

7 Resisting austerity in the era of COVID-19

Between nationwide mobilisation and decentralised organising in Ecuador

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Introduction

A wave of right and far-right governments swept Latin America after a commodity ‘super cycle’ came to an end around 2014, seemingly marking the end of a decade characterised by progressive and leftist governments in the region. In the moment we finish writing this chapter, in early 2021, right-wing governments have been governing debt and fiscal crises through increasing foreign debt and imposing austerity measures, including cuts to social and environmental programs and the privatisation of state institutions. In effect, such measures have placed the cost of debt and fiscal deficits on the popular classes that most depend on government services. The turn towards austerity in Latin America has been compared to the 1980s and 1990s, when the original neoliberal project produced what are frequently called “the lost decades”, in reference to rising poverty and inequality in the region (Naranjo, 2004). The lost decades and the current conjuncture of the late 2010s have both been characterised by reductions in social spending and market deregulation, in addition to policies designed to secure capital accumulation, such as labour flexibilization and free trade agreements (FTAs) largely imposed by international money lenders.

In response to a broad array of neoliberal reforms in the 1990s and early 2000s, multiple governments across the region were challenged or toppled by mass popular protests that converged on political centres. Likewise, massive street protests emerged in the final months of 2019 in a number of countries in the region, particularly in Ecuador, Chile, Colombia, and Haiti. Thus, 2019 ended amid growing popular discontent and mass social mobilization, characterized by growing articulations between diverse social movements. However, this mobilization was truncated by the COVID-19 public health crisis. Specifically in Ecuador, the central government took advantage of the public health crisis to advance austerity measures and further benefit capital through state deregulation and provision of financial incentives for environmentally destructive activities linked to extractive industries and the corporate food sector – a veritable economic–environmental “*corona-shock*” (c.f. De Fato, 2020).

In Ecuador, resistance has not disappeared during the pandemic despite the absence of large mass uprisings. Rather, as we explore in this chapter,

decentralised organisation has (re)articulated regionally and nationally in digital spaces and through legal processes, linking impoverished families and Indigenous and peasant organisations. Moreover, we find that some local governments, which had been strengthened institutionally over the previous decade, now play key roles in resisting austerity measures and supporting popular socio-environmental organising from within the state. During the pandemic, such organising processes have emerged or strengthened to defend and advance alternative forms of governing economic crises through proposals that favour the poor and protect the environment over the interests of elites. In this chapter, we examine such decentralised organising in the context of the pandemic in two case studies: 1) anti-extractivist mobilisations that have resisted the advance of mining companies in the Andean Chocó region and 2) agroecological organizations that have promoted the distribution of peasant food products in multiple locations in the Andes. These anti-neoliberal movements have contested government attempts to advance austerity measures, and service debt through the privatization of the commons by furthering mining concessions and the corporatization of food production. We highlight the solidarity work that goes into this (re)articulation of anti-austerity sentiments and reflect on the ways decentralised organisation is not isolated from anti-neoliberal struggles present in mass movements.

We sustain that anti-neoliberal environmentalisms rely on and produce forms of solidarity that respond to the material consequences of austerity, while also challenging its ideological basis by providing counter-hegemonic narratives (Calvário et al., 2017). Featherstone (2015, 2008) argues that solidarity is a relational practice that forges subaltern political hegemony through alliances and mutual transformation. In contemporary Ecuador, we observe that decentralised, anti-neoliberal environmentalisms generate solidarity by negotiating differences among a wide range of movements within a shared moral economy (Clarke & Newman, 2012). In effect, disparate movements generate shared counter-hegemonic narratives that challenge the ideological basis of capital accumulation (Andreucci, 2019; Calvário et al., 2020). This attention to solidarity among “particular” anti-austerity environmentalisms contrasts with writing that would minimize them as reactive, ephemeral, or “contained” in relation to the “universality” of capital (Harvey, 2007, p. 165). Instead, we argue that, despite its limitations, decentralised organising has constituted a distinct moment in ongoing historical trajectories of alternative politics that contingently shape anti-neoliberal resistance (Featherstone, 2015). Moreover, following geographer Doreen Massey’s (2009) call to attend to the cross-scale articulations that produce place and place-based politics, decentralised organising in seemingly “local” contexts in contemporary Ecuador are, in fact, embedded in – and articulated with – progressive politics across national and international scales. Within this perspective, decentralised organising against austerity during the pandemic has represented a particular moment for building alternative agencies and relations on the terrain of “popular culture” and,

thus, for advancing self-organising and self-determination more broadly (Calvário et al., 2017).

Our analysis of social organising among anti-extractivist actors draws upon semi-structured and online interviews with eight members of the association of local governments *Macomunidad del Chocó Andino*, carried out in mid-2020, as well as the analysis of social media publications from two anti-extractivist networks: *Caminantes* [Walkers] and the *Alianza por los Derechos Humanos – Ecuador* [Alliance for Human Rights – Ecuador]. Our analysis of food regime politics and the agroecological movement is based on phone interviews with leaders of 20 organisations over the course of six months in 2020, as well as discussions with three NGO technicians and the director of alternative food networks at the Ecuadorian Ministry of Agriculture.

In the next section, we discuss distinct moments of austerity, socio-environmental demands, and mass mobilisations over the last three decades in Ecuador. Subsequently, we detail austerity measures and their consequences during the COVID-19 pandemic, a context that largely prevented mass mobilization. We highlight the decentralization of protest and organising amid the COVID-19 pandemic, focusing on the actions of anti-extractivist and agroecological collectives to articulate digital networks, use the legal system, and build or strengthen alliances with local governments. Anti-austerity mobilisations are flexible assemblages that transform in relation to specific conjunctures. In the conclusions, we reflect on the political implications of variegated forms of organising in contemporary Ecuador.

Austerity and mass mobilisations in Ecuador

From the lost decade to post-neoliberalism

“Austerity” became a keyword in Latin American political economy during the 1980s debt crisis, a period characterised by the reduction of public investment, along with the elimination of state-run development programs and institutions, which effectively impoverished millions and resulted in widespread social unrest across the hemisphere (Green, 1996). In Ecuador, it was not until the early 1990s, with the presidency of Sixto Durán-Ballén (1992–1996), that a government consistently enacted austerity measures aligned with the requirements of multilateral money lenders, particularly those of the International Monetary Fund (IMF). Such policies included the privatisation of the petroleum sector, which facilitated the expansion of oil production into Indigenous territories and continued the industry’s history of spills and pollution in the northern Amazon (Acosta, 2006). This moment witnessed the emergence of Indigenous contestations against oil production in the Amazon region, in alliance with environmentalists and human rights NGOs, and a variety of demands for compensation for damages to the ecosystem, stronger environmental regulation, infrastructural development, and the nationalisation of oil production. Peasant agriculture was also undermined

by neoliberal governments: Austerity measures during the 1990s included the end of the agrarian reform (Kay, 2002) and market liberalisation impacted local production. This decade was characterised by financial deregulations that fed inflation and ultimately led to a collapse of the banking sector in 1998 and the subsequent dollarization of the economy in 1999. In response to neoliberal reform, nationwide, mass uprisings paralysed the nation's transportation grids on multiple occasions. In 1990, 1994, 1997, and 2005, nation-wide protests converged on Quito to challenge the legitimacy of the central government and rejected an imminent free trade agreement with the United States that risked peasant agricultural production. This cycle of mass mobilisations toppled three neoliberal governments and, in 2005, propelled the articulation of a national movement formed between the Indigenous movement, labour unions, workers, students, and other left-wing sectors.

The 2005 uprising fed into the creation of a left electoral movement called *The Citizens' Revolution*, leading to the election of President Rafael Correa in 2006. This government advanced neo-institutional reforms that recovered the role of the state in market regulation and growth, as well as neo-structural reforms (Correa, 2002) centred on regional integration and economic modernisation and diversification. It established regulatory frameworks to control the financial sector and, in general, to reverse the historical privileges of the economic elites. Correa's rise to power was part of a broader wave of "pink" or progressive governments that came to power between 1998 and 2007 in Ecuador, Venezuela, Bolivia, Brazil, Chile, Argentina, Nicaragua, Honduras, Uruguay, and Paraguay, drawing strength from popular sectors and rising commodity prices (Svampa, 2015). In Ecuador, improved tax collection and the renegotiation of oil contracts for increasing national oil rents resulted in large investments in healthcare, education, and welfare programs that reduced poverty and inequality and secured a period of continuous governance under Correa (2007–2017). In 2008, a new national constitution was enacted, as a result of nation-wide mobilisation and civil society engagement. This constitution is considered particularly progressive insofar as it recognises, among other legal innovations, the rights of nature; the collective territorial rights of Indigenous, Montubios and Afro-Ecuadorians peoples; the plurinational character of the Ecuadorian state; the state's commitment to food sovereignty and sustainable agriculture; and the principle of *Buen Vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay*, an emergent, Indigenous-inspired paradigm that favours wellbeing over capital accumulation.

Yet, over the course of Correa's administrations, the renewed role of the central state in market regulation and foreign investment entailed the expansion of extractive frontiers into Indigenous and Afro-Ecuadorians' lands and the consolidation of agroindustries. In 2013, Correa suspended one of the most creative initiatives to keep oil underground: the Yasuní ITT Initiative. This initiative had proposed suspending plans to extract oil from one of the most biodiverse areas of the Amazon, where Indigenous peoples in voluntary isolation inhabit, in exchange for partial international compensation for

“carbon emissions avoided” (Larrea & Warnars, 2009). Furthermore, Correa’s government developed an incipient mining sector by advancing a legal framework to permit large-scale metal mining in vulnerable ecosystems. While the government invested marginally in peasant agriculture and markets, it ceded rural development to corporate interests, promoting the vertical integration of peasant farmers into corporate value chains, and it redoubled efforts to import seeds and agrochemicals in order to strengthen export-oriented agroindustries, in addition to signing a free trade agreement with the European Union in 2016 (Lasso, 2019; Lyall et al., 2019).

Environmental concerns and the uneven distribution of environmental harms during the post-neoliberal period contributed to a fracturing of the political Left and, in turn, a partial, fractured re-emergence of mass mobilisations, beginning in 2010 and 2011. The political limits of a progressive regime whose legitimacy was based on the redistribution of rents from extractivism – to the detriment of territorial self-determination and plurinationality (Vela-Almeida, 2018) – were challenged by Indigenous, environmentalist, and feminist movements. These movements in particular began protesting extractivism, as well as policies that undermined peasant farming. The Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), the largest Indigenous movement in the country, articulated demands against Correa’s party, along with urban environmentalist collectives and environmentalist NGOs. Yet, other leftist organisations remained loyal to the ostensibly progressive regime. Ecuador’s largest peasant organisation, the National Confederation of Peasant, Indigenous, and Black Organizations (FENOCIN), did not break ranks with Correa. Due to the authoritarian politics of Correa, internal fracturing, mainstream media delegitimizing, falling oil prices, and the resurgence of the political Right, among other factors, Correa’s progressive agenda weakened during the last years of his presidency. Meanwhile, social responses to the privatisation of the commons remained fractured through the post-neoliberal period.

The return of neoliberalism and the October 2019 uprising

In 2017, former vice-president Lenin Moreno rose to power, promising to continue the post-neoliberal agenda of Rafael Correa; however, Moreno distanced himself from Correa, viciously reframing the progressive administration as a regime rife with corruption and excess. Instead, Moreno aligned with conservative blocks that were eager to ensure that the fiscal crisis would be managed through austerity rather than taxation. He assigned ministerial posts to representatives of corporations, commerce, industry, and agribusiness, who oversaw the reduction of government ministries and regulatory agencies; the privatisation of public companies, including banks, refineries, and hydroelectric plants; and the flexibilisation of labour conditions. Although the Central Bank reported a reasonable 3% growth for the country’s economy in 2017, Moreno set out on an aggressive austerity program to lower the debt,

including cuts in social spending and massive layoffs in the public sector. Subsequently, poverty, unemployment, and inequality ticked upwards rapidly in the country (INEC, 2020a).

Moreno coupled an austerity regime with tax relief for corporations to “save” the broader economy, actively redistributing wealth upwards. Namely, in 2018, Moreno erased more than \$1.3 million USD in fiscal debt among the 50 largest corporations in the country and offered tax cuts to the private sector, favouring transnational oil corporations, telephone companies, banana exporters, and the largest banks in the country (Arauz, 2018). Sustaining these forms of corporate welfare, amid an economic crisis, required lines of external funding and further austerity measures against the country’s poor. Thus, in 2019, Moreno signed an agreement with the IMF to borrow \$4.2 billion USD over three years. Among the loan’s conditions, the government agreed to further tax deductions and fiscal exemptions for big businesses, along with layoffs for 23,000 public employees. Another key condition for the agreement was the elimination of fuel subsidies that would increase costs of transportation and potentially have inflationary effects on the costs of food. Since 1996, various neoliberal presidents had attempted to eliminate fuel subsidies, contributing to nation-wide protests that overthrew governments. When the Moreno government announced that it would enact these reforms in October 2019, nationwide protests swiftly erupted. Protesters occupied the country’s highway system, and gradually concentrated in the capital city of Quito, recalling prior epochs of anti-austerity mass mobilisations.

These protests against austerity constituted the largest uprising that the country had seen in 15 years. In addition to demanding a withdrawal from the IMF agreement, this moment was widely recognised as an opportunity to re-articulate social movements that had been fractured under the Correa regime and it gave rise to new leaders, particularly within the Indigenous movement. Over the course of 11 days, a diverse range of organisations, including Indigenous, peasant, unions, and human rights organisations, joined with students, workers, environmentalists, feminists, health workers, and broad segments of the urban middle and poor classes to reject austerity. In an impressive display of “solidarity from below”, diverse groups organised with transportation cooperatives to move on the cities and with universities and cultural centres in cities, where they rapidly created a vibrant care economy. Food was shipped in from rural areas and prepared in make-shift food kitchens, in which urban feminists ate alongside Indigenous families from the Andean agricultural lands, the mining sectors of the southern Amazon and from the oil-producing territories of the northern Amazon. Food, clothing, and medical supplies were donated and channelled to wherever they were needed to sustain the protest. Dissident municipal and provincial governors expressed their support for the protests via alternative radio networks and online platforms, but largely watched from a distance, as protest concentrated in Quito, where protesters faced-off with the police and military to try to capture the presidential palace and the National Assembly (see Figure 7.1).



Figure 7.1 Protesters marching in Quito during the October 2019 national uprising.

Source: Photography: Ivan Castaneira, October 2019

Moreno and his team recognised the danger that these forms of mass mobilisation represented to presidential regimes in modern Ecuadorian history. Thus, he declared a state of emergency only a few hours after street mobilisations began and relocated his administration to the city of Guayaquil. Civil rights were restricted, prohibitions were placed on gatherings, and prior censorship of information in the media was imposed. Physical and psychological racist violence escalated as protesters marched to Quito, with a massive deployment in the capital city of police and military forces, along with war tanks. The United Nations and the Interamerican Commission of Human Rights raised concerns over the violation of civil rights and the use of excessive force by police. Ultimately, nine protesters were killed, 1,507 were injured, and 1,382 were illegally detained (United Nations Human Rights Office of the High Commissioner, 2019). This government reaction reflected its fears that this anti-austerity uprising would force the fall of the government. In a dramatic televised negotiation between Moreno and representatives of the Indigenous movement and other sectors, the government ceded to protesters' demands and agreed to renegotiate the IMF agreement by suspending the elimination of fuel subsidies.

Despite the momentum for organising following the experience of October 2019, the COVID-19 pandemic precluded any further mass convergences due to the risk of contagion and a prolonged state of exception that would allow Moreno to advance new austerity measures (see also Figure 7.2). The



Figure 7.2 Woman rejecting the agreement with the IMF during the October 2019 national uprising

Source: Photography: Ivan Castaneira, October 2019.

pandemic opened a window for what Naomi Klein (2007) refers to as “disaster capitalism”, or the exploitation of a sudden crisis to impose “shock” neoliberal reforms with limited chance for social contestation. Following Klein, we adopt the term “*corona-shock*” to refer to the implementation of austerity policies by the Moreno government during the COVID-19 health crisis. In the next sections, we illustrate that the pandemic has facilitated the advance of austerity measures in three main ways: 1) as the discursively-constructed “cause” of socio-economic crisis, legitimising further austerity reforms which had already been planned; 2) by creating a context of “permanent emergency” to implement unpopular austerity measures and suspend civil rights; and 3) as an opportunity to promote the expansion of extractivism and environmental deregulation as the only way out of a deepening economic crisis.

Corona-shock in Ecuador

After the government announced the first cases of COVID-19 in late February 2020, the number of infections grew rapidly and, within a month, the country became a regional epicentre (Millán Valencia, 2020). The government enforced travel restrictions and decreed a national state of exception, with curfews imposed from March to June. The public health crisis provided

a distraction and an extra-legal context for Moreno to push forward austerity policies and legislative reforms that had failed just months prior due to the popular uprising. Public spending was constricted, even for the health sector (Báez-Valencia, 2020). The government insisted on making payments to foreign bondholders (Tobar, 2020). In addition, the so-called “Humanitarian Law” in June 2020 relaxed labour regulations, enabled the massive dismissal of public- and private-sector workers, permitted the increase of precarious working conditions, and the leakage of capital to tax havens (Tobar, 2020). The law pushed by Moreno constituted a deep regressive breaching of economic and labour rights. Ecuador fell into a public health crisis and possibly into the worst economic crisis of its modern history. The National Institute of Statistics and Census (INEC) (2020b) indicated that, between May and June 2020, only 16.7% of the economically active population had adequate employment. The Ecuadorian government was one of the few countries that decided to pay in advance its foreign bondholders, instead of investing in the economy, much less its healthcare system, food security, or other essential needs. Indeed, the public spending for the health sector during the pandemic was less than the spending in 2019 (Báez-Valencia, 2020).

Environmental regulation was also rolled back. In April 2018 the Organic Environmental Code was issued, which enables the environmental authority to redefine or change the category of protected areas, according to technical considerations (Art 37), increasing the possibility of carrying out extractive activities. As Moreno made the case for reducing the size of an “obese state”, the Ministry of the Environment was merged with the Secretariat of Water in March 2020. The budgetary reduction that accompanied this merger was unconstitutional and weakened the regulatory capacities of both institutions (CAMAREN, 2020). The same occurred with the merger of the Regulatory Agencies of the Mining, Hydrocarbons, and Energy sectors, which reduced their overall regulatory capacities on the extractive sector. In June, the Park Rangers Association denounced the elimination of 193 contracts for rangers and specialists in the National System of Protected Areas (SNAP), an entity responsible for the control and care of the country’s terrestrial, maritime, and coastal ecosystems. In September 2020, the Vice-Minister of the Environment resigned in protest of the dismissal of 398 officials and the regime’s intention to dismiss more workers, which, he said, would lead to the “absolute inoperativeness of the Ministry of Environment and Water, and weakening of environmental management” (Petersen, 2020, *our translation*). These and similar austerity measures made it more difficult to maintain environmental control during the pandemic, contributing to the rapid increase in illegal logging for export (Aguilar, 2020), the expansion of illegal mining in the southern Andes and Amazon, and a series of oil spills in the northern Amazon. Moreover, the state justified new, legal mining concessions as a strategy to respond to pandemic-related economic stagnation.

In the food sector, the central state enabled agribusiness and food corporations to advance their interests in and through the crisis, in terms of deregulation,

targeted insurance payments, and participation in emergency programs. The government worked – albeit unsuccessfully – to facilitate the formal entry of transgenic seeds into the productive sector, despite being prohibited in the constitution. Similarly, the regime unsuccessfully attempted to open the country to the importation of fruits and vegetables, potentially exposing peasant farmers to competition from subsidised industries abroad. Both attempts to deregulate imports were blocked by the peasant movement and its allies; however, the Ministry of Agriculture successfully expanded credit and paid insurance claims to big agrobusiness monoculture producers of select crops (e.g., corn, rice). In effect, the government directed emergency credits almost exclusively to large-scale farms, including the oil palm industry, even as the Indigenous movement demanded that the state support peasant organisations. Additionally, the government advanced in its negotiations with the United States for a free trade agreement, the first phase of which was signed behind closed doors in late 2020 (González Franco, 2020). Finally, the central government has permanently pushed to incorporate small and medium-sized agricultural producers into the agri-business model by modernising techniques and resources, and more recently with the introduction of a proposal for the Sustainable Development Law for the Agricultural Sector that encourages digitisation of agricultural production and smart and efficiency-based models.

In a context of increased military and police control and widespread fear due to the raging pandemic, social movements could not organise a mass uprising in response to these government assaults on the workers, peasant farmers and the environment. Instead, decentralised organising re-consolidated in relation to particular socio-environmental conflicts and articulated nationally through the digital sphere and the legal system. In the next section, we detail two case studies highlighting the emergent role of local governments in anti-neoliberal environmentalisms under COVID.

The mining sector

Despite only contributing to 0.47% of Ecuador's GDP (Banco Central del Ecuador [BCE], 2020), the mining sector became central to discussions about economic and employment reactivation in response to the economic crisis aggravated by COVID-19 (Ministerio de Energía y Recursos naturales no renovables [MERNNR], 2020). In June, 2020, the Ministry of Energy and Non-Renewable Natural Resources published the “National Development Plan for the Mining Sector 2020–2030”. The publication of this document amid the pandemic surprised most civil society organisations, as it had not gone through the administrative and legal mechanisms of pre-legislative participation processes. It sought to ensure that mining “reaches greater representation in the contribution to the national economy by increasing the participation of this activity in the Gross Domestic Product – GDP, the generation of employment, and the attraction of national and foreign investment” (MERNNR, 2020, p. 1, *our translation*). The plan suggested that economic diversification through

mining “will contribute to the sustainability of the country’s economic model” (*ibid.* p. 1, *our translation*). The plan did not include any analysis of the environmental ramifications or regulations, and only mentioned possible damages in terms of how they might be avoided through technological fixes. In fact, it promoted institutional deregulation, indicating that “a delay in the granting of environmental and water permits has caused many of the mining owners to develop their extractive activities even without the pertinent permits, causing illegal mining activities” (*ibid.* p. 53, *our translation*). In other words, the document argued that regulation actually provoked illegal mining.

Mining companies attempted to take advantage of the state of exception, mobility restrictions, and restrictions on organising to access protected territories and accelerate extraction despite the spread of the virus among company workers (Earthworks, 2020). However, this attempted expansion did not go unchallenged. One example of resistance has been the *Mancomunidad del Chocó Andino* (hereafter referred to as the *Mancomunidad*), which is a coalition of six local or “parish” governments in the north-western Andes. This region was designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 2018. Due to its rich biodiversity, ecotourism and agriculture are the two main livelihoods; yet, as of 2020, the region also hosted 36 mining concessions on 30,632 hectares (i.e., 24.6% of the total land) and new, legal, and illegal mining activities have been expanding, affecting ecosystems, the health of the population, and tourism (Y. Tenorio, lawyer of the Pacto Antimining Front, personal communication, September 4, 2020). Companies have long operated in the area without an environmental license. For example, the contract application of the company *Melinachango* has not been re-approved since 2002 (Y. Tenorio, personal communication, September 4, 2020). But Mining companies took advantage of the pandemic to accelerate their activities, mobilising mining equipment without permits, particularly in the communities of Buenos Aires and San Francisco de Pachijal. According to the president of the Pacto parish government, companies have acted in collaboration with personnel from public institutions, such as the Ministry of Environment and Water (MAAE) and the Mining Regulation and Control Agency (ARCOM) (R. Paredes, personal communication, October 22, 2020). To make matters worse, the already limited budgets of local governments in the *Mancomunidad* were further cut in response to COVID-19.

Nonetheless, in coordination with the local population, these local governments have succeeded in mobilising anti-mining sentiments during the crisis. The president of the Pacto parish government, a lawyer, and various environmental organisations and local actors, such as *The Youth Network*, have formed the “Pacto Mining Front” (see also Figure 7.3). The Front mobilised, seizing trucks and other mining equipment. In response, the mining companies sued the president of Pacto for allegedly stealing their gold. In turn, the Front also initiated legal processes to defend their right to prior consultation for all extractive activities in their territories (I. Arcos, member of the Pacto Antimining Front, personal communication, September 8, 2020). Furthermore, the Front requested that the Quito Metropolitan Council pass a resolution to support



Figure 7.3 Pacto Antimining Front calling for the protection of water, life, and nature

Source: Photography: Ivan Castaneira, July 2020.

the conservation of the *Mancomunidad* forests and “give priority to life and not gold”. On October 20, 2020, the Quito Metropolitan Council unanimously voiced its support for the termination of metal mining concessions in the region and the inclusion of the region within the National System of Protected Areas (Bosques Andinos, 2020).

The Pacto Mining Front expanded its activities beyond resistance to mining to respond to worsening food insecurity in the region, organising food distribution – along with rural development NGOs like Condesan and the social investment fund *Fondo Por Todos* – from local producers to local consumers and areas in Quito. The Youth Network, in turn, promoted an initiative called *La Chala*, which created agroecological bio-stores and food baskets with local production for local consumption, as an economic alternative to help unemployed youth and the producers that had lost their market outlets during the pandemic. Thus, territorial-based organising was re-consolidated and expanded in the face of austerity measures and attempts to expand mining activities. Residents of the *Mancomunidad* promoted a solidarity economy, based on conservation, peasant agriculture, and community-based ecotourism.

The local nature of this resistance has not prevented it from entering into cross-scale dialogues and forging extraterritorial articulations, partially through virtual platforms and social media. For example, the *Caminantes* network, a nationwide anti-mining alliance, has helped to spread information about the resistance in the *Chocó Andino*. The work of *Caminantes* on social media,

particularly on Facebook, intensified during the pandemic, as it organised talks, educational panels, and videos covering anti-mining actions and providing information about environmental impacts and human rights violations linked to mining.

Another strategy of anti-extractivist resistance focused on the legal system to demand precautionary measures and protection actions against the violation of human rights, the rights of nature, and collective rights, especially to the “free, prior and informed consultation” (Vela-Almeida & Torres, in press). As the violation of collective rights has historically accompanied the promotion of extractivism in the country, legal action has become one of the most effective ways to dispute extractive projects that threaten people and nature (Rodríguez-Garavito, 2011). For instance, the *Alianza por los Derechos Humanos Ecuador* (Human Rights Alliance Ecuador), an organisation born during the October 2019 uprising, played a fundamental role in generating alerts regarding human rights violations during that state of exception and, more recently, advancing the lawsuits of Indigenous and Black communities for environmental and social reparations and territorial defence against extractive projects.

Thus, in 2020, anti-extractive organising advanced through diverse organisational formations and tactics. The work and alliances of anti-extractivist organisations expanded their struggle and forced into public consciousness and debates issues of extractive violence, the right to consultation and direct democracy, alternative economies, and the protection of the environment, despite central government attempts to expand extractive frontiers under the cover of the pandemic.

The food sector

The majority of Ecuadorians depend on open-air, wholesale, and retail marketplaces for food that is less expensive than what can be purchased in supermarkets; yet, markets across the country were closed between March and June 2020, leaving consumers with little other option than supermarkets despite a deepening economic crisis. The central government ignored calls from the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), the World Food Program (WFP), and Ecuadorian peasant networks for the state to support local, peasant food production and distribution. Instead, responses from the national government to growing food insecurity during the lockdown were *ad hoc* and limited. Food corporations and supermarkets jockeyed to play roles in the national government’s patchwork initiatives. The government’s “emergency food plan” to distribute food kits was organised in coordination with the National Beer Corporation, which developed an online platform called “Tienda Cerca” [Close Shop] to facilitate the delivery of limited supply of “solidarity baskets”. The Ministry of Agriculture (MAG) also distributed a limited number of baskets to the public. Likewise, the municipal government of Quito partnered with the largest food corporation in the country, *La Favorita*, despite pressure from peasant producers to buy their goods. As described earlier, much of the policy work in the

agriculture sector during the pandemic was geared towards safeguarding and benefiting large businesses, not peasant farms. Thus, corporate interests were prepared to take advantage of the food crisis and much of the government was primed to facilitate them.

In response, three creative initiatives emerged among peasant farmers to counter corporate expansion. First, rural communities set up new markets to facilitate food barter or sale at a local or community scale. Second, some local, municipal, and provincial governments run by peasant farmers and their allies promoted inter-provincial food barter, gathering large amounts of food from local producers and exchanging it across ecological zones. Third, the agroecological movement mobilised across the Andes to provide fresh produce to urban consumers. Here, we focus on the distribution of agroecological foods during the pandemic.

Agroecology refers to the study of sustainable farming, peasant farming practices that eliminate the need for external inputs, such as agrochemicals (Altieri, 2018), and an environmentally and socially conscious food *politics* (De Molina, 2013). This food politics is linked to the social demand for food sovereignty through agroecological territorial articulations, alternative markets and public policies (Calle et al., 2013). Since the 1990s, NGOs and social movements have organised farmers in Ecuador to transition towards agroecological production and to lobby the state for support. The nationwide agroecology movement successfully lobbied to introduce agroecology promotion into the 2008 constitution (Intriago et al., 2017), though the central government largely evaded this mandate (Giunta, 2014). Organisations such as the Agroecological Collective of Ecuador (CEA) have tried to organise consumers directly (Sherwood et al., 2013), and this strategy accelerated in dozens of sites across the Andes during the pandemic, as individual organisations and their partners in local governments developed or expanded diverse strategies of commercialisation, including online platforms and food basket home deliveries. Despite the considerable risks of and obstacles to providing food baskets, organisations sought to prove that this environmentally sustainable, local form of food production and distribution could respond to current and future food needs.

Between March and June 2020, most agroecological networks participating in this study offered a food basket delivery option to former and new customers through online platforms, *Facebook*, or the smartphone application *WhatsApp*. These organisations noticed the overall demand for their goods increase by approximately 300%–400%. With years of experience in organising to acquire agroecological skills and lobby the state, agroecologists were able to quickly re-work internal arrangements; transform their logistics, storage, processing, packaging, and delivering processes; manage significantly greater volumes; and boost product diversity. For example, the Union of Agroecological Producers and Associative Commercialisation of Tungurahua (*Unión de Productores Agroecológicos y de Comercialización Asociativa de Tungurahua*) (PACAT), an Andean organisation of 420 families in the Tungurahua province, began to offer direct

delivery for the first time at the onset of the pandemic. Within one month, PACAT was delivering 300 baskets per week in Tungurahua and soon expanded its geographic reach, selling 150 food baskets weekly in other provinces. The president of PACAT says, “a process that would have taken us ten years under normal conditions took us three months” (L. Villacís, personal communication, June 14, 2020, *our translation*). PACAT farmers ultimately sold 50 tonnes of food to urban consumers between March and June. With the partial re-opening of markets in June, sales dropped to weekly 150 baskets in total. Many organisations throughout the Andes reported similar experiences of boom, adaptation, and reduction. The association *Pamar Chacri* in the Azuay province, for example, reported that demand went from zero to 300 food baskets in March. In the Loja province, the Agroecological Network of Loja (*Red Agroecológica de Loja*) (RAL) reported a 400% increase in overall demand between March and June, which they met through food baskets. Even quite small organisations adapted, including a group of six families called ABEC on the outskirts of Quito that absorbed an additional ten farmer families and shifted to food basket distribution via WhatsApp.

In most successful cases, organisations absorbed demand in terms of volumes and product diversity not only by transforming internal processes, but also by allying with other producers and organisations across ecological zones. They also allied with local governments or local technicians from the Ministry of Agriculture for collection and transportation purposes. In some organisations, members had to open up their homes as collection centres, but, in other cases, municipal or provincial governments provided storage spaces and aided in processing. In some cases, multiple “local” actors coordinated in a transportation chain. For example, some agroecological organizations gathered and processed food in collection centres, prior to passing food baskets on to local government technicians, who then distributed them via urban volunteers or organisations with their own cars, motorcycles, or bicycles.

In sum, agroecological organisations were able to respond, helping consumers avoid contagion and access fresh and healthy produce, due to organizational flexibility and the development of new digital tools. They rapidly and creatively generated alliances of solidarity among organisations and with consumer groups and local governments to govern new or significantly expanded networks of food distribution, despite the central government’s focus on alliances with corporate actors in its limited food security response.

Conclusions: Shifting articulations of socio-environmental resistance

In this chapter, we briefly traced shifting strategies of socio-environmental resistance against neoliberal governance in Ecuador, highlighting primarily the role of decentralised organising in the context of “corona-shock”. Drawing from our analysis, we emphasise four dimensions of the political ecology of austerity in Ecuador.

First, neoliberal austerity in contemporary Ecuador has operated as a class project, whereby the government has responded to debt and fiscal crises through cuts to social spending, while actively redistributing wealth upwards through targeted subsidies, deregulation, and investments in “strategic” sectors, such as mining and agroindustry. This observation aligns with Harvey’s (2011) definition of austerity as a class politics for re-engineering society and privately appropriating the commons, adopted by the editors of this book. That is, the case of Ecuador illustrates that focusing on cuts in social spending and public investment is insufficient for understanding austerity, as it is often accompanied by the privatisation of the commons and fiscal reforms that benefit domestic and transnational capitalist and financial sectors. Austerity has important socio-environmental dimensions, as shown by attempts to expand extractive activities and corporate food interests during the pandemic that further environmental degradation. While some of these trends had been propelled by the post-neoliberal government of Correa, during the pandemic they were more aggressively promoted through environmental and economic deregulation and, moreover, they were discursively construed as “the only way out” of a deepening economic crisis.

Second, the shifting strategies of the state to push forward austerity measures reflect the fact that, as a class project, neoliberalism a) necessarily relies on violence and coercion and b) works by exploiting conditions of crisis, as in the case of what we have termed “corona-shock”. The use of force and violations of human rights, as exemplified by the violent state repression of October 2019, are almost a *sine qua non* for imposing a class project oriented towards austerity. Indeed, austerity measures taken during the COVID-19 crisis were forced upon Ecuadorians in a “state of emergency” and amid fear and increasingly precarious living conditions. At the same time, recognising that neoliberalism is a fractured and contested project allows us to draw attention to diverse and variegated forms of political agency and counter-hegemonic narratives (Featherstone, 2015).

Third, the diverse nature of the different levels of government and the possibility of articulation with organisations and grassroots movements allows reactive anti-austerity dynamics against the state *from within*, evidencing the complexity of the state, and its porosity. This could be seen both in the case of the *Mancomunidad*, in which the Pacto parochial president and the Quito Metropolitan Council have played key roles in supporting anti-mining struggles, as well as in the institutional support of local governments in the distribution of agroecological food baskets. The active role played by local governments in facilitating localised resistance further demonstrates the geographically variegated, incomplete nature of state neoliberalisation. While the central state may be more susceptible to elite capture, local governments in Ecuador – which emerged from the post-neoliberal government with new infrastructures and greater jurisdictional capacities – are often socially and environmentally embedded in territories in resistance, acting in solidarity with decentralised resistance.

Fourth, even though the pandemic interrupted the possibility of a mass popular counter-hegemonic movement, anti-austerity mobilisation continued to take place through decentralised and networked resistance and solidarity movements, for instance against extractivism and for access to agroecological food. These anti-austerity mobilisations have proven to be flexible, context-specific, and scalable assemblages. The October 2019 demonstrations had united many different organisations, generating and sustaining a national scale of resistance. As the conjuncture changed radically during the pandemic, social mobilisation decentralised and expanded through distinct networks of action (e.g., legal, digital). Such complex, shifting articulations generate intertwined socio-political relations through constant organising, which would suggest that there might be room for nationwide articulations against neoliberal onslaughts if diverse forms of social movements are able to reach common ground anti-neoliberal demands.

The anti-extractivist organising of the *Mancomunidad* and the multiple agroecological movements re-focused on communal, reproductive work, which facilitated alliances with local organisations, as well as cross-scale, virtual networks of mobilisation. While not all forms of environmentalism in the country are necessarily anti-neoliberal, solidarity networks in the *Mancomunidad* and the agroecological movement are recognizable forms of anti-neoliberal environmentalism that, through self-organisation, create new subjectivities and solidarity practices; insist on alternative and spontaneous agencies; and formulate everyday social relations in/with nature (Calvário et al., 2020). In this sense, these are not merely defensive struggles, but are part of an ongoing process of contextually situated resistance that opposes neoliberalism and austerity (Calvário et al., 2017; Featherstone, 2015). These struggles continue to exceed the “local”, demonstrating the ability to forge solidarity networks strategically, among neighbouring communities, distant neighbourhoods, or digital communities, legal organisations, and distinct levels of government.

In this dynamic context, we would like to comment on recent electoral developments at the moment we completed this chapter in March 2021. In February, Ecuador held a first round of elections for president and legislators. The two presidential candidates with the greatest percentage of the vote in the first round advance to a run-off in the second round – unless a single candidate can accrue 40% of the vote and has more than ten points difference with the second candidate, in which case that candidate wins out-right. The results of the first round put the political heir to Rafael Correa, Andrés Arauz, in first place with 32.72% of the vote and yielded a technical tie for second place between Guillermo Lasso (19.74%), representing the oligarchy, and Yaku Pérez (19.38%), representative of the Indigenous movement. Although Lasso ultimately advanced to the second round, the first round represented an important win for leftist tendencies, which accumulated more than 70% of total votes. Right-wing parties obtained one of their lowest percentages of the vote in their electoral history. These results reflected a widespread rejection of austerity policies; an electoral manifestation of popular demands

advanced during the mobilisation of October 2019; and the electoral resurgence of the Indigenous movement, which became the second largest block in the National Assembly. Yet, they also reflected the deep fracture between a left that supports Correa's party and a left represented by Pachakutik that sees Correa's party as its enemy.

In addition, this plebiscite involved a popular consultation in the Andean municipality of Cuenca, the third most populated urban and rural canton in the country, where two large-scale mining projects have been planned. More than 80% of voters rejected metallic mining located in water recharge areas. This historic anti-mining vote legally bound the state to prohibit metallic mining in *páramo* ecosystems, and it demonstrated the centrality of socio-environmental mobilisation for promoting the defence of water, agricultural land, the broader environment, and small-scale livelihoods. A possible return to a progressive regime in Ecuador (along with similar turns in Argentina and Bolivia) would be widely regarded as a popular response to the continuous struggles to protect the commons and to oppose austerity policies. Still, the question remains regarding what position a progressive government would take regarding the extractivist and corporate food sectors, in a political scenario in which the Indigenous movement could be either an ally or an opponent as political scars and recriminations from both sides define relations within the left.

In conclusion, we highlight that the most visible forms of popular resistance in Ecuador have historically resulted in street protests, marches, and blockades. There remains a collective memory that mass uprisings have been able to topple neoliberal practices and governments in modern history. This fact may seem to reflect challenges for re-imagining political agencies and conditions of possibility for resistance in the era of COVID-19. Yet, if we take a closer look at the work that produces mass protest out of ostensibly decentralised struggles, then we can begin to see these scaled modalities of resistance in dialectic, rather than in isolation.

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