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Framing in a Multicultural Social Movement: The Defence of the San Pedro Mezquital River (Mexico)

ABSTRACT

This article analyses the sustainability movement that opposed the construction of the Las Cruces hydroelectric project in the San Pedro River watershed in Nayarit, Mexico. It focuses on the movement's theoretical framework and general orientation in order to show how the various and distinct frameworks that emerged throughout the evolution of the movement were selected, adjusted and creatively reworked within the movement. This allowed these frameworks to adapt to changing local social, cultural, and environmental conditions through a process that also enriched them and imbued them with new meanings through contact with the perspectives of coastal agricultural and fishing communities, as well as with indigenous Naayeri communities in the mountains.

Keywords: *sustainability movement; Mexico; frames; sustainable equilibrium; good living*

Introduction

This article analyzes the sustainability movement that formed in opposition to the construction of the Las Cruces hydroelectric project in the San Pedro River watershed in the state of Nayarit, western Mexico. It begins by presenting the movement's theoretical framework and general orientation. It then describes how distinct frames that have arisen through academic discourse have contributed to the coalescence of this movement as it evolved. This entails explaining how various aspects of the theoretical framework were selected, adjusted, and creatively reworked in order to adapt the general framing to local social, cultural, and environmental conditions, during a process that enriched them and gave them new meaning through contact with the perspectives of coastal agricultural and fishing communities and the indigenous Naayeri (or Cora)¹ communities in the mountains. This led to a gradual and complex transition from

1 Ethnic group that inhabits the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the state of Nayarit (in the municipality of Del Nayar), although they also have settlements in the state of Jalisco. They call

positions that were closely tied to sustainable development to non-developmental positions. One position that stands out is the Naayeri's worldview, which is characterized by a search for spiritual and ecological balance and harmony (similar to concepts of 'good living' among the Kichwa, Quechua, and Aymara in South America, as well as intercultural 'dialogue of knowledge').

The movement analysed established an important alliance among the fishing, agricultural, and indigenous sectors that share this watershed, as well as with regional, national, and international non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the academic sectors that played a role in its formation. This broad alliance of such disparate sectors and organizations came together through the formation of two councils: the Inter-Community Council composed of members of indigenous groups and the mestizo population and a council made up exclusively of representatives of Naayeri communities.

This movement emerged in opposition to a project that was based on what we could call the logic of "hydraulic structuralism", as termed by Arrojo.² This logic has been applied to legitimize global capital's aggressive privatization of water, and in this case electrical energy, in many so-called 'underdeveloped nations' around the world.

This article analyses:

1. the underlying orientations that clashed in the context of this mega-project,
2. how the framing of protest has changed, and
3. the dimensions and significance of those changes.

Formally speaking, the protest movement has sought to establish the sociocultural bases for generating an inter-community project to galvanize alternative forms of collective wellbeing on a regional scale. Achieving those goals has required a complex framing process through which the region's inhabitants engaged in dialogue and negotiations involving knowledge and policies of an intercultural nature. This process was made possible by identifying and/or defining common adversaries, namely, those who promoted the construction of the Las Cruces Dam, a project that the inhabitants considered to be a very real and shared threat.

themselves Naayeri. This native people resisted the Spanish conquest and colonisation until 1721.

- 2 Pedro Arrojo: *El reto ético de la nueva cultura del agua. Funciones, valores y derechos en juego*, Barcelona 2006.

Theoretical and Methodological Focus

Our analysis was carried out using the neo-pragmatic³ perspective of framing theory. First, we used the notions of framing and counter-framing proposed by Benford and Hunt,⁴ who conceived of the framing of collective actions as operations that define “situations as problematic (diagnosis) and [propose] scenarios of reparation (prognosis),” which call “for their sympathizers to mobilize and coordinate collective actions”.⁵ These authors refer to counter-framing as attempts to “reject, undermine, or neutralize the myths, versions of reality, or interpretative frameworks of a person or group”.⁶ The prevailing notion of framing here is clearly strategic. While it clarifies a dimension of collective action that is actually present, it erroneously converts it into a synonym for the totality, thereby disregarding other dimensions, such as identity and emotions, among others, and excluding the uncertainty and chance that are integral to such phenomena. Here, by adopting the perspective of Trom and Zimmermann⁷ and Cefai,⁸ we present a pragmatic and dramaturgical interpretation of these two operations in order to illustrate their experimental and relational character, the diverse motives, and the uncertainty that are inherent in all framing operations as they arise, evolve, and become clearly defined. We begin by using these approaches to rethink the nature of processes that give life to social movements.

- 3 Carlos Rea: *Acción colectiva y procesos de enmarcamiento: los deudores de la banca en México*, in: *Il Dubbio* 3 (2004), pp. 69–83; Danny Trom/Bénédicte Zimmermann: *Cadres et institution des problèmes publiques. Les cas du chômage et du paysage*, in: Daniel Cefai/Danny Trom (eds.): *Les formes de l’action collective. Mobilisation dans les arènes publiques*, Paris 2001, pp. 281–315; Daniel Cefai: *Les cadres de l’action collective. Définitions et problèmes*, in: Daniel Cefai/Danny Trom (eds.): *Les formes de l’action collective*, pp. 51–97; John Dewey: *The public and its problems*, New York/Athens [1927] 1954. Other useful references in this topic are: Antonio Rivas: *El análisis de los marcos: una metodología para el estudio de los movimientos sociales*, in: Pedro Ibarra/Benjamín Tejerina (eds.): *Los movimientos sociales. Transformaciones políticas y cambio cultural*, Madrid 1998, pp. 181–215; John McCarthy/Jackie Smith/Mayer Zald: *El acceso a la agenda pública y a la agenda del gobierno: medios de comunicación y sistema electoral*, in: Dough McAdam/John McCarthy/Mayer Zald (eds.): *Movimientos sociales: perspectivas comparadas*, Madrid 1999, pp. 413–441.
- 4 Robert Benford/Scott Hunt: *Cadrages en conflit. Mouvements sociaux et problèmes sociaux*: Daniel Cefai/Danny Trom (eds.): *Les formes de l’action collective*, pp. 163–194.
- 5 *Ibid.*, p. 167.
- 6 *Ibid.*
- 7 Danny Trom/Bénédicte Zimmermann: *Cadres et institution des problèmes publiques*.
- 8 Daniel Cefai: *Les cadres de l’action collective*.

Our approach understands the constitution of social movements through a pragmatist view⁹ of how practical investigations develop, that is, how the participating actors (re)constitute themselves and gradually come to concur and coordinate as they search for solutions to problems that alter or disrupt the normal course of their daily lives, or that threaten to do so. This process reaches a point at which their inquiries are transformed into defiance, or into a resolute defence of the existing sociocultural order. As the shared social problem is reconfigured into a public issue, many factors simultaneously emerge and fade: the actors involved, the axes of conflict among them, the arenas of controversy, the pertinent institutional devices that exist to confront them, and the audience that witnesses the dispute. That is, a dramaturgical dimension appears through the disputes among the actors in the diverse public arenas (public drama) as they present partially or radically distinct, or even opposing, definitions of the causes and consequences of a problem, and the means for solving it. The actors thereby mobilize specific discursive and performative strategies and tactics as they strive to ensure that their view of the situation prevails, while at the same time discrediting and rejecting those of their opponents. They also attempt to convince the wider public that their position is the only correct one, while motivating people to get on board with them, or at least not join an opposing group.¹⁰ In disputes of this nature, the actors implement a series of roles, a grammar of motives, certain frames of meaning, and a repertory of specific practical actions and stagings that, together, define a system of conflictual action¹¹ imbued with a specific sociohistorical meaning.

This perspective leads us to understand the framing process as:

an operation that permits the mobilizing/updating of frames; which brings into play an ever-varying mix of strategies, practical necessity and reproduction, adjustment and invention, all based on intuition and discovery, trial and error, projection and *a posteriori* reconstruction, and entails cultural and ideological referents, affections and emotions, institutional limits and situations, and consensus and imposition. Framing is not, then, exclusively or by priority, a strategic operation,

- 9 Daniel Cefai: La construction des problèmes publics. Définitions de situations dans des arènes publiques, in: *Réseaux* 14:75 (1996), pp. 45–66; also see Michel Callon: *Éléments pour une sociologie de la traduction. La domestication des coquilles Saint-Jacques et des marins-pêcheurs dans la baie de Saint-Brieuc*, in: *L'année sociologique* 36 (1986), pp. 169–208.
- 10 Robert Benford/Scott Hunt: *Cadrages en conflit. Mouvements sociaux et problèmes sociaux*.
- 11 Daniel Cefai: *Qu'est-ce que'une arène publique? Quelques pistes pour une approche pragmatiste*, in: Daniel Cefai/Isaac Joseph (eds.): *L'Héritage du pragmatisme. Conflits d'urbanité et épreuves de civisme*, Paris 2002, pp. 59–100.

but rather, a form of practical investigation (*d'enquete*, cf. Trom and Zimmerman, 2002) that acquires the form of categorizations.¹²

In brief, we understand framing and counter-framing as experimental processes that, far from omitting a strategic dimension, combine it with distinct kinds of operations, though not necessarily harmoniously. In the concrete case that concerns us, these processes underwent reciprocal adjustments as the conflict evolved. For the people who opposed the construction of the dam, forming a broad social and political intercultural alliance over the length and breadth of the watershed required putting into practice a dialogue centered on a certain body of knowledge, political conceptions, and views of nature and the world. What gradually emerged was the most stable and mature version of their counter-framing, which we set out to explain in this article.

Our research is based on information gathered through documentary sources (official documents from the social movement, other social organizations, and government agencies, as well as academic pronouncements), participant observation, a series of semi-structured interviews, and informal, unstructured interviews with individuals directly involved in the movement. I must clarify that, as Coordinator of the *Pro-Regiones* project¹³ in Nayarit during the early years of the study period (from 2008 until 2011), I participated in processes to provide information on this hydroelectric project, convene discussions about it, and define and implement a strategy to inform and explain the nature of this government project in communities throughout the watershed. I also directly participated in creating the Inter-Community Council for Sustainable Development of the San Pedro River (CIDSCRSP), and in other later and important activities carried out by the movement, which are described herein. The research group to which I belonged included professors and students at the Autonomous University of Nayarit, supported by a team of peers at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM). The research group's principal activities consisted of holding information workshops, developing participatory community diagnoses, contacting local, national and international scholars, and accompanying local actors during interactions with government agents who promoted the project.

12 Carlos Rea: *Acción colectiva y procesos de enmarcamiento: los deudores de la banca en México*.

13 A university project that began at the National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM) with activities in several regions of the country, and which applied Sergio Zermeño's theoretical-methodological perspective of sustainable development. In Nayarit, this initiative created the Pro-Regiones Nayarit Project, based at the Autonomous University of Nayarit.

A History of Confrontation

Context and Background

The San Pedro-Mezquital River watershed (SPMW) is located in the state of Nayarit, in northwestern Mexico. This river system originates in the neighbouring state of Durango, where it is called 'La Saucedá'. The portion of the basin that is located in Nayarit is of singular importance because (1) it is the only undammed zone in Mexico and (2) it contains the *Marismas Nacionales*,¹⁴ the most extensive wetlands on Mexico's Pacific coast and one of the most important wetlands in the American Pacific region. This area is characterized by great biodiversity and high productivity. Several Naayeri communities exist in the watershed, as well as some Wixarika (or Huichol)¹⁵ communities, imbuing the region with notable sociocultural importance. However, the basin is experiencing a serious process of deterioration due to the contamination of the San Pedro River,¹⁶ exacerbated by a new factor that constitutes an immense ecological risk: the mega-project to construct a system of large dams.

The proposal to build huge hydroelectric projects in this region responds to a context of global dimensions, as recent decades have witnessed the extraordinary construction of monumental dam projects worldwide, recently accompanied by multibillion-dollar markets for water. This has propelled the privatization and de-nationalization of this resource to the advantage of large transnational corporations, and to the detriment of extensive regions and numerous social groups that have seen their sources of this vital liquid snatched away.¹⁷ Sadly, the discourse of global warming and sustainability has been used as a powerful justification for these policies across large areas of the globe, allegedly as an option for producing non-polluting energy and water for human consumption.

It was in this globalized setting that the governments of Felipe Calderón Hinojosa (National Action Party, PAN, 2006–2012) and Enrique Peña Nieto (Institutional

- 14 *Marismas Nacionales* is "a stretch of lagoons roughly 20 kilometers wide and 90 kilometers long, which depends on normal water flows and seasonal flooding with freshwater and sediments, especially from the San Pedro River, and saltwater from tidal flows from the Pacific Ocean" (Academic Pronouncement against the construction of Las Cruces hydroelectric dam, March 2010).
- 15 Ethnic group that inhabits the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the state of Nayarit and parts of the states of Jalisco, Durango, and Zacatecas. They call themselves Wixaritari (in plural) or Wixarika (in singular).
- 16 Carlos Rea et al.: *Marcos y redes sociales: educación ambiental y desarrollo regional sustentable en la región baja de la Cuenca del Río San Pedro en Nayarit*, Research Report, Mexico 2007.
- 17 Vandana Shiva: *Las guerras del agua. Privatización, contaminación y lucro*, Mexico 2003; Pedro Arrojo: *El reto ético de la nueva cultura del agua. Funciones, valores y derechos en juego*.

Revolutionary Party, PRI, 2012–2018) launched proposals to promote the generation of clean energy in Mexico, in response to present and future demands for progress and national development that would not contribute to global climate change. In this context, and operating through the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE in Spanish), their governments proposed constructing the Las Cruces hydroelectric mega-project in Nayarit (among several other projects), even though three enormous dams were already functioning in that state (Aguamilpa, El Cajón, and La Yesca).

In late 2008, the CFE announced a project to build five dams on the San Pedro River and seven more on the Acaponeta River, primarily to generate electricity.¹⁸ A meeting at the Autonomous University of Nayarit (UAN) marked the inception of a controversy that would generate one of the most impactful social movements in the region, as professors and members of civil society raised their voices in opposition to the project (initially led by a university-based group called *Pro-Regiones* (UAN/National Autonomous University of Mexico, UNAM)¹⁹ and the World Wildlife Fund, WWF). In January 2009, this group undertook an intense information campaign in towns and communities throughout the watershed, designed to:

- promote the creation of community and inter-community spaces for discussion, which would serve as platforms for disseminating information, defining positions, and eventually organizing resistance to the project;
- salvage, reinvigorate, or create regional ‘ecosystem’ identities; and
- promote initiatives and activities aimed at achieving regional sustainability.

This process quickly began to drive an important public debate among the inhabitants of the watershed, one that would later acquire importance at the state level.

The Actors

The dispute led to the formation of a conflictual system that featured two opposing camps, one of which was composed of local inhabitants of the San Pedro River watershed who opposed the project. This included members of cooperatives, *ejidatarios*,²⁰ rural producer organizations, and indigenous communities (Naayeri and Wixaritari).

18 This initiative involved reactivating an older project called the ‘Northwest Interconnected Hydraulic Plan’, which was designed to transport huge volumes of water from Nayarit to Sonora through a system of dams and canals interconnected with rivers in the region.

19 The Pro-Regiones Project was succeeded by an organised movement called the Center for Social Development and Sustainability Nuiwari A.C., created by Pro-Regiones/UAN.

20 The *ejido* is a type of collective property of the rural land, recognised in Mexican law, which is indivisible, inalienable and cannot be inherited, and the *ejidatarios* are the families who are

These varied groups formed an organizational structure consisting of the Inter-Community Council and the Naayeri Indigenous Council, the movement's core organizations that were created primarily through the work of *Pro-Regiones*. Over time, these councils were strengthened by the backing of local, regional, national, and international NGOs that provided technical, legal, environmental, and economic advice, along with the support of labour unions, cooperatives, and urban, farmers, youth, and women's organizations, as well groups of scholars in Mexico and abroad. This heterogeneous constellation of organizations has generally backed the Naayeri councils' positions in opposition to dam construction and in defense of the territory, culture, identity, and views of the collective wellbeing of towns and communities in the watershed.

The other camp was composed of a broad base of adversaries who were identified as: the federal government, which included the CFE, the National Commission for the Development of Indigenous Peoples (CDI), the National Water Commission (CONAGUA), the Ministry of Agriculture, Livestock, Rural Development, Fisheries and Food (SAGARPA), the Ministry of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT), the state government of Nayarit, and the national and transnational consortiums that intended to build the dam. A group of secondary supporters included professors at the UAN and the University of Guadalajara (UdeG) who worked for government agencies, municipal governments, and regional economic interests and who believed they would benefit in some way from the project.

Arenas of Struggle for the Movement in Defence of the San Pedro River

The work performed during the information campaign began in January 2009, by *Pro-Regiones* and the WWF. This led to the creation of the Inter-Community Council for the Sustainable Development of the San Pedro River Watershed²¹ in July of that year, which incorporated numerous *ejidos*, cooperatives, and indigenous communities. The year 2012 saw the founding of the Naayeri Indigenous Council, composed of communities and groups associated with this indigenous people.²² The whole set of the movement's actions that revolved around these two community councils involved debates and dealings with social, academic-scientific, legal, political, and media institutions and agencies.

part of an *ejido*. Nevertheless, from the neoliberal reform of agrarian Law in 1992, privatisation of *ejidal* land is possible.

21 Carlos Rea/Luz Ceballos/Bertha Villaseñor: Equilibrio sustentable y resistencia social en la cuenca del río San Pedro en Nayarit, in: *Desacatos* 47 (2015), pp. 116–131.

22 Interview to Julián López (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2018.

In the social domain, the councils constituted the heart of the resistance to the hydroelectric project and the defence of local lifestyles and collective wellbeing. They also served as the setting-off point for activities designed to organize and incorporate indigenous and mestizo populations in the watershed. Their work was carried out by representatives and working groups that were active in various communities in the basin, as well as by producer organizations and the resolute involvement of indigenous communities with traditional governing structures. The two councils²³ also coordinated relations among an array of social organizations and sectors allied to the cause, and led the conflictual discussions with the government agencies that promoted the project.

It is important to note that the native communities' impact on the heart of the movement gradually increased. From an initial attitude marked by scepticism and caution, the Naayeri in the mountainous Sierra Madre region (led by residents of the communities of Presidio de los Reyes and Mesa del Nayar) came to exercise significant influence. This evolved into cultural, moral, and political leadership in resistance to the dam, and began a process of defining options for the collective wellbeing of the region.²⁴ In fact, the indigenous council eventually linked the defence of the river with defending the sacred sites of the Naayeri people, several of which are also sacred to the Wixaritari, Mexicaneros (or Meshikan)²⁵ and Tepehuans (or O'dam)²⁶, as well as with other historical demands by these native peoples. This dynamic strengthened relations between the Naayeri of the San Pedro watershed and those in the Sierra, and with other native peoples in the region, especially the Wixaritari, in the common defence of the sacred sites of Haramara and Wirikuta.²⁷

With respect to the academic-scientific debate, the defense movement had to gather and systematize scientific information with the help and support of professors, researchers, and members of local, national, and international NGOs. Those materials were enriched by information and experiences provided by local people as the movement prepared to confront representatives of the CFE at distinct moments. One of those moments took place during a visit by members of the International Wetlands Convention (RAMSAR) in June 2010, the first time that promoters and opponents of

- 23 The Centro para el Desarrollo Social y la Sustentabilidad Nuiwari AC played an equally important role in this history of struggle.
- 24 Carlos Rea/Luz Ceballos/Bertha Villaseñor: Equilibrio sustentable y resistencia social en la cuenca del río San Pedro en Nayarit.
- 25 Ethnic group that belongs to the municipality of Mezquital, in the Sierra Madre Occidental, in the state of Durango. They also inhabit the states of Nayarit, Zacatecas, and Jalisco. They call themselves Meshikan.
- 26 Tepehuans (from the South) is an ethnic group that inhabits the Sierra Madre Occidental, in some areas of the states of Durango, Nayarit, Zacatecas, and Jalisco. They call themselves O'dam.
- 27 Interview to Julián López (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2018.

the project confronted each other publicly and formally in an institutional setting. A second occasion occurred in February 2014 at a meeting held to present and discuss the environmental impact reports that were developed to justify the feasibility and importance of the hydroelectric project. The protests that the residents, professors, and NGOs presented on that occasion forced the proponents to commission several additional studies in order to correct the deficiencies detected by the opposition.²⁸ Taking place within that arena of debate were numerous conferences, public forums, academic panels, roundtable discussions, and other meetings that all helped people form a clearer idea of the 'state of the question', for both the inhabitants of the basin and for public opinion.

Turning to the legal aspect, the movement worked intensively to formalize its objections and to document the government's non-compliance with legislation on matters related to the environment, changes in agrarian property laws, and the rights of original peoples, especially the right to be consulted as stipulated in the International Labor Organization's Convention 169, to which Mexico is a signatory.

Regarding the movement's gradual politicization, this meant gaining strength by forging alliances through meetings and conferences with civil society organizations and other social movements. Notable among these measures was the October 2012 IX National Meeting of MAPDER, that is, the Movement of People affected by Dams and in Defence of Rivers,²⁹ and the First Statewide Forum of Independent Civil Society Organizations in May of the same year.³⁰ The principal issue addressed at that forum was the fight against the Northwest Interconnected Hydraulic Plan, which included the Las Cruces dam and the Centenario Canal, another highly-controversial water diversion plan proposed by the state government. The second issue was the defense of indigenous peoples, their territory, culture, identity, and sacred sites.

On various occasions, the fight against the hydroelectric project led the mestizo and indigenous communities involved to raise awareness about their demands by blocking city streets. This occurred in Tuxpan in September 2013,³¹ when the Naayeri communities, accompanied by a large contingent of mestizos, staged the first massive occupation of public spaces in the municipal capital. A similar event took place in

28 *Dominio Público: Suspendida evaluación de la MIA Presa Las Cruces, podría ser desechada*, 25 March 2014, at: <http://dominiopublico.mx/suspendida-evaluacion-de-la-mia-presa-las-cruces-podria-ser-desechada/> (accessed on 22 January 2015).

29 *Mapder: Declaración de Presidio de los Reyes*, at: <http://www.mapder.lunasexta.org/?p=2046> (accessed on 19 June 2015).

30 *Nayarit en línea: Organizaciones independientes buscan erradicar problemáticas de Nayarit*, 18 May 2014, at: <http://www.nayaritenlinea.mx/2014/05/18/organizaciones-independientes-buscan-erradicar-problematicas-de-nayarit?vid=63554> (accessed on 15 January 2015).

31 *René Ruiz: ONG se manifiestan contra edificación de la presa TRes Cruces en Nayarit*, in: *Crónica*, 10 September 2013, at: <http://www.cronica.com.mx/notas/2013/781833.html> (accessed on 4 April 2015).

January 2014,³² when a convocation of independent social organizations in the state resulted in a multitudinous march in Tepic in support of the movement—the first time that its presence was felt in the state capital. At the end of that year, the streets of Tepic were occupied once again, this time by residents from 44 indigenous communities who, along with several urban social organizations, denounced intense state repression and expressed their solidarity with the struggle of parents of the missing students from Ayotzinapa³³, Guerrero.

With regard to mass media, the movement organized several press conferences, gave interviews, and opened significant local spaces, thanks to the large-scale public actions that were undertaken. Here, it is important to mention the ‘Campaign to Defend Muxatena’. Launched in 2014,³⁴ this movement demanded the cancellation of the Las Cruces project and respect for Naayeri sacred sites, with 49,000 people signing the related petition.

However, as the movement grew it found itself facing an enemy that had adopted a strategy to steadily weaken it through intimidation, repression, and even the jailing and murder of indigenous leaders in the mountainous regions.³⁵ Those actions by the state were accompanied by an intense media campaign that presented the dam as ‘necessary and inevitable’. The CFE and the social organizations that it hired also offered to carry out sorely-needed, but small projects and works in communities as a way to overcome local social resistance. In response, in March 2014, members of the movement sent commissions to Mexico City for a series of meetings with congressional representatives, human rights groups, and universities, at which they denounced the repression to which they were subjected and began to move the conflict onto the national social, media, and political agendas.

32 Agustín Del Castillo: Convocan a manifestación cultural en defensa del Río San Pedro, in: Milenio, 9 June 2014, at: <https://www.milenio.com/estados/convocan-manifestacion-cultural-defensa-rio-san-pedro> (accessed on 4 April 2015).

33 43 students of the Rural Normal School ‘Rural Raúl Isidro Burgos’ of Ayotzinapa, Guerrero, were victims of enforced disappearance on 2 September 2014, in Tixtla, in the municipality of Iguala de la Independencia. They allegedly disappeared at the hands of police officers of Iguala and Cocula, who handed them to drug cartel Guerreros Unidos to murder them, according to the version of Attorney General’s Office.

34 Juan José Guerra Abud et al.: No autorice la mega hidroeléctrica en Nayarit; proteja el río San Pedro Mezquitlan, los pueblos indígenas y los manglares de Marismas Nacionales, 2 March 2014, at: <https://www.change.org/p/no-autoricen-la-mega-hidroel%C3%A9ctrica-las-cruces-defiendemuxatena-juanjoseguerra-robertosandoval-estefanoconde> (accessed on 9 June 2015).

35 Ángel Espa: El río San Pedro y la nación Náyeri amenazados por las transnacionales, in: Grieta, 23 February 2015, at: <https://www.grieta.org.mx/index.php/2015/02/23/el-rio-san-pedro-y-la-nacion-nayeri-amenazados-por-las-transnacionales/> (accessed on 7 March 2016).

Finally, in 2016, President Peña Nieto was forced to admit that his government did not have the funds needed to carry out the project, and that the construction would have to be financed through private investments. Thus, in early 2017, the entire project was suspended, likely once and for all.³⁶

The Framings in the Dispute

We will now analyse the general characteristics of the framings by both sides in the conflict.

Official Framing³⁷

To justify the importance—indeed the necessity—of the project, from the outset³⁸ the CFE based its campaign on the assertion that the urgent need to actively combat the effects of climate change worldwide required a new national energy policy, one that would be more in line with the global consensus to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. This meant prioritizing clean energy sources such as hydroelectricity, wind power, geothermal energy, and even nuclear power. But that argument appeared to be merely instrumental, that is, a means of justifying the project's developmentalist logic, which understands and treats nature as simply a provider of resources for human benefit, a strictly anthropocentric perspective. The human and social dimensions of sustainability—the search for individual and collective wellbeing—accompanied this logic as a purportedly automatic consequence of the allegedly 'rational' exploitation of resources, but *not* as an ethical premise for organizing the social use of nature.

The government's position was that Nayarit possessed enormous hydraulic wealth, more than sufficient to support the development of projects designed to exploit these resources in order to meet the increasing national and international demand for electricity. However, it never addressed the issue of the constant upward spiral of consumption, a reality that revealed its flawed logic and its failure to consider potentially dire consequences, as well as the urgent need to substantially modify it. The govern-

36 Verónica Ramírez: Se cancela presa Las Cruces, in: Realidades, 31 January 2017, at: <http://realidadesperiodico.com/nota.php?id=54375> (accessed on 16 July 2018).

37 See the chapter on justification, in: Federal Electricity Commission: Manifestación de Impacto Social del P.H. Las Cruces, at: https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/155900/Evaluaci_n_o_Manifestaci_n_de_Impac_to_Social_del_Proyecto_Hidroel_ctrico_Las_Cruces.pdf (accessed on 13 May 2015).

38 Based on arguments presented in various public meetings by CFE officials and technicians, as well as by private consultants contracted by that agency.

ment's approach seemed to say that we must simply try to respond to demand as efficiently as possible, but uncritically, though this meant that the most marginalized populations in the most socioeconomically disadvantaged and least politically-relevant states would shoulder the burden that economically-advantaged groups in rich states were unwilling to bear. The official discourse further argued that the Las Cruces dam was a 'sustainable' project in the sense that it was

- economically feasible;
- would bring significant social benefits; and
- took environmental protection into account in its conception, construction, and operation.

This discourse on the project was clearly framed in terms of state intervention in the exploitation of strategic resources based on the logic of supposed inter-regional solidarity, which also conformed to the criteria of the market economy. The central element assumed by this logic was that any serious government has an implicit responsibility to satisfy the energy needs of national modernization projects in an environmentally responsible way, in order to bring benefits to society as a whole. It implies acting opportunely to provide the nation with the infrastructure required to exploit a vital natural resource that in many regions has become a scarce and therefore valuable commodity. The fact that water exists in abundance in certain areas of Mexico gives those regions a considerable comparative advantage that increases their competitiveness. According to the official logic, these were the circumstances under which Nayarit should engage in exploitation in order to generate wealth, while at the same time efficiently meeting present and future energy demands, within and beyond national borders. Obviously, the construction of the dam, the management of hydraulic resources, and the exploitation of electricity would occur within the boundaries, criteria, and dynamics of the free market economy, while the criteria of public patrimony, public interest, and collective wellbeing were deemed irrelevant. The prevailing element in this framing is a modernizing orientation that is anthropocentric, rationalist, productivist, extraction-based, mercantilist, and confiscatory—one that is founded upon conceptions of hydraulic structuralism.³⁹

39 The tendency to construct large hydroelectric projects characterised the management of surface waters around the world in the second half of the twentieth century, driven primarily by the U. S. government, but also promoted by multinational corporations, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT), the World Trade Organization, and the World Bank (Vandana Shiva: *Las guerras del agua*). This dynamic of privatising water on a global scale has been accelerated by the neoliberal emphasis on extraction, which intensifies processes involving dispossession and territorial depredation, in the interests of capitalist accumulation by transnational entities (David Harvey: *The New Imperialism*, Oxford 2003; Carlos

The variations in the official framing that were observed from the onset of the conflict to 2017 were basically of form, not substance. As the number of social and technical objections multiplied and organized social resistance gained strength, the CFE held firm to its position that the conflict needed to be settled in closed spaces through purely technical discussions. Clearly, its objective was to attract, isolate, and neutralize opposing social actors. Now with the support of the WWF, the CFE proposed additional protocols to improve the process, offered to increase social participation, and promised to guarantee the minimum amount of water necessary to preserve the environmental, social, and productive processes in the watershed. However, the behaviour of the official sectors—marked by cooptation, intimidation and repression—contradicted and delegitimized those minor adjustments to their framing.

Framing by the Movement

Unlike the government's position, the movement's framing underwent substantive changes over time. Here, three main periods can be identified.

First Period: Sustainable Equilibrium

The first phase combined the establishment of the movement itself with the process of developing its initial framing. As various frames were being evaluated with the goal of developing a definitive frame, the discussions involved were affected by internal tensions that reflected the members' diversity and their distinct orientations towards key matters that affected the group as a whole. And while we can assume that those orientations were modified as the movement developed, we will attempt to accurately describe the most mature and general positions observed among the actors.

One of the proposed frames was characteristic of the WWF, the NGO that convened the first discussions about the dam project. This view can be categorized as critical but fundamentally conservationist, a frame where the quality of life of human groups is secondary to conservation and the appropriate or sustainable use of resources, or at least disengaged from it, and in which it is not considered a problem in itself. However, the WWF later adopted a negotiating stance with official organisms that was virtually devoid of criticism, and shared the idea that the behavior of semi-gov-

Rodríguez: Geopolítica del desarrollo local: campesinos, empresas y gobiernos en la disputa por territorios y bienes naturales en el México rural, Mexico 2015) and to the detriment of indigenous and rural communities. Such projects also actively involve the interests of national and regional actors (government and private) who directly or indirectly benefit from their approval.

ernmental industries can be moralized by appealing to the rule of law in Mexico. Nevertheless, despite this significant change, the WWF's intervention was crucial during the early stages of the conflict in terms of increasing the visibility of the environmental importance of the San Pedro River.

The next framing to be considered was the one posited by the university group *Pro-Regiones* (UAN/UNAM), which explicitly adopted sustainable equilibrium,⁴⁰ as its theoretical-methodological proposal. This approach supports the sustainable use of all forms of energy generated by an ecosystem, in a reasonably well-organized manner and with fair distribution. Its goal is to achieve social densification, that is, to improve the quality of life of human groups through a balanced relationship with their natural surroundings. This objective can best be achieved in medium-sized regions by relying on a sociology of convergence, not conflict. Hence, while it reconfigures the relation between human beings and nature in order to reinsert the latter into a comprehensive ecosystem plan, the sustainable equilibrium remains anthropocentric, at least to a degree.

The university project progressed to the point of seeking to help expand the ability of community actors to act autonomously. To this end, it promoted informed and reflexive, but active, initiatives by local residents, to open public spaces, and actions to develop a democratic, participatory culture that could impact the process of democratic institutionalization.⁴¹ The cornerstones of this frame were the defence of universal and collective rights and the direct participation of people in defining the path that they believed would improve their quality of life. Thus, its main concerns did not include the growth of material production as a premise of wellbeing. Instead, it sought to construct and strengthen sociocultural, political, and economic factors that are integral to improving people's living conditions. With this orientation, resistance to the hydroelectric project is not considered to be a goal in and of itself, but rather a step in the quest to achieve sustainable equilibrium in the region.

Nevertheless, tensions arose between these frames and the diverse views of the inhabitants of the lower watershed (especially the community of Tuxpan), whose framing can be understood as centring on the river itself, with which, they assert, they maintain a strategic, instrumental relationship. This may well reflect the fact that many of those localities are of relatively recent formation, and therefore, they have no ancestral ties to the river or land. Although the river is part of an increasingly deteriorating regional environment, it still allows people to carry out the economic activities with which they sustain their families and communities. However, probing this frame

40 Sergio Zermeño: *Reconstruir a México en el siglo XXI. Estrategias para mejorar la calidad de vida y enfrentar la destrucción del medio ambiente*, Mexico 2010.

41 Jürgen Habermas: *Tres modelos de democracia. Sobre el concepto de una política deliberativa*, in: *Polis* 10, at: <http://www.revistapolis.cl/10/habe.htm> (accessed on 4 May 2011).

more deeply reveals that the river is a framing that nourishes their historical memory of earlier agrarian struggles and recognizes organizational structures that support collective dynamics, objectives, norms, and solidarity.

With respect to the Naayeri indigenous community of Presidio de los Reyes, which, together with Tuxpan, formed one of the fundamental axes of the movement during the first period, we found that nature, as a set of resources, coexists with, but is gradually subordinated to, a spiritual and holistic view. This is a consequence of the search for balance between humans and their natural surroundings, and of pretensions to development, community wellbeing, and environmental health. The people of Presidio were seeking resources and political participation in a decision-making process that deeply affected them, but even more significantly, they were striving to achieve a harmonious ecosystem, respect for their culture and social organization, and recognition of their ancestral rights to the land and water as their patrimony.⁴²

Other frames emerged from the diverse agricultural, fishing, and urban groups and communities along the coastal plain and the indigenous Naayeri region. Their respective orientations gradually became formulated and then expanded, and were immersed in differences, tensions, contradictions, and even conflict. Despite this, certain features predominated that allow us to speak of a common position. Little by little, interaction among these distinct frames led to the emergence of a position in which the framing that characterized the *Pro-Regiones* initially predominated. This reflected the fact that *Pro-Regiones* was the principle player in the information campaign to spread the word about the impending hydroelectric project, and in the first organizational efforts in towns and indigenous communities before the creation of the Inter-Community Council. However, local inhabitants frame added a fundamentally important concept, namely, an experiential component that was as much cognitive in nature as it was emotional and affective. As a result, the sustainable equilibrium perspective became much more meaningful for inhabitants and was integrated into their interpretation of the phenomenon that they were confronting.

Once constituted, the Inter-Community Council for the Sustainable Development of the San Pedro River watershed formulated a declaration that synthesized the arguments made by the opponents of the dam. This key document⁴³ presented the following fundamental demands:

- the involvement in the consulting process of all the social, economic, political, and cultural actors in the region who were directly or indirectly affected by the hydroelectric project;

42 Pedro Arrojo: El reto ético de la nueva cultura del agua.

43 CIDSCRSP: Primer pronunciamiento del Consejo Intercomunitario para el Desarrollo Sustentable de la Cuenca del Río San Pedro, 1 August 2009.

- the opening of institutionally-recognized spaces for public debate, where all parties could actively participate in an informed manner;
- the evaluation of the feasibility and environmental and social impacts of the project, together with the resulting resolutions, within the confines of national and international law;
- giving priority to alternative infrastructure works that would be less costly and better addressed the needs of the region; and
- the implementation of regional development strategies in an integral manner.

The framing outlined therein highlights political-technical aspects that required the inhabitants to actively participate in a fundamentally public debate. Aspects of academic discourse were also still evident, and contributed to defining the framing presented by the movement at that time.

Second Period: Dominance of the Indigenous Worldview

During the second period, both the grammar of sustainable equilibrium promoted by *Pro-Regiones* and the position held by the *ejidatarios* in Tuxpan were gradually subordinated to the Naayeri way of thinking, which came to predominate. Consequently, concepts such as wealth, growth, and development, among others, no longer appeared among the members' central concerns, but were replaced by human dignity, respect, autonomy, and balance among humans, nature, and the spiritual and sacred realm.⁴⁴ This perspective had thus evolved from anthropocentrism to biocentrism and ecocentrism. Similarly, insistence on the right to be different and to be heard and recognized stood out. Through this process, the concept of development was transformed from a single view of the future to an embryonic view of other possible projects that contribute to wellbeing.⁴⁵

[...] our original peoples still conserve [...] nature as a common good off of which we have lived and wish to keep living. We're not interested in [and] don't think

44 Interview to Odilón de Jesús (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2015.

45 This way of thinking and living is similar to views of 'good living' that emphasise the centrality of nature as a sacred, living being that is a subject of rights, that place the community above the individual, and relate to nature with care, instead of the view of unbridled exploitation for supposed human benefit. Finally, it proposes happiness as the final goal of everyday practices and of life itself (Boris Marañón: *Buen vivir y descolonialidad. Crítica al desarrollo y racionalidad instrumentales*, México 2013; Pablo Davalos: *El "Sumak Kawsay" ("Buen Vivir") y las cesuras del desarrollo*, in: *América Latina en Movimiento*, at: <http://alainet.org/active/23920> (accessed on 2 June 2012).

about accumulating wealth, but in conserving the health of nature, our Mother Earth, our nature, keeping her in good health because if our Mother is healthy then we will surely be healthy also.⁴⁶

This change in the movement's framing was also demonstrated by the fact that the legal arena took centre stage. It was during this second period that the government intensified its actions to change land use regulations in the territory of the indigenous communities, though this meant multiple violations of rights, including those of indigenous peoples, agrarian rights, and basic human rights. In this phase of the struggle, the movement imposed injunctions to block the government's efforts and demanded that it consult with indigenous peoples, as stipulated by law. Finally,

in 2017, [members] from the Mexican Center for Environmental Law filed an injunction on behalf of the initiative by the Wixarika people in Bancos de San Hipólito, because they had a ceremonial center on the river that they shared with the Naayeri and O'dam. [That measure] proceeded and blocked dam construction.⁴⁷

Another axis of this social framing was the growing indigenous component, given that the struggle for indigenous peoples' rights was resonating loudly in both the national and international media as well as in legal realms, which held out the promise of being a more effective and efficient means of publicly promoting the movement's motives and goals. This was also influenced by the thematic, spatial, temporal, historical, and cultural proximity of the Wixaritari, who had recently succeeded in their internationally visible defense of their territory (the case of Wirikuta).⁴⁸ Another key aspect was the sweeping nature of the criticisms formulated by the movement, which by now called into question the entire development model that was being espoused by the state of Nayarit, including agro-industrial exports, the privatization of beaches for large tourist complexes, and the privatization of hydraulic and geothermic resources to generate electricity for agriculture and human consumption. This led to the conviction that

we had to stay organized, continue to organize, and begin to coordinate with other struggles that are going on right now, on other fronts, some in education, others over questions of work, social issues, human rights abuses; that is, different orga-

46 Interview to Julián López (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2018.

47 Ibid.

48 Carlos Rea/Luz Ceballos/Bertha Villaseñor: *Equilibrio sustentable y resistencia social en la cuenca del río San Pedro en Nayarit*.

nizations on distinct fronts of resistance, of struggle [...] that's how we came into contact and came to collaborate with other struggles [and] obtain advice from professors and people who offered guidance.⁴⁹

Finally, it is important to note the gradual emergence of tensions between the movement and some of the national and international NGOs that supported it, due to the latter's tendency to make decisions for the members of the movement based on their professional experience and the fact that they offered advice, guidance, and indispensable financial resources. These tensions later translated into the assertion of the movement's autonomy, not only from the state but also from some of its allies. During this phase, the team of university professors in *Pro-Regiones* Nayarit also lost its central position in the process, and was replaced by the Nuiwari⁵⁰ civil association and natural forms of leadership that arose and became established at the core of the Inter-Community Council and the Naayeri Indigenous Council.

Third Period: Inroads in the City and on the National Scene

The third period was marked by the predominance of the indigenous grammar in the movement's general framing. Facing increased state pressure, and in the aftermath of the government's resounding defeat in the discussions about the environmental impact report in February 2014 (though that report was eventually approved by SEMARNAT), the centrality of the indigenous social component was reaffirmed and organized by the councils, while the movement's allies (NGOs, advisors) were relegated to a secondary role in terms of both participation and influence. The adversaries were basically the same, but the movement had gained a clear understanding of the reality that their opponents represented: a predatory, neoliberal, extraction-based, global development model.

[...] we've always lived here [...] sometimes, you know, governments negotiate with transnational corporations to directly affect our territories without taking into account that we live off the river [...] we live off our Mother Earth, and that we've always been here. We were here in the colonial period and remain here with our ways of life, our culture, our traditions, but governments don't consider this when it comes to building megaprojects on our lands.⁵¹

49 Interview to Julián López (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2018.

50 The Centro para el Desarrollo Social y la Sustentabilidad Nuiwari AC.

51 Interview to Pedro Cayetano (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2018.

The movement's strategic allies came to include an expanding group of national social and legal actors, though political actors were considered allies of a more tactical nature. During this period, the movement's organizational work and actions were considerably more systematic and strategically planned, thanks to the involvement of Nuiwari, the two councils (CDSCRSP, CIN), and the most supportive NGOs. However, the influence of Nuiwari and the other NGOs, with their professionalized logic of action and concern for efficacy, continued to create certain tensions with the dynamics that are characteristic of the Naayeri communities, which are governed by traditional, religious criteria oriented towards reaching community consensus based on a conception of temporality that is significantly distinct in terms of its definition and the performance of actions.

Regarding the predominance of this indigenous element in the movement's overall framing, we can see that the central goals during this stage were to gain recognition and active respect for cultural differences, the right to autonomy, the right to be different but equal and to live in a distinct way but together, and above all, legitimacy for views of collective wellbeing that are different from the modern mestizo-western perspective. These circumstances provided a learning experience for the mestizo population that was involved, directly or indirectly, with the movement.

[...] the first thing that mestizos may have learned from the original peoples is another way of perceiving our Mother Earth, our nature, based on the awareness that we belong to our Mother Earth, not the other way around [...] we need to nurture her, take care of our Mother Earth, our nature, and not exploit it with the intensity with which it is now being exploited, with no thought given to the effects.⁵²

The movement's framing was also modified by practical exigencies that were imposed by a changing political scene, as the government intensified its active promotion of the dam and adopted a more aggressive attitude towards the opposition.⁵³ The new framing clearly sought to widen the movement's reach in cities (principally with citizens and social and political actors in Tepic and Mexico City), expand and solidify its contacts with actors in social spheres (on the local level with organizations, collectives,⁵⁴ and diverse movements; on the national level with universities, social movements, and environmental and human rights NGOs), and penetrate the institutional political are-

52 Interview to Julián López (Naayeri spokesman), Tepic 2018.

53 A new state government took office in late 2017. It has yet to announce its official position on the dam.

54 There is an important relation with social, cultural and party collectives composed of urban youth, who in the crisis of local traditional cultural politics search for alternative political and symbolic references. This can lead to important identifications with elements of indigenous forms of thought and living.

na (through frequent contact with candidates for different positions at the municipal and state levels, and with state and federal representatives). Also notable was its stronger incursion into the legal arena on the basis of indigenous law, which is supported by agrarian statutes, and to a lesser degree by environmental law. The movement also made inroads into the arena of national (and increasingly international) public opinion. And even though it was keenly aware that its adversary was large and the pressure it imposed was causing suffering, it became evident during this period that by turning to the institutional spaces that were within its reach and by appealing to public opinion, the movement's framing never renounced its search for a political solution to the conflict, not even for a second. Moreover, it never abandoned the fundamental component of social organization as the guarantor of its struggle.

Conclusion

Through this history, we see the formation of an "actantial"⁵⁵ system that emerged as a social problem became defined in terms of a public problem, complete with victims, perpetrators, judges, and witnesses. This process developed in a mutually experimental way amidst conflictual interactions among the actors involved. In this saga, the university professors with the *Pro-Regiones* research team were precursors to the operation of denomination in the watershed. They formed a shared definition of the situation by interacting with other academic organizations and civil society, and by consensus. While, at the time, that was perceived as a serious problem of general interest, it simply represented an external view.

Making the problem publicly visible did not begin immediately. Rather, the initial core group made a strategic decision to focus on expanding the social bases in order to position the community so that a collective actor could assume a leading role once the conflict became a matter of public debate. This phase was followed by a long, slow process of galvanizing the social sectors and producer organizations in the watershed around the two councils, and the ensuing collaboration with groups and sectors at the state and federal levels. This entailed comparing and evaluating diverse cultural and political framings, which had to be at least partially harmonized through processes of intercultural dialogue of knowledge, as the indigenous worldview was gradually being introduced. Achieving this meant confronting the official framing, which considered the matter simply as an initiative to sustainably exploit natural resources based on criteria of efficiency and profit, in response to a supposedly necessary logic of development for the benefit of the nation.

55 Luc Boltanski/Yan Darré/Marie-Ange Schiltz: La dénonciation, in: Actes de la Recherche en Sciences Sociales 51 (1984), pp. 3–40.

In opposition to this framing, the movement presented a counter-framing that conceived of water and land as common patrimonies, prioritized human and biological wellbeing, asserted the centrality of the sustainable equilibrium of humans and nature, and appealed to the principle of ecosystem care rather than economic feasibility. The specifics of this framing were gradually defined by experimental adjustments that began with initial contact among the distinct views of members, and then continued as the conflictual relationships with the dam's promoters played out through confrontations in distinct arenas of struggle.

These were the two versions that competed for credibility and legitimacy among the watershed's inhabitants. As a result of this dispute over the denomination and significance of the process, a well-justified suspicion towards the official position emerged and became entrenched in important sectors of the population. And over time, this acquired its own form and content through the inter-community declaration discussed above. Here, we can see a demand for the democratic management of the hydraulic ecosystem,⁵⁶ which was to be understood not only as a set of resources but also as a common patrimony. And as such, management would not only be based on economic profit calculations—even if that appealed to an intergenerational ethic of solidarity (echoed in sustainable development)—but on a biocentric and holistic perspective that recognizes the environmental, sociocultural, and spiritual spheres to be just as important as economic factors, or more so.

Finally, it is important to highlight the general orientations that opposed one another and the institutional devices that were publicly used as the 'correct' ones for confronting and resolving the conflict. This is related to a clash between two views of how to conceive of improving people's quality of life. One of those is modern and rationalist, based on the idea of progress. The other predates and falls outside the modern project, and is definitively critical of it. It asserts a fundamental place for individual and collective happiness and ecosystem balance on the normative horizon.

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