

Abstract

LIMITS OF HYBRID GOVERNANCE IN THE ENERGY TRANSITION IN CHILE: WATER, SOCIAL COHESION AND PARTICIPATION IN THE FACE OF LITHIUM EXTRACTION

The global shift toward renewable energy has dramatically increased the demand for lithium, positioning the Atacama Desert as a key site for extraction. The brine deposits in the Salar de Atacama are among the richest in the world, with exceptionally high lithium concentrations and minimal impurities—making the extraction process both efficient and economically attractive. However, this area is not just a resource site—it is the ancestral land of the Likanantay People, who have lived there for generations. In northern Chile, the rapid expansion of the extraction industry has led to the emergence of hybrid governance arrangements that involve state institutions, transnational corporations, and Indigenous communities. These interactions are deeply contested and shaped by overlapping legal frameworks, competing sustainability narratives, and ongoing struggles for Indigenous rights.

This paper draws on qualitative research methods, including 40 in-depth interviews and participatory observation conducted across multiple sites. The analysis focuses on three interrelated dimensions of socio-environmental impact linked to lithium production: water scarcity, social cohesion, and participation in decision-making processes. These dimensions are examined not only as outcomes of governance and extractive practices, but also as spaces of contestation and resilience. Furthermore, the paper explores the strategic role of non-governmental organisations in supporting Indigenous communities to mobilise ancestral knowledge, legal instruments, and advocacy networks. Through these efforts, communities are actively redefining their position within the energy transition, asserting alternative visions of development rooted in environmental stewardship and cultural continuity.

By embedding these dynamics within broader debates on sustainability, policymaking, and resource governance in Latin America, this paper contends that prevailing governance models are limited in their ability to foster enduring pathways toward sustainability. These constraints arise from the persistent prioritisation of economic growth—primarily through extractivist practices—and established power asymmetries within decision-making processes. As a result, such models often reinforce structural inequalities and environmental degradation, rather than enabling inclusive and resilient development strategies.