





# Socio-environmental Conflict in Argentina

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## Abstract

Socio-environmental conflicts are those focused on the incompatibility of the use of natural resources and their impacts on the environment by different social groups. The number and importance of such conflicts has increased significantly in Latin America during the last decade, and here the focus is on the specific case of Argentina, analyzing their characteristics which, for some, have prevented to date a solution that is beyond “sum zero”.

Keywords: *environmental conflicts, mining, Latin America, Argentina*

## Resumen

Los conflictos socio-ambientales son aquellos enfocados en el incompatibilidad del uso de los recursos naturales y sus impactos en el ambiente por parte de las diferentes sectores sociales. Su número e importancia ha aumentado considerablemente en América Latina durante la década pasada. Aquí el foco se centra en el caso específico de Argentina, analizando sus características que, para unos, han impedido hasta ahora una solución que esté más allá de la “suma cero”.

Palabras clave: *conflictos ambientales, minería, América Latina, Argentina*

## Introduction

Traditionally Latin America was seen by the countries that occupied and colonized it as a practically inexhaustible source of natural resources that seemed to be at the disposal of those that wanted to take them, with complete scorn for the sustainability of the use and benefit of the local

population: gold, emeralds, oil, wood, copper and tin, among others, were exploited up to depletion, or substitution by other products (Topik, 2006). The establishment of the republics in the nineteenth century on the ruins of the Spanish and Portuguese empires, meant little change to the pattern, since the new governments urgently needed funds, and thus quickly allowed the continued and expanded development of their natural resources via authorizations and permissions to national and foreign companies (Tucker, 2000). Only in the latter part of the twentieth century did states and their societies begin to delimit the rights of development in order to better manage resources and provide greater benefits for their owners, by stricter rules or, in some cases and in very specific political circumstances, by the nationalization of foreign corporations.

This process had many ups and downs and differences between countries, but from the decade of the 80s the globalization of Latin-American economies and the impact of neoliberal theories opening the development of natural resources under the “rules of the market” meant a greater presence of foreign capital and a loss or weakening of the control of the states over their resources. At the same time, a strong environmental impact on the activities was felt, especially notable in the cases of the mining, fishing and deforestation for the expansion of farming (Liverman and Vilas, 2006; Murray, 1999).

From the beginning of the new century the situation begins to change, basically for three reasons: first, the reappearance in several countries of the idea of the re-appropriation of its natural resources; second, the sustained growth of environmental ONGs that had already been evident at the end of the twentieth century; finally, due to the appearance on the scene of local actors, up to that moment outsiders in the negotiations and absent from the distribution of benefits (Ten, 2008; Price, 1994).

Little by little the ideas of environmentalism penetrated society, often mixed in with the claims of groups alienated by many problems such as the lack of infrastructure, or access to land and housing, as well as related to their income, or their ethnic ascription (Tobasura Acuña, 2006; Weiss and Bustamante, 2008 and López, 2005).

Among the most important groups are the movements for indigenous claims which superpose their territorial claims on to the protests against petroleum development, and that of peasants focused on the environmental problems of mining development (Vargas Hernandez and Noruzi, 2010, Bebbington, Abamaovay and Chiriboga, 2007).

Without the ties and restrictions that the military governments imposed, social movements concerning different environmental topics gradually developed; basic to many, but not uniquely, was the mining industry. Although the role that this activity had played in development was already of great

historical significance (Graulau, 2008), in this new context the component worsened because mining has changed scale. It is now no longer a question of the exploitation of seams of mineral in underground galleries but, due to an increase of the price of some metals – especially gold - that covers greater extraction costs; most mining investments goes to the development of opencast practices, which means the removal of huge quantities of material and the use of water and chemical substances for the purification process, with the consequent potential environmental impact (Urquidi and Leire, 2011). But mining has not been the sole source of conflicts. In other cases the establishment of paper mills have also generated controversies and conflicts of a socio-environmental nature in Chile, Brazil and Argentina.

In this study the focus is on conflicts centred on the incompatibility of the various uses of natural resources and their impact in the specific case of Argentina, analyzing their characteristics, and their possible consequences for distinct social groups (Folchi, 2001). Argentina is a country in which, until recently, these types of conflicts did not occur, thus the rapidity of their expanding number makes an analysis very necessary, focusing on the reason by which to date a solution that is beyond “sum zero” has not been found.

### **The Argentine Case**

Within the general panorama previously described, Argentina is characterized by some special characteristics: low overall population density, and a spatial concentration of population in urban areas in which the diffusion of environmental issues is so limited that there is scarce interest in the topic of the development of natural resources, or of the environmental impacts that this might entail. This does not mean that what we might term the “environmental question” does not exist, but related to the critical relationship between society and environment as a problem there have developed a series of mediations that make its significance noted only sporadically, and related to very specific topics.

Argentina faces many environmental problems at different scales and intensity, such as deforestation, water contamination, soil erosion, indiscriminate fishing, overgrazing, mining’s impact, and urban floods. Nevertheless, these have not been sufficient to generate a generalized reaction on the part of society that we might name a real environmental conscience. As a result, the country was not a propitious place for the creation of environmental movements with the capacity to press governments or to generate this conscience among the public. This separation between society and the environmental question has also generated a breach with regard to the environmental rights of the population and the functioning of justice that protects them. The result of this is that the conscience of environmental problems tends to be generated first at the local level and faced with the absence of a general regulative, effective and reliable framing of the process of dialogue and negotiation, the problems have been resolved directly via conflict, which generally results in one of the parts obtains everything and the other nothing (Putnam and Wondolleck, 2003).

Recent years have witnessed an increasing number of cases where different sectors of society have joined together to

claim rights of clear environmental origin, in the search for an “environmental justice” that goes beyond the mere legal and is constituted in social learning of their rights and the means of sustaining them. The year 2005 accounted for no less than ten social movements related to environmental issues, a number that has multiplied rapidly reaching the current level (only related to mining topics more than 100 episodes had developed in 2011), showing a great diversity of scales and forms of development (Giarracca, 2006). In all the conflicts the same actors may be noted, each with distinct weight: the companies, the national and provincial governments, the environmentalists and the local society – all confront each other directly or indirectly, with variable results.



### **Initial Conflicts**

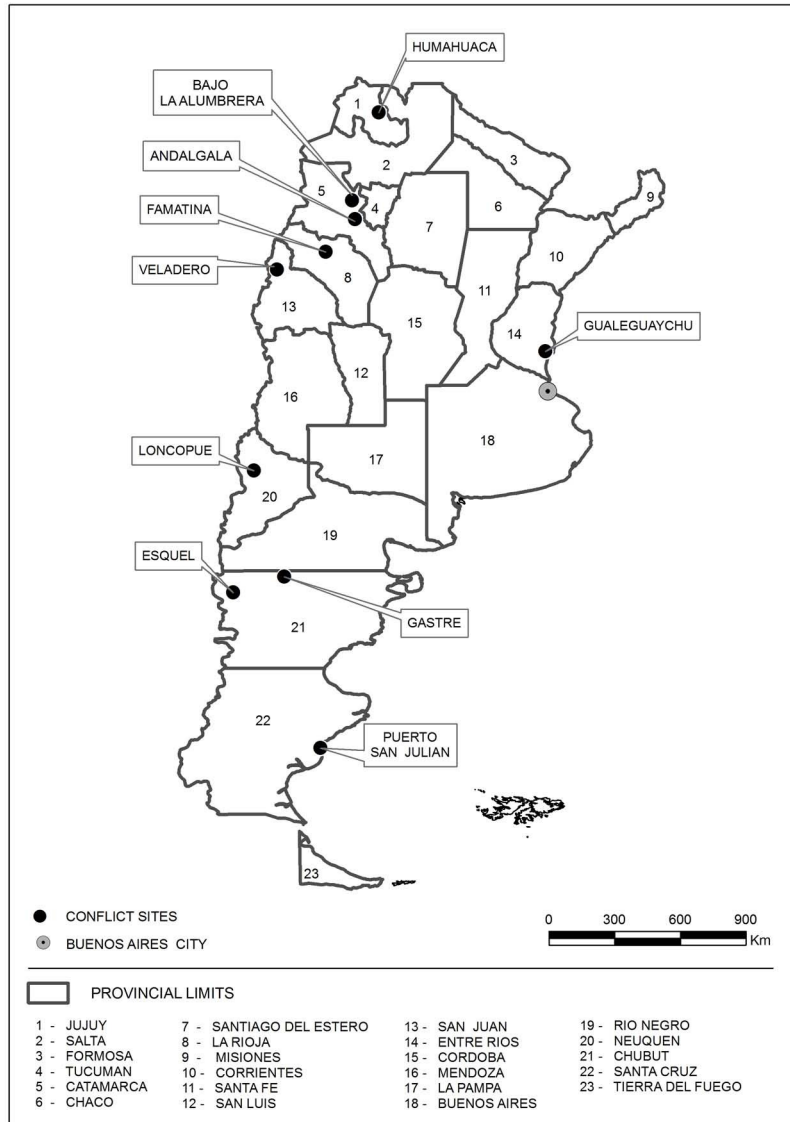
The first topic of environmental concern that became a public issue at the national level happened in the mid-80s related to the possible installation in the locality of Gastre, in the Patagonian plateau, of facilities destined for the storage of radioactive wastes (Figure 1). Argentina was a precursor in nuclear research and then in the construction of reactors and nuclear power plants for the production of energy, and this increasing activity led to the need to plan the disposition of the generated residues. The National Atomic Energy Commission (CONEA) was studying the possibility of undertaking the enterprise in several places of the country that fulfilled the safety requirements for this type of facility, and the final selected place was Gastre. On making the project public, the very incipient environmentalist movement of that time began a strong campaign to prevent the work from being initiated. It was not a question, in this case, of a local or spontaneous movement, since the very scarce local population did not take any part in the controversy; it was the efforts of several small environmental movements formed by militants in different cities of the country. For a mere project located in a very isolated place, in this case there were neither large popular mobilizations nor actions of any direct type; it was little more than a media event, where the opinions of the different actors crossed the stage of the mass media. The environmentalists made use of the bad name that nuclear activity had achieved to attack the project, and CONEA tried to show that the previous studies had demonstrated that the facilities precluded any danger for the population, and also that no decision had been taken (it had not even reached the pre-project stage of investment).

Before the increasing campaign of opposition, and before paying a high political cost, the national government forced CONEA to deactivate the project, and the environmentalists celebrated their victory. It was, actually, a demonstration of their capacity to influence in the State in decision-making of this type, although environmentalism had

yet to face private activity much more prepared for this type of confrontation (Blanco, 2006; Chiappe, 2004).

The following case had different characteristics, and although it did not have the national repercussion of the previous one it marked, to a certain extent, a methodology of action for the local population in environmental confrontations. It occurred at the end of the 90s in the Humahuaca canyon, in northwest Argentina, and concerned the construction of a high-tension electricity line. Humahuaca canyon is one of the most spectacular and emblematic sceneries of Argentina, with settlers with strong roots in a locality inhabited from pre-Columbian times and that through history had accumulated a rich cultural tradition. The threat to its natural and cultural patrimony mobilized the local population against the project, including a popular mobilization towards the area where the locals had already begun to install cairns to mark the proposed positions of the enormous high-tension towers. Confronting this, and the deluge of journalistic articles in the regional newspapers (although the project had already been passed by the provincial legislature), the fear of the political consequences were such that the provincial government took a step back and annulled the project. It might be said that this was the first spontaneous local social movement of an environmental thrust in Argentina, though of relatively small scale both in the number of settlers involved, and in the size of the project and that of the construction company, a local concern that produced an environmental impact statement of such poor quality that it appeared as almost a joke.

Figure 1. Location of Conflict Sites



The protests development was very rapid, but it limited itself to the locality and did not generate any type of later institutionalization among the advocates for the canyon. The mobilization dissolved as soon as its initial target was reached (Reboratti, 2008). The national environmental movement had no role in this conflict, which was developed and solved completely within the local frame, for which reason its consequence beyond the province of Jujuy was minimal. Curiously, nor did the environmentalists claim this conflict as any precedent for their later struggles. The following conflict cases would be different.

#### **Esquel and Gualeguaychú**

In 1993, Argentina promulgated a law promoting mining (Ley 24.196, de Promoción de la Actividad Minera) where interested companies were given a series of advantages for prospecting and developing the extraction of a variety of minerals. This generated a large number of investments, especially in the Andean area in the west of the country. The spread of mining activity and its components of environmental impact generated (and increasingly generate) a series of conflicts in which were intermingled social, juridical, political and economic questions.

The first one of these conflicts was generated in the Patagonian Andes in 2002, more concretely in the city of Esquel, over a mining installation project located very close to that city (Urquidi and Walter, 2011). The conflict was based, as were then all of mining origin, in the coexistence of diametrically opposing visions expressed by the company and what the residents were thinking concerning the use of the water, contamination, noise, employment and economic benefits for the local and regional population. When the company presented the province with its environmental impact study the topic had already become public and the people, spontaneously, had begun to mobilize across several assemblies, manifestations and presentations before the courts claiming that this project should “go no further” until a clear legal basis had been established. One has to remember that

Esquel is located on the edge of the Patagonian Andes, an area of great natural beauty, and relatively recently populated (its foundation dates from the beginning of the twentieth century) attracted to it— especially in the last few years — precisely because of its characteristic beauty, for which reason any potential threat towards nature is taken very seriously.

The mobilization of the residents was supported by the full weight of the national environmentalists, actually a dense network of small affiliated conservationists, with some very active leaders and with an intense use of social networks via the Internet, which ensured that the conflict take place publicly at the national level. But the most striking impact was that the Municipal Intendancy called for a non-binding referendum among the local population. Once completed, the results showed a crushing 81 percent of the voters voted not to allow the mine to be located in Esquel. In the interim, the residents had been gathering together to form a formal institution, the *Asociación de Vecinos Autoconvocados* (Association of Self-assembled Neighbors). The establishment of this institution was a very important step since it was later replicated in many other places, always with the characteristic of being original spontaneous institutions, but whose formalization allowed them to act coherently in the legal and political context.

The spontaneity is what gave them a characteristic feature and that located them, before a public very suspicious of political organizations, as socially legitimate and honest actors in a search for environmental justice. On the other hand, in case of Esquel, and in helping the networked environmentalists, the Esquel Assembly had an enormous ability to reach all the media. The first reaction of the mining company was to try to take the topic to the courts, but in successive instances they declared in favor of the residents.

In a situation similar to the case of Humahuaca, the provincial government was at first a strong promoter of the project, but with the popular reaction increasing it changed its attitude, until finally it arranged the cessation of the mining activities until a study in depth could be undertaken (Walter, 2008; Walter and Martínez Alier, 2010).

The following environmental conflict soon followed in yet another geographical context, this time on the border with the Uruguay, and with another topic, the decision of Uruguay to allow the installation of two plants producing paper cellulose near the city of Fray Bentos (Figure 1). On the Argentine side of the River Uruguay one encounters the locality of Gualaguaychú, where a spontaneous movement was formed when a group of residents took very seriously the possibility that the plants were contaminating the river and began to organize and generate public declarations of protest forming, as had happened in case of Esquel, an ad-hoc institution, the Self-assembled Assembly of Gualaguaychú (AACAG).

From the beginning, the protesters were summoned under the motto “No to the paper-makers”, but the fact that these were going to be constructed in another country and that the Fray Bentos population did not seem worried about the environmental aspect and, much to the contrary, was strongly supportive of the project, the topic was complicated from the outset. Before the apathy showed at the beginning on the part of the Argentine government and the justice system, the residents chose a very radical methodology: they

blocked transit over the nearby international bridge for a few hours.

In 2005, the Argentine central government began to worry about the issue, since it was a question of a problem of a river shared by two countries and the social protest was continuously growing. However the Uruguayan government continued with its politics of promoting the installation of the factories (one of them abandoned the idea, but the other one began construction rapidly), facing which the assemblymen answered by blocking the Libertador San Martín international bridge each time with greater frequency and mounted a mobilization that attracted more than 40,000 persons from many places in Argentina, a remarkable number given the size of Gualaguaychú.

The topic began to take on never-before-seen characteristics, due to the repercussions in the mass media and the capacity for action that the AACAG had demonstrated. This protest had been organized in a completely horizontal form, not having authorities and everything being solved by means of meetings and open deliberations. Finally, and before the fact that the factory kept on constructing at an intensive pace, in February, 2006 the AACAG decided to cut transit across the bridge for an indeterminate time. That decision and the extent of its reporting produced a curious effect: the national government, lacking any concrete environmental policy, adopted the speech of the extreme environmentalists of the AACAG and it began to press Uruguay, taking the case to the International Court of the The Hague. Before this presentation, the Assembly opened the international bridge temporarily to transit, but not without earlier organizing a gigantic mobilization of 100,000 persons, clearly the largest concentration of population seen in the country related to an environmental theme, and much larger than a good part of the mobilizations that the political parties had attempted to generate during recent years.

Nevertheless, before the defeat of the diplomatic attempts, the blockage of the bridge was resumed, now in a definitive form. The Court of the The Hague in 2010 emitted a finding that in effect authorized the installation of the factory (that had begun to produce in 2007), before which the Argentine government had no other remedy that to accept the finding and press the AACAG so that it abandon all forms of direct pressure and remove the blockade of the bridge, which had been in place for three years. The AACAG remained bruised, and although today it still supports its attitude of denial to the cellulose factory, it lacks any capacity of maneuver. This result demonstrated that the policy of environmentalism that bet on everything or nothing did not always result in a victory and sometimes, as in this case, in a defeat (Palermo and Reboratti, 2007).

#### **New Mining Conflicts**

The defeat of environmentalism in the Gualeguaychú case did not mean that conflicts would stop, even less so, and they were related to the topic of opencast mining development. The possibilities of this activity had awoken overseas great expectations for investment (Jimena, 2003), and as a result from the end of the 1990s four large deposits were opened: Alumbreira, Cerro Vanguardia; Veladero and Hombre Muerto, and by the middle of 2012 there were at least another six in advanced states of development.

According to the 1994 reformed National Constitution, natural resources are property of the provinces, and therefore they are those who must negotiate with the mining companies for possible permissions and conditions of development, being framed inside what determines the law of promotion of mining promulgated in 1993. The provinces took the topic in very different forms: some of them have directly prohibited opencast mining (Córdoba, San Luis), but others (basically the poorest, who see mining as a key source of income) have not done that and on the contrary they have promoted it.

When we lower the analytic level to the concrete cases of mining project installations, that is there where conflicts



appear. The intensity and results of similar ones are very variable, for factors such as the time in which investments took place there, the distance the deposit is located from some inhabited center, the capacity of mobilization of the local movements and the forms of reaction to these mobilizations on the part of the provincial governments. But in general the conflicts have a similar pattern of development, which is as follows: after a development project becomes known, some sectors of the local society are mobilized to stop it, influenced by the group's more radicalized and active environmentalists at the national level, which promotes the natural concerns of the settlers for the effects that the large-scale mining might have on their environment, ¿???

Facing this situation the companies, which have already received the approval of the province but generally have avoided any contact with the local society, answer saying that the project is completely secure from the environmental point of view, and that it will generate jobs and have very positive effects in the local and regional economy. Before the social mobilization, the response of the provincial governments is variable: in the cases where they directly and openly support the mining companies they accuse these social movements of irresponsibility and try to suppress the protest; in others (and according to the form and scale that the events take), they begin to doubt, or sometimes they revoke the development permits. On its part the national government, so as not to pay political costs, tries not to interfere, but facing an increase of the number and importance of the conflicts in general it takes part for the mining activity. This way the conflicts enter a game of confrontations, without neither a field of negotiation nor the will to do it on the part of the involved actors.

#### **A Pentagon of Relations of Strength**

Comparing the Argentine cases to date, it is possible to conclude that conflicts are generated by interrelation between five types of different actors who comprise an imaginary pentagon centred on an investment project with a specific territorial location. It is a pentagon of relations of strength that has its apices formed by the national government, the provincial governments, the companies, the national environmentalist movement, and the local population (Figure 2). In every specific case the ways of being related that each of the actors have with other apices, the power that they can demonstrate, and the social and political context, are going to produce different results.

Since it has no specific environmental policy, the national government tends to support opencast mining activity, and has demonstrated publicly its desire to promote it (*Clarín*, 2012b). In the Patagonian province where they both began their political careers, the current President and her deceased husband (Santa Cruz), is where one of the first

investments (Cerro Vanguardia, 2012) was established, and where no type of conflicts have been generated. The case with the paper company on the river Uruguay was different, since there the government decided to support the environmental movement after an international conflict developed, but it never supported an anti-industry position *per se*, since in Argentina there have been installed more than a dozen cellulose industrial plants, some generating significant pollution.

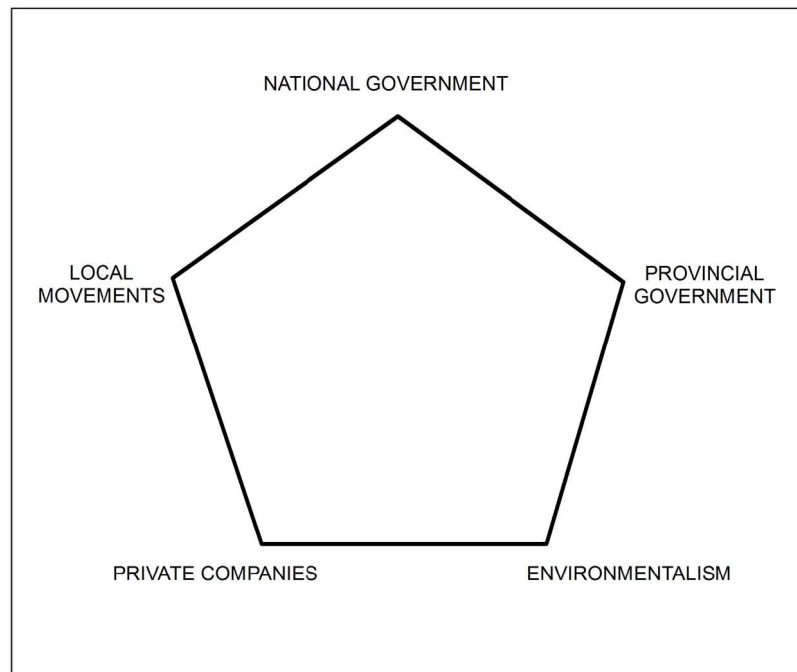


Figure 2. Pentagon of Relations of Strength

The relations of the national government with environmentalism have varied significantly; although it has not confronted the formal organizations (those, who with the exception of Greenpeace, have proven to be too aggressive on the mining issue and were very cautious in case of the Uruguay), it has done so with institutions that form informal networks and with the local mobilized population concerning short cuts, one of the preferred actions of these groups (although curiously it allowed the Assembly of Gualaguaychú to keep an international bridge blocked for three years). On the other hand, although federal legislation of the 1990s was very favorable to mining development and allowed production without taxes being payed, it has not tried to modify this legislation, whereas, for example, it collects from other exports of primary products more than 35 percent of its value.

Since the provincial governments are, according to the National Constitution, the proprietors and persons in charge

of the natural resources located in their territories, they are this clearly actors of supreme importance. The handling of these natural resources depends on the legislation of each and every province and on the decrees of the provincial executive power. Again there are major variations in specific cases.

As previously mentioned, in some provinces opencast mining is directly prohibited (this is more a precautionary measure than anything else, since it is a question of provinces where projects of investment had not registered, except in the case of Mendoza). In others, on the contrary, mining production is promoted openly, and there have been at least two cases where in the electoral period a candidate promises to prohibit the activity but, on having gained access to power, do quite the opposite. Relations of provinces with the national government on this matter are very ambiguous, although the latter supports mining activity, when a conflict arises it usually tries to avoid opening any link with the provincial government, as a simple measurement of political precaution (even if the pro-mining provincial governments is a part of the official national ruling party).

In the provinces that support mining relations with environmentalists are usually very aggressive, and range from threats to police repression on groups that generate direct actions. In official speeches frequently the word “environmentalist” is used as synonymous with instigator and foreigner to the province, referring to the militants who come to take part in the declarations and road blockages. In some cases the provincial police even inspect the vehicles that come to the places where there are conflicts and do not allow the passage of the “environmentalists” (*Clarín*, 2012d).

Curiously, this attitude influences the actual local movements, which frequently insist that they are not “environmentalists.” The most complex situation for the provincial governments are its relation with the local social movements, where almost always politics is mixed with the environmental claims. To avoid conflicts, the provinces try to avoid moments of potential confrontation, organizing public hearings to evaluate the plans of mining investment. But if this strategy fails and the local population is mobilized (for example blocking a highway, a very frequent action), it tries to negotiate its suspension and, if the blockage is very long, it suppresses it with the provincial police.

The relation of the provincial governments with the mining companies is, from the beginning, asymmetric, since it is a question of very poor provinces negotiating with gigantic transnational corporations, with budgets that are far larger than those of the provinces. This asymmetry includes the fact that very frequently the provinces do not have any technical aptitude to evaluate either the plans of investment or the studies of potential environmental impacts. But the provinces also face a difficult quandary: mining promises to be an important source of economic wealth, by way of direct resources from tax revenues and indirectly via the creation of employment both in the mining industry itself, and in the many services that it generates. The combination of these two aspects, plus the ever increasing frequency of cases of corruption, means that often provinces approve investments without too much prior analysis.

Environmentalism in Argentina has at least two distinct aspects: one is the environmental conservation institutions of a formal nature, usually based in Buenos Aires, with several years experience such as the Argentina Foundation of Natural Resources (FARN), the World Wildlife Fund (WWF) and Greenpeace. They are experienced institutions in the field, formed by professionals of different areas, with a firm financial base and whose mission is environmental protection through the lobbying process, generating information for public pressure on governments and the formulation of legislative projects. In the first two have good formal relationships with national and provincial governments, not necessarily exempt from critical positions.

Greenpeace's case is different, since it tends to generate campaigns which are characterized by their wide media impact and rarely coincide with official intentions. Together the three institutions look for the support of the urban middle classes and have changing attitudes in the cases of socio-environmental conflicts we have discussed. Usually the WWF has stayed on the margins, as it is basically directed to conservation activities, but it has generated some general reports on the subject of mining and its environmental impact, trying to maintain a balance between the positions of more radical environmentalism and the official position to promote mining. On the occasion of the repression of the actions of local groups it has expressed its concern.

FARN, which normally deals with legal issues, has held back from conflict, and even in its latest report (FARN, 2012) on the environmental situation does not mention them. Meanwhile Greenpeace is the one that has frequently opined on the subject, especially in regard to potential pollution, even after a bad experience in the case of the paper mill, where its action was rejected by the Assembly of Gualaguaychú, it has tried to act independently (for example blocking a path to a mine in San Juan with their own advocates), as part of a campaign against the use of cyanide, and protesting over the non-implementation of legislation related to the protection of glaciers (Greenpeace, 2012).

The most active environmental groups in the field are those that are related to distinct environmental movement networks with minimal institutionalization. They are in a very early development phase of environmentalism, characterized by relying more on sensitive issues than in handling empirical and verifiable information, using an aggressive tone, wrapped in a doomsday rhetoric and prone to detect all kinds of conspiracies aimed at environmental destruction. The latter leads them to reject any opinion that contradicts their views, either from the official, academic or business levels, sectors that are often involved in its alleged schemes. Not only unreliable from the point of view of the information they



manipulate, they have ceased to have any significant response among the public, especially in urban youth. These groups are usually built around iconic persons, some of whom have a long history of environmental agitation, and rely heavily on informal social networks that use the Internet as their main vehicle. Their most characteristic feature is that they hold absolute positions, which usually do not shift, expressed in slogans defined by the negative (*e.g.*, no open-caste mining, no pulp mills, no to the use of agrochemicals). This position is usually adopted by local movements without reflecting on the viability of the protest, which closes the door to any negotiations, and leads the conflict to a dead end.

Meanwhile local movements, even when supported and enhanced by environmentalism, have specific characteristics of each locality with regard to their social origin and composition. One element to consider is that local environmental conflicts, as they increase in number, have a snowball effect, and although their beginnings were tentative and ineffective (*e.g.*, the Veladero Alto mine located in the province of San Juan, was installed and is in full swing without local movements preventing it) (*Diario de Cuyo*, 2005), with the ever-increasing amount of mobilization, they become longer and more effective.

For example, the Agua Rica mine in Catamarca faced many difficulties to initiate development, and the Famatina Project in La Rioja has yet to advance (*Clarín*, 2012a and 2012c). While the reasons given by local social movements are always similar (potential polluting effects, competition for water, economic and social impact of location), in each case are also added issues related to local population characteristics, such as ethnic identity, regional culture threatened by the influx of foreign companies and landscape heritage (Svampa and Antonelli, 2011).

The social background of participants involved in protests is very diverse and it is very difficult to establish any general rules. Sometimes the initiators belong to the middle class (merchants, civil servants, teachers, farmers), others are indigenous or peasant leaders or representatives of associations of small farmers. Pressure techniques are generally twofold: public demonstrations and roadblocks (the latter is a widespread form of protest in Argentina, arising from the protests by groups of unemployed of the mid-1990s) to which are added personal legal filings and, if the protest results in the formation of formal institutions, of collective type.

Their relations with other actors are generally complex. While receiving much help from informal environmental movements (especially with regard to advertising their actions), at the same time the participation of these does not

always mean assistance when dealing with provincial authorities, who often accuse them of being mobilized by “infiltrators” (hence their insistence in refusing to be called “environmentalists”). For its part, formal environmentalism has no direct links to these demonstrations, and merely reports instances of violent repression, or carry out their own activities isolated from the population, as in the case of Greenpeace.

The most complex relationship is with provincial governments, sometimes mediated by local governments, but usually there exists a type of indirect pressure game through the media, centered around the effects that having demonstrations and especially the roadblocks. If these are transient, usually the provincial government does nothing, but if they extend over time, and with pressure from mining companies, the provincial authority reacts violently, repressing the local protests. The local movements have virtually no direct relationship with the companies, which inevitably identifies them as the main enemy.

In Argentina there are approximately thirty transnational mining companies operating, most of which are in the exploratory phase of development (Table 1).

Their role in local environmental conflicts can be described at best as ambiguous. No one can say that they really meet the standards that the call for corporate social responsibility indicates, much less to seek “social license” for their projects (Sagebien, 2008). In general they avoid contact with the local population, and in practice offload on to provincial and municipal governments the role of mediator or regulator of conflict, since the public role of the companies does not usually go beyond describing in their Web site very positive characteristics from their point of view that the Project entails: high standards of environmental control, generation of local employment, generating spillover effects into the local economy, infrastructure investment and support for local government.

It is possible that this attitude of reluctance to make direct contact with the local population originates in the example of Esquel, where these attempts only served to increase the suspicions of the local population, or in Guleguaychú and Veladero, where companies set up despite the protests. However, the case of Cerro Vanguardia is from that point of view very interesting (Cerro Vanguardia 2012). Although the site is located in a very isolated location and far from the nearest population, from the beginning the company

took pains to establish a positive relationship with the closest community (Puerto San Julian), which allowed the possibility of reactions from local people. Also in case of Agua Rica and the population of nearby Andalgalá the company tried to do the same, but with an adverse outcome (No a la minería, 2012).

#### **Final Reflections**

The description of the mechanisms of relationship between actors within the pentagon of power, indicates that what is lacking is the creation of a field of interaction and negotiation. To accomplish this, the first step should be that each of the actors appears keen to participate in this process, which so far has not happened; as we have seen much of the relationship is marked by mutual distrust.

One of the foundations for the creation of such a meeting of minds should be to define a common base of knowledge about the project and an objective analysis of its consequences. However, from that point of view the irreducible position of environmentalism towards non-formal dialogue is often transferred to local movements, this signifying a major obstacle, exacerbated by the isolationist position adopted by the mining companies.

One possibility is to think that these conflicts could be resolved through a referendum. But should this refer only to the local population, that might potentially suffer the consequences of mining, or the entire province which, in some sense the “owner” of the mineral deposits? There are two contrasting examples: the cases where there was a local referendum the result was always opposition to the mine, as was the case of Esquel and, more recently, Loncopué (Aranda, 2012). But in the election or re-election of provincial governors who explicitly expressed their support for mining, inevitably they gained a large majority, as was the case of Río Negro and San Juan.

Conflicts in search of environmental justice have been growing in scale, frequency and complexity, and it is clear that the development of each has been a step forward in the methods of organizing these spontaneous movements supported by environmental activism. It is true that this often leads to social movements to take very extreme positions from which it is very difficult to negotiate solutions that do not end in a zero-sum, and that the lack of a broader vision in the long run can be negative for the movements themselves. But what is undeniable is the role of these movements for environmental justice in building environmental awareness in society.

These spontaneous social movements, heterogeneous in their social composition, horizontal, noisy and politically intractable, are growing day by day in Argentina, in each case learning methodologies of pressure and protest, and getting stronger and clearly more effective in the dissemination of

their effects. That these actions will actually generate a change in the ways of environmental policy in Argentina remains a challenge for the future.

#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> According to article 124 of the reformed National Constitution of 1994 “...corresponde a las provincias el dominio originario de los recursos naturales existente en su territorio”

<sup>2</sup> For example for the case of La Alumbrera see these sites:

<http://www.alumbrera.com.ar> y para Veladero  
[http://www.barricksudamerica.com/operaciones/veladero\\_informacion.php](http://www.barricksudamerica.com/operaciones/veladero_informacion.php)

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Table 1. Transnational mining corporations operating in Argentina, 2012

<b>Empresa</b>	<b>Origen</b>
Anglogold Ashanti	Sudáfrica
Aquiline Resources	Canadá
Barrick Gold	Canadá
Meridian Gold	USA
Minera Alumbreira	Suiza
Northorn Orion	Canadá
Patagonia Gold	GB
Rio Tinto	Australia
Tenke Mining	Canadá

Source: author's compilation