



# “The sea is our bread”: Interrupting green neoliberalism in Mexico



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## ABSTRACT

This article analyzes how the intensification of neoliberal policies and the use of privatization to govern access to the ocean and its resources are producing the conditions for the dispossession of Indigenous fishing customary rights as well as resistance practices that interrupt neoliberal policies. This article highlights the role of actors beyond the state in producing the specific junctures at which the vocation of the Indigenous peoples in the Tehuantepec Isthmus in the state of Oaxaca, Mexico, is changed to become a “center of sustainable development.”

## 1. Introduction

In Mexico, the neoliberal land policies of the early 1990s fostered a wave of territorial reorganization, which targeted the resources that have historically sustained Indigenous communities. Oaxaca provides a highly relevant example of this because, besides being the most culturally diverse state in Mexico, it is praised for its biodiversity, the existence of strong Indigenous governance institutions and, most recently, for having the best wind in the world. This article analyzes how the expansion of neoliberal policies has shaped the management of the ocean and understandings of sustainable development in the Tehuantepec Isthmus in the state of Oaxaca.

While studies have paid attention to the generation of environmental conflicts worldwide, less attention has been devoted to analyzing the negative effects that “green neoliberalism” has had on Indigenous people's subjectivities and their relationships with their resources [1,2]. This article changes that by analyzing how, under the rhetoric of improving people's lives, the vocation of the region, and people, are changed to become a “center of sustainable development.” It interweaves changes in agricultural and fisheries production with communities' responses to changes that threaten their livelihoods and highlights how land and resource access are being created by privatization and reregulation. It argues that contested conceptions of how the ocean is used and the use of privatization to govern access to resources are producing conditions for the dispossession of Indigenous customary fishing rights as well as resistance practices that interrupt neoliberal policy implementation. This article relied on the analysis of government and agency documents and legislation, as well as on conversational interviews conducted with Indigenous community members and activists in February and March 2013 in the

Tehuantepec Isthmus. This article also builds on previous research on the effects of large scale wind power generation in this region [3]. First it maps the goals of differently located actors. Then it traces the political, economic and legal processes through which the dispossession of customary and access rights operates. Finally, it analyzes the effects on Indigenous communities and how they respond to such processes of neoliberal dispossession.

## 2. Neoliberalism: a governance assemblage

Neoliberalism has often been treated exclusively as an economic project involving deregulation, regulation, privatization, individualization, and transformation of the state-citizen relationships. However, Brown [4] argues that, despite foregrounding the market, neoliberalism is not primarily focused on the economy. Rather, its focus is on desired political, social, cultural, and environmental effects. Building on Foucault's notion of governmentality, Li contends that as a specific type of “governance assemblage” [5], neoliberalism involves practices, discourses, knowledge, and ways of being in the world that emphasize the market, individual rationality, efficiency, and the responsibility of entrepreneurial subjects. The concept of neoliberal governance assemblage captures how the economy, society, and the environment are governed by networked interactions between states, financial institutions, non-governmental organizations, and communities, producing natural resources in specific ways. Because the act of governing includes the acts and rationalities of different actors operating at different levels, Li suggests looking beyond the state [6]. This concept also illustrates how the act of governing involves the reorganization of social relations, institutions, communities, and ways of life, and operates through diverse practices, orchestration and contestation.

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From this perspective, change and the expansion of neoliberal policies are the product of an assemblage of various governmental and non-governmental actors' interactions, actions and agendas [7]. As this article shows, land and resource rights and regimes of authority are being transformed through complex interactions among the state, local, and foreign actors, who are contesting previous forms of control.

One of the forms these interactions have taken in Latin America occurs through the logic of green neoliberalism [8–10]. Green neoliberalism is understood as a process through which environmentalism and capital accumulation become compatible, producing various regimes of resource management. The premise of green neoliberalism is that nature is better protected by managing the non-human world as a commodity. Promoters of this approach contend that the green economy serves the dual purpose of improving the welfare of the poor and fostering greener economic growth [8]. Scholars have also documented the growing trend of land and resource appropriation (green grabbing) for environmental purposes and the creation of new frontiers of land control and regimes of authority and rights [11,12]. As this paper will show, discourses of sustainability and privatization have been central to accessing or appropriating Indigenous land and natural resources.

Oceans have long been spaces for resource extraction but only in recent decades have new economic desires and environmental knowledge contributed to the need to regulate ocean space [13]. Besides regulating where fisheries can occur, offshore wind energy generated by coastal winds has gained considerable attention from governments, energy corporations, and coastal community residents. A relative newcomer to coastal space use, efforts to develop wind energy have been contentious particularly with regards to small-scale daily marine resource users [14]. Scholars document how new ways of thinking, valuing and producing from the ocean have resulted in the increase of aquaculture, despite environmental concerns and coastal communities' protests [15].

Although some attention has been paid to the generation of environmental conflicts and the negative effects produced by sustainable development and energy projects on Indigenous communities, more research is needed to understand how reregulation and property shape such energy developments in different contexts. Environmental organizations, states, and international financial institutions have supported the idea that “unclear” property regimes and the inefficient use of resources are connected to high levels of poverty and environmental destruction in countries of the global south. Accordingly, if the poor's living conditions deteriorate, this failure is seen as a product of people's unwillingness to embrace innovation and take responsibility for themselves, concealing the violence that accompanies such structural processes of imposing private property. As Springer notes, the imposition of private property regimes involves acts of violent dispossession as well as enduring forms of violence to make such systems operate [16]. Although state authoritarianism becomes a means of maintaining social order and power, local actors and communities have agency. They are subjects with different capacities for action including critique, negotiation, and resistance [6].

How the ocean is conceptualized, used and valued poses challenges for small-scale fishing communities' survival and illustrates the uneven power relations that exist among governments, corporations, and local communities. Indeed, emphasis on capital and innovation over other local values renders small-scale fisheries invisible. As will be shown later, local knowledge and context shape meaning and value: the ocean and fisheries are not only a source of livelihood but also of wellbeing and collective identity. In looking at the intersection of fisheries and coastal wind power generation, the intent is to show how state law, environmental knowledge, and ideas of economic growth are mobilized to change the vocation of a region and, in turn, how Indigenous communities interpret and respond to such changes.

### 3. Governing fisheries, harnessing wind, and threatening Indigenous livelihoods

Fisheries and rural development have important historical roots in Mexico where the idea that people are poor because they are fishers or that they are fishers because they are poor has been prevalent. The post-revolutionary reforms of the early 20th century were driven by such ideas. Article 27 of the Mexican Constitution of 1917 prompted the allocation of communal land rights to Indigenous and peasant communities under the *ejido* framework, in which the plot of land granted could not be legally sold nor bought. Article 27 also granted coastal communities titles to fixed fishing grounds for exploitation of fisheries, including shrimp, abalone, lobster, oysters, squid, mullet, octopus, and totoaba, depending on the region [17]. While fishing cooperatives were created in different regions, in the Tehuantepec Isthmus they were regulated according to Indigenous communities' own normative systems. Cooperatives were intended to foster development opportunities for rural communities, which were conceived of as marginalized, egalitarian communities that depended upon the state's assistance. As has been noted, this assistance constituted the basis for clientelist relationships between the Mexican state and rural communities [17], through which benefits were distributed in exchange for political support.

By the early 1980s, however, Mexico experienced a dramatic economic crisis. Support for small-scale agricultural activities was significantly reduced and many fishing cooperatives were on the verge of bankruptcy as the state-controlled fisheries bank, BanPesca, which had provided soft loans, was closed down. In 1982, the Mexican government announced it could no longer meet its debt obligations and threatened to default on its borrowing. In response, the International Monetary Fund demanded the substitution of state-driven development by market-oriented policies, which coincided with ideas about the state's incapacity to manage the economy. Between 1982 and 1991, Mexico received thirteen structural and sectoral adjustment loans [18,19]. The accompanying structural “reforms” included investment deregulation, the elimination of import substitution policies, the privatization of publicly owned corporations, as well as substantial reductions in price supports and government cutbacks [20].

The IMF also proposed to “swap a portion of Mexico's national debt for the conservation of forested areas” [3]. In this context, environmentalism justified a set of actions to infringe upon communities' land and resources and transform people from “predators” into “stewards” of nature as turtle fisheries became the target of international conservation efforts. The identification of turtles as endangered species was also used by the United States Gulf of Mexico's shrimp lobby to infringe upon Mexico's fishing rights citing a number of incidental captures of sea turtles by Mexico's old fleet in the Gulf of Mexico. Similarly, the dolphin safe campaign was used by the United States to justify the “tuna war” against Mexico, which resulted in important sanctions. Whether the protection of these species represented a real concern in these cases is besides the scope of this article. What is clear is how conservation issues have been used to prevent commercial competition in fisheries. The World Trade Organization (WTO) has sided twice with Mexico, however, in both cases the United States has used conservation issues to impose stricter rules for Mexican fishing vessels basically overriding the WTO's decisions. Certainly, the lower production costs of the old Mexican fleet gave Mexico an advantage in a competitive and growing market for wild shrimp. Tuna and turtle fisheries and turtle egg gathering ended in 1990 as the Mexican government committed to protect these species [21].

Besides fisheries, rural sustainable development was also envisioned. In 1986, the Federal Electricity Ministry (Comisión Federal de Electricidad CFE) installed devices to measure the velocity, intensity and variability of the north-south winds flowing across the Tehuantepec Isthmus. The Atlas of Oaxaca published in the early 1990s by the United States Department of Energy and National

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