



# The building of mining discourses and the politics of scale in Ecuador

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## ABSTRACT

In questioning the multiple positions of the stakeholders involved in the mining debate in Ecuador, this paper offers an analytical framework to uncover the ‘politics of scale’ of mining discourses. This is done by understanding how discourses are simultaneously structured, disassembled and restructured according to power relations among stakeholders involved in the mining debate. Q methodology is used as a tool to assess the subjective perceptions of key stakeholders regarding mining projects in the country. Results highlight four distinct discourses: (1) responsible extractivism; (2) local self-determination; (3) national economic development; and (4) local economic development. Discursive analyses suggest that mining positions are constructed to contest power in: decision-making, the enactment of values and rights, and the uneven distribution of economic benefits and socio-environmental burdens associated with mining. The analysis also offers insights for enhancing conflict-resolution and depicting the political complexity associated with structural power inequalities among actors implicated in mining conflicts in the country.

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## 1. Introduction

The current government of Ecuador is promoting mining industry as a means for development, thrusting the country headfirst into a resource extraction bonanza, which has expanded the mining frontiers across Latin America over the last thirty years (Bebbington, 2012; Bebbington et al., 2008a). Three mining projects backed by large foreign investments are planned in the southern Amazonian region of the country, known as the Cordillera del Condor. These projects include the open pit copper mines of ‘Mirador’ and ‘Panantza-San Carlos’ managed by the Chinese Corriente Resources and the gold mine of ‘Fruta del Norte’ managed by the Canadian Lundin Gold. Plans for extraction have generated conflicts at multiple scales due to diverging development goals among stakeholders. These conflicts occur amidst an evolving institutional reform, in which the government has adopted a post-neoliberal approach to development and uses mining as an economic strategy to deliver welfare investment (Becker, 2011).

Mining conflicts result from uneven scalar relationships that emerge when decision-makings about extraction lies far away from sites of extraction, where local communities bear most

socio-economic and environmental costs, often with limited benefits (Lane & Rickson, 1997; Martinez-Alier, Kallis, Veuthey, Walter, & Temper, 2010). These conflicts result in contesting rhetoric, which range from concerns about environmental impacts to questions of sustainability, development models and the legitimacy of decision-making for mining policies (Bebbington, Hinojosa, Bebbington, Burneo, & Warnaars, 2008b; Hilson, 2002; Urkidi, 2010; Urkidi & Walter, 2011). In Ecuador particularly, discourses illustrate anti-mining strategies by using science and the law (Buchanan, 2013; Moore and Velasquez, 2012), the defence of life, indigeneity and sacred nature (Warnaars, 2013; Velasquez, 2012); or emphasizing self-determination and post-extractive development (Gudynas, 2011). Studies have also detailed alliances between indigenous groups and NGOs in strengthening environmental discourses across local, national and international arenas (Urkidi, 2010; Davidov, 2013, 2014).

Several conflict studies on extractivism in Ecuador focus on a range of anti-mining discourses placed to counteract the rhetoric supported by the Ecuadorian government; however, relatively little attention has been afforded to the strategies of stakeholders who support mining in an effort to leverage power in the mining debate. There remains a need to expand on how pro and anti-mining stakeholders enhance their political agency by strategically shaping discourses at multiple scales (Jones, 1998; Swyngedouw, 1997; Urkidi, 2010; Urkidi & Walter, 2011). By engaging in the

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literature of politics of scale, this study aims to shed light on the discursive agenda of stakeholders and their underlying subjective positions at play regarding four themes within the mining discussion in Ecuador: decision-making, recognition of values and rights, distribution of benefits and distribution of costs. Secondly, we aim to expand this discussion on how stakeholders enhance their political agency by strategically shaping discourses at multiple scales and how stakeholders leverage their positionalities in an attempt to reconfigure current scalar power structures. By more explicitly identifying the scalar differentiation of mining discourse in Ecuador, it becomes possible to better understand the gap between the geographical scale at which mining conflicts are experienced and the scale at which mining policies have been politically defined (Bebbington, 1999).

In the following section, the theoretical underpinnings of the politics of scale in the Ecuadorian context are discussed. Section 3 details how mining discourses are explored through the use of Q methodology. Section 4 describes the four discourses revealed from Q methodology analyses. Section 5 identifies the multiple positions regarding decision-making, rights and values, socio-environmental concerns and economic distribution linked to mining discourses, and section 6 reviews the discursive strategies used to contest scalar power structures. Section 7 offers insights for conflict resolution in mining governance. Finally, a conclusion is provided in Section 8.

## 2. Politics of scale in the Ecuadorian mining debate

The expansion of the mineral frontier in Ecuador has created a confrontation over interests due to conflicting definitions of natural resource use on territories in dispute at different geographical scales in the country (Bebbington, 2012; Bebbington et al., 2008a; Chicaiza & Yanez, 2013; Hilson, 2002; van Teijlingen & Hogenboom, 2016; Warnars, 2013). The analysis of scale as a framework for understanding uneven spatial development allows for a refined explanation of the social and political struggles taking place in distinct geographical spaces and the processes to reconfigure environmental values and developmental meanings (Smith, 1990; Swyngedouw, 1997). Political struggles over mining imply restructuring power between the scale at which a problem is perceived or experienced and the scale of political power to address the problem (Kurtz, 2003; Williams, 1999).

Geographical scale is related to a scaffolding of socio-political systems associated with territorial units from the global to the local (Brenner, 2001). Swyngedouw (1997: 169) defines scale as “the embodiment of social relations of empowerment and disempowerment and the arena through and in which they operate”. Scales are then interpreted as ongoing social processes of socio-political and economic struggle that are periodically restructured to strengthen power and control while disempowering other scales (Marston, 2000; Smith, 1992; Swyngedouw, 1997). Accordingly, scales are ‘socially constructed and politically contested’ and are constantly restructured by contingent socio-environmental, cultural, economic and political processes (Brenner, 2001; Brown & Purcell, 2005; Delaney & Leitner, 1997; Marston, 2000; Swyngedouw, 1997).

Politics of scale makes reference to how territorial units are constructed, hierarchized and reorganized in relation to one another through collective social action and socio-spatial differentiation (Brenner, 2001; Marston, 2000). For instance, the politics of scale in mining conflicts broadly highlights distinctions between the national power represented in the central government advocating mining as an economic model of development and local powers that contest national hierarchies in favour of self-determination. However, within this general and dichotomized

vision between the national and the local exist myriad other articulations generated by groups seeking to support or challenge extractive policies in nuanced ways. In Ecuador, current scalar arrangements for mining policies and natural resource management consolidate the authority of the central state over any other subnational scale. Yet, this configuration did not emerge without political struggle and resistance from groups opposed to the central government’s ideological plan (Dosh & Kligerman, 2009).

The core struggle around mining activities is that power and decision-making are currently held by the central government. Groups opposed to mining activities thus remain disadvantaged to make decisions and subsequently pursue scalar restructuring to better balance their political positions. An attempt to restructure scale occurs when strategic, discursive, organizational and symbolic relationships change between interrelated scales and challenge the existing hegemony of a particular power structure (Brenner, 2001). For example, anti-mining movements leverage positions against mining by strategically targeting concerns within specific geographical spaces in order to challenge national decisions. In an attempt to reconfigure scalar structures, stakeholders jump scales from local to national to global (and vice versa) in a phenomenon called ‘glocalisation’ as an effort to leverage power across certain geographical scales and reassert power on other scales (Swyngedouw, 1997; Urkidi, 2010). Pro-mining actors, such as international mining corporations, also use global-to-local strategies in an attempt to gain access to communities using instruments of corporate social responsibility (Jonas, 1994).

Along these lines, Urkidi and Walter (2011) stress the need to develop a broader analysis of the mining debate that illuminates diverse discursive strategies, as many perceptions about mining are scale-specific and have a particular political interest. For example, van Teijlingen and Hogenboom (2016) found that mining discourses of several stakeholders in Ecuador are constructed under sometimes-contradictory sets of meanings over development and society-environment relations. It is thus necessary to pay closer attention to how the diversity of contesting interests for mining activities pursue different scalar arrangements by analysing the political agenda of stakeholders acting at multiple scales (Delaney & Leitner, 1997). In the following section, we highlight the use of Q methodology in exploring distinct mining discourses that politically differentiate the various positions used to leverage power at different scales.

## 3. Methods

A stakeholder analysis was conducted by mapping actors and examining laws, plans, agreements and reports related to the management of mineral resources in Ecuador. Subsequently, Q methodology was employed as an exploratory tool to understand the discursive agendas of stakeholders and their subjective perceptions regarding the identified mining projects. This method was chosen as it explores the complex and socially contentious nature of conflicts (Durning, 1999; Watts & Stenner, 2012). By focusing on a range of viewpoints from stakeholders, Q methodology identifies common variables among participants and accounts for differences between them. The result serves to develop meaningful categories reflecting particular perspectives and values (Stainton Rogers, 1995). Q methodology also helps to map perceptions into clusters of participants who share similar perspectives and values (Durning, 1999). Q methodology was designed as technique form of factor analysis, in which respondents were presented with a sample of heterogeneous statements regarding mining and then asked to rank-order the statements (Brown, 1996; Durning, 1999). Limitations might arise due to constraints placed on pre-determined choices of specific statements for participants, as

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