (2017) *Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics in More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Robinson CJ (2021) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Penguin Books.
- Sánchez Contreras J (2019) Mujeres indígenas, bienes comunales y despojo. In: Mercado Mondragón J, Ochoa Muñoz K, Ortiz Leroux J & Ramos García JM (eds.) *Mundos indígenas: Territorio, movilidad, identidad, gestión [Indigenous Worlds: Territory, Mobility, Identity, Management]*. Mexico City: UAM, 96-109.
- Sandoval Vázquez D (2020) *Tren Maya, Sembrando vida y Corredor Transístmico: Impactos en el valor de uso territorial de las comunidades indígenas y campesinas [Mayan Train, Sembrando Vida and Transisthmian Corridor: Impacts on the value of territorial use of indigenous and peasant communities]*. Mexico City: CECCAM.
- Secretary of the Interior (SEGOB) (2020) *Programa Regional Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec [Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec Regional Program]*. 4 August. Available at:

https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5597712&fecha=04/08/2020#gsc.tab=0
(accessed 6 October 2023).

Shepherd LJ (2008) *Gender, violence and security: discourse as practice*. London: Zed Books.

Shepherd LJ (2013) *Critical approaches to security an introduction to theories and methods*. Abingdon: Routledge.

Sin Embargo (2021) Corredor del Istmo: usan asamblea con firmas falsas... y hasta de un muerto [Isthmus Corridor: they use an assembly with false signatures... and even from a dead person]. 2 October. Available at: <https://www.sinembargo.mx/02-10-2021/4034582> (accessed 6 October 2023).

Tierra y Territorio (2023) Amenazas y Hostigamiento durante tequio comunal en Puente Madera [Threats and Harassment during communal tequio in Puente Madera]. 2 July. Available at: <https://tierrayterritorio.wordpress.com/2023/07/02/comunicado-amenazas-y-hostigamiento-durante-tequio-comunal-en-puente-madera/> (accessed 6 October 2023).

Tirado E (2021) Ejército: ¿Leal o cómplice fiel de AMLO? *Eje Central*, 18-24 March.

Tripp AM, Ferree, Marx M & Ewig C (eds.) (2013) *Gender, violence, and human security: critical feminist perspectives*. New York: New York University Press.

Tronto J (1993) *Moral Boundaries: A Political Argument for an Ethic of Care*. 1st edition. New York, NY: Routledge.

Tuhiwai Smith L (1999) *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. London: Zed.

Tzul Tzul G (2019) Sistemas de gobierno comunal indígena: la organización de la reproducción de la vida [Indigenous communal government systems: the organisation of the reproduction of life]. *El Apantle: producir lo común* 22: 171-182.

Zarauz López HL (2018) *Revolución y rebeliones en el Istmo de Tehuantepec [Revolution and rebellion in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec]*. Mexico City: Instituto Mora.