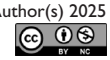
Article

SECURITY DIALOGUE

Security Dialogue
1–26



DOI: 10.1177/09670106251331021
journals.sagepub.com/home/sdi


Security meanings and land defense in the context of the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure (CIIT) megaproject

Susanne Hofmann
LSE, UK

Abstract

This article explores the meanings of security within the context of the Interoceanic Corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (CIIT) project in southern Mexico, a proposed multimodal transport corridor connecting the Gulf of Mexico to the Pacific Ocean. Touted as a viable alternative to the Panama Canal, the CIIT aims to expedite global goods circulation while simultaneously boosting the local economy. However, as with many large-scale infrastructure or resource extraction projects, such developments often lead to profound changes—altering landscapes, populations, and economies—frequently at the cost of the environment and communities' established ways of living. Drawing on interviews with local residents, the article delves into the significance of the communal life system, or *comunalidad*, in securing alternative lifeworlds. These lifeworld-based notions of security stress the importance of mutuality, reciprocity, and care—principles through which natural resources are managed and collective well-being is structured. This article argues that in order to adequately conceptualize, critique, and challenge the harm caused by invasive infrastructure megaprojects, it is necessary to broaden conventional security frameworks to include the protection of distinct lifeworlds—that is, co-constituted conditions of being-together, rooted in the interconnectedness of human, non-human, and natural worlds.

Keywords

Anthropology, communality, infrastructure megaprojects, land defense, Mexico, security

Introduction

This article explores the concept of security within the context of the upheaval brought about by infrastructure megaprojects. Megaprojects, whether focused on natural resource extraction or infrastructure development, often result in significant changes to the landscape, population, and local economy, frequently causing harm to the environment, as well as disrupting established ways

Corresponding author:
Susanne Hofmann, LSE, Houghton St, London, WC2A 2AE, UK.
Email: s.hofmann@hotmail.co.uk

of living and social structures within communities. Megaprojects are large-scale, complex undertakings that usually cost over one billion US dollars, require many years to complete, involve a variety of public and private stakeholders, and often affect millions of people. These projects span various sectors, including mining, tourism, energy, hydrocarbons, agro-industry, and transport infrastructure, among others. The planning and construction of a megaproject typically involve numerous experts, politicians, and companies. International organizations and both public and private planners often promote megaprojects under the banner of modernization and economic progress. The construction of these projects is generally justified by the perceived local benefits, such as job creation, improved access to roads, enhanced medical and educational services, and the expansion of terrestrial network cables, all aimed at boosting the regional economy and facilitating global integration.

Research on megaprojects in Latin America often starkly contrasts with the optimistic, developmentalist outlook promoted by policymakers. Much of academic research of megaprojects in Latin America is seen through the analytical lenses of violence, dispossession, (neo)developmentalism, (neo)colonialism, neoliberal globalization, and extractivism (Ceceña, 2019; Furlong et al., 2018; García, 2019; Rodríguez Wallenius, 2015). There is an understanding that the processes employed in the generation of megaprojects as well as their impacts involve violence. Megaprojects tend to descend on 'ethnoregions' (López y Rivas, 2020)—that is, resource-rich territories with a strong presence of Indigenous peoples, which are perceived as 'underused' by a privileged minority with links to economic and government elites, an 'extractivist mindset' (Durante et al., 2021) and 'rentier mentalities and aspirations' (Rodríguez Wallenius, 2021).

At the onset of almost all megaprojects stands the transformation of land from collective to private ownership, and in many cases the displacement of established communities. It is understood that large-scale infrastructures pave the way for capital influx and extraction. The dispossession of lands and the extraction of natural wealth, such as minerals, metals, forests, fertile land and oil, interrupt existing social relations and reconfigure socioterritorial ties (Gasparello, 2021; Núñez Rodríguez, 2021). Forceful resistance to the appropriation of common wealth is often countered by the criminalization of oppositional social movements (Esguerra-Muelle et al., 2019; Tapias Torrado, 2019) and the securitization of transnational capital investment, resulting in a militarization of the concerned regions (Dunlap and Correa Arce, 2021), time and again with the aid of paramilitary groups that frequently operate as a clandestine arm of the armed forces (Von Borstel, 2013).

There is also extensive evidence that benefits, such as employment, tend to be fixed-term and low-pay for the majority of the workforce, and that ultimately, megaprojects lead to stark economic inequalities and exclusion that did not exist before (Zaremberg et al., 2018). It is widely recognized that organized crime follows the installation of megaprojects (Alvear-Galindo et al., 2022; Paley, 2023) as a result of the often combined impacts of capital influx, urbanization, industrialization, economic growth, and a change of patterns of consumption. Conflicts over control of various illegal economies—such as those involving drugs, rare earths and minerals, and biopiracy—have been observed to escalate direct violence, corrupt local state institutions, and destabilize territories and their populations. In sum, megaprojects imply the accumulation of multiple forms of violence: direct, structural and cultural violence—the latter referring to the devaluation of Indigenous peoples and their ontologies based on the nurture, regeneration, and sacredness of living entities (Durante et al., 2021).

At the heart of this article is the *Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (CIIT) project (Secretary of the Interior, 2020), one of the most ambitious megaprojects championed by Mexican ex-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (AMLO). The CIIT is a multimodal transport corridor designed to link the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean, aiming to accelerate and expand global trade while simultaneously boosting the local economy. It has been promoted as an

alternative and competitor to the Panama Canal. The project includes several key components: a high-speed freight train alongside a parallel highway, port modernizations in Coatzacoalcos and Salina Cruz (including deep dredging and breakwater expansions), airport expansions, investments in oil refineries, a new gas pipeline to increase extraction, logistics centers at both ends of the north–south axis, and the construction of industrial parks along the corridor.

These industrial parks, referred to as 'development poles' or 'welfare poles' in AMLO's rhetoric, are expected to attract industries from various sectors, including agriculture, textiles, automotive, metals, machinery, semiconductors, electronics, pharmaceuticals, medical equipment, information technology, energy, petrochemicals, transport, and logistics. Like the US–Mexico border, the CIIT is planned to function as a Free Trade Zone, offering businesses fiscal incentives to encourage private investment in the region (*El Economista*, 2022). The AMLO government committed 120 billion pesos to the project, with additional funding anticipated from the private sector (Government of Mexico, 2022).

Officially, the Program for the Development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec was touted as a means to generate jobs and improve living conditions, aiming to attract and retain those fleeing poverty (Government of Mexico, 2019). The program promised the development of urban infrastructure, educational services, workforce training, housing, mobility, and research and technological infrastructure. However, critics argue that the Interoceanic Corridor will pave the way for the expansion of other extractive and predatory megaprojects in the region, such as mining, wind factories, hydroelectric dams, and commercial forestry and agro-industrial plantations (GeoComunes, 2020). The project is expected to produce a wide range of secondary and long-term impacts across 79 municipalities in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is home to nearly 2.3 million people, including over half a million Indigenous from 12 different peoples, as well as Afro-descendants (Sandoval Vázquez, 2020).

The concept of a dry canal leveraging the Tehuantepec Isthmus's strategic position between the Atlantic and Pacific economies is not a recent development. It has been proposed by previous presidents through initiatives such as *Programa Alfa-Omega* (1977), *Programa Integral de Desarrollo* (1996), *Plan Puebla Panama* (2001), and *Plan Istmo Puerta de América* (2013). The history of infrastructure proposals in the Isthmus reveals a persistent drive by successive administrations to tap into the region's valuable resources, including oil, wind energy, water, forests, metals, and minerals. The Indigenous communities in the region have a longstanding history of resistance to maintain control over their natural resources and self-determination over their territories (Manzo, 2008; Zarauz López, 2018). The above plans for infrastructure megaprojects were halted due to strong local opposition. Large-scale wind energy projects were the first to settle in the southern Isthmus, after intense resistance from local residents, landholders, and a broad coalition of social movements was defeated (Alonso Serna, 2022; Dunlap and Correa Arce, 2021; Martínez-Mendoza et al., 2021; Zárate-Toledo et al., 2019).

While researching the impacts of the multimodal transport corridor in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec in southern Mexico, this research encountered interview responses that offered unique perspectives on security, which stood in stark contrast to the concepts and language typically used in security studies. Drawing on both interviews with local residents and participant observation in relevant community events (find more details on the research methods used in section 4), this article explains the significance of the communal life system, or *comunalidad*, in relation to the capacity to secure alternative lifeworlds. The article begins with a short review of security studies, highlighting Latin American contributions to the field, and indicating the conceptual omissions regarding the securing of lifeworlds. A subsequent section is dedicated to outlining the particularities of Mexican ex-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (in office 2018–2024) security governance, followed by an in-depth analysis of the meanings of security as expressed by the participants

in this study. The article argues that in order to adequately conceptualize, critique, and challenge the harm caused by invasive infrastructure megaprojects, it is necessary to broaden conventional security frameworks to include the protection of distinct lifeworlds—that is, co-constituted conditions of being-together, rooted in the interconnectedness of human, non-human, and natural worlds.

Security studies, in/security in Latin America, and the security of Indigenous worlds

This article does not aim to provide an exhaustive review of the security studies literature, but it will highlight key developments and concepts relevant to this study. Traditional security concepts emerged during the Cold War, heavily influenced by the disciplines of international relations and security studies (Lake and Morgan, 1997; Morgenthau, 1985). This traditional approach is characterized by its state-centric and military-oriented focus. A major critique of this framework is that its emphasis on state and territorial integrity neglects other sources of insecurity, which often stem not from interstate wars but from conflicts rooted in people's identities, histories, and resources. The evolution of non-traditional security approaches has been significantly shaped by postcolonial perspectives and security thinking from the Global South.

One notable concept that broadened the scope of security is human security (MacLean and Black, 2016; Thomas, 2001). Unlike the traditional focus on nation-states and sovereignty, human security centers on the survival, well-being, and dignity of individuals. Its seven dimensions—economic security, food security, health security, environmental security, personal security, community security, and political security—offer a comprehensive understanding of the societal, political, and environmental causes of instability that can threaten security. This reconceptualization has gained significant traction in Global South countries, which are often most affected by human-induced resource scarcity, irregular migration, climate change, and other dynamics that undermine peace and societal cohesion.

Critical security studies challenge the state's role as the primary provider of security, arguing that the state does not always ensure the safety of all its citizens and questioning who truly benefits from its security measures (Caballero-Anthony, 2016; Krause and Williams, 1997; Peoples and Vaughan-Williams, 2015; Schlag et al., 2016). In some cases, the state itself poses the greatest threat to its citizens. Therefore, security should prioritize individuals rather than the sovereign state. Certain branches of critical security studies even question the very concept of security, arguing that it can never be entirely 'good' or 'emancipatory' because it is rooted in state-centric ideology and ultimately serves only the state's objectives (Aradau and Van Munster, 2011; Neocleous, 2008). In this view, security is inherently exclusionary, relying on the existence of a 'threatening other' (Aradau, 2008), and therefore, true security for all is unattainable (Lipschutz, 1995).

Securitization theory, associated with the Copenhagen School, is another strand of non-traditional security studies that emphasizes the role of language in security politics. This theory posits that security is constructed through speech acts (Buzan et al., 1998) and should be understood as an intersubjective process manifested through discursive practices in social and political life. According to securitization theory, an issue becomes securitized not because of actual threats, but through a subjective process in which certain issues are socially and politically framed as threats. Securitizing an issue elevates its importance and urgency, justifying extraordinary measures to address it. Importantly, Buzan, Waever, and De Wilde argue that securitization is primarily conducted by political actors who decide what constitutes an existential threat.

Canadian scholar Wilfrid Greaves is one of the few who examines Indigenous peoples' security through the lens of securitization theory. Focusing on Arctic Indigenous peoples, he notes that

despite the identification of existential threats they face, there has been little to no immediate action or provision of resources (Greaves, 2016). He attributes this to the unequal distribution of social power, emphasizing that security claims are only successful when recognized by an authoritative audience capable of responding to the threat. Indigenous and other subaltern actors have identified and articulated threats to their collective futures, but they have not succeeded in securitizing their concerns due to a lack of recognition by the authoritative audience and differences in the 'referent objects'—the issues or entities to be secured—which remain outside the cognitive and value frameworks of those in power.

In Latin America, security analysts have explored phenomena such as (para)militarization (Hernández and Romero-Arias, 2019; Hochmüller et al., 2024; Olney, 2011), the war on drugs (Lessing, 2018; Rivera Hernández and Sadek, 2020), the policing of insecurity (Arias and Ungar, 2009; Uildriks, 2009; Ungar, 2010), and the emergence of criminal gangs (Bunker, 2013; Grillo, 2017; Jones and Rodgers, 2009), as well as disappearances (Gallagher, 2023; Hernández Manrique, 2022; Mandolessi and Olalde Rico, 2022) and kidnappings (O'Reilly and Ochoa, 2021), as symptoms of chronic violence and insecurity in the region. Latin American security approaches have long contested traditional, state-centric security narratives by challenging the notion of the state as the guarantor of security. Analysts argue that it is often the state's sporadic, violent, and corrupt presence in community life that generates insecurity (Goldstein, 2012).

Scholars point out that recent patterns of social violence and drug trafficking must be understood within the context of the political and economic impacts of neoliberal transformations (Gledhill, 2014; Maldonado Aranda, 2012). Gledhill (2015) notes that participation in illegal economies offers more to marginalized individuals than national and international programs under neoliberalism, which typically address only extreme poverty. These actors fill the gaps left by the neoliberal state in providing paternalism (*padronazgo*). Arias and Goldstein (2010; Arias, 2017) argue that the spread of violence and insecurity in the Global South is not simply a failure of democratic institutions but is rooted in pervasive inequality. Many individuals, excluded from state services, are compelled to seek economic opportunities in criminal economies and social protection from the informal loyalty networks associated with them. Rather than a breakdown of state power, a complex picture emerges in which micro-level armed regimes perform local governance functions, simultaneously maintaining systems of dominance and control, both in opposition to and in cooperation with state actors.

Actor-focused approaches to security, such as 'security from below' (Pearce and Abello Colak, 2009), have gained momentum in Latin America. Security from below emphasizes a people-centered approach, where communities are active participants in constructing security based on agreed norms and shared values, responding to the specific needs of their communities. The distinct phenomena of self-defense groups (*grupos de autodefensa*) and community security (*seguridad comunitaria*) have led to numerous studies across Latin America (Castaño Orozco, 2024; Fuentes Díaz and Paleta Pérez, 2015; Guerra, 2018; Herrera, 2023; Sierra Camacho, 2015). Regarding southwestern Mexico, Sierra Camacho (2013) argues that community security, often misunderstood by traditional analysts, is a comprehensive model fundamentally different from state public security. It is deeply intertwined with community organization, identity, territorial foundations, and histories of exclusion and racism. However, since the mid-2010s, new actors entering territories with community security systems have created complex social conflicts related to capital accumulation and natural resource exploitation, threatening to overwhelm these communities' defense structures (Sierra Camacho, 2013). Unfortunately, public security policies and national governance—whether neoliberal or leftist-populist—seek to limit collective rights and facilitate access for national and transnational capital to Indigenous territories, criminalizing community security efforts and self-governance actions in the process.

Overall, the discipline of security studies has largely overlooked Indigenous peoples' security concerns. While there is a growing body of literature on environmental security (Hough, 2014; Schnurr and Swatuk, 2012) and posthuman security (Grijalva-Maza, 2021; Harrington, 2017; Mitchell, 2017), most approaches fail to address earth politics (Ari Chachaki, 2014; Christie, 2021) in relation to the threats facing Indigenous peoples' lifeworlds. The majority of security studies remain fundamentally anthropocentric (Mitchell, 2016) and Eurocentric (Shani, 2017). In the context of large-scale infrastructure development, human-centric approaches fall short of capturing the intricate and interconnected economic, social, cultural, environmental, and spiritual systems that are often profoundly and irreversibly altered. Western frameworks of justice and existing security paradigms typically overlook grievances of this kind, where entire worlds—specific conditions of collective existence—are damaged or obliterated. Recent scholarly approaches scrutinizing security ethics (Burke and Nyman, 2016), however, have begun to challenge these limitations. Drawing on posthumanism, these perspectives emphasize that humans coexist within heterogeneous, co-constituted worlds, suggesting that security studies must evolve to understand how harm is distributed not only across beings but also within the relationships that bind them.

AMLO's security governance: Armoring megaprojects against resistance

Public infrastructure projects are increasingly referred to as 'critical infrastructures', typically defined as systems and services essential to the health, safety, security, and economic well-being of a nation. Disruptions to these infrastructures are perceived as posing significant threats to the state and its population. In his first year in office, Mexican ex-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador established a new civil armed force, the National Guard, now comprising 120,000 members deployed across the country. This initiative aimed to remove the military from street patrols, a practice central to his predecessor's 'war on drugs', which had led to widespread civilian abuses and impunity. The National Guard was envisioned as a civilian force under the Secretary of Security and Citizen Protection, tasked with preventing and combating crime, particularly organized crime, the mafia, and drug trafficking.

In 2020, citing the presence of organized crime in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, AMLO deployed 13,000 National Guard members to the region to ensure investor security—effectively militarizing the area (Azamar Alonso and Rodríguez Wallenius, 2020). By March 2021, AMLO announced that the Interoceanic Corridor project would be managed by the Secretary of the Navy (SEMAR) to prevent its privatization (*Milenio*, 2021). Navy Chief José Rafael Ojeda Durán later stated that profits from the project would fund the pensions of retired Navy personnel (López Obrador, 2023). This decision was met with strong criticism from civil society and security experts, who argued that AMLO's government not only increased the military's budget but also provided them with an 'autonomous financial source' through the CIIT, thus expanding their power significantly (Tirado, 2021: 11).

In October 2022, the transfer of the Isthmus Railways (Ferrocarril del Istmo de Tehuantepec – FIT) to SEMAR was formalized, and Admiral José Rafael Ojeda Durán took over as the company's director. This transfer placed the Isthmus of Tehuantepec complex—including airports, railways, highways, wind factories, pipelines, and 10 industrial parks, as well as the ports of Salina Cruz and Coatzacoalcos—under the Navy's control. Social movement organizations have condemned the harassment of communities by the armed forces deployed to protect these federal megaprojects. For example, in March 2023, Navy, State Police, and National Guard forces forcibly evicted Mixe residents in Mogoñé Viejo, Oaxaca, who had been protesting against CIIT-related construction that

damaged their lands (*La Jornada*, 2023). Protesters reported being intimidated and threatened by the heavily armed officers, drawing criticism from human rights organizations.

In May 2023, AMLO issued a decree declaring the facilities of the CIIT and other critical infrastructure projects as matters of strategic priority, public interest, and national security. This decree followed an earlier attempt to classify such projects as national security issues, which the Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) had invalidated. AMLO justified the new decree by alleging that opponents of these projects were funded by the US government, claiming he could prove it (*Capital 21*, 2023). This move effectively aimed to prevent the judiciary from ruling in favor of opposition groups challenging these projects.

The rise of militarism and the increasing militarization of Mexico under AMLO's administration alarmed oppositional social movements, human rights organizations, and leftist media. However, interviews with residents in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec revealed a range of attitudes toward the deployment of the National Guard. Some residents were indifferent, others were concerned, and some welcomed the force, hoping it would reduce delinquency and organized crime. Unlike other regions of Mexico, such as Chiapas or Michoacán, the Isthmus of Tehuantepec has not previously experienced extensive militarization or counterinsurgency measures, which may explain the general population's varied responses to the National Guard's presence. After all, the Isthmus is the region that has fought off the implementation of interregional development projects, as well as foreign intruding forces, more than once through organized resistance (Manzo, 2008; Zarauz López, 2018).

From its inception, the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project generated significant security impacts for certain communities and actors. Some oppositional leaders and social movement activists interviewed for this research reported being verbally threatened, intimidated, and insulted, both on social media and in *asambleas comunitarias* (community assemblies).[1] Some were labeled as 'terrorists' and marginalized within their own communities, leading to emotional stress and feelings of isolation, especially when coupled with threats of expulsion. A small but growing number of interviewees recounted encounters with armed actors who made repeated threatening phone calls, followed them, or damaged their personal property (see also *Avispa*, 2023). One land defender interviewed for this project has now been given the draconic sentence of 46 years and 6 months for protesting against the installation of an industrial park on the Pitayal, the common forest of the Zapotec Indigenous Community of Puente Madera (Frontline Defenders, 2024).

This research uncovered a widespread and generalized perception of insecurity along the north–south axis of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, spanning the states of Veracruz and Oaxaca. The metropolitan area of Coatzacoalcos, Veracruz, has been particularly affected by organized crime dynamics over the past decade. As a hub for drug trafficking and a key crossing point for migrants heading north,[2] the area has seen significant security challenges. While many people did not attribute increased insecurity directly to the CIIT project, they did note a general rise in security incidents linked to the expanding and intensifying activities of drug trafficking groups. For example, several respondents expressed concern over the growing influence of the Jalisco New Generation Cartel (CJNG) in the region, highlighting the recent spread of *cobro de piso*—the practice of extorting regular payments from businesses—even in small towns and rural areas of the Isthmus.

Respondents reported the recent arrival of individuals from Michoacán who were interested in purchasing land in the region, including *ejido* land. Some accounts indicated that pressure and threats were used against individual landowners as part of these land speculation efforts. Additionally, concerns were raised about the involvement of organized crime in the construction sector, as well as criminal groups illegally extracting natural resources, such as stone needed for the breakwater in the Salina Cruz harbor extension, from communities that had not consented to these activities.

Researching security

Researching security presents a unique challenge due to its dual nature: it is both elusive and unbounded, deeply rooted in personal feelings and perceptions, while also heavily shaped by impersonal, state-centric frameworks and terminologies. Early in the research process, it became apparent that respondents often mirrored the dominant security discourse prevalent in the local public sphere, influenced by media and social media narratives. To genuinely capture individual experiences of (in)security, it was essential to train research assistants to recognize this dynamic and to provide respondents with a broader, more inclusive concept of security.

The aim of this study was to develop a micro-level, grounded understanding of security. The empirical research, conducted between 2020 and 2022, spanned the COVID-19 pandemic and involved the principal investigator along with four Mexican research assistants, three of whom were based locally in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (two in Veracruz and one in Oaxaca). The assistants came from Afro-Mexican and Mestizo backgrounds, with varying levels of academic training. To overcome the limitations of remote research from the UK, I created a specialized interview training video for the research assistants. This training ensured they could differentiate between security-related responses that stemmed from personal knowledge—such as perceptions, feelings, thoughts, opinions, and experiences—and those based on secondary knowledge, such as media discourse, news events, common sense, and rumors. The two types of knowledge were carefully distinguished in the analysis.

The research assistants were responsible for recruiting interviewees, initially conducting interviews online and by phone, and later in person. They utilized their personal networks and a snowball sampling technique to reach members of communities directly impacted by the project: those affected by construction work, resettlement requests, natural resource extraction, and more. As pandemic restrictions eased, the assistants also participated in information campaigns and community meetings to identify potential interviewees. Following the pandemic, I relocated to Juchitán, a city in the southern Isthmus, for several months to conduct additional interviews.

As a result, our data includes perspectives from affected community members, local residents, social movement participants and leaders, environmental activists, local journalists, staff from associated NGOs, officials, civil servants, legal experts specializing in Indigenous and land rights, as well as artists and academics with connections to communities or movements in the region. For community members with limited formal education, we developed shorter interview guides using simple language. In total, we conducted 127 interviews. The interviews were transcribed, coded, and systematized using QDA Miner Lite, and were then analyzed thematically.

Meanings of security in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec

Care/work as security

The Isthmus of Tehuantepec is abundant in natural resources and is recognized as one of the most biodiverse regions in the country. However, it is also one of the most unequal areas, plagued by high rates of infant and maternal mortality, illiteracy, malnutrition, unemployment, and emigration. Economic wealth is concentrated among a few privileged groups, including employees of the Mexican oil company Petróleos Mexicanos (Pemex), private companies connected to the petrochemical industry, ranchers, farmers, and a significant group of politicians and managers serving the state. Alongside commercial agricultural production, a traditional subsistence economy persists, based on fishing and the *milpa* system. In recent years, increasing drug use—especially of alcohol, marijuana, and crystal meth—in urban centers and rural towns has further weakened communities' abilities to sustain their economies and govern themselves.

Respondents often connected their sense of security to the broader structural issues of poverty and marginalization, which they believed were responsible for the current levels of insecurity in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. As a result, they saw the creation of conditions that promote well-being for the entire population as the only effective solution to the insecurity they faced. Amaia,[3] a Mestiza woman with an urban background who supports a women's land defense project in Veracruz, explained:

> Security isn't just about more police; it's about creating the material conditions for well-being, so that there are opportunities—alternative life opportunities that don't lead to delinquency. Improving living conditions, generating alternatives, and resources are all matters of security. (Interview 1)

Amaia emphasized the interconnected nature of security, linking personal, collective, material, and environmental dimensions. Therefore, any solutions to insecurity must address all these interconnected aspects. She added:

> I take care of myself, but I also take care of you, the community, and nature, so that we can all have security, live well, in harmony, and for a long time. If we destroy the mountain, the water, and everything else now, what will happen? We need to recognize that we are part of this territory, not its owners; it's an inheritance. We must protect it so that future generations can also enjoy it and have a good life. (Interview 1)

Amaia's vision of security is rooted in reciprocal social practices, mutual aid, and productive activities that respect nature rather than deplete it. Thus, community-driven and land-based forms of local, social organization form the foundation for building security for all. Care has been a key element in transformative politics and alternative, non-state forms of organizing, particularly within feminism and disability activism (Clement, 1996; Piepzna-Samarasinha, 2018; Puig de la Bellacasa, 2017; Tronto, 1993). Tronto (1993: 103) describes care as encompassing all activities that 'maintain, continue, and repair . . . a complex life-sustaining network'. This understanding of care acknowledges the inevitable interdependence between human bodies, people, and the environment (Engster, 2005; Kittay and Feder, 2002). When we view security through the lens of care—focused on the maintenance, cultivation, and repair of a complex and heterogeneous network of life—security actions should be aimed at fostering the conditions for the flourishing of diverse life projects or lifeworlds. Addressing security as an expanded care relationship that sustains multiple life projects or coexisting lifeworlds (i.e., co-constituted ways of being and relating to others) requires broadening Western concepts of justice, security frameworks, and their associated notions of potential harm.

Amaia's perspective aligns with the narratives of various Indigenous community members we interviewed, including Zapotec/Binniza, Mixe/Ayuuk, Nahuatl/Popoluca, Ikoots/Huave, and Zoque people. When asked about their notions, experiences, and perceptions of security and insecurity, the concepts of 'being well' (*bienestar*) and 'living well' (*buen vivir*) were frequently mentioned. Ester, for instance, translated the Nahuatl term for security into the Spanish *bienestar* (well-being), emphasizing that it is a collective concept meaning 'hopefully we will all be well' (*ojalá todos estemos bien*) (Interview 2). This broader notion of security includes being safe at home and on the streets, and ensuring that people have what they need to eat and live. This is all part of the Nahuatl understanding of security. Rosa translated security from Ayuuk, describing it as 'the care you make from the heart' (*el cuidado que haces del corazón*) or 'caring for what's inside' (*cuidar lo de adentro*) (Interview 3). Alejandro, a Zoque speaker from the Chimalapas region in the Isthmus, explained that the Zoque concept of security integrates 'collective work' (*trabajo mutuo*) with 'mutual care' (*cuidado mutuo*), saying, 'I feel safe, protected, because I know I can count on

the care of others' (Interview 4). Here, the link between security, care, and action is significant. Security cannot be achieved through discourse or mindset alone; it is always tied to concrete, active, and collective practices of care. Care generates security and is inseparable from community, as Ximena, a land defender from Veracruz, noted: 'We say we are safe where we take care of each other, where we are in community, where we are well' (Interview 5).

When asked how to secure their territory against an encroaching infrastructure project, Casimiro, an elder from an Indigenous community in the southern Oaxacan part of the Isthmus, pointed to the *cargo* system[4] as essential to territorial defense:

> The issue of *cargos* is one of the pillars of our community, of the community life system (*sistema de vida comunitaria*), which also includes the assembly, *fiestas*, the earth, the water—everything that is shared. These are our tools that give us the strength and capacity to maintain and defend our way of life (*forma de vida*). (Interview 6)

Another important activity for community sustainability and the safeguarding of ways of life, widely practiced across Oaxaca, is *tequio. Tequio* refers to the work that all community members are expected to contribute for the collective good. This can include tasks such as construction work, food preparation, firewood collection, and harvesting, among others. In the context of organized collective opposition to the CIIT megaproject, *tequio* plays a crucial role in resisting the infrastructure project and defending the community from attacks. The Zapotec community of Puente Madera, which opposes the transformation of their communal forest into an industrial park and its integration into the CIIT project, has organized resistance since 2021. After discovering irregularities in the minutes of a community assembly and demanding their annulment (*Sin Embargo*, 2021), one community member received death threats, and his firewood was stolen when leaving the communal forest. In response, the community assembly decided to hold *tequio* in the Pitayal forest to demarcate and clear boundary markers and remove fences from illegal pastures claimed by corrupt and self-declared owners of the common land (*Tierra y Territorio*, 2023).

Harmony and unity as security

The concepts of peace and harmony are deeply intertwined with security, as highlighted by Ximena: 'To live safely means living peacefully, in harmony with the community, in an organized way, with the confidence that our region, rich in natural and cultural wealth, is preserved. To maintain all of this is to live securely' (Interview 5).[5] Ximena, a leader of a land defense organization, is dedicated to protecting her community's natural resources from exploitation due to the CIIT project. Her territory, known for its fertile land, biodiversity, and abundant water resources, is under threat. Water is especially scarce in the Isthmus, and the industries associated with the CIIT project will require a steady water supply, potentially leading to waste management issues. Some members of Ximena's community fear that the project will deplete their natural wealth in favor of industrial development, jeopardizing both their environmental and cultural heritage. According to Ximena, true security lies in the preservation of both natural and cultural wealth. The destruction of these resources would lead to the loss of traditional livelihoods, force emigration, and potentially erode cultural identity. The arrival of the CIIT project has already disrupted harmony, causing divisions within many communities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.

The CIIT infrastructure project has sparked polarization and conflict among local residents. For example, disputes have arisen over which village will receive a government contract to supply rocks for the breakwater construction in Salina Cruz harbor (*El Universal*, 2022). The resulting roadblocks and protests have affected truckers, who lost work and pay due to their inability to

deliver materials (*Corta Mortaja*, 2022). The most significant conflicts have emerged between supporters and opponents of the project, particularly regarding land use. The government's development of 10 new industrial parks involves transforming the property regime from social or collective ownership to private ownership, leading to internal conflicts. Prospects of individual gain have fueled disputes within decisionmaking assemblies, including the emergence of false *comuneros* (persons with access to collectively held land titles) and the falsification of land titles. Additionally, there has been dissatisfaction with the power that collective landholders (*comuneros, ejidatarios*) wield over the community's future, particularly regarding whether and where the project will be implemented. Disagreements have also arisen over whether to negotiate with the government and accept payouts for local improvements, such as roads or schools. There have even been reports of opposing *ejidatarios* being assaulted or threatened with exclusion from their communities.

While Ximena's organization has not faced physical attacks, it has experienced a decline in community support. Recently, the municipal president led a discreditation campaign, accusing the organization of misusing funds and warning residents not to associate with it. This smear campaign has weakened the organization's standing in the community, forcing it to restart efforts to articulate its concerns and rebuild community support for defending the land and its natural wealth.

When asked about what could foster security, respondents frequently mentioned the importance of unity. Aurelia expressed this sentiment: 'I've seen cases where people are united and look out for each other. In the past, our neighborhood was like that, but now, honestly, I feel we've let ourselves down. It's not the same anymore' (Interview 7). Umberto, a member of a coastal Ikoots community in the south of the Isthmus affected by large-scale wind factory construction in the early 2000s, recounted how unity helped them resist previous megaprojects and state intrusions.

> Before 2012, everything was perfect here. We were like one single man (*como un solo hombre*) from X to Laguna Y.[6] The project promoters and the military couldn't do anything because the people stood as one. But the state realized it couldn't dominate us, so it started dividing us. (Interview 8)

The inhabitants of the Isthmus have been characterized by fighting for their rights and their territory, therefore the implementation of wind factories that began with the La Venta pilot project in 1994 has not been free from conflicts (Cruz Rueda, 2011; Dunlap, 2018b; Dunlap and Correa Arce, 2021; Flores Cruz, 2020; Howe et al., 2015; Vázquez García, 2021).

At the time of this research, there had been no land acquisitions for the CIIT project in Umberto's community, but there had been a request for a land donation for a new military base, which the community rejected due to their opposition to the militarization of the region. Although the CIIT project had not yet directly impacted the community, the harmony within it had become fragile, and the political climate was increasingly divisive. Ex-President Andrés Manuel López Obrador enjoyed considerable support in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec during his term of office, with many Indigenous community members convinced by his promises to transform the country and create a state and economy that genuinely serve the people. In past conflicts over infrastructure and development projects, opposition had been more unified against the openly neoliberal agendas of previous presidents. Now, Indigenous communities are divided between those who wish to preserve traditional ways of life and protect the land and biodiversity, and those who believe the federal project will bring economic opportunities and social programs.

When asked how communities could protect themselves from being divided over infrastructure megaprojects, Indigenous respondents emphasized the importance of information and dialogue. Umberto articulated this point clearly:

> To unite people again, we need to raise awareness, showing them how this project doesn't benefit our community. What we're experiencing is political division and the tearing apart of our social fabric. We need to talk, raise awareness, and analyze why we're having this conflict over the program. If everyone goes their own way, we won't move forward. We need a single idea to progress. (Interview 8)

Community cohesion, or what Umberto calls '*ser un solo hombre*', being one single man, is crucial for cultural survival in the context of land defense and resistance to invasive infrastructure. Decisions about whether to embrace the CIIT project or continue ancestral ways of sustaining life must be made collectively in the assembly, involving all community members. However, community assemblies, as the sole legitimate decisionmaking body, often become targets for manipulation by external actors with vested interests in infrastructure projects (Dunlap, 2018b, 2020; Dunlap and Correa Arce, 2021). Respondents mentioned instances where absentee *comuneros*,[7] shuttled in from the capital, instigated the sale of communal land to the government for the CIIT project, or where assembly minutes were falsified to declare a vote in favor of the land sale (as in the Puente Maderas case).

Territorial and cultural knowledge as security

In recent years, there has been a surge in the availability of 'territory and security' workshops and training sessions provided by international NGOs, along with a proliferation of 'security manuals' or handbooks aimed at guiding communities facing external threats related to land defense or territorial conflicts. Many of these manuals are, to some extent, derived from Frontline Defenders' (2005) *Protection Manual for Human Rights Defenders* (revised in 2009), which is still widely distributed by Peace Brigades International (PBI). This manual is a comprehensive guide covering various aspects of security, including risk assessment, security incidents, prevention strategies, communication, and the use of information technology. Additionally, more specialized manuals have been produced by organizations such as ProDesc (2018), with their *Community Security and Territory*, Aluna's (2021) *Risk Assessment in the Defense of Human Rights – Methodological Guide*, and Consorcio's (2021) *Holistic Feminist Protection*.

We spoke with Elena, an experienced NGO worker who has conducted territorial security workshops for communities affected by land conflicts related to resource extraction, environmental destruction, monoculture plantations, and infrastructure projects. For many years, she has accompanied land defenders in the states of Chiapas and Oaxaca, including the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Elena suggested that some of the approaches developed by or influenced by organizations from the Global North are inadequate because they focus exclusively on the individual, isolating leaders and land defenders from their communities and contexts. She emphasized:

> Defenders in territorial contexts are not individual defenders; they operate within a framework of collective defense, within a community. The threats and risks that a defender faces are transferred to their collective and community environment, but most mechanisms don't account for precautionary or protection measures for communities. (Interview 9)

Instead, what is often offered are technological solutions, such as satellite phones or panic buttons, which regularly fail in rural or structurally disadvantaged areas where there is no signal, or where the individual cannot afford consistent phone data. Moreover, many land defenders are wary of telecommunication providers and resist transmitting their location at all times. The provision of bodyguards is another measure the state offers in extreme risk cases, but after a lengthy bureaucratic process. However, there have been instances where the bodyguards themselves have

harassed or become threats to the person they were supposed to protect, leading many female land defenders to distrust this state-sanctioned protection.

Elena also highlighted the importance of territorial knowledge—and the secrecy surrounding it—as central to self-protection in conflicts. One method her organization has employed to safeguard territories and people in socioterritorial conflicts is the creation of maps detailing the locations of megaprojects, related resistances, and threats. Teachers and elders play a crucial role in passing this knowledge on to younger generations, embedding it in collective memory (see Hofmann, 2024). Elena continued:

> They told us, well, there are things we can share, but there are things we cannot share, either in this space or any other, because it makes us vulnerable. This isn't about trust; it's about following a code of practice to protect ourselves from acute threats—such as keeping the routes we use secret. This is fascinating because there are things that are only spoken of within communities, and that's part of their security mechanism. (Interview 9)

Viviana, from an Ikoots community in the southern Isthmus, discussed how language has been a key element in their resistance. The fact that her community predominantly speaks Ombeyajts has helped their assembly remain free from external influence, allowing them to discuss and decide on invasive infrastructure projects on their own terms. She explained:

> . . . because we speak the language, because we know how to care for the sea—perhaps, as fishermen, we understand the sea. It is life itself: from there we eat, from there we live. Our assembly is successful. Not every community has achieved that. Speaking the language has often been helpful because outsiders didn't understand what we were discussing, but in the end, they were told the people's decision. (Interview 10)

As a translator, Viviana is acutely aware of the importance of cultural understanding in generating and protecting a distinct lifeworld. She lamented that during negotiation meetings with government representatives about infrastructure or development projects, the interpreters employed were often inadequate. Viviana stressed that an interpreter needs to understand the context, people's rights, and have the sensitivity to grasp what people truly want to convey. She recounted instances where interpreters failed the community by providing literal translations that outsiders could not comprehend. To accurately translate a person's cosmovision, an interpreter must know the history, context, and current happenings within that person's community to ensure cultural meanings are not lost in intercultural communication. Thus, language and cultural knowledge, along with the ability to maintain and communicate them, form an existing security mechanism that some communities have preserved to ensure cultural survival.

These examples demonstrate that risk assessments, security strategies, and protection measures developed from external perspectives often fail when not grounded in the lived experiences and perspectives of the affected territories. In contrast, culturally grounded knowledge can be highly effective in the context of land defense.

Fiesta as security

The two key elements of land defense that contribute to security—*tequio* and territory—are foundational components of the concept of *comunalidad. Comunalidad*, or communality[8] in English, is a concept shared by various peoples of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (including the Zapotecs, Chontales, Huaves, Zoques, Mixes, Mixtecs, and Chinantecs), though it is interpreted and practiced differently across these communities. It refers to the generation of a collective way of life

(*modo de vida*) or lifeworld. According to Indigenous intellectuals, the four essential pillars of *comunalidad* are territory, *tequio*,[9] *fiesta*, and assembly (Díaz Gómez, 2003; Manzo, 2015; Martínez Luna, 2013, 2021). In this section, I will explore how the *fiesta*, or community celebration, functions as a means of generating security.

In 2022, I interviewed Lucia, a young Zapotec woman who sells flowers in the Juchitán market. During my visit to her home in a village in the Oaxacan part of the Isthmus, where she also offers healing flower baths in her garden, Lucia had carefully considered her responses to my questions. She was one of the few interviewees who had deeply reflected on how to translate and communicate cultural notions of 'security' and 'being safe' into Spanish.

> I have not heard of the word 'security' in Zapotec; it's not something that is directly translated. I think it's a different concept. Quite the opposite, in fact. For me, it means that together with those who live around us, those closest to us, we find a balance, as well as a way of taking care of each other's joy (*cuidar de la alegría de los demás*). (Interview 11)

She further explained the idea of '*el don de cuidar de la fiesta*' ('the gift of taking care of the celebration') or '*el don de cuidar de la alegría de todos*' ('the gift of taking care 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' (Interview 11).

The *fiesta communal*, or community celebration, is a space for coexistence and redistribution. In Zapotec towns such as Juchitán, Tehuantepec, and Ixtepec, these community celebrations, known as *velas*, are annual events that draw thousands of attendees. The *fiestas* play a vital role in fostering a specific way of life or community life system in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. They enhance social cohesion, contribute to the local economy, and reaffirm cultural identity. By promoting community organization, they strengthen bonds of friendship and kinship, enabling dynamics of exchange and reciprocity. The economic impact is significant as well, with increased demand for goods and services related to the celebrations, such as food, decorations, and traditional costumes. Finally, these events are spaces where identity is reaffirmed through the preservation of customs and traditions, ensuring cultural survival.

Comunalidad is both a lived practice and a system for reproducing life collectively. It did not originate as a written document or theory but was transmitted within communities. The effort to conceptualize it arose from cultural dialogues that took place in Mexico during the late 1980s and early 1990s, involving participants from Juchitán, the Zona Mixe in San Juan Guichicovi, and the Sierra in Oaxaca. The first to document *comunalidad* in writing were Juan José Rendón, Jaime Martínez Luna, Benjamin Maldonado, and Floriberto Díaz. They worked with a coalition of teachers and Indigenous promoters from Oaxaca and recognized that without a written conceptual framework, Indigenous perspectives would struggle to be heard in educational contexts, particularly in academia. Martínez Luna defined *comunalidad* as follows:

> The 'communality' —as we call the behavior resulting from the dynamics of the institutions that reproduce our ancestral and current organization— rests on work, never on discourse; that is, the work for decisionmaking (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 'stubborn resistance' against the destruction or dissolution of Indigenous ways of living due to external influences and impacts (Esteva and Guerrero Osorio, 2018). *Comunalidad* is a means of persistence, a way of continuing to exist in a particular manner despite pressures to dissolve,

reduce, or transform into something else. The goal is not to resist all change but to determine what external elements are incorporated into one's way of life and which are not. Gutiérrez and Navarro (2019) characterized *comunalidad* as a deliberate 'effort to produce the commons' and 'a collective way of managing interdependence', with the defense and affirmation of life at the center of communal striving. Indigenous scholar Tzul Tzul (2019) noted that Indigenous peoples in Abya Yala historically had to confront colonialism and economic liberalism, which sought to erase communal governance and land structures. She emphasized that the power of *comunalidad* lies in people's service to the collective. This service—the collective work toward community well-being—creates the conditions for material self-determination and the ability to disrupt and resist projects of domination.

As part of a comprehensive community life system, the *fiesta*, or 'everybody's joy', contributes to generating security by reinforcing and repairing social bonds through exchange and reciprocity, redistributing economic wealth, and reaffirming cultural identity. The repeated and intentional effort to produce 'everybody's joy'—along with the other elements of *comunalidad* (land, *tequio*, and assembly)—enables the construction of an alternative means of regenerating life, one that avoids submission to prescribed (colonial, Western, capitalist, etc.) ways of living. As Floriberto Díaz Gómez (2003, reprint) stated, 'You can't be dominated if you can regenerate life.'

Assembly, communication, networks, and cooperative projects as security

When asked about the best way to protect their territories amidst the development of infrastructure megaprojects like the CIIT, many respondents emphasized their cultural heritage, self-determination, and self-governance. Javier's insightful comments illustrate this perspective:

> I believe the only way to partially shield ourselves from such impacts is by reconnecting with our culture first—reclaiming ancestral knowledge and understanding who we truly are. But it's not just about awareness; it's about action. We need to remember who we are within our territory and what it means to be Zoque or Zapotec. By practicing our ancestral knowledge, producing our food, and governing ourselves through our assemblies of elders and community meetings, we can regain our territorial rights. (Interview 12)

Despite the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) recognizing Indigenous peoples' right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) on matters affecting their territories, various studies have shown that consultations often face legal and procedural violations (Cruz and Flores Cruz, 2013; Dunlap, 2018a; Zaremberg and Torres Wong, 2018). Analyzing the effectiveness of land defense strategies against invasive megaprojects, Tapias Torrado (2020) found that the revitalization of traditional collective authority in combination with the re-establishment of ancestral organizational forms of governance played a core role in successful community defense. Respondent Javier pointed out that although self-determination is recognized in international agreements, it remains unrealized in practice. 'We need to return to our foundational governance systems, to our ancestral knowledge, to the pedagogy of the cornfield [*milpa*]. We need to produce our medicines and break the chains of submission and colonization that still persist' (Interview 12).

Respondents highlighted the importance of Indigenous self-organization as a source of hope in the face of potential destruction from the CIIT project. Indigenous communities emphasized that maintaining the practice of community assemblies strengthens their resilience during times of conflict. The community assembly, as the highest authority in Indigenous communities, serves as a space for dialogue, debate, consensus-based decisionmaking, and collective action. Sofia, who has supported Indigenous communities in their territorial defense for seven years, explained the value of the assembly:

> The recovery and preservation of traditional forms of organization, such as assemblies, greatly aids resistance. It creates a collective entity, not just an individual defending their land. It fosters a framework where everyone stands together—if one person is threatened, the whole community responds. (Interview 13)

Achieving security, in an emancipatory sense, is closely tied to political self-determination and self-governance. The practice of consensus-based assemblies allows communities to take control of their lives, making decisions and pursuing actions beyond mere survival. When megaprojects threaten established ways of life, affected communities often struggle with a lack of resources, economic survival, drug consumption, internal conflicts, violence, corruption, and emigration. They may not have a fully developed alternative project to counter the federal development plans, which often promise benefits that never materialize while downplaying environmental and cultural impacts. The community assembly[10] provides a space for ongoing dialogue, enabling the articulation of doubts and the discussion of alternatives. It is a vital tool for maintaining and generating alternative ways of life, protecting communities from cultural assimilation and erasure.

Developing alternative community visions requires significant time and effort, involving extended dialogue to articulate desires and needs, resolve conflicts, and overcome differences. Methods such as community diagnosis (*diagnóstico comunitario)* and life plans (*plan de vida)* have gained traction in helping communities craft their collective vision of a prosperous and culturally meaningful future (Castro Rodríguez and Reyes Méndez, 2019; Consejo Dueñas, 2021; *La Jornada*, 2021; Morales and Esteva, 2019). The assembly is also a means of organizing and coordinating opposition effectively. As Tomás put it, 'Our last resort is to tell people that only by mobilizing can we achieve our objectives' (Interview 14).

Respondents stressed the importance of internal dialogue and communication with other communities affected by megaprojects to secure their lifeworlds. These worlds are collectively generated conditions of being-together, involving humans, non-humans, and elements of the natural world such as forests, mountains, and rivers. Existing security frameworks—including both non-traditional and critical security studies—often fail to account for these worlds, focusing solely on humans and property. Mitchell (2014) refers to the destruction of these worlds as 'mundicide', highlighting the erasure of irreducible, heterogeneous collectives. In this context, our respondents emphasized that communication strategies and alliances with others are crucial for securing lifeworlds. Communities that have experienced longstanding division and conflict must start with basic articulation processes, bringing together different members to discuss concerns, perspectives, needs, and desires before developing security strategies and measures.[11]

Xóchitl's account illustrates the value of listening:

> Sometimes we no longer even listen to each other. Listening to each other is a valuable experience, knowing how the other person thinks, even if they're your lifelong neighbor. You might discover shared concerns and similar thoughts, which can be very empowering. Mirroring yourself in the other is an important tool for reaffirming what we are as a whole and figuring out what we need and want. (Interview 15)

Faced with the CIIT project, many respondents saw the need to build lasting ties with other Indigenous communities affected by megaprojects across the country and to form alliances with urban resistance movements. A broad network of allies, mutually supporting each other, was seen as crucial for protection against fragmentation and division, one of the biggest threats to community cohesion in times of conflict. Additionally, producing audio and audiovisual materials, such as community radio and documentaries about their experiences with state-sanctioned megaprojects, and disseminating them via social media played an important role in building wider alliances, enhancing the chances of securing their existing lifeworlds. Linking with other communities and

expanding networks also improved their ability to assess the viability of certain forms of resistance and alternative community projects.

Young female participants, in particular, viewed the initiation of productive, cooperative business projects as a way to build long-term resilience and security for their communities. Examples mentioned include ecological tourism, organic agriculture, and women's collective economies such as cooperatives for *totoperas* (women who produce *totopos*, a local type of tortilla). These projects not only promote economic independence but also reinforce the community's established ways of life. Sofia noted that women, in particular, seem to prefer generative approaches to security over mere territorial defense, such as the establishment of community guards or security rounds against organized crime groups. Having observed that local, land-based productive projects strengthen the community by enhancing available capabilities and knowledge, she thought that 'this is a new approach that is beginning to emerge, and it is vital for beginning to manage these scenarios of violence' (Interview 13).

The assembly represents the collective will and power of the community, challenging the state's governance institutions, which are limited to Western democratic principles such as representation, party politics, and elections. Extensive communication and network building with other affected communities allow for the pooling of knowledge, providing some protection against defamation, attacks, and silent erasure. Cooperative business projects geared towards self-sustainability also promote skills within the community, contributing to a secure and resilient existence.

Conclusion

The interview data analyzed provides us with a window into an uncharted understanding of security that bypasses the state-centric ideas of traditional security, but simultaneously refuses the anti-security stance of critical approaches. Instead, the security articulated here is based on the functioning of the *comunalidad* life system, grounded in relationships of mutuality, reciprocity, and care, through which natural wealth is allocated and collective well-being organized. This life-world-based security understanding aims to protect specific conditions of being-together, understanding human and non-human life and the natural world as inseparable, co-constituted worlds.

The experiences of residents in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec highlight that the autonomous capacity to sustain life is central to their understanding of security. At the heart of this concept is *comunalidad*, a life system that structures the collective reproduction of life through four key elements: (a) enabling the formation of collective will and decisionmaking through community assemblies; (b) fostering community work known as *tequio*; (c) uplifting spirits and providing a framework for mending relationships and distributing wealth through communal celebrations (*fiesta*); and (d) grounding all these practices in the territory, which forms the very basis of life. As Manzo (2015), founder of Unión Hidalgo's Communal Autonomous University of Oaxaca (UACO), succinctly puts it, 'There are some peoples who live in the mountains that have not seen any element of their communality compromised. Their forms of resistance are more ferocious.' Communities where communality remains intact have a greater capacity to protect their lifeworld than those where it has been disrupted.

Understanding the profound, reworlding impact of large-scale infrastructure projects, such as the CIIT, on social and environmental landscapes is crucial. Over time, these projects transform the landscape and social life in ways that are often irreversible, particularly through the conversion of common lands and natural wealth into private property. This transformation deprives communities of the natural wealth essential for their collective survival, effectively dispossessing them of the means to reproduce their way of life—everything collectively held within their territory, such as water, forests, pathways, and sacred sites (Hofmann, 2024). As a result, everyday life is disrupted,

emotional bonds with the land become severed, and traditional modes of subsistence, social relations, and cultural practices are profoundly altered. This leads to the transformation of entire lifeworlds, destabilizing social peace and severely undermining the security of communities opposed to such projects.

The insecurity faced by these communities is multifaceted, stemming from a web of oppressive economic, social, political, and symbolic structures that threaten their present and future existence. This form of lifeworld insecurity is a legacy of cultural imperialism embedded in contemporary legal systems, which often fail to protect alternative ways of living.

Many respondents expressed a desire for a *horizonte seguro*—a secure horizon—where their future is foreseeable, their livelihoods are stable, their natural environment is preserved, and their social relations and way of life continue uninterrupted. They also aspired to personal flourishing and culturally relevant education for their youth. Ultimately, security, as envisioned by many community members we spoke to, was about having control and predictability over their lives and surroundings. Achieving the right to self-governance of their territory, based on a life system that fosters solidarity and reciprocity, was seen as crucial to both their collective security and cultural survival. For them, security lay in the continued ability to create communal horizons (*construir horizontes comunales*), grounded in the principle of mutual care and support (*cuidado entre todos*).

This article has analyzed meanings of security in the face of the existential threats that the CIIT megaproject poses on the lifeworlds of Isthmus residents, including Indigenous and Afrodescendants. These persistent articulations, however, have not driven decisive audiences that dispose of the power to mobilize material resources and command action towards securitizing these lifeworlds. This is partly owed to the insufficiency of contemporary Eurocentric justice frameworks that are unable to securitize alter-lifeworlds, and partly to the convenience of the 'imperial mode of living' (Brand and Wissen, 2021) that unjustly depletes the lifeworld-sustaining natural wealth of other territories. Currently, one hegemonic form of life reproduction—namely extractivist 'racial capitalism' (Robinson, 2021)—interrupts other existing forms of life and means of existence, attacks the collective reproduction of the community, thwarts food sovereignty, and weakens or denies any form of local self-government, all of which together could guarantee the material and symbolic reproduction of collective life, as well as the durability and balance of the relationships produced.

Efforts to preserve or rebuild *comunalidad* through collective governance are integral to a strategy aimed at defending and nurturing the community fabric, including its social and emotional bonds, as well as the shared goods and services it produces and manages. The creation of the commons (*lo común*) is a process that organizes interdependence and connections between human and non-human life, centering on the defense and affirmation of life (Tzul Tzul, 2019). Through the practice of *comunalidad*, communities reconnect, reclaim, and restore what various forms of dispossession have eroded, fragmented, altered, or destroyed. In this context, the securitization or protection of alternative lifeworlds is rooted in the practical and tangible exercise of the social relationships and structures that the communities seek to preserve 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

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article: 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 program under the Marie Skłodowska-Curie grant agreement no. 844176.

ORCID iD

Susanne Hofmann https://orcid.org/0000-0002-4147-796X

Notes

1. The community assembly is the major decisionmaking body in Indigenous communities that adhere to traditional governance.
2. 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 became very intense during AMLO's administration, and the practices of criminal gangs and traffickers extremely abusive with frequent reports of exploitation and disappearances, which makes migrants increasingly resort to traveling with the help of smugglers.
3. All names of persons have been exchanged for pseudonyms.
4. *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 decisionmaking 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.
5. It must be noted that in Spanish there is no distinction between security and safety.
6. The place names have been omitted here to guarantee the speaker's anonymity.
7. 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 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 Cosío-Ruiz, 2017).
8. 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.
9. Related practices of community solidarity are *faena* and *mano vuelta*.
10. The community assembly can by no means be romanticized. There are known issues with the equality and participation of women, highlighted by many of our female respondents who have fought all their lives to be heard and taken seriously in the community assembly. See also Zoque scholar Sánchez Contreras (2019) on women and access to land and the assembly.
11. We found this the case in particular in the state of Veracruz, where there are communities that have experienced processes of disintegration resulting from a wide array of causes, including displacement, poverty, emigration, environmental catastrophes, resource conflicts, and cartel violence, to name a few.

References

Alonso Serna L (2022) Land grabbing or value grabbing? Land rent and wind energy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca. *Competition & Change* 26(3–4): 487–503.

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).

Alvear-Galindo G, Giraldo-Durán A, Ramírez-Gutiérrez SE and Hernández V. (2022) Economía criminal en Veracruz y la región del Totonacapan, México, 1998-2018 [Criminal Economy in Veracruz and the Totonacapan Region, Mexico, 1998-2018]. *Sociedad Y Economía* 47: 1–22.

Aradau C (2008) *Rethinking Trafficking in Women: Politics out of Security*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.

Aradau C and Van Munster R (2011) *Politics of Catastrophe: Genealogies of the Unknown*. London and New York, NY: Routledge.

Ari Chachaki W (2014) *Earth Politics: Religion, Decolonization, and Bolivia's Indigenous Intellectuals*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Arias ED (2017) *Criminal Enterprises and Governance in Latin America and the Caribbean*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Arias ED and Goldstein DM (2010) *Violent Democracies in Latin America*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Arias ED and Ungar M (2009) Community policing and Latin America's citizen security crisis. *Comparative Politics* 41(4): 409–429.

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 and 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.

Brand U and Wissen M (2021) *Imperial Mode of Living*. London: Verso.

Bunker RJ (2013) *Criminal Insurgencies in Mexico and the Americas: The Gangs and Cartels Wage War*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Burke A and Nyman J (eds) (2016) *Ethical Security Studies A New Research Agenda*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Buzan B, Wæver O and de Wilde J (1998) *Security: A New Framework for Analysis*. Boulder, CO: Lynne Rienner.

Caballero-Anthony M (2016) *An Introduction to Non-Traditional Security Studies: A Transnational Approach*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

Capital 21 (Mexico City) (2023) *AMLO blinda obras de infraestructura - las declara de seguridad nacional* [AMLO protects infrastructure projects - declares them to be of national security]. 19 May. Available at: https://www.capital21.cdmx.gob.mx/noticias/?p=41574 (accessed 6 October 2023).

Castaño Orozco CS (2014) Guardias Campesinas como figuras de seguridad comunitaria en los territorios campesinos: el caso de Pradera, Colombia [Peasant Guards as community security figures in peasant territories: the case of Pradera, Colombia]. *Desafíos* 36(1): 1–28.

Castro Rodríguez A and 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.

Ceceña AE (2019) Geopolítica de los estrechos: Canales, trenes y conexiones catastróficas [Geopolitics of the Straits: Canals, Trains and Catastrophic Connections]. *América Latina en movimiento* 547: 1–4.

Christie JJ (2021) *Earth Politics and Intangible Heritage: Three Case Studies in the Americas*. Gainesville, FL: University Press of Florida.

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.

Consorcio (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).

Cruz B and Flores Cruz RM (2013) La consulta indígena: Mecanismo para el despojo en el Istmo [The Indigenous Consultation: A Mechanism for Dispossession in the Isthmus]. In: Del Pozo E and Martínez JC (eds) *Caminos dese abajo: organización social y uso del derecho en la defensa del territorio en Mexico* [Paths from below: social organization and the use of law in the defense of territory in Mexico]. Mexico City: GEDISA, 155–176.

Cruz Rueda C (2011) Eólicos e inversión privada: El caso de San Mateo del Mar, en el Istmo de Tehuantepec Oaxaca [Wind energy and private investment: The case of San Mateo del Mar, in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Oaxaca]. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 16(2): 257–277.

Díaz Gómez F (2003) Principios comunitarios y derechos indios [Community principles and Indian rights]. In: Rendón Monzón JJ (ed.) *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 (2018a) "A bureaucratic trap:" Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) and wind energy development in Juchitán, Mexico. *Capitalism Nature Socialism* 29(4): 88–108.

Dunlap A (2018b) 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.

Dunlap A and 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.

Durante F, Kröger M and LaFleur W (2021) Extraction and extractivisms: Definitions and concepts. In: Shapiro J and McNeish JA (eds) *Our Extractive Age: Expressions of Violence and Resistance*. Abingdon, Oxon: Routledge, 19–30.

El Economista (Mexico City) (2022) 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.

Esguerra-Muelle C, Ojeda D, Sánchez T and Ulloa A. (2019) Introducción: Violencias contra líderes y lideresas defensores del territorio y el ambiente en América Latina [Introduction: Violence against leaders defending the land and the environment in Latin America]. *LASA Forum* 50(4): 3–5.

Esteva G and 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.

Flores Cruz RM (2020) El Istmo de Tehuantepec en disputa. El camino de la Asamblea de Pueblos del Istmo (APPIIDDTT) frente al expansionismo de las energías renovables [The Isthmus of Tehuantepec in dispute: The path of the Assembly of Peoples of the Isthmus (APPIIDDTT) in the face of renewable energy expansion]. *Revista Mexicana de Estudios de los Movimientos Sociales* 4(2): 97–120.

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).

Frontline Defenders (2024) *Mexico: Sentence against human rights defender David Hernández Salazar, member of the Assembly of Indigenous Peoples of the Isthmus in Defence of Land and Territory (APIIDTT)*. Available at: https://www.frontlinedefenders.org/en/statement-report/mexico-sentence-against-human-rights-defender-david-hernandez-salazar (accessed 28 August 2024).

Fuentes Díaz A and Paleta Pérez G (2015) Violencia y Autodefensas Comunitarias En Michoacán, México [Violence and Community Self-Defence Forces in Michoacán, Mexico]. *Iconos* 19(53): 171–186.

Furlong A, Netzahualcoyotzi R, Sandoval Palacios JM and Porto J. (2018) *Planes geoestratégicos, securitización y resistencia en las américas* [Geostrategic plans, securitization and resistance in the Americas]. Macapá: UNIFAP.

Gallagher JK (2023) *Bootstrap Justice: The Search for Mexico's Disappeared*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

García C (2019) Los grandes proyectos de generación hidroeléctrica en Mesoamérica. Violencia genocida contra el territorio e identidad de los pueblos originarios [Large hydroelectric generation projects in Mesoamerica. Genocidal violence against the territory and identity of Indigenous peoples]. In: Agiular Rivero M and Cando LE (eds) *Violencia, territorio y extractivismo* [Violence, territory and extractivism]. Mexico City: Monosílabo, 63–72.

Gasparello G (2021) Turismo, economías ilegales y violencias en Quintana Roo. Evidencias, tendencias y riesgos del megaproyecto Tren Maya [Tourism, illegal economies and violence in Quintana Roo. Evidence, trends and risks of the Tren Maya megaproject]. In: Gasparello G and Núñez Rodríguez VR (eds) *Pueblos y territorios frente al tren maya. Escenarios sociales, económicos y culturales* [Peoples and territories facing the Mayan train. Social, economic, and cultural scenarios]. Oaxaca: Bajo Tierra, 149–210.

GeoComunes (2020) Análisis general del proyecto de Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec [General analysis of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec Interoceanic Corridor project]. April. Available at: http://geocomunes.org/Analisis_PDF/GeoComunes_Trans%C3%ADstmico_22Abril2020.pdf (accessed 6 October 2023).

Gledhill J (2014) Seguridizar, reprimir, pacificar: una crítica de las nuevas guerras en América Latina [Securitizing, repressing, pacifying: a critique of the new wars in Latin America]. In: Valladares de la Cruz LR (ed.) *Nuevas violencias en América Latina: Los derechos indígenas ante las políticas neoextractivistas y las políticas de seguridad* [New forms of violence in Latin America: Indigenous rights in the face of neo-extractivist policies and security policies]. Mexico City: UAM, 31–62.

Gledhill J (2015) *The New War on the Poor: The Production of Insecurity in Latin America*. London: Zed Books.

Goldstein DM (2012) *Outlawed: Between Security and Rights in a Bolivian City*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

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 (2019) *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.

Grijalva-Maza LF (2021) Posthuman security? Lessons from Abya Yala. In: Ibarrarán ME and García-Aguilar JL (eds) *From Human to Post Human Security in Latin America: Examples and Reflections from Across the Region*. Leeds: Emerald Publishing, 101–124.

Grillo I (2017) *Gangster Warlords: Drug Dollars, Killing Fields, and the New Politics of Latin America*. London: Bloomsbury.

Guerra E (2018) Organización armada. La dinámica operativa de los grupos de autodefensa tepalcatepenses [Armed organization. The operational dynamics of the Tepalcatepec self-defense groups]. *Estudios sociológicos* 36(106): 99–124.

Gutiérrez R and 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.

Harrington C (2017) Posthuman security and care in the anthropocene. In: Eroukhmanoff C and Harker M (eds) *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*. Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 73–86.

Hernández G and Romero-Arias CA (2019) La Guardia Nacional y La Militarización de La Seguridad Pública En México [The proliferation of paramilitary groups in southern Mexico: State strategy or battle between local political elites?]. *Urvio* 25: 87–106.

Hernández Manrique A (2022) Las Paradojas de La Desaparición En México: Lugares, Objetos y Sujetos de La Memoria [The Paradoxes of Disappearance in Mexico: Places, Objects and Subjects of Memory]. *Tercio Creciente* 21: 27–38.

Herrera JS (2023) Rejecting the social contract: Criminal governance, Agrarian inequalities and the Autodefensa movement in Michoacán, Mexico. *Journal of Latin American Studies* 55(1): 51–76.

Hochmüller M, Solar C and Pérez Ricart CA (2024) Militarism and militarization in Latin America: Introduction to the special issue. *Alternatives: Global, Local, Political* 49(4): 209–216.

Hofmann S (2024) Infrastructure megaprojects as world erasers: Cultural survival in the context of the interoceanic corridor of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. *Latin American Perspectives* 51(5): 140–163.

Hough P (2014) *Environmental Security: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Howe C, Boyer D and Barrera E (2015) Los márgenes del Estado al viento: autonomía y desarrollo de energías renovables en el sur de México [The State's Margins to the Wind: Autonomy and Development of Renewable Energy in Southern Mexico]. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 20(2): 285–307.

Jones GA and Rodgers D (2009) *Youth Violence in Latin America Gangs and Juvenile Justice in Perspective*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Kittay EF and Feder EK (2002) *The Subject of Care: Feminist Perspectives on Dependency*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers.

Krause K and Williams MC (1997) *Critical Security Studies: Concepts and Cases*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

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).

Lake DA and Morgan P (1997) *Regional Orders: Building Security in a New World*. University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press.

Lessing B (2018) *Making Peace in Drug Wars: Crackdowns and Cartels in Latin America*. New York, NY: Cambridge University Press.

Lipschutz R (1995) On security. In: Lipschutz R (ed.) *On Security*. New York, NY: 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).

López y and Rivas G (2020) *Pueblos indígenas en tiempos de la Cuarta Transformación* [Indigenous peoples in times of the Fourth Transformation]. Mexico City: Bajo Tierra.

MacLean SJ and Black DR (2016) *A Decade of Human Security: Global Governance and New Multilateralisms*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Maldonado Aranda S (2012) Drogas, violencia y militarización en el México rural. El caso de Michoacán [Drugs, violence and militarization in rural Mexico. The case of Michoacán]. *Revista mexicana de sociología* 74(1): 5–39.

Mandolessi S and Olalde Rico K (2022) *Disappearances in Mexico: From the "Dirty War" to the "War on Drugs"*. Milton Park: Taylor & Francis.

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.

Martínez-Mendoza E, Rivas-Tovar LA and García-Santamaría LE (2021) Wind Energy in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec: Conflicts and Social Implications. *Environment, Development and Sustainability* 23(8): 11706–11731.

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.

Mitchell A (2016) Posthuman security/ethics. In: Burke A and Nyman J (eds) *Ethical Security Studies: A New Research Agenda*. New York, NY: Routledge, 60–72.

Mitchell A (2017) 'Posthuman security': Reflections from an open-ended conversation. In: Eroukhmanoff C and Harker M (eds) *Reflections on the Posthuman in International Relations: The Anthropocene, Security and Ecology*. Bristol: E-International Relations Publishing, 10–18.

Morales A and Esteva G (2019) *El Istmo que queremos* [*The Isthmus We Want*]. Oaxaca: Universidad de la Tierra.

Morett-Sánchez CJ and 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.

Morgenthau H (1985) *Politics Among Nations*. New York, NY: McGraw Hill.

Neocleous M (2008) *Critique of Security*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Núñez Rodríguez V (2021) Acumulación por desposesión en territorios agrarios mayas [Accumulation by dispossession in Mayan agrarian territories]. In: Gasparello G and Núñez Rodríguez VR (eds) *Pueblos y territorios frente al tren maya. Escenarios sociales, económicos y culturales* [Peoples and territories facing the Mayan train. Social, economic, and cultural scenarios]. Oaxaca: Bajo Tierra, 113–148.

Olney P (2011) La proliferación de los grupos paramilitares en el sur de Mexico: ¿estrategia de Estado o batalla entre elites politicas locales? [The proliferation of paramilitary groups in southern Mexico: State strategy or battle between local political elites?] *Desafíos* 23(2): 83–121.

O'Reilly C and Ochoa R (2021) Intimate crimes: Kidnapping, gangs and trust in Mexico City. *Punishment & Society* 23(3): 444–448.

Paley DM (2023) Repensar el crimen organizado [Rethinking organized crime]. *Revista de la Universidad de México* 4: 102–108.

Pearce J and Abello Colak A (2009) 'Security from below' in contexts of chronic violence. *IDS Bulletin* 40(2): 11–19.

Peoples C and Vaughan-Williams N (2015) *Critical Security Studies: An Introduction*. New York, NY: Routledge.

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, MN: University of Minnesota Press.

Rivera Hernández RD and Sadek I (2020) *Narratives of Vulnerability in Mexico's War on Drugs*. New York, NY: Springer.

Robinson CJ (2021) *Black Marxism: The Making of the Black Radical Tradition*. London: Penguin Books.

Rodríguez Wallenius C (2015) *Geopolítica del desarrollo local: Campesinos, empresas y gobiernos en la disputa por territorios y bienes naturales en el México rural* [Geopolitics of local development: Peasants, companies and governments in the dispute over territories and natural resources in rural Mexico]. Mexico City: UAM.

Rodríguez Wallenius C (2021) Geopolítica de las resistencias socioambientales frente a la construcción del Tren Maya [Geopolitics of socio-environmental resistance to the construction of the Mayan Train]. In: Azamar Alonso A and Rodríguez Wallenius C (eds) *Llover sobre mojado: conflictos socioambientales frente al extractivismo y megaproyectos en tiempos de crisis múltiple* [Rain on the wet: Socio-environmental conflicts regarding extractivism and megaprojects in times of multiple crises]. Mexico City: UAM, 282–307.

Sánchez Contreras J (2019) Mujeres indígenas, bienes comunales y despojo [Indigenous women, communal property and dispossession]. In: Mercado Mondragón J, Ochoa Muñoz K, Ortiz Leroux J and 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.

Schlag G, Junk J and Daase C (2016) *Transformations of Security Studies: Dialogues, Diversity and Discipline*. New York, NY: Routledge.

Schnurr MA and Swatuk LA (2012) *Natural Resources and Social Conflict towards Critical Environmental Security*. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

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).

Shani G (2017) Human security as ontological security: A post-colonial approach. *Postcolonial Studies* 20(3): 275–293.

Sierra Camacho MT (2013) Seguridad y justicia bajo acoso en tiempos de violencia neoliberal: las respuestas de la policía comunitaria de Guerrero [Security and justice under harassment in times of neoliberal violence: the responses of Guerrero's community police]. *Estudos & Pesquisas sobre as Américas* 7(2): 11–36.

Sierra Camacho MT (2015) Pueblos Indígenas y Usos Contra-hegemónicos de La Ley En La Disputa Por La Justicia: La Policía Comunitaria de Guerrero [Indigenous Peoples and Counter-Hegemonic Uses of the Law in the Dispute for Justice: The Community Police of Guerrero]. *The Journal of Latin American and Caribbean Anthropology* 20(1): 133–155.

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).

Tapias Torrado N (2019) Mujeres indígenas liderando la defensa de los derechos humanos frente a los abusos cometidos en el contexto de megaproyectos en América Latina [Indigenous women leading the defence of human rights against abuses committed in the context of megaprojects in Latin America]. *LASA Forum* 50(4): 6–11.

Tapias Torrado N (2020) *Indigenous women leading the defence of human rights from the abuses by megaprojects in Latin America, in the face of extreme violence*. DPhil Thesis. University of Oxford.

Thomas C (2001) *Global Governance, Development and Human Security: The Challenge of Poverty and Inequality*. London: Pluto Press.

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? [Army: Loyal or faithful accomplice of AMLO?] *Eje Central*, 18–24 March.

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

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.

Uildriks NA (2009) *Policing Insecurity: Police Reform, Security, and Human Rights in Latin America*. Lanham: Lexington Books.

Ungar M (2010) *Policing Democracy: Overcoming Obstacles to Citizen Security in Latin America*. Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press.

Vázquez García AR (2021) Despojo y Resistencia En El Istmo de Tehuantepec, Oaxaca, En La Era Del 'Capitalismo Ecológico.' *Punto CUNORTE* 1(12): 38–68.

Von Borstel M (2013) *Guerra de baja intensidad y megaproyectos hidráulicos* [Low-intensity warfare and mega hydraulic projects]. Guadalajara: Casa del Mago.

Zárate-Toledo E, Patiño R and Fraga J (2019) Justice, social exclusion and indigenous opposition: A case study of wind energy development on the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, Mexico. *Energy Research & Social Science* 54: 1–11.

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

Zaremberg G and Torres Wong M (2018) Participation on the edge: Prior consultation and extractivism in Latin America. *Journal of Politics in Latin America* 10(3): 29–58.

Zaremberg G, Torres Wong M and Guarneros-Meza V (2018) Descifrando El Desorden: Instituciones Participativas y Conflictos En Torno a Megaproyectos En México [Deciphering the Mess: Participatory Institutions and Conflicts Around Megaprojects in Mexico]. *América Latina Hoy* 79: 81–102.

Interviews cited (listed in order of appearance)

Interview 1. Amaia, 12 March 2021
Interview 2. Ester, 19 December 2020
Interview 3. Rosa, 29 December 2020
Interview 4. Alejandro, 22 July 2022
Interview 5. Ximena, 24 September 2020
Interview 6. Casimiro, 8 December 2021
Interview 7. Aurelia, 13 December 2020
Interview 8. Umberto, 4 December 2021
Interview 9. Elena, 6 April 2022
Interview 10. Viviana, 29 September 2020
Interview 11. Lucia, 7 July 2022
Interview 12. Javier, 11 December 2021
Interview 13. Sofia, 28 February 2022
Interview 14. Tomás, 11 December 2021
Interview 15. Xóchitl, 28 March 2022

Susanne Hofmann is a visiting fellow at the Department of Geography and Environment of the London School of Economics. Her work explores land defense struggles in the context of large-scale infrastructure construction, examining how implementation processes reactivate and reinforce existing territorial, environmental and social conflicts. In recent research she focused on the construction of the multimodal transport corridor in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec (Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec – CIIT), analyzing dynamics of insecurity and militarization, as well as related community responses. S.Hofmann@lse.ac.uk