



Entangled territorial controversies: Contesting mining, territorial ordering, and authority in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala

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ABSTRACT

This article examines territorial disputes in the Palajunoy Valley of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala's second largest city located in the western highlands. Drawing on our field research, we explore how dominant territory-making practices and indigenous-led resistance play out over an emerging municipal territorial ordering plan that gets interwoven with disputes over large-scale mining, waste disposal, and municipal authority amid wider urban-rural marginalization and tensions. We innovatively combine the notions of territory, territorial ordering governmentality, and the echelons (or levels) of rights framework to unpack the different layers on which dominant actor alliances' territorialization strategies and the responses of territorial defense movements emerge. Departing from an understanding that the disputes in the valley are not only about resources, but also entwined struggles over rules, authority, and discourses, we make a twofold argument. First, we argue that the ruling-group's existing territory-making practices and new territorial ordering techniques coincide across the echelons, building on and reinforcing stark power imbalances. Second, we argue that indigenous-led, territory-based resistance movements engage in diverse strategies of contestation to articulate shared concerns around externally-imposed territorial interventions across echelons, but are challenged by micropolitical fragmentation, threats and instances of violence, and fragile multi-scalar support networks. Our analysis suggests that future territorial defense depends on the strengthening of multi-scalar and multi-actor alliances that – while acknowledging difference and tensions within and among resisting actors – devise their strategies along the four interconnected echelons and articulate their concerns in converging yet plural resistance strategies.

1. Introduction

This article examines the territorial struggle in the Palajunoy Valley (*Valle de Palajunoy* in Spanish) which is south of Guatemala's second largest city, Quetzaltenango, located in the country's Western highlands. Though not being far away from Quetzaltenango's city center, the Palajunoy Valley has a rural feel and is home to ten Maya K'iche indigeneous communities. In the whole municipal area of Quetzaltenango

including the valley territory, the municipal government of Quetzaltenango (*Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango*) intends to implement territorial ordering plan (*POT – Plan de Ordenamiento Territorial*). This policy instrument – first presented in 2017 and altered in two rounds of reforms in 2019 and 2021 (*Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango, 2017; 2021*) – is heavily contested. The disputed POT introduces a new logic of municipal spatial governance aligned with national and international sustainable development guidelines¹ (*Segeplan, 2018*). It proposes a set of ordering

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¹ Quetzaltenango's 89-page-long POT links to the national development plan *K'atun (Plan Nacional de Desarrollo K'atun: Nuestra Guatemala 2032)* which is aligned with the UN Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The national Secretariat for Planning and Programming of the Presidency (*Segeplan*) guides municipal governments in the implementation (*Guideline PDM-OT*). The POT also incorporates the Sustainable Xelajú (*Xelajú Sostenible*) report, resulting from the Initiative for Emerging and Sustainable Cities (*ICES*) promoted by the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB & *Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango, 2014*; see also *van Wiltenburg, 2020*).

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techniques (e.g., land-use classification, construction norms, sanctioning mechanisms) to reorganize municipal space, relationships, and subjects (Arzeno, 2019; Asher & Ojeda, 2009; Baletti, 2012; Sevilla Buitrago 2008; 2014; Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023). The concerns around territorial ordering come on top of the contested, elite-driven large-scale mining of construction materials, operating across the valley's hillslopes since 1999. Territorial ordering intents also get woven into existing conflicts over waste disposal and lack of municipal services as well as struggles over authority between indigenous organizations and the municipal government, amid wider urban-rural and ethnic marginalization and tensions.

With an emphasis on the contestations of the POT as emerging socio-spatial governance instrument rooted in promises of sustainability, this article explores *how dominant territorialization and forms of resistance in the valley play out over the articulation of a diversity of territorial disputes?* These interwoven territory-particular disputes refer to mining, waste disposal, municipal authority, urban-rural divides, and territorial planning. To address the question, we combine the concepts of territory (Agnew 1994; Boelens et al., 2016; Elden 2010; Escobar, 2008; Porto-Gonçalves, 2002), spatial ordering governmentality (Arzeno, 2019; Baletti, 2012; Foucault, 1978/2002; 1991; Rose-Redwood, 2006), and the echelons of rights analysis (Boelens, 2008; Zwartveen et al., 2005; Zwartveen & Boelens, 2014). We depart from an understanding that the Palajunoj Valley's territorial disputes are about more than material resource control (resource echelon) and encompass questions of rules and regulations (rule echelon), legitimate authority (authority echelon), and the dominant representation regime (discourse echelon). The echelons' disputes and outcomes mutually influence and constitute each other.

We propose a twofold argument. First, we argue that existing powerful territory-making practices and new territorial ordering techniques mobilized by dominant actor alliances coincide across echelons, building on and reinforcing stark power imbalances. Second, we argue that territorial defense movements engage in contestation strategies that intend to articulate the shared concerns around externally-imposed territorial interventions across echelons. However, they are challenged by micropolitical fragmentation, instances and threats of violence, and fragile multi-scalar support networks.

We use dominant actor alliances as an umbrella term for usually nontransparent (i.e., obscure responsibility and lack of accountability) and partly unstable (i.e., actors may take different stances over time) coalitions among elite-owned extractive companies, national state institutions, municipal government, and international agencies that establish their territorial claims through entwined strategies (i.e., subtle governmentality techniques, hegemonic modes of power). We suggest territorial defense movements as umbrella term for complex (i.e., diverging motivations of actors) and changing (i.e., intricacies of creating and maintaining a cohesive movement strategy) coalitions among valley inhabitants, indigenous organizations (i.e., umbrella term for different forms of social mobilization and indigenous representation; Section 3), NGOs, journalists, lawyers, and researchers that contest powerful territorial interventions in the valley.

Our objective is to color accounts of extractive territorialization and resistance in Guatemala and beyond, in three ways. First, our attention to the empirical novelty of a territorial ordering plan as an emerging socio-spatial governance paradigm, and how it intertwines with existing territorial disputes (i.e., mining, waste disposal, authority), contributes to ongoing debates around territorial resistance struggles to extractive projects (e.g., Aguilar-González et al. 2018; Aguilar-Støen, 2014; Aguilar-Støen & Hirsch, 2015; Copeland, 2023; Pedersen, 2014; Rasch, 2013; Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021; Urkidi, 2011) and municipal territorial politics

and authority struggles in Guatemala (e.g., Aguilar-Støen & Sveinsdóttir, 2022; Batz, 2017; Illmer, 2018). The Guatemalan territorial ordering-governmentality process links to wider Central- and Latin America trends (e.g., Arzeno, 2019; Montes Lira, 2001, Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023). Second, we propose the conceptual combination of territory, governmentality, and the echelons of rights analysis (ERA) framework as an original approach to shed light on complex material, social, and political processes evoked by the interaction of powerful territorialization and resistance strategies. In contrast to previous applications of the ERA-framework to specific disputed issues (e.g., de Bont et al., 2016; Duarte-Abadía et al., 2015; Hendriks, 2020; Hidalgo-Bastidas et al., 2018; Mena-Vásquez et al., 2020; Prieto Lopez et al., 2021; Stoltenberg & Boelens, 2016), our application of the ERA-framework allows us to 'zoom out' from the dispute over one specific issue to examine how multiple issues entwine and are disputed within the same territory. Third, our focus on the micropolitics of resistance unraveled through the ERA-framework contributes to debates about territory and territory-based resistance movements (e.g., Dougherty & Olsen, 2014; Horowitz, 2011, 2012; Prieto Lopez et al., 2021; Rasch & Köhne, 2016; Walter & Urkidi, 2017). These insights are relevant in and beyond Guatemala by stressing how multi-scalar and multi-actor territorial defense movements needs to balance the joint articulation of interrelated territorial issues while accounting for diversities, tensions, and contradictions within such justice struggles.

In the next section, we reflect on our methodology, ethics, and positionality. In Section 3, we dive into extractive developments in Guatemala and describe the territorial arena in the Palajunoj Valley. We present our conceptual framework linking the notions of territory, governmentality, and echelons of rights in Section 4. In Section 5, we analyze how dominant actor alliances coincide in their powerful territory-making and new ordering governmentality techniques, and how practices of resistance (i.e., counter-conducts) of territory-based movements articulate and connect shared concerns in defense of territory, surfacing across echelons. Section 6 reflects on our analytical framework and the micropolitics of territorial defense movements, and highlights our theoretical and empirical contributions.

2. Methodology

This article builds on qualitative field research conducted by the lead author from 2021 to 2024 as part of a transnational research project on the socio-territorial impacts of extractive industries and the corresponding multi-scalar dynamics and modes of resistance. The research was conducted in Spanish and translated into English. We draw on a set of qualitative methods commonly used in critical geographic research (Gomez & Jones III, 2010). This included 20 in-depth interviews and roughly 35 informal conversations (i.e., with valley inhabitants, indigenous organization members, NGO employees and researchers, university researchers, journalists, lawyers, former municipal officials), participant observation (e.g., workshops of NGOs, gatherings of indigenous organizations) and field visits (e.g., assessing the valley's hydrology). We scrutinized gray documents (e.g., POT, ministry policy documents, NGO reports), and followed media reports. We further considered rumors, non-verifiable information widely repeated among resisting actors, sometimes in slightly modified ways, that circulated in opposition to official narratives (Liu & Lo, 2022). Rumors played a significant role in crafting counter-narratives and mobilizing resisting actors around a shared narrative. Amid poor official information access, rumors worked to de-legitimize 'the singular truth' presented by powerful actors with counter-facts (Copeland, 2014; Liu & Lo, 2022).

We triangulated the lead author's findings with co-authors' and

students' research conducted in the valley over the past five years (Baud et al., 2019; García Garzon, 2021; Hendriks, 2020; van Wiltenburg, 2020). These contributions allowed us to compare our findings with previous observations and enabled us to track the valley's developments over time (e.g., contestations of the territorial ordering plan, strategies and challenges of resistance movements, and municipal government changes).

We adjusted our approach to the researched issues' sensitivity and conflictuality. As official consent forms entailed a risk for our research participants, we obtained their consent orally.² We anonymized all research participants' names and removed identifying characteristics if they could compromise research participants' safety. In coordination with our collaborators, we determined what information could be made visible or should be withheld. Considering potential dangers resulting from informants' visibility during in-person interviews (i.e., due to concerns about safety or judgement by others), we prioritized informal conversations and observation-based methods, and offered phone or online interviews as an option.

Our initial research plan entailed interviewing officials of powerful institutions (e.g., municipality and ministry officials, mining companies' employees), but we chose not to do so after experiences of intimidation (i.e., the lead author was intimidated against conducting research in the Palajunoy Valley by high-ranking municipal officialdom; pers. comm. 01-08-2022). However, this decision does not correspond to a generalization of powerful actors as monolithic (Ntjenjom Mbohohou & Tomkinson, 2022; Oglesby, 2010; Rice, 2010); in fact, we acknowledge dynamic and diverse positionalities of all actors involved. For instance, we recognize that officials might have chosen to intimidate us for distinct reasons (e.g., vulnerability vis-à-vis superiors, concerns about their position, pressures from third parties). To nonetheless account for dominant actors' strategies, we approached former officials (i.e., being mindful of potential political motivations) and considered gray documents, taking them as entry points to understand the discourses and techniques of territory-making circulated by influential agents. We further leaned into the perspective of the territorial defense movement, providing us with unique insights into the alignments, tensions, and contradictions between resisting actors.

Our research with resisting actors yielded moments of discomfort. The atmosphere among valley inhabitants was tense, rooted in divisive strategies of co-optation and micropolitical tensions (pers. comm. NGO members 30-07-2022; 22-08-2022; journalist 12-08-2022; indigenous organization member 24-08-2022; Sections 3 and 5.3). Inhabitants commonly had skeptical attitudes toward research, rooted in previous breached promises by researchers, distrust in dominant institutions that legitimize their practices through scientific knowledge discourse, and experiences of research-related violence (Aguilar-Støen & Sveinsdóttir, 2022). "No researcher can come and do what they want. They might be disguised as researchers, but then they have another interest," stated an indigenous organization member (pers. comm. 15-08-2022). Another valley inhabitant expressed doubts: "[M]uch research and so many projects have happened, yet nothing changed for peoples' realities, or it sometimes even changed them for the worse" (pers. comm. 22-08-2022). But the skepticism and refusal were not universal. We experienced support from different resisting actors (e.g., indigenous organizations, NGOs, lawyers, researchers). They underlined the importance of making the situation in the valley visible, unveiling the atrocities and socio-

environmental disruptions committed by elite companies and government accomplices. Such relationships of trust enabled reciprocal discussions about our research progress.

3. Territorial disputes in the Palajunoy Valley

3.1. Extractive industries in Guatemala and non-metallic mining in the Palajunoy Valley

Guatemala's land and resources have long been extremely unevenly distributed. This forms the core of powerful and resisting political projects and demands. Land reforms of the 1950s democratic government were vilified and overthrown in a CIA-supported military coup. A decade-long internal armed conflict dominated by state repression and violence followed, taking the lives of more than 200,000 people and hitting rock bottom with a genocide against the indigenous population (Comisión de Esclarecimiento Histórico, 1999; Copeland, 2019a; Sieder, 2010).

While these political instabilities and violent climate attenuated Guatemala's integration into international capital markets, the end of the 36-year-long civil war in the mid-1990s marked a turning point for the country's extractive industries. While land problems and extreme inequalities remained unresolved in the peace process (Batz, 2017), Guatemala's economic and political structures were reconfigured to facilitate extractive mega-projects aligned with neoliberal development and economic liberalization ideas. New elites with access to international commodity markets entered the country and formed alliances with existing elites who retained control over political resources and land (Aguilar-Støen, 2014; Aguilar-Støen & Bull, 2016). These reconfigured structures shape mining conflicts until today. Additionally, the post-war demobilization of the military led to the emergence of private security actors whose use of violence continues to figure into conflicts over mining and territory (Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021). Two new laws (mining law in 1997, concession law in 2005) and a free trade agreement with the United States (i.e., CAFTA-DR in 2006) paved the way for mining development.

Reflecting wider Latin American trends and backed up by responsible national institutions,³ the number of mining exploration and exploitation licenses skyrocketed along with the number of mining-related conflicts (Bull & Aguilar-Støen, 2016). Currently, Guatemala has 309 granted mining licenses (23 for exploration, 286 for exploitation), covering more than 1 % of the national territory. Additionally, 641 applications for mining licenses are being processed, that – if granted – would cover up to 20 % of the national territory (OIE, 2022, p. 27). Next to economic revenues from mining, it has been argued that the rapid expansion of mining projects reflects the strategic value of mining for elite-driven land control (Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021) and remaining structural inequalities prevailing in the country (Aguilar-González et al., 2018). Local resistance to extractive projects is often criminalized and repressed (e.g., Rasch, 2013; Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021), continuing the history of violence against indigenous and peasant communities (Henighan & Johnson, 2018) and perpetuating structural racism and white-elitist dominance (Casaús Arzú, 2007).

Most mining projects extract metallic resources and are pursued by alliances between old and new elites, the national government, military, and transnational interests. The second biggest mining player, however,

² This entailed verbally explaining the research objectives and procedures, emphasizing the right to voluntary participation, discontinuity, and withdrawal. We discussed aspects of discomfort, risks, anonymity, and confidentiality, explaining the official complaint procedures, and clarified doubts and questions.

³ The Ministry of Energy and Mines (*Ministerio de Energía y Minas* in Spanish) grants mining exploration and exploitation licenses. The Ministry of Environment and Natural Resources (*Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales* in Spanish) is responsible for environmental impact assessments.

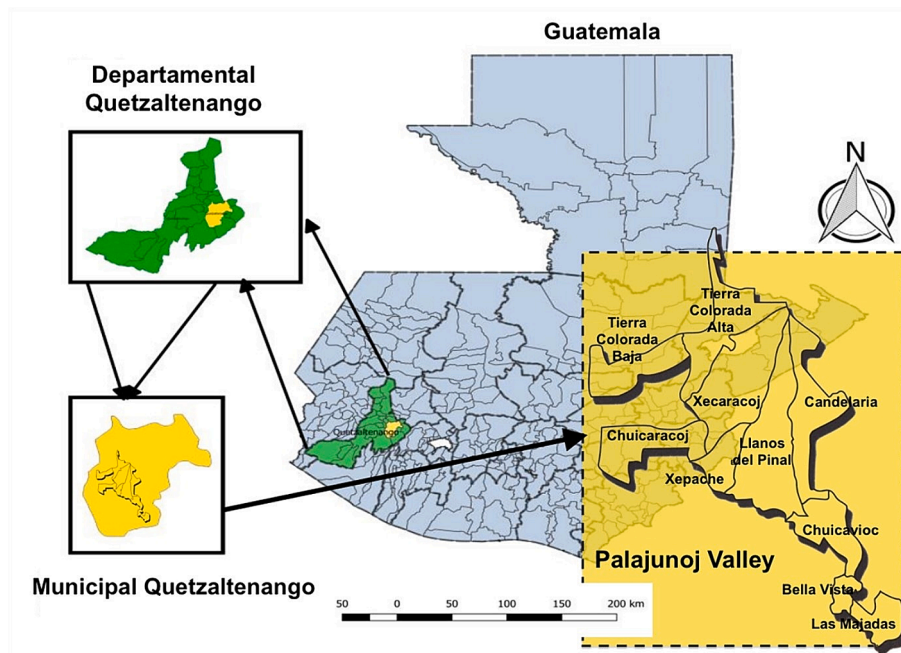


Fig. 1. The Palajunoj Valley in the municipality of Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. Map provided by [García Garzón, 2021](#).



Fig. 2. The La Roca mine in the Palajunoj Valley. Photo taken by the lead author.

is the non-metallic mining company and cement monopoly Cementos Progreso, linked to the elite Novella family ([Aguilar-Støen, 2014](#); [Bull & Aguilar-Støen, 2016](#)). The need for building materials like sand, gravel and pumice has increased the number of open-pit non-metallic mines across the country. Our case study in Quetzaltenango ([Fig. 1](#)) is one example where rapid urban growth requires substantial non-metallic resources for construction ([IDB & Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango, 2014](#)). Here, large-scale non-metallic mining companies entered the Palajunoj Valley from 1999 onwards. They were able to evade formal rules and did not conduct proper consultations (pers. comm. lawyer 22-04-2021; valley inhabitant 15-08-2022). On paper, five mining companies hold licenses for the valley territory ([Ministerio de Energía y Minas, n.d.](#)). In practice, three of them, Piedra Azul, AGRECA and La Roca, dominate the valley ([Fig. 2](#)), while one mine (La Rosa) has been

suspended, and another one (Peña de Oro) is significantly smaller. Additionally, artisanal mines⁴ of varied sizes are scattered across the valley.

The valley extends into the southwestern periphery of Quetzaltenango and lies at the foot of the Santa María and Cerro Quemado volcanoes to its south and east, and the Siete Orejas volcanic ridge to its west ([Grandin, 2000](#)). Ten indigenous communities⁵ live in the valley, together making up a population of 20,000-25,000. They mostly practice *milpa*, a form of subsistence agriculture based on Mayan principles (pers. comm. NGO member 25-07-2022), selling the vegetables in markets in the close-by city. Some work in artisanal mining ([Ordóñez et al., 2019](#)), and many depend on remittances from family members in the US.

Inhabitants living close to the large mines denounce environmental degradation, ranging from soil erosion, deforestation, landslides and flooding to contamination of crops, and water scarcity (see [Ordóñez et al., 2019](#)). Respiratory problems are more common compared to other municipal areas, due to dust from explosives used in the mines. Health authorities confirm this impact but have never made public the report that quantifies it (pers. comm. university researchers 10-08-2022; NGO member 11-01-2024). The communities also report far-reaching impacts in their everyday life, like noise from explosions and heavy transport trucks that drive in the narrow streets resulting in life-threatening situations and two recent casualties (pers. comm. NGO member 20-12-

⁴ To distinguish artisanal mining from the negative impacts of large-scale mining on the valley's hillslopes, inhabitants refer to a practice of 'leveling the ground' for agricultural purposes that has been carried out for decades and that produces small quantities of construction materials as a byproduct. On closer examination, artisanal mining is contradictory. Artisanal mining includes a spectrum of activities ranging from small plots mined by inhabitants with hoes to semi-industrial mechanized mines owned by entrepreneurs from outside the valley, which may provide employment to a few valley residents. Licensing procedures that lump all artisanal mining activities together in one category are seen with skepticism. Some of these practices may in sum be damaging for the environment and the health of workers.

⁵ Candelaria, Chuicaracoj, Chuicavioc, Las Majadas, Llano del Pinal, Tierra Colorada Alta, Tierra Colorada Baja, Xecaracoj, Xepache, and Bella Vista.

2022; 27-07-2023).

To counter the communities' criticism, the mining companies offer employment and provide goods or workshops to some inhabitants (e.g., female empowerment workshops, family garden projects). These practices generate complex, ambivalent micropolitical ecologies around mining (e.g., Dougherty & Olsen, 2014; Horowitz, 2011, 2012; Rasch & Köhne, 2016) and challenge the maintenance of a clearly demarcated opposition pole. Members of valley-based indigenous organizations, urban-based social movements that support the indigenous organizations, and most valley inhabitants (i.e., not all organized within or supporting indigenous organizations) criticize the companies' co-optation practices and the rupture of the valley's social fabric (*tejido social*). They have also celebrated successes in their contestation of extractive activities, yet their responses and reactions to extractive developments are unstable and heterogeneous (Sections 5 and 6).

3.2. Conflicts over municipal authority and territorial ordering

The mining issues overlap with an intermittent conflict between valley inhabitants and the municipal government. The conflict partly revolves around profound mutual mistrust and the co-existence of multiple territorial authorities (cf. Aguilar-Støen & Hirsch, 2015). While the municipal government collaborates with the Community Development Councils (COCODEs – *Consejos Comunitarios de Desarrollo*) as officially recognized spaces for citizen participation,⁶ indigenous organizations from the valley denounce the COCODEs as co-opted by municipal interests. Indigenous Mayors (*Alcaldía Indígena*) and Ancestral Authorities (*Autoridades Ancestrales*) are two organizations competing over authority with the municipal government but are not recognized by official law (cf. Constanza, 2016). These indigenous organizations are not necessarily aligned in their struggle and compete over support from the valley's residents, sometimes blurring political positions with personal economic interests and building on gendered differences (Sections 5.3 and 6).

Questions of ethnicity and material-political territorial marginalization exacerbate the conflict over authority. While the valley is a resource backbone for Quetzaltenango (e.g., mined materials, agricultural products), this interconnectedness is made invisible and racist narratives paint rural livelihoods as backwards (pers. comm. university researcher 22-08-2022). Many valley inhabitants also live without basic municipal services, namely water and electricity, drainage systems, and garbage collection (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022; journalist 12-08-2022). Given the lack of adequate drainage systems and the deforestation of the hill slopes caused by mining (Fig. 3), the valley regularly floods (pers. comm. university researcher 11-08-2022). The municipality disposes tons of untreated garbage in a dump in the valley. Hazardous substances are suspected to leak into the valley's water systems (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022; NGO members 30-07-2022; indigenous organization member 07-08-2022).

The municipal government's POT as emerging socio-spatial governance instrument gets woven into these tensions and the conflict between indigenous organizations and ladino-led⁷ municipal authority. Linked to wider Central and Latin American trends of territorial ordering (Arzeno, 2019; Montes Lira, 2001; Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023),

⁶ The COCODEs are regulated by the Development Council Law and result from Guatemala's post-war decentralization reforms (see Constanza, 2016). In the past, COCODEs have played ambiguous roles in conflicts over territory and resources. In some cases, they have served as institutional spaces and networks for elites to promote mining interests (Constanza, 2016), which seems to resonate with the situation in the Palajunuj Valley (Section 5.3). In other cases, their authority has been mobilized in alliance with municipal authorities to challenge mining operations (Copeland 2019a).

⁷ In Guatemala, the term 'ladino' is often used as a non-indigenous ethnic-societal category.

official narratives promise that achieving a desired territorial order contributes to the achievement of the sustainable development goals (Footnote 1) and the common good (Arzeno, 2019). By reorganizing municipal space through a set of ordering techniques, the POT is presented as efficient instrument to control informal urban development, provide environmental protection for areas threatened by encroachment of building or mining activities, and solve flooding issues through "the effective administration of water" (*Municipalidad de Quetzaltenango*, 2017; 2019) by its municipal professionals.

The official narratives around territorial ordering clash with indigenous frames of territorial ordering (Baud et al., 2019) and trigger various concerns. The land-use zoning plans are viewed as conflicting with communal land-use practices. Indigenous-led organizations fundamentally distrust the municipality and suspect a hidden agenda or deception behind the POT (Nelson, 2009). They see the POT as a loophole for corruption (i.e., suspected personal economic interests of the mayor in mining as he runs a truck transport company; pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022; NGO member 21-08-2022; university researcher 28-09-2023) and for betrayal of the valley communities (Baud et al., 2019). Critics also highlight that the POT fails to control the large-scale mines and protects the mining companies (La Voz de Xela, 2018). Other valley inhabitants criticize the POT as tax-collection tool allowing municipal officials to enrich themselves (pers. comm. valley inhabitant 01-08-2022; lawyer 20-08-2022; NGO members 24-08-2022).

3.3. Interrelated contestations

Over the years, different indigenous organizations have articulated these interrelated territorial issues and challenged them, often in alliance with other organizations.⁸ The large-scale mining has triggered several protests and roadblocks. The communities have tried to legally fight the mines, for instance by reporting non-compliance with consultation processes (*Prensa Libre*, 2019). One mine was successfully suspended in 2019 (i.e., the La Rosa Mine adjacent to the community of Xepache). Despite widespread resentment, it has been challenging to maintain anti-mining mobilizations due to employment opportunities and co-optation, instances of violence and criminalization, and fragile support alliances (cf. Aguilar-Støen, 2014; Copeland, 2023).

More recently, the POT has led to protests. In 2018, valley inhabitants gained support from urban social movements demanding a stop to mining and to renegotiate the POT (cf. García Garzón, 2021).⁹ Although the POT was amended in 2019 and 2021,¹⁰ the indigenous organizations deemed important points as unaddressed (i.e., construction regulations, land-use practices). Elections held in 2019 led to a change of municipal government, and the newly elected mayor breached his election promise to suspend the POT.

⁸ As an illustration, the collective of social organizations of Quetzaltenango (*Multisectorial de Quetzaltenango*) consisting of representatives of citizen collective, unions, student organizations, and indigenous organizations tries to articulate shared concerns affecting Quetzaltenango across urban-rural divides. As another example, internationally-funded NGOs such as SERJUS or Movement for Peace, Disarmament and Liberty in alliances with lawyers accompany territorial defense of indigenous organizations and contest the criminalization of indigenous leaders.

⁹ A social movement in defense of territory of Quetzaltenango temporarily formed in 2018, in which the Citizen Collective of Quetzaltenango allied with SERJUS, valley inhabitants, and indigenous organizations, converging over shared concerns regarding heavy floods, the municipality's attempt to rush the implementation of the POT, and around the garbage dump.

¹⁰ Though the protestors demanded otherwise, most of the POT remained unchanged. Detailed modifications were made, for example regarding construction licenses, sustainability and ecological standards for construction in rurally-classified areas, the strengthened role of the municipal construction control department and technical roundtables, and specified fines for not respecting municipal construction standards.

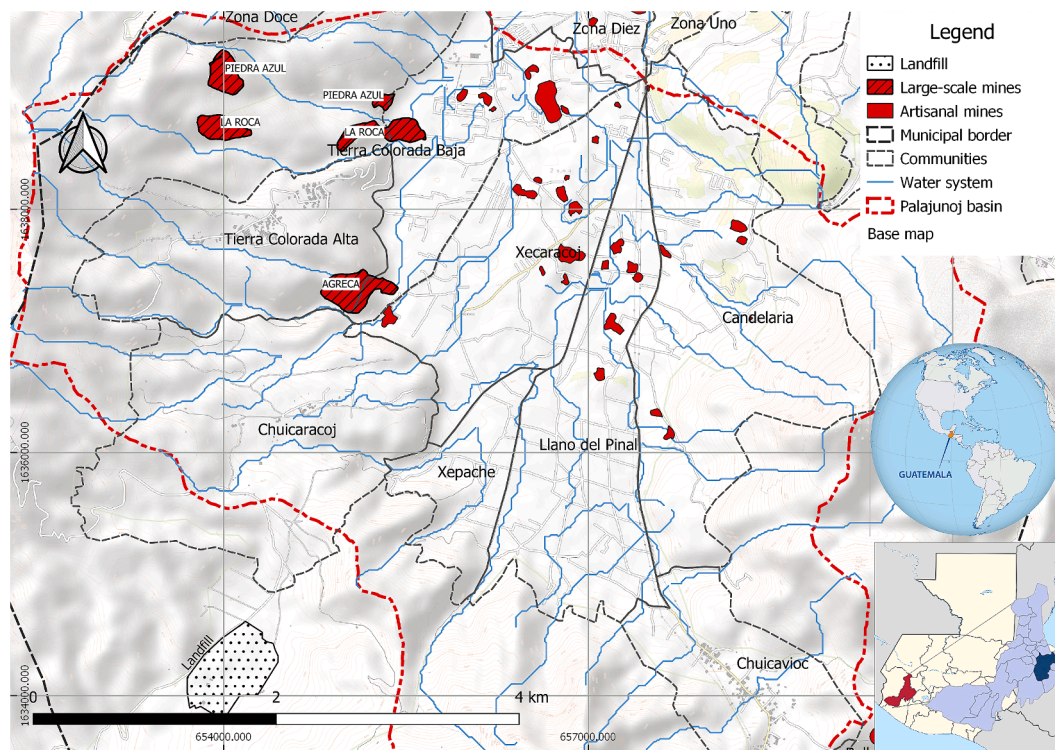


Fig. 3. Mining and water systems in the Palajunuj Valley. Map provided by Rodolfo Armando Rivera Pascual.

In response to the broken political promise, valley inhabitants spearheaded by the Indigenous Mayors maintained a 75-day roadblock in 2022, sealing off access to the municipal garbage dump. The protest created a garbage crisis in the city (i.e., garbage accumulated over weeks, disturbing residents who feared health and hygiene risks). With each passing day, it became more difficult for the protesters to maintain the blockade, as it meant the loss of daily wages. But with each passing day, the protesters also increased the political pressure. After several moments of ‘almost-escalation’ by the security forces (pers. comm. journalist 12-08-2022), the Guatemalan president came to Quetzaltenango to mediate, and the municipal government attempted to establish dialogue tables. From the protesters’ perspective, such mediation attempts were unsuccessful due to pre-formulated results (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 07-08-2022; 15-08-2022). Nonetheless, they decided to refrain from further protest due to the loss of income and challenging weather conditions but also because they were met with violence (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 07-08-2022).

4. Territory, governmentality, and echelons of rights

We combine a territorial lens with the notion of governmentality and the ERA framework. The territorial lens expands our view on the Palajunuj Valley beyond questions of resource access and control (i.e., regimes of spatial control of resources; Rasmussen & Lund, 2018) and allows us to account for multiple territorial contradictions. We understand territory not as a fixed naturally given or physical entity, but as a space that is socially, naturally, and politically co-constituted through the interactions of collaborating or competing actor alliances (Agnew 1994; Elden 2010; Escobar, 2008). In the struggle to define, order, and control space, resources, and people materially, socially, and politically, dominant actor alliances and territorial defense movements deploy their strategies of territorialization and seek to establish their own territoriality, or way of relating to territory (Baletti, 2012; Boelens et al., 2016; Porto-Gonçalves, 2002). Through the idea of territorial pluralism, the territorial lens also captures the contradictions and conflicts produced

by the concurring and clashing processes of territorialization and overlapping notions of territoriality (Baletti, 2012; Hoogesteger et al., 2016; Porto Gonçalves, 2002; Escobar, 2016).

We deploy the notion of governmentality (Foucault, 1978/2002; 1991), understanding processes of spatial definition, re-ordering, and control as strategies of governmentalization (Arzeno, 2019; Baletti, 2012; Boelens et al., 2016; Moreira, 2011; Rose-Redwood, 2006; Sevilla Buitrago, 2008; 2014). We propose to analyze the logic and practices of territory-making and territorial ordering at play in the valley as spatial governmentalities. We depart from Rose-Redwood (2006, p. 480) who emphasizes the operationalization of power through spatial governing techniques and points out that “the ordering of space is itself one of the requisites for producing governmental power/knowledges” or governmentality. These techniques build on a set of rules about ‘what should (not) be done in territory’ and norms that classify territorial practices as normal or abnormal (Moreira, 2011). Baletti (2012) analyzes territorial ordering plans as spatial governmentality efforts that build on a set of techniques to “conduct the conduct” (Foucault, 1978/2002, 1991) over territorial subjects, objects, and relations. Attention to spatial governmentality also reveals how territorial defense movements question and contest dominant modes of territorial ordering and subjection through “counter-conducts” and the “art of voluntary insubordination” (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 194; see also Arzeno, 2019; Asher & Ojeda, 2009).

To explore the different layers where governmentalities and counter-conducts surface in the Palajunuj Valley, we use echelons of rights analysis (ERA; Boelens, 2008; Zwartveen et al., 2005; Zwartveen & Boelens, 2014;). The ERA framework exposes how powerful territorial governmentality techniques and coercive territorial interventions as well as their contestation unfold and reinforce each other on diverse levels of struggle (Fig. 4). By fleshing out the connections between the ERA framework, the notion of territory and governmentality, our analytical approach allows us to examine how multiple issues within the same territory entwine and are disputed across echelons.

The ERA’s four levels capture the struggle over land and resource access and distribution, over contents of rules, norms, and laws, over the

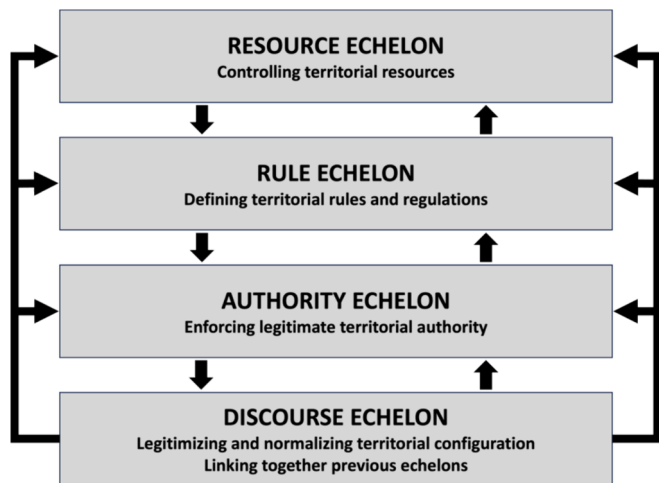


Fig. 4. The four echelons of territorial struggle. Illustration by the authors.

legitimacy of authority, and over the dominant-normalizing discourses. The first level, the resource echelon, explores the struggle for land and resource access and control. It considers technological means and infrastructures, financial resources, and labor that are mobilized to materialize territorial configurations, enabling resource access for some actors while excluding others. Next, the rule echelon captures struggle over the content of rules, norms, and laws concerning the distribution and use of land and resources. It unravels how diverging legal systems (e.g., state mining law, customary territorial laws) and norms (e.g., formal, informal) may co-exist in the same territory, leading to pluralistic and conflicting understandings of fair territorial configurations.

Third, the authority echelon touches upon aspects of authority and legitimacy and the ability to enforce rights systems and normative orders as legitimate. It considers institutions and actors that influence formal political decisions and shape land and resource-use policies, but also actors holding informal territorial authority. Finally, the discourse echelon grapples with discourses that present certain territorial orders as self-evident, entwined with power/knowledge regimes (Foucault, 1982). These discourses legitimize and normalize certain territorial interests, meanings, and ontologies as true, at once sidelining alternative truths and views. Coinciding and conflicting discourses are mobilized among collaborating and competing actor alliances, trying to cohesively tie together all previous echelons (the authority, rule and resource echelons). In sum, the four ERA levels will serve to analytically disentangle interrelated domains where territory-making practices and territorial ordering governmentality and counter-conducts become apparent in the Palajunoy Valley (Fig. 5).

5. Analyzing the territorial disputes in the Palajunoy Valley

5.1. The resource echelon: Conflict over land and resources

In material terms, the dispute in the valley manifests around territory-making through resource extraction, land use, distributive injustices, and their contestations. As large-scale mines encroach hillside land, many valley inhabitants condemn the environmental degradation (i.e., deforestation, soil erosion, landslides, flooding), health impacts (i.e., respiratory issues due to dust from explosions), and disruptions to their everyday lives (i.e., noise, constant passing of trucks). They further decry that extraction-related profits flow out of the valley into the hands of powerful elite networks. Infrastructural developments are understood to only take place if they benefit the mining companies (i.e., paved roads for transporting mined materials). Despite the negative sentiments, a few employment opportunities and benefits provided by the companies (e.g., mining companies provide payments to selected leaders, gifts to

valley residents, workshops with women's groups) are a factor challenging a coherent anti-mining mobilization.

The negative impacts of mining are disregarded by municipal and national authorities (pers. comm. university researcher 10-08-2022), while they are repeatedly raised by the valley's indigenous organizations, claiming that land and resource access should be restricted for damaging territorial outsiders (pers. comm. NGO researcher 16-04-2021; university researcher 10-08-2022). Valley inhabitants and indigenous organizations see their own land and resource-use practices as less harmful (i.e., agricultural land use for *milpa*; stony grounds that are leveled through artisanal mining, providing construction materials and an important source of income). The municipality sees both large-scale and artisanal mining as damaging for the environment and health. The municipality's regulation efforts are limited to artisanal mines, which might end up illegalized with artisanal miners losing their income (on contradictions of formalizing artisanal mining, see e.g., Hilson & Maconachie, 2017; Persaud et al., 2017; Spiegel, 2017). Large-scale mining is governed by different rules and institutions. Paradoxically, the small negative impacts of artisanal mining compared to the large-scale mines are not considered (i.e., due to legal ramifications, powerful and/or corrupted interests; see also Hendriks, 2020). Consequently, the municipality fails to control or even monitor the negative impacts or even deems large-scale extraction as legitimate and controlled, so that it continues unhindered (cf. Hendriks, 2020). At once, the valley inhabitants' existing frustration (i.e., due to the lack of municipal service provision and the suffering under the municipal garbage dump; Section 5.2) with the municipal government increases.

The disputes around mining and criticism of municipal spatial governance are exacerbated by the flooding burden during the rainy season. "They [inhabitants] not only confront floods every winter, but they are also stronger every time," reports an NGO member (pers. comm. 09-09-2021). Many inhabitants decry how the municipality refuses to take care of appropriate drainage systems (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022; valley inhabitant 12-08-2022). Several factors exacerbate the flooding, but various actors note the significant impact of large-scale mining due to soil erosion and loss of water-retention areas:

[T]he mines have an impact on the flooding problem. They are not the only cause, but they have a high negative impact, especially during rain peak times... that is when the capacity of the soil to absorb the quantities of water is not enough... [then] water currents rush down the hills and wash a lot of stones and sand with them (pers. comm. university researcher 11-08-2022).

Valley inhabitants and indigenous organizations feel abandoned with this issue. An NGO member tells us that "[t]here is a lack of attention, or even ignorance, from municipal authorities to find a solution to negative effects of large-scale extraction, especially the flooding during the rainy season" (pers. comm. 26-07-2021).

The ignorance of negative mining impacts resonates with the POT's formal and state-centric territorial ordering proposition that fails to acknowledge that mining and flooding are two sides of the same coin (cf. Baud et al. 2019). The technocratic POT proposes a set of territorial ordering techniques (cf. Baletti, 2012; Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023) aimed at sustainable and effective territorial control by de-normalizing informal rural territorial practices of valley inhabitants which are labeled as "bad" (cf. Arzeno, 2019). From the perspective of the plan's opponents, the POT gets woven into or aggravates existing conflicts over territorial resources, as most valley inhabitants do not believe in the POT's solution and suspect a hidden agenda of resource appropriation behind it (pers. comm. valley inhabitants 01-08-2022; 22-08-2022; 24-08-2022). Their mistrustful reactions and fear of deceit – seeing the POT as a two-faced plan pretending to yield development while yielding betrayal – is a critical response that prevents a naïve acceptance of a new logic of territorial governance in the Guatemalan post-war context of ongoing violence and betrayal by state institutions (cf. Nelson, 2009; Copeland 2014).

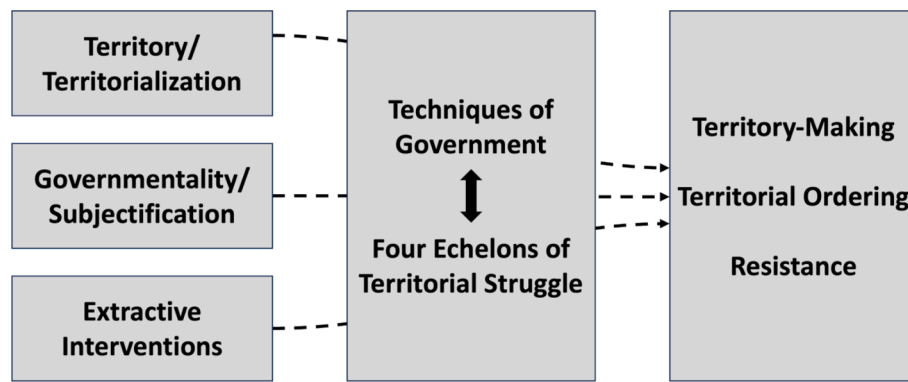


Fig. 5. The analytical framework combines territory, governmentality, and the ERA framework. Illustration by the authors.

The resource echelon emphasizes the valley's material realm of powerful territory-making practices and their contestation, reflected in uneven land and resource access and distribution amid stark power imbalances and mutual mistrust. The valley's material reconfiguration through large-scale mining is criticized by many valley inhabitants and indigenous organizations, denouncing negative environmental and health impacts and aggravated flooding issues. The municipality does not differentiate between large-scale and artisanal mining practices, and regulations only limit artisanal mines. The formal and state-centric logic of the POT prioritizes technocratic solutions that seem blind to large-scale mining interventions, which aggravates already strained rural–urban relations, spurred on by the lack of municipal services, malfunctioning drainage systems, and the dumping of toxic garbage.

5.2. The rule echelon: Legal and normative disputes

Techniques of territory-making, territorial ordering, and their contestation resonate on the echelon of rules and regulations. The mining companies build on the Ministry of Mining's exploitation licenses (Ministerio de Energía y Minas, n.d.) to justify the appropriation of land, stressing that subsoil resources are state administered and depoliticizing extractive interests as national interests. Risk mitigation and environmental impact assessment studies as conditions for mining licenses are bypassed, as are international consultation conventions (i.e., ILO 169 ratified by Guatemala in 1996). The mere contents and validity of laws and regulations turn out to be less important than the ability of dominant actor alliances to appropriate, interpret and enforce them, reflecting what Sieder (2010) specifies as the (un)rule of law in post-conflict Guatemala. A university researcher specified that “[the] owners of Piedra Azul mine had direct ties to the government. Obviously no environmental or social impact studies were done” (pers. comm. 10-08-2022).

The legal-extractive territory-making techniques are strongly contested. Opponents of large-scale mining delegitimize the Ministerio de Energía y Minas licenses by emphasizing deficient, pre-formulated impact studies and consultations (pers. comm. NGO researcher 16-04-2021; NGO member 30-07-2022; urban social movement member 11-08-2022). Resisting actors' focus on bypassed consultations reflects how the non-compliance with consultation regulations is often mobilized strategically in Guatemalan anti-extractive struggles (cf. Copeland, 2019a; Illmer, 2018). Consultations remain a controversial instrument of resistance because their outcomes often remain legally unrecognized by authorities, while they imply the juridification of fundamental indigenous rights into official legal systems (cf. Sieder, 2010; 2020; see also Batz, 2017; Rasch, 2013).

Normative-legal disputes also unfold around the valley inhabitants' health issues, aggravated by mining and municipal territorial interventions. Indigenous organization members complain that health concerns of valley inhabitants – in contrast to those of urban residents –

are not considered (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 07-08-2023). As an illustration, the garbage accumulated in the city during the 2022 protests was framed as health risk for urban residents and indigenous protesters were antagonized by the municipal government. The same risks have been ignored amid a decade of dumping of garbage in the valley, potentially leaking into soil and water, and leading to an “unpleasant odor and unhealthy conditions [that] cause gastrointestinal and respiratory illnesses” (Prensa Comunitaria, 2022). This intensifies valley inhabitants' frustration with and mistrust of municipal practices (Illmer, 2018; see also Copeland 2014; Nelson, 2009):

We put up with the garbage all the time, and in the city, they cannot even put up with it for a couple of days because of the smell and other risks. So, I ask you: ‘What are we, are we humans or are we animals? ... The garbage dump contaminates our soil and our waters, too...’ (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 15-08-2022).

The co-existence of municipal and customary law, and the collision of different frames of territorial ordering (cf. Baud et al., 2019) further strain urban–rural relations. Ideas around sustainable territorial ordering that promise environmental protection rooted in ladino-normative ideas around of nature, sustainability, land, housing and public space use (cf. Arzeno, 2019), and which are, moreover, promoted by urban-based municipal officials, come into conflict with grass-rooted indigenous territorial visions. Valley inhabitants build on indigenous territorial norms to criticize the technocratic-modernizing POT's interference with indigenous territoriality. Their criticism reflects unfolding conflict around the POT's subtle intent to governmentalize the valley territory (cf. Baletti; 2012; Rose-Redwood, 2006; Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023). The municipal government justifies the new logic of municipal spatial governance amid multi-scalar legal ramifications and regulations. “They [protesters] wanted the plan to be suspended. We legally cannot suspend the plan... it is written in the municipal code, written in the law” (pers. comm. municipal official 01-08-2022). The municipal code, national legal ramifications, and international norms and guidelines (i.e., Segeplan and IDB Guidelines) are drawn in to justify the inescapability of the POT.

The land-use categorization proposed in the POT further exacerbates normative-legal disputes. The POT is full of parameters that establish the ‘desired territorial order’ by defining which land-use practices “are legal and illegal, regular and irregular, formal and informal, planned and unplanned, and natural and unnatural” (Arzeno, 2019, p.14). A former municipal official states that “open-pit mining can be done in compliance with ... the POT” (pers. comm. 05-08-2022). Indigenous organizations – guided by their mistrust in state institutions (cf. Copeland 2014; Illmer, 2018; Nelson, 2009) – thus entwine critiques of mining and territorial ordering in their territorial defense strategy and blame government institutions for shielding large-scale extractive interests. After failed attempts to curb formal territorial regulation and planning in defense against mining, critics now understand the regulations as

intentionally making powerful corrupt-actor alliances invisible. An NGO member stated that “[those implementing the POT] just serve as the right hand of some powerful invisible people who try to hide their economic or political interests behind the POT. It is all about corruption” (pers. comm. 21-08-2022). It was also stated how the POT “was not for the improvement of the valley but to extract more,” and then showed us the document evidencing how “[t]he first printed version of the POT was sponsored by Cementos Progreso [with] the company’s name and logo written on the back side ... They only removed [that] in the adapted versions” (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022).

To counter regulations backing up the enclosure of valley territory, valley inhabitants mobilize different informal and formal legal sources to defend their territorial claims (Benda-Beckmann, 1997; Benda-Beckmann & Turner, 2018; Boelens et al., 2023; Sieder, 2010; 2020). One valley community managed to mobilize cohesively and legally suspended a mine by denouncing the non-legitimacy of a mining license (Section 3). Valley residents also refer to principles of private property and communal land tenure to legally defend their claims. In recent years, the indigenous organization Ancestral Authorities has legally mobilized communal land titles. “The valley communities have the necessary land titles. They bought them from the Spanish crown in 1782... they should be backed up by principles of property” (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022). Regardless, they have not been successful in asserting these rights. While the legal land titles facilitated past powerful occupations, the legal enforceability of communal land titles to reclaim the territory remains unsuccessful amid power imbalances, weak institutions (Batz, 2017), and clashes with state or private tenure rights.

The rule echelon highlights how in the valley’s territorial struggle unfolds around rules and regulations, reflecting territorial legal pluralism. Rights, principles, and legal-normative constructs of different formal and non-formal sources are backed by different powers, and co-exist, interact, clash, and often hybridize into new socio-legal repertoires, in the same political-territorial arena (cf. Boelens et al., 2023, p. 1134; see also Benda-Beckmann, 1997; Benda-Beckmann & Turner, 2018; Sieder, 2010; 2020). National mining laws overlap and contradict indigenous rights conventions, customary law, or the municipal legal code. Given pertinent power imbalances, laws tend to shield powerful interests. Mining and the new territorial ordering logic are presented as legally inescapable, while legal shortcomings remain unaddressed. Marginalized interests remain unprotected, aggravating frustration with and distrust in official state institutions and laws. Valley inhabitants and indigenous organizations draw on a mix of customary and official legal strategies to delegitimize powerful territory-making techniques. They thereby simultaneously legitimize and challenge the rule of law, while (often co-opted) dysfunctional institutional-legal systems fail to guarantee fundamental rights (cf. Batz, 2017; Sieder, 2010; 2020).

5.3. The authority echelon: Competition over legitimate authority

The ability to reinforce territorial governmentalities and interventions raises questions of authority. Actor alliances converge or compete over the legitimate control of the territory and its resources. Legal pluralism and the co-existence of authorities play out in multi-scalar vertical terms (i.e., from international to communal authority claims) but also horizontally (e.g., among independently and municipally-steered indigenous organizations). Mining companies shield their interests by mobilizing national policies and laws (Section 5.2). Resisting actors have limited authority and are confronted with legal backlash:

When we legally challenged problematic practices [referring to the absence of licenses or non-compliance with consultation laws], the ministry came to prohibit the artisanal mines. They made the argument that we did not have licenses for exploitation (pers. comm. valley inhabitant 07-08-2022).

The authority of the post-conflict Guatemalan state is extremely

strong vis-a-vis movements seeking to defend their rights and territories (Nelson, 2009; Sieder, 2010). “[T]he state is very capable against individuals and families [referring to criminalization processes], but against powerful actors the state is very slow [referring to impunity regarding land grabs and violence]” (pers. comm. lawyer 08-12-2022). A valley inhabitant shared that “valley inhabitants who had criticized the noncompliance of community consultations were criminalized” (pers. comm. 25-08-2022; see also pers. comm. NGO researcher 16-04-2021). When impunity is problematized, valley inhabitants are criminalized (pers. comm. lawyer 08-12-2022). Next to weak legal institutions and violent strategies, the dominant actor alliances also demarcate their authority through strategies of co-optation and corruption (Section 3 and 5.1; see also Aguilar-Støen & Hirsch, 2015).

The municipality seeks to establish legitimate authority in the valley, thereby competing with indigenous organizations, while siding with national and international actors (e.g., mining companies, Segeplan). Through the POT, the municipality is officially given a “management instrument ... to promote the social, economic, technological development and land use planning of its jurisdiction” (Segeplan, 2018, p. 87). The set of territorial ordering techniques linked to this instrument (e.g., marking municipal boundaries, determining land-use practices, construction licenses including the penalization through fines; see also Baletti, 2012; Rose-Redwood, 2006) is not a neutral technical-management instrument but reinforces formal authority vis-à-vis informal indigenous organizations within the same territory. While the POT remains ineffective in achieving its formulated goals (i.e., due to inadequate leadership or political instability; see Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023), it subtly expands municipal territorial authority claims and contributes to renewing the conflict around ‘what’ are legitimate territorial politics between indigenous and ladino actors.

Indigenous organizations in defense of territory contest the municipality’s spatial restructuring intentions from above. “How can they do that if it [the land] is ours? We have the right to property, and it is the land of the Maya K’iche indigenous population” (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 07-08-2022). Embedded in wider frustrations with municipal politics characterized by ineffectiveness, symbolic approval processes, corrupt practices, and co-optation strategies of political parties during electoral processes (cf. Illmer, 2018; Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023), these organizations therefore delegitimize the municipality’s territorial authority. “We are a forgotten territory,” says a member of an indigenous organization, “[t]he municipality does not offer infrastructure, electricity, and water, but now they want our taxes” (pers. comm. 07-08-2022).

Critics also mention the entwinement of territorial ordering governmentality and extractive interests. An indigenous organization member describes the POT as “a trap and modern form of eviction” (pers. comm. 25-08-2022). “The POT is a modern tool of eviction. It involves fines which, when they cannot be paid, guarantee dispossession. The POT works in the interests of mega-entrepreneurs wanting to create an industrial area in the valley” (pers. comm. journalist 12-08-2022). The rumor about evictions fuels the opposition to municipal presence amongst many valley inhabitants. To prevent further undermining of municipal authority, the municipal government tries to stop additional criticism. As the 2022-protests exposed the municipality’s limited control of the valley territory to the national public and exacerbated the garbage situation in urban Quetzaltenango, the municipality violently reiterated its legitimacy:

There were three moments... it was going to escalate ... The police at some point had the eviction order, as for them the protest was taking place within state territory... But then the departmental governor hit

the brakes. He listened to the people because he did not want the responsibility for the blood of many children. His human side was noticeable ... At the end nothing happened because the municipal government and the departmental government fought over who was going to be responsible for the blood (pers. comm.).¹¹

Several protesters were charged criminally during the protests, accused as ‘terrorists’ committing crimes against the municipality. Their legal process is dragged out, described as “a common strategy of attrition” (pers. comm.). “Those who don’t shut up are criminalized, the others are threatened with the removal of municipal support, like project money” (pers. comm.). Next to such means of intimidation, direct violence was reported, including the kidnapping, torturing, and killing of a protester (pers. comm.; see also Prensa Libre, 2022).

The opposition to mining, municipal territorial restructuring and imposed authority claims is not unified; heterogeneity and tension challenge a cohesive-unified territorial defense movement. The contestation of municipal authority is ambiguous, and multiple groups that claim territorial authority co-exist (cf. Aguilar-Støen & Hirsch, 2015). The micropolitics of formal representation are ingrained in the modes of vernacular representation and grassroots participation (cf. Dougherty & Olsen, 2014; Horowitz, 2011, 2012; Rasch & Köhne, 2016). Some valley inhabitants support the COCODEs as legitimate representative organs (pers. comm. NGO member 30-07-2022). Others criticize the COCODEs for being co-opted or even corrupt. “The COCODEs operate under the law of the municipality. The representation is not real. They become co-opted messengers of the municipality,” summarizes an indigenous organization member (pers. comm. 07-08-2022; confirmed by former municipal official 05-08-2022). An NGO member decried that “[the COCODE structure] depoliticizes the struggle. The decentralized system goes against proper forms of indigenous organization and struggle” (pers. comm. 30-07-2022; see also Constanza, 2016; Copeland, 2019b).

Apart from the officially supported COCODEs, two indigenous organizations independent from the municipality claim territorial authority in the valley. Indigenous Mayors was the driving force behind the month-long mobilization in 2022 (pers. comm. journalist 12-08-2022), while Ancestral Authorities tried to legally defend the valley as indigenous territory (Section 5.2). Both organizations challenge external authority, questioning official institutions:

Before the Spanish colonizers arrived, this territory and its people already existed. So, I asked the mayor who had been here first... It was us! So ... who is going to ask permission to whom in this territory (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 15-08-2022).

The municipal government responds by actively delegitimizing the indigenous organizations. “They are not real indigenous authorities if they just formed,” stated a former municipal official (pers. comm. 20-08-2022).

However, the indigenous organizations struggle within the valley with controversies around their legitimacy. Next to COCODE supporters granting legitimacy to official mechanisms of representation, other valley inhabitants criticize Indigenous Mayors and Ancestral Authorities as male-dominated organizations, and as sometimes mixing official functions with private interests (pers. comm. valley inhabitants 22-08-2022; 24-08-2022). Additionally, the co-existence of indigenous organizations and mobilization tactics is perceived as risky by some inhabitants, as “[it] potentially breaks the political nucleus [of] the valley” (pers. comm. NGO member 21-08-2022; confirmed by former municipal official 05-08-2022). Other resisting actors counter the narrative of competing indigenous organizations and deteriorating social organization. “They complement each other. Each of them carries one flag in the

same overarching territorial struggle” (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022).

Powerful techniques of territory-making and their contestation evoke questions of authority. Multi-scalar actor alliances’ claims of legitimate authority coexist, making their ability to manifest these claims essential. Nontransparent powerful alliances between mining companies and state institutions can enforce or bypass formal rules and regulations, complimented by strategies of co-optation and corruption, violence, and material-technical advantages. Backed up by multi-scalar legal and institutional ramifications, the municipal government equally manifests its legitimate authority in the valley through subtle spatial ordering governmentality techniques, depoliticizing participatory mechanisms, and coercive strategies. At the same time, authority claims of powerful actors are contested and undermined. Resisting actors engage in “counter-conducts” (Foucault, 1978/2002, p. 194) to question the governmentalization of their territory through powerful laws, institutions, and policies. Micropolitical tensions, internal criticism, and stark power imbalances compared to powerful actors nonetheless challenge this endeavor.

5.4. The discourse echelon: Disputes over the cohesive narrative

Territory-making governmentalities and counter-conducts in the Palajunoj Valley resonate on the level of discourses. Opposing actor alliances try to stabilize their own territorialities (cf. Baletti, 2012; Boelens et al., 2016; Porto-Gonçalves, 2002) as self-evident. Extractive companies and state institutions discursively complement each other while the discourses of indigenous organizations counter their powerful narratives. The large-scale mines are backed up by the narrative that extractive interests are national interests, fundamental for Guatemala’s national sustainable development and progress. The Ministerio de Energía y Minas establishes the national political priority of “guarantee [ing] the exploration and exploitation of ... minerals in a rational, responsible and environmentally sustainable manner, supporting the development of the country” (Ministerio de Energía y Minas, 2020, p. 3). According to this narrative, mining is a national concern, legitimately governed by national authorities. Promises of local development and benefits for mining-adjacent communities prevail if mines are efficiently managed and technically controlled (Ministerio de Energía y Minas, 2020).

In concert with the discourses of sustainable development, the mining companies suggest working toward a generalized national desire for progress. Cementos Progreso operates several production plants in the valley and promotes a culture of inclusive and sustainable progress while announcing its commitment to the Sustainable Development Goals (Progreso, n.d.). The company’s name itself – translated as Progress Cements – discursively justifies the extraction of building materials, intrinsically connecting the idea of progress with cement-based construction. In the valley, the mining companies implement community projects (e.g., AGRECA’s family garden projects and female leadership trainings). These establish partial local acceptance and trigger ambivalent micropolitical minescape ecologies (cf. Dougherty & Olsen, 2014; Horowitz, 2011, 2012; Rasch & Köhne, 2016; Walter & Urkidi, 2017), all while reproducing the discursive link between mining, community development, and empowerment. The discourse of externally-initiated development and empowerment also pairs with a racist-stigmatizing discourse of valley inhabitants as “unknowing, backward and underdeveloped peasants” (pers. comm. lawyer 29-07-2022). Indigenous organizations actively counter this discourse, criticizing the extractive actors and municipal government for preventing their progress. “We want respect and recognition ... They have lowered our self-esteem. They say we are not capable. We want our dignity and our rights” (pers. comm. valley inhabitant 07-08-2022).

Intricately linked to the discourse of mined development is the promotion of the depoliticizing belief that responsible mining is possible, assuming that all environmental impacts can be mitigated by technical-expert solutions. Mining is reduced to the material-technical

¹¹ Some quotes in this and following paragraphs are completely anonymized, as the instances of violence have not been publicly investigated. Research participants are protected from being identifiable.

realm, and technical assessments and impact studies are presented as sufficient condition for granting exploration and exploitation licenses. Negative social impacts of mining, such as the deaths of valley inhabitants, are framed as unfortunate accidents blamed on the victims' careless non-compliance with safety regulations. Any liability is denied (pers. comm. NGO members 20-12-2022; 27-07-2023). This is also possible because of a legal-institutional blindness to marginal interests (cf. Sieder, 2010), linked to wider trends of impunity in the extractive sector (pers. comm. NGO member 30-07-2022; see also Sveinsdóttir et al., 2021).

The companies rely on sustainable certification schemes (the Responsible Sourcing Certification for Ready Mix Concrete from the Concrete Sustainability Council (CSC) in the case of Cementos Progreso) to stabilize the responsible mining discourse. The Ministerio de Ambiente y Recursos Naturales awarded Cementos Progreso the National Cleaner Production and Environmental Seal Award, suggesting environmentally friendly and responsible mining (for a critique of certification schemes, see also Stoltenborg & Boelens, 2016; Vos & Boelens, 2014). This discourse indirectly favors large-scale mining, the practices of risk mitigation and impact assessment, and the use of modern machinery. Artisanal mining is portrayed as a "worse and uncontrolled practice" (pers. comm. municipal official 01-08-2022) which in turn legitimizes restrictive policies.

The discourse of responsible mining is blind to the recurrent flooding issues in the valley. Validated by the impact and risk-mitigation studies, and supported by a dominant actor alliance, the expanding mines are rarely associated with the floods, despite the loss of upstream water retention areas (pers. comm. university researcher 11-08-2022).

[O]ver the year, the winter rains have increasingly affected the population ... mudflows consisting of water and sand ... pass through the houses, and, with the lack of drainage, the houses are flooded... the inhabitants are tired of these problems, but there is no authority that comes to close the mines. If you speak up, they threaten you (Prensa Comunitaria, 2022).

In contrast, the municipal government and national agencies naturalize the floods (i.e., make nature responsible), blame rain events triggered by climate change. Uncontrolled territorial interventions and territorial ordering cultures (i.e., unplanned construction projects, artisanal mining) are blamed for soil erosion and flooding (pers. comm. university researcher 10-08-2022). The POT is presented as a policy instrument solution that protects public interests, aligned with the development discourse of national and international actors. "According to the municipality, whoever is against the POT, is against development ... wants to remain underdeveloped" (pers. comm. former municipal official 05-08-2022). The depoliticizing-naturalizing discourse and proposed spatial ordering solutions are perceived as deceitful and ineffective by opponents (see also Sullivan Lemaitre & Stoler, 2023). Their critical counter-discourse re-politicizes the floods as human caused:

If you ... ask the municipality to share information regarding the flooding ... they will ... provide you with misinformation ... we are talking about sensitive information, we are not talking about mere hydrological or climatic aspects but about anthropogenic aspects [referring to human intervention in the territory] (pers. comm. former municipal official 11-08-2022).

In defense of their territory, indigenous organizations counter the discourse of a shared public interest, aimed at making stark power imbalances invisible. They refer to their structural exclusion and historic marginalization (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 07-08-2022). Many valley inhabitants report how recent territorial improvements were made possible with remittances from migrated family members, whereas state institutions have not provided any improvement (pers. comm. valley inhabitant 15-08-2022). "[The migrants] left to protect the territory from afar" (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 25-08-2022). Indigenous organizations thus stress their

territorial autonomy. Referring to the history of colonization, they question the legitimacy of state or extractive interventions, contest the commodification and privatization of territory, and promote indigenous conceptualizations of territory and territoriality (cf. Batz, 2017).

Indigenous organizations in the valley further disassociate themselves from urban life. Drawing on indigenous critiques of modernity and development, they counter ideas of territorial ordering and extractive development, framing them as threats to their territoriality (cf. Copeland, 2019a). Palajunoj's indigenous organizations highlight the peasant identity and diverse ways of living and relating to territory. They articulate their own territorialities in relation to their "everyday territory-making practices" (cf. Baletti, 2012, p. 578). "We do not want money from the municipality. We are peasants (*campesinos*), we work the land and, in the fields, to make a living" (pers. comm. indigenous organization member 25-08-2022). Questions of identity and territoriality also link discursively to the Mayan cosmovision, delegitimizing extractive territorial interventions (cf. Batz, 2017; Copeland, 2019a). "They do not go along with the Mayan cosmovision that we are hosts in the earth, we have to take care of it for future generations, the earth is a body that we are hurting," summarized an indigenous organization member (pers. comm. 07-08-2022; see also No Ficción, 2022).

Delving into how territory-making governmentalities and counter-conducts unfold on the discourse echelon illustrates coinciding and conflicting discourses linked to diverging ideas of territory and territoriality. The discourses of extractive alliances and state institutions coincide. They legitimize large-scale mining with narratives of sustainable development and responsible mining and build on depoliticizing technical knowledge and management discourses. Negative socio-material impacts of mining are naturalized and depoliticized, and coercive strategies try to prevent the emergence of critical counter-discourses. Discourses around progress also intertwine with racist-modernist narratives. Indigenous territoriality and territorial autonomy are articulated to counter external-extractive and colonizing interventions and discourse. Indigenous critiques of the commodification of territory, modernity and development pave the way for territorialities rooted in the Mayan cosmovision and ontologies, articulated through everyday territory-making practices and peasant identities.

6. Discussion and conclusion

This article has explored the territorial struggles in the Palajunoj Valley of Quetzaltenango. We combined the concepts of territory, governmentality, and the echelons of rights framework to unravel the complex material, social, and political territorial reconfiguration processes. Our ERA-analysis shows how various disputed issues intertwine in the battles for and over territory. The dominant alliances' territory-making techniques and the counter-conducts mobilized by territorial defense movements play out over mining, waste disposal, municipal authority, territorial planning, and wider urban-rural marginalization dynamics. Both, dominant (through ancient and modernist governmental ordering techniques) and resisting actors (through myriad deviant norm-setting and institution-making practices) seek to interweave these diverse territory-specific issues across the four interrelated echelons of resources, rules, authority, and discourses.

Manifested in Palajunoj Valley but having analytical relevance across case studies and regions, the ERA-analysis sheds light on how the arena of territorial contestation and materialization is given concrete shape and substance: those who dominate prevailing territorial discourse establish and legitimize territorial authority; those who establish authority determine the rules of the game; and those who establish territorial norms and rules define the way territorial resources are or should be distributed. Territory and territoriality, territory-otherwise and counter-territoriality, are at the heart of the dispute, subduing and interweaving the Palajunoj valley's diverse conflict issues.

While we acknowledge the entangled modes of power in real-life territorialization processes and have touched upon hegemonic

territory-making practices, our analytical focus is on emerging spatial ordering governmentality. Subtle, technocratic-modernist, and SDG-backed territorial ordering governmentality is contested and gets woven into existing territorial conflicts. While promising sustainability and order for the common good, we show how the territorial ordering plans refuel existing conflicts. Our Guatemalan-specific analytical insights regarding the territorial ordering-governmentality process connects to wider Central- and Latin America trends.

We stress the importance of micropolitics for understanding the complexities of territory-making and resistance movements in and beyond Guatemala (e.g., Dougherty & Olsen, 2014; Horowitz, 2011, 2012; Rasch & Köhne, 2016; Sosa & Zwartveen, 2016; Sosa et al., 2017; Walter & Urkidi, 2017). We concur with Horowitz (2012, p. 23), who emphasizes the need to study “the controversies and complexities of grassroots groups’ relationships [with other actors like the state and corporations].” Leaning into the experience of the territorial defense movements, our analysis has highlighted the complexities and ambivalences in territorial power struggles, rejecting simple contradictions, romanticized representations, and binary oppositions. This is important because “the tendency to assume uniform opposition to mining in contentious communities, [...] deprives communities’ residents of their complexity as decision makers and brackets away much of the [prevailing attitudes, behaviors and actions]” (Dougherty and Olsen, 2014, p. 184). In the Palajunoj Valley, some groups oppose extractive developments, others decide to advocate for mining development, and further factions may strategically accept the intrusion of mining companies while negotiating favorable conditions. These diverging reactions may even be embodied in one and the same organization, community, or indigenous leader, at different moments or simultaneously. The analytical unraveling of micropolitics – of alignments, contradictions, and tensions within and among resisting actors – is important because acknowledging difference and conflict is the political starting point for strengthening unified and yet plural movements in their struggle for justice (e.g., Mouffe, 2007; Schlossberg, 2004).

In conclusion, our analysis holds four key insights that go beyond this case study. First, existing governmental and elite-based territory-making practices and new, modernist territorial-ordering techniques mobilized by dominant actors coincide, building on and reinforcing stark power imbalances across all echelons. Second, territorial defense movements engage in strategies of contestation that intend to articulate shared concerns around externally-imposed territorial interventions across all echelons. At the same time, micropolitical tensions, instances and threats of violence, and fragile multi-scalar support networks remain an obstacle for a cohesive territorial defense movement. Third, in political-strategic terms, future territorial defense crucially depends on the strengthening of multi-scalar and multi-actor territorial defense alliances that mobilize pluralities and bridge and unify across differences. Such alliances need to enable opposition to dominant actor alliances through cross-scalar counter-conducts that are strategically strengthened along the four interconnected echelons and articulate converging territorial concerns and shared resistance strategies. Finally, we suggest subtle spatial planning governmentality techniques such as the territorial ordering plan in the case of Quetzaltenango, which intertwine with and deepen the contested territory-making practices through mining and territorial marginalization processes, merit further attention from researchers in and beyond Guatemala, as do the resistance movements that problematize their inscribed injustices.

CRedit authorship contribution statement

Hannah Porada: Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Formal analysis, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Rutgerd Boelens:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization. **Barbara Hogenboom:** Writing – review & editing, Supervision, Formal analysis, Conceptualization.

Declaration of competing interest

The authors declare that they have no known competing financial interests or personal relationships that could have appeared to influence the work reported in this paper.

Data availability

The data that has been used is confidential.

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