



of resistance and the insurgencies that have emerged from several of these territories highlight the ongoing battle against models of production that prioritize exploitation over sustainability. It is essential to understand that the region's complexity and current conditions of profound inequality stem from these extractivist practices, which lead to the spoliation and plunder of our lands and resources.

A clear example of this dynamic can be found in historical records. Since the 19th century, productive activities in the region have been organized around export-oriented agriculture, including the cultivation of crops such as bananas, coffee beans, and sugar. These activities have often been exploited by transnational corporate capital, leading to the over-exploitation of land and labor, further endangering both our biodiversity and the livelihoods of our people.

Extractivist capitalism as an Instrument of oppression

It is essential to mention here that capital has formed an economic-political alliance with the region's bourgeoisie. This class, made up of big landowners, not only concentrates land as a result of labor exploitation but also the different forms of repression and criminalization of Indigenous and peasant sectors. An example is El Salvador, where the agrarian restructuring, which was mostly based on expanding coffee production, has implied a change in the model based on the communal management of the land, which disappeared to benefit the elites and the groups holding power. Backed by agrarian reforms carried out in the region, land has gone from communal ownership to private property, based on the "need for investments." This was a fundamental factor in the process of grassroots uprising and struggle that has been met with repression and criminalization of the Salvadoran people.

Another case is the monocrop banana plantations. The main country producing and exporting bananas from the region was Honduras. The consequences of the imposition of this model include the struggles that peasants and Indigenous peoples had to wage to defend their right to life and land. Big land-owning capital not only funds production operations but also funds repressive armed units against the civilian population.

Transnational corporations have been operating in our region for more than two centuries, following the logic of oppression and accumulation of our peoples' goods. However, this oppression is not restricted only to the forms of production and trade because it has to do with the expansion of imperialism and the creation of social



conflicts in the territories. This is the case of the wars that happened in the 1980s in countries including Nicaragua, El Salvador, and Guatemala, where the United States played a key role by providing military aid and funds to maintain these wars, created as a strategy to dominate the peoples and stop processes of social demand for access to land and a dignified life. They also played a role in the strategy to stop the "spread of communism."

In Nicaragua, more than 150,000 people have lost their lives due to this war. In El Salvador, estimates show that more than 75,000 people have died between 1979 and 1992 due to the conflict. In Guatemala, more than 200,000 people have died, and around 45,000 have disappeared. In this sense, it's essential to highlight the cruelty of US foreign policy. The magnitude of the actions executed by US-backed military forces in Guatemala against the country's Indigenous peoples [is genocidal](#).

The region has been historically criminalised by local and foreign capitalist forces, supported by repressive apparatuses that have always counted on imperialist aid and funding. In the 1990s, these territories under dispute have been subjected to structural adjustment measures, giving way to privatisation models and the most palpable manifestations of neoliberal policies.

One of the faces of neoliberalism

In the late 1980s, the so-called Washington Consensus emerged, a set of economic policy reforms that Latin American and Caribbean countries should have followed to achieve "development." Ten strategies were designed and pushed, including fiscal policy discipline, redirection of public spending, tax reform, interest rate liberalisation, competitive exchange rates, trade liberalisation (a gateway to free trade agreements), liberalisation of inward foreign direct investment, privatisation of state enterprises, market deregulation, and property rights.

This context marked an era of great challenges in the region. In the 1990s, the bases were established to sign the Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between the United States, Central America, and the Dominican Republic (CAFTA-DR), signed by all Central American countries between 2003 and 2005. This deal encompassed four main areas of implementation: institutional and administrative matters, trade of goods, trade of services and investments, public procurement of goods and services, and others.

The consequences of this trade agreement for the region include deepening already existing socio-economic inequalities; tax reforms in favour of "investors" to the detriment of the rights of the peoples; changes to legislation on intellectual property;



labour law reforms (increasing labour precariousness); repression of the struggles for social rights; exploitation of territories; rise of monopolies; and weakening and failure of the country's small producing sectors.

It was also by the end of the 1990s that another threat was revealed, known as Plan Puebla Panama (PPP), formally introduced as a proposal by the Mexican government (representing the interests of the US government) to promote the integration of the Mesoamerican region. The plan included building a transportation and communications infrastructure network, allegedly aiming to promote social and economic "development" for the region.

However, the PPP was part of the strategies of the imperialist architecture to ensure control over and exploitation of strategic natural resources of our region, as well as the control over the territorial dynamics of major areas that maintained a grassroots organisational fabric across the region. This control was one of the major goals behind this proposal.

When we put these shared elements into perspective and draw a parallel with the reality we are living in today, looking into its structural causes, we can understand that the strategies of free trade, expansion, and deepening of the extractivist model have a logic behind them: to ensure profit-making to the detriment of people's lives. More than 50 percent of the population today is living in poverty. In 2023, more than 1.5 million people from the region had to migrate—65 percent of them were under 35 years old.

This logic is also supported by the criminalisation of the people who defend rights, a measure that aims to protect investments and intimidate populations. September 2024 data from Global Witness show that, in Mexico, more than 70 percent of the people killed in 2023 were Indigenous people. Most victims were struggling against mining operations in their territories. In Honduras, 18 activists defending their territories were assassinated.

The Struggles Cannot be Stopped

Across the Mesoamerican region, grassroots organisations are mobilising in different territories, for only social mobilisation can lead to the necessary change to build a dignified present and future, with justice and equality for the peoples.

In the region, there are several and broad sectors that are organizing from common interests or struggles, including the right to land, the ancestral right to their



territories, the right to decent and safe housing, the right to protect our languages, the right to water, to healthy food, the defense of territories free from mining and extractivist tourism, against hydropower projects, the right to organic production, against all forms of exploitation and against all forms of violence, against imperial capitalism, against patriarchy, against militarization, the right to and autonomy of our bodies, the right of children, teenagers, and the youth to live free from all violence, exploitation, and exclusion, the right to cooperativism, the right to alternative media, the right to build other forms of politics, the right to free, inclusive education, and the right to reclaiming the memory and happiness of the peoples.

There are definitely many other expressions of struggle that have not been mentioned here. This is part of the diversity and accumulated understanding we have built over the course of history. It is also part of the legacy our grandmothers have left us, and it is part of the memory that runs through our veins, as the peoples who have always struggled, from sunrise to sunset—and even through darkness, we stand.

The Mesoamerican Grassroots Movement is a space bringing together several grassroots expressions from the Mesoamerican region to tackle the threats posed by free trade agreements.

Republished from Capire. Original language: Spanish. Source link available at: <https://capiremov.org/en/analysis/mesoamerica-fighting-the-impacts-of-extractivist-capital/>
