



Stamina and the embodiment of expertise: resources of transnational activism to counter corporate slow violence

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Abstract Analyses from political ecology and other disciplines show on the one hand how projects of hydroelectric power production can lead to situations of corporate slow violence. On the other hand, contributions of the same disciplines analyse how transnational activism can change shape, course, and power structures in environmental conflicts. My contribution brings together these debates, which have so far been conducted separately, by analysing the conflict around a run-of-the-river hydroelectric power plant in rural Ecuador. The power plant has been backed by a legitimising discourse of contributing to sustainable non-carbon-based solutions to global climate change. Despite this good image, the company ignored the national legislation and the knowledge of the local population about their river, as well as their needs, and thus involved them in a situation of corporate slow violence. Parts of the community subsequently joined with activists from the U.S. and formed an NGO to convert the physical protest-dominated resistance strategy into one of scientific and legal activism. My analysis shows how this case of corporate slow violence was confronted by these activists mobilising a variety of resources, among them two that are not taken into account in the relevant literature so far, namely the necessary time, residency, and stamina to cope with the violence, and the use of the embodiment of expertise of the white colonialist *other* as a strategic tool to change power structures in the region.

Keywords Political ecology · Corporate slow violence · Transnational activism · Hydroelectric energy production · North-South linkages · Stamina

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Ausdauer und die Verkörperung von Expertise: Ressourcen des transnationalen Aktivismus gegen unternehmerische *slow violence*

Zusammenfassung Analysen der politischen Ökologie und anderen Disziplinen zeigen einerseits, wie Wasserkraftprojekte zu Situationen unternehmerischer *slow violence* führen können. Andererseits wird in Beiträgen derselben Disziplinen analysiert, wie transnationaler Aktivismus Form, Verlauf und Machtstrukturen in Umweltkonflikten verändern kann. Mein Beitrag führt diese bisher getrennt geführten Debatten zusammen, indem er den Konflikt um ein Laufwasserkraftwerk im ländlichen Ecuador analysiert. Das Kraftwerk wurde als ein Beitrag zu nachhaltigen, nicht kohlenstoffbasierten Lösungen für den globalen Klimawandel legitimiert. Trotz dieses guten Images ignorierte das Unternehmen die nationale Gesetzgebung und das Wissen der lokalen Bevölkerung über ihren Fluss sowie ihre Bedürfnisse und verwickelte sie so in eine Situation unternehmerischer *slow violence*. Ein Teil der lokalen Bevölkerung schloss sich daraufhin mit Aktivist:innen aus den USA zusammen und gründeten eine Nichtregierungsorganisation, um die vom physischen Protest dominierte Widerstandsstrategie in eine wissenschaftliche und juristische umzuwandeln. Meine Analyse zeigt, wie diese Aktivist:innen diesem Fall von unternehmerischer *slow violence* begegneten, indem sie eine Vielzahl von Ressourcen mobilisierten, darunter zwei, die in der einschlägigen Literatur bisher nicht berücksichtigt wurden, nämlich die nötige Zeit, das Vor-Ort-Sein und die Ausdauer, um sich dieser Gewalt entgegenzustellen, und die Nutzung der Verkörperung des Fachwissens des weißen kolonialistischen *Anderen* als strategisches Instrument zur Veränderung der Machtstrukturen in der Region.

Schlüsselwörter Politische Ökologie · *Slow violence* von Unternehmen · Transnationaler Aktivismus · Nord-Süd-Verflechtungen · Durchhaltevermögen

1 Introduction

The hydroelectric power plant called ‘San José del Tambo’ in central Ecuador is a small project compared to mega dam projects common in the Global South. Nevertheless, the size of the power plant stands in stark contrast to the avalanche of negative consequences that the planning, construction, and operation of the power plant have brought to the people living along the river, not only but above all through the privatisation of the water, the loss of biodiversity and the regular flooding of the area in the rainy season.

Already during the planning of the project, a considerable part of the local community became aware of these potential socio-environmental consequences and organised resistance, first through physical protest, then through national and international networking that culminated in the founding of a transnationally integrated NGO called ‘Dulcepamba Project’ in 2015. Almost a decade later, the NGO is still active, with its three founding members continuing to drive the work forward to this day.

In this situation of protracted conflict with conflict lines that are difficult to understand, the hydroelectric power plant in the Dulcepamba river is an emblematic example of slow violence that according to Rob Nixon (2011, p. 2) “occurs gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all.” I will extend this term in the paper to corporate slow violence, as the main actor responsible of slow violence in this case is a private corporation.

However, while there is now a vibrant academic debate on slow violence and how to conceptualise and resist it (see e.g. Blake and Barney 2018; Davies 2022; O’Lear 2021; Robins 2014), there is still a lack of in-depth description and analysis of the role of transnationally operating NGOs in cases of slow violence. This is probably due to the fact that systematic and comparative peace and conflict studies has focused on armed violent conflicts between national actors, leaving aside transnational actors such as corporations and NGOs (Sändig and Schramm 2016) and the slow violence faced by the people in the Dulcepamba river valley.

In parallel, there is abundant literature on resistance to development projects such as hydroelectric power plants, above all in political ecology, social movement studies and neighbouring disciplines (De Vries 2007), also pointing to the increasing importance of transnational actors in local environmental conflicts, be they corporations or other institutions (see e.g. Andrews 2014; De Waal 2015; Martínez-Alier 2002; Rodrigues 2003; Tarrow 2005). Some of these studies address common strategies of transnational activism, and the different hierarchies of North-South relations within transnational activism are also of interest (Silva 2013). But it still remains unclear how these strategies are shaped by and shape cases of corporate slow violence.

My contribution to this special issue brings these two discussions together with the following question: How does a transnationally connected NGO composed of local activists and activists from abroad influence resistance to corporate slow violence?

To answer this question, I draw on my material from two months of field research: my notes from participant observation, interviews, focus group discussions and other written sources, such as technical reports or court judgements. The focus is on two aspects to counter the corporate slow violence in this case that have not been properly addressed in the relevant literature: first, the importance of long-term engagement and stamina the transnational activists offer; and second, the impact of white activists from abroad who exude expertise and authority in racialised societies in the Global South.

My paper is divided into two parts: First, I will lay out the theoretical foundations of my analysis, namely slow violence in dam projects and the strategies of transnational activism, engaging with the limited literature on transnational activism and time and the more extensive theoretical debate about North-South relations within transnational activism. I will then explain my methodology. In the second part, I will first conduct a conflict analysis of the case and then proceed to analyse the strategies of resistance applied by the Dulcepamba Project. I will then analyse the importance of time and stamina in the activism of this NGO and how the embodiment of the expertise of some of its members as white scientists influences their work in Ecuador.

2 Theory

2.1 Slow violence and slow activism

Nixon (2011) coined the term ‘slow violence’ for the kind of violence that is not an immediate, spectacular event such as an explosion, a gunshot, or a battle, but evolves over time, months, years, maybe even decades; the most prominent example in the author’s monography is the slow poisoning of toxic waste and the atrocities of climate change. Nevertheless, these slow processes of degradation are intentional political processes, situated in concrete geographical contexts (Pain and Cahill 2022), and are as catastrophic as events of immediate violence, even if the causalities of these catastrophes are postponed for years or decades and the negative effects are transmitted to the next generation and beyond (Nixon 2011).

Due to its large temporal dimensions and lack of spectacle, slow violence is often overlooked (Nixon 2011), not only by the general public, but also by scholars of peace and conflict studies who focus on statistical analyses and comparative studies of armed conflicts and outbreaks of violence (Le Billon and Duffy 2018). Nevertheless, slow violence can be ignored by those in power, but it is often very clearly perceived by affected communities who lack resources to remove themselves from their toxic environments (Davies 2022).

Also, the long time span that inevitably leads to changing strategies, unexpected outcomes and altering actors make it difficult to assess the victory or defeat of protest movements in cases of slow violence. Therefore, Rachel Pain and Caitlin Cahill (2022, p. 363) propose a shift towards “an epistemological commitment to situated knowledge and honoring of insights into the relationships between the complex interleaving of everyday lived experiences with broader structures,” a proposal I would like to follow in this paper.

David Blake and Keith Barney (2018) apply the concept of slow violence to a hydropower project in Laos, stating that:

“The concept of slow violence can be applied to the broad spatial, scalar and temporal socio-ecological impacts and processes that arise from hydropower projects, with high propensity to generate negative but difficult to quantify impacts, particularly in the absence of transparent pre-project baseline studies” (Blake and Barney 2018, p. 7).

And they conclude that the dam is a “salient example of the slow violence of ecosystem degradation, livelihood choice erosion, loss of local autonomy, cultural transformation and exposure to multiple new risk factors from development-induced displacement and resettlement” (Blake and Barney 2018, p. 20), in addition to more acute violence such as state-enforced displacement or repression of protests. Kimberley Anh Thomas (2021) adds in her analysis of the same case that slow violence in hydropower projects is often not just an unfortunate side effect, but a part of their regular or even optimal functioning, violence that is, if not intended, at least accepted.

Steven Robins (2014, p. 104) describes how activists for decent sanitation in the informal settlements of Cape Town, South Africa “render politically legible

previously normalised and taken-for-granted daily realities of structural violence” and calls this kind of activism against slow and structural violence ‘slow activism.’ The activists engage with the bureaucratic logic of the state for years, discussing technical matters or budgets with officials and creating registers of community experiences. Like this, they find a way to face the challenges of the representation of slow violence, namely that the violence is made invisible by dominant actors such as the state or private companies. At the same time, he points out that the activists combine their ‘slow activism’ with more spectacular forms of protest that bring media coverage and attention on the national stage.

2.2 Strategies of transnational activism

The emergence and activism of the Dulcepamba Project evolves within what Margaret Keck and Kathryn Sikkink (1998) call “transnational advocacy networks.” These networks build new links between local civil society actors and international organisations and hence enable a change in the relationship between local actors and their national governments. According to Keck and Sikkink (1998, p. 200), these advocacy networks are “particularly useful where one state is relatively immune to direct local pressure and linked activists elsewhere have better access to their own governments or to international organizations.”

The same authors coin the term of the ‘boomerang pattern’ when NGOs bypass their national governments and ally with international actors to put external pressure on national governments (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Rose J. Spalding (2013, p. 25) observed a similar strategy in transnational activism networks within countries with democratic governments that she calls the domestic loop variation of the ‘boomerang effect’, e.g. when a domestically rooted group uses information or frames constructed through participation in transnational networks to put direct pressure on the regional and national authorities without the need for international partners.

One of the most commonly used instruments to create the necessary pressure for the ‘boomerang effect’ is the co-production and validation of local knowledge. This is of utmost importance as the dominant actors promoting projects that entail or lead to slow violence often leave the burden of proof for the causal link between their activities and the change in local livelihoods to the locally affected communities (Conde 2014), rendering slow violence more invisible. Yet affected communities in most cases do not have the formal training that enables them to collect data and respond to such assumptions using the same scientific language. Nor do they have the significant time and financial resources required for such a project (Conde 2014). This is why scientists and activists from outside who have the relevant expertise can make a crucial difference. Marta Conde and Mariana Walter (2022) show how the co-production of knowledge and its interpretation and use to mobilise action in different networks enable the challenge of power structures and the redefinition of local conflicts.

Another way of using local knowledge is so-called institution shopping, a strategy normally used by the dominant actor, especially by international companies, whereby on the one hand the laws, rules, and regulations best suited to their own interests are selected and on the other hand those that represent possible constraints

are ignored (Haller 2020). With increased knowledge and agency, institution shopping also becomes possible for actors with less decision-making power, e.g. local communities and environmental activists (Haller 2020). Through this process, local demands that previously went unheard can be placed in a broader context.

2.3 Transnational activism and time

The very definition of slow violence, as previously mentioned, includes a notion of time, namely violent acts against an affected population over a longer period of time than normal eruptions of violence are perceived. It is therefore not surprising that simply staying in place and getting the timing right are decisive factors in resisting cases of slow violence and engaging in slow activism. Surprisingly, time or temporality is rarely perceived as an aspect in analyses of transnational activism (Gillan 2020).

Nevertheless, time is an implicit part of Conde's analysis of transnational activism (2014), which emphasises the importance of local knowledge for resistance because it provides information about local geography, interlocutors and social knowledge about local impacts on human health and the ecosystem. In contexts of slow violence this knowledge provides more valid information about a specific environment than scientists with globalised expertise can provide. To gather this local knowledge, it is essential to spend time in the area.

2.4 North-South relations and the embodiment of expertise and authority

In the literature on transnational activism, some studies address the North-South relationships that are common in these settings—e.g. environmental justice NGOs from the Global North addressing local conflicts in the Global South by providing financial and other resources to local protest and resistance movements—with the general conclusion that there are more tensions in these combinations than in South-South collaborations (Andrews 2014; Rodríguez-Garavito and Arenas 2005; Khagram et al. 2002; Silva 2013).

As José Antonio Lucero (2013, p. 83) notes in his analysis of the collaboration between Oxfam and indigenous organisations in Bolivia and Peru: “The collaboration of outside funders with grassroots actors involves practices and discourses across a terrain made up of uneven power relations.” He concludes that transnational connections come at a cost for local activists, first because they might be more concerned with the interests and needs of the international audiences than with the local communities they want to represent, and second because they get involved with globalised discourses that include dangerous clichés and stereotypes. Therefore, as Lucero (2013, p. 101) puts it, the ‘boomerang effect’ mentioned above can not only hit the target, but also the same actors that first let it fly.

However, as Sidney Tarrow (2005) points out, a transnational advocacy network consists first of all of individuals who cross borders and become transnational, mostly through fluid, informal processes (see also Spalding 2013). Any transnational activism starts with individuals who personally connect different levels of knowledge, expertise and norms. Tarrow (2005, p. 43) perceives these transnational activists as

“a stratum of people who, in their lives and their activities, are able to combine the resources and opportunities of their own societies into transnational networks,” their main resource being the ability to shift their activities between levels, from the local to the global and back, by connecting discourses, resources, and legislations.

The epistemic and ontological knowledge that unites an individual is therefore crucial to her or his ability to engage in transnational activism. Nevertheless, these informal activities are rarely part of analyses of a movement’s transnationalism, as they are more difficult to grasp. They are not even understood within larger organisational concepts of activism.

Therefore, it is important to ask who an individual *is* and who he or she can *represent*. In this sense, to be a white scientist in environmental conflicts in the Global South means embodying the colonialist *other*. Of course, there are countless studies on racialised society in Latin America (see, for example, Dixon and Johnson III 2018; Golash-Boza and Bonilla-Silva 2013; Wade 2010). However, when it comes to the question of what racialised stratification means for transnational activism, there are only sparse accounts in the literature. In their analysis of the co-production of knowledge, Conde and Walter (2022, p. 163) conclude:

“[The white scientists’] contribution to these struggles is grounded on the legitimacy and power of a colonial construct of ‘expertise’ that is played out by both movements and scientists in the struggle. Their scientific authority and certifications as ‘experts’ is the reason why they are summoned to collaborate by local groups” (Conde and Walter 2022, p. 163).

They thus address, at least in part, the motivation of activists in the Global South to seek collaboration with white scientists. But what the embodiment of the white stereotype means in a racialised society and what possibilities this embodiment entails is not yet fully addressed. This is astonishing, as the effect of being white and embodying the colonialist *other* cannot be overlooked in Ecuador and other parts of the Global South (Telles 2014). This advantage is even used by some NGOs such as Peace Watch to protect local human rights activists by the mere presence of people from outside.

3 Data and methods

While I was researching environmental conflicts in connection with sustainable energy structures, I was surprised that such a small power plant as the one in the Dulcepamba river valley would develop into such a long-lasting, sometimes very violent and devastating conflict. I therefore contacted the Dulcepamba Project and they invited me to join them. I spent two months in the field, living and working with the activists, helping them fill out questionnaires, talking to people, providing information, and accompanying them to meetings or administrative procedures on water use.

I conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with current or former villagers with very different perspectives on the conflict, most of whom were contacted through the Dulcepamba Project. I led three focus group discussions, two with villagers living

upstream about their legal insecurity due to the power plant and one with members of the Dulcepamba Project. In addition, I had countless informal conversations with community members, local and foreign activists, as well as some government officials. I tried to cover a wide range of perspectives. To this end, I also asked the company for an interview or conversation, but they did not respond to my request.

Because of this involvement, I was perceived as part of the Dulcepamba Project, as another international activist. This made me both a participant and an observer, but also influenced the way people spoke to me or refused to speak to me at all. At the same time, participation in the NGO was necessary to gain access to a place of ongoing conflict and to be safe there.

4 Analysis

4.1 Conflict analysis: slow violence in the Dulcepamba river valley

The ‘San José del Tambo’ hydroelectric power plant is a run-of-the-river dam. It diverts the river water and channels it through a canal, a retention basin, and the turbines for energy production. Further downstream, the same amount of water is channelled back into the river. Normally, a small water flow is left free-floating in the original riverbed to maintain biodiversity.

The valley of the Dulcepamba river, in which the power plant was built and where the subsequent conflict developed, is a steep Andean valley in south-west Ecuador, approximately 50 km from Guayaquil, the largest city in the country. It stretches from the Andean highlands down to the subtropical foothills and further into the coastal plains. There are almost 140 villages spread across the valley (Morán 2019), with a total population of around 14,000 according to the last census in 2010.

The region is nicknamed the ‘granary of Ecuador’ as it has the ideal climatic conditions for a wide variety of crops. Due to the lack of flat land, there is no large-scale, homogenous, plantation-like agricultural production in the river basin as in Ecuador’s coastal areas. The most important activity of the local population is small-scale agriculture for subsistence and for sale on local and regional markets. Cash crops are also grown to a lesser extent, especially cocoa, which is mainly produced for international export. Despite these favourable agricultural conditions, the province of Bolívar is one of the poorest regions in the country (Ministerio Coordinador de Desarrollo Social 2017).

While land ownership in the region is regulated by notarised title deeds for even the smallest piece of land, the regulations governing access to and use of the numerous water sources are less clear. At the official level, all water resources are owned by the state, which in turn grants usage licences to individuals upon their request, prioritising human use and irrigation for agriculture, which guarantees food sovereignty. Permits for energy production have the lowest priority and the privatisation of water is explicitly forbidden. This hierarchy of water users was already enshrined in the previous constitution and is reinforced by the establishment of access to water as a human right in Ecuador’s very progressive national constitution of 2008.

Despite these laws and their favourable position in the hierarchy of water access even before the new constitution, the overwhelming majority of farmers in the Dulcepamba river valley did not register their water uses with the state. Some of them did not even know that this was a legal requirement, or they did not consider it necessary to formalise the use of an undisputed resource. Others shied away from the necessary effort, as the process of obtaining a water use licence is time-consuming and complicated. It takes almost a whole day to get from the region to the nearest office where the applications for water use are issued and processed, and the procedures take several years to complete.

Therefore, thousands of inhabitants of the watershed did not have water use permits in 2004 and 2005, when the National Ministry of Electricity issued environmental licenses and operating permits for the Dulcepamba river to Hidrotambo S.A., which included a right to more water than the watershed discharged in two-thirds of the year (Newmiller et al. 2017). The operating licences granted to Hidrotambo by the Ministry of Electricity only allowed the generation of energy for internal use, e.g., for the operation of factories owned by the same investors as Hidrotambo. Hidrotambo later amended its licences to generate electricity from the Dulcepamba river and sell it to the national grid as part of the national strategy to export renewable energy production.

The majority investors of Hidrotambo S.A. are a group of companies owned by the Cuesta family. They are well known in Ecuador as they have made a fortune through a national monopoly for the production of rubber boots as well as many other economic activities (La Hora 2018). At the time, Hidrotambo had also attracted international investors from Spain and Canada and was part of the Clean Development Mechanism of the United Nations.

The planning process for the power plant had some major inconsistencies. Most significantly, the state authorities awarded the water concessions to Hidrotambo without respecting the hierarchy of water use established in the law described above. To circumvent national legislation on water use, the company literally made the nearly 14,000 people living in the Dulcepamba river watershed upstream of the dam invisible with the grotesque lie that “nobody lives in the area.”

Additionally, although the company has carried out an environmental impact assessment, it was rudimentary and not based on rigorous science. The process of free, prior and informed consent and the process of environmental consultation—both constitutionally required for a project of this magnitude in an area partly inhabited by indigenous communities—was virtually non-existent in the region. Only one of my informants remembers two information sessions that preceded the construction of the power plant, but they took place in San José del Tambo, a larger town located some kilometres further downstream of the hydroelectric power plant.

Therefore, the residents of San Pablo de Amalí (hereinafter ‘San Pablo’)—the village of 500 inhabitants next to the mini-dam—only learnt of the construction plans after workers from the project had already entered their private properties to begin topographical studies. When the former head of the village and former member of the Dulcepamba Project learnt about the hydroelectric power plant, he decided to call a meeting with three other villagers. They were all upset about the rude and aggressive behaviour of the construction workers and the company and

decided to confront them the next day. They spread the word and mobilised 22 other community members.

When the construction workers were confronted with this protest, they called the police to take action against the community mobilisation. The subsequent confrontations between the police and the protesters quickly escalated as the villagers continued to mobilise people from across the region. During the most intense periods of the protest, up to 1000 people from all villages in the Dulcepamba river valley came to San Pablo to protest. The company not only called in the police for support, but also the military. Between 2005 and 2012, San Pablo temporarily turned into a “war zone”, as several community members call it, with daily confrontations between villagers, police and the military, the frequent use of tear gas and rubber bullets and arbitrary arrests of protesters. Some even remember the use of live ammunition by the military and police.

The state authorities and the company framed the protests as political offences against the state and accused several protesters of sabotage and violence. As the protesters already had a considerable network in the country at the time, including politicians and NGOs committed to human rights, they convinced enough members of the national parliament to grant them amnesty in 2008.

In 2009, events took an unexpected turn: the Ecuadorian Army Corps of Engineers contracted to build the dam realised that Hidrotambo did not have all the necessary permits to continue with construction. They therefore cancelled the contract and withdrew from the project, as did the international investors. The villagers thought that the withdrawal of these actors meant the end of the entire project.

But they rejoiced too soon. In 2012, Hidrotambo signed a new operation licence with the Ministry of Electricity, and in 2013 new subcontractors started construction again. To avoid protests, this time they did not approach the river crossing in San Pablo, but came from the other side, through a village called Vainillas. The villagers of Vainillas did not protest as they saw the project as an asset and did not fear flooding from the dam because their village is not located directly on the river in the flatter part of the valley like San Pablo, but further up in the mountains.

In 2014, Hidrotambo finished construction of the power plant and diverted the river towards San Pablo. Parts of the village began to erode into the diverted river during the rainy season. Additionally, in the dry season, the amount of free-flowing water decreased as the Hidrotambo dam diverted the river through canals and pipes for a distance of about three kilometres outside the riverbed, which affected the river’s fish population. Several villagers remember tons of fish rotting on the riverbank in the days following the river diversion.

The residents of the area warned not only of the loss of biodiversity in the water, but also of possible flooding. They knew that the river appears to be just a small stream in the dry season, but after heavy rainfall during rainy season it becomes a raging torrent that is difficult to control. Therefore, they feared losing their houses and land if the dam was built and the free flow of the river was blocked. In October 2014, some villagers, including the future project members, even filed a lawsuit for protective measures in the local court. The judge labelled them crazy and rejected their claims.

But just five months after the mini-dam was completed, during the first rainy season, on March 19, 2015, the community's fears came true: the river eroded, undermined and flooded San Pablo. Two women and a child lost their lives in the floods, and 14 houses were swept away by the river. The river diversion and the discharge of floodwater from the dam's intake structure also caused major damage to the only access road to the village and led to the loss of numerous farm plots (Benavides Llerena 2019).

This reconstruction of the events around the hydroelectric power plant shows that the conflict was not about the scarce resource of water but escalated because there were differences over the coexistence with the river and the use of its water in the area. It is therefore an environmental conflict in terms of political ecology, not because of scarcity per se, but because of all the other aspects of collective decision-making around and through the environment (Le Billon 2015).

It is also an emblematic example of corporate slow violence. Hidrotambo, as a private company, initially ignored local conditions in the area and made the people affected by its construction plans invisible. Thanks to their economic and social power, they were able to circumvent national law and count on the support of the regional authorities. They were able to maintain their plans even in the face of fierce physical protest over many years and at a time when conflicts over environmental justice were being re-enacted at national level through a new constitution. The local knowledge of the community was then disregarded in the construction work. When the worst fears of this community were tragically proven correct, the company denied any causal relation between the construction of the mini-dam and the flooding of the area, claiming that the rainfall was an exceptional event that could not have been foreseen. In doing so, the company once again denied local knowledge and shifted the burden of proof for the causal link onto the local community. The subsequent protests in the area brought with them a catastrophic moment, a violent eruption that was far from slow and was labelled an offence against the state by the dominant actors, discursively and legally disconnecting the protests from the previous acts of slow violence.

4.2 Strategies of transnational activism applied by the Dulcepamba Project

During the second phase of the protests in the region in 2012, Rachel, the first of the two US Americans who would soon co-found the Dulcepamba Project, arrived in San Pablo. She had studied BAs in Environmental Analysis and Latin American Environment and Society in the United States and completed an exchange semester at a university in Quito. An internship with a national NGO was part of her exchange programme, during which she was assigned to create a documentary about the environmental conflict around the hydroelectric power plant in San Pablo.

In 2014, Rachel received a Fulbright research scholarship to continue her investigation of the power plant. As part of this research project, she installed weather stations and hydrological stations in the Dulcepamba river in collaboration with a US university and local activists in order to further monitor hydrologic developments in the valley. The stations were not only installed out of scientific interest, as Rachel explained:

“The people [in the village] were worried [about the water], but there was no information how much there is and how much they need, information which could contribute to a court ruling. [...] So, the idea was that information about water availability and needs, or demand – in short, about river basin management – could contribute to a court ruling [against Hidrotambo]. Our results could have determined that there is enough water to operate the power plant during dry season and for local farmers and nature, and that [the villagers] should stop menacing the hydroelectric [power plant] and just say: ‘Yes, there is enough for you, there is enough for the current population,’ and that’s it” (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

And later, she clarified:

“There were threats that the local people talked about. A villager told me: ‘I go to the Water Ministry, and they tell me: ‘Don’t even bother about the water adjudication because it is all for Hidrotambo’.’ So, I said: ‘But do we know how much there is? Do we know if they actually will need to block water users upstream to get the adequate concessions, the adequate waterflow, or not?’ So, this was the aim in the beginning: let’s see if there is enough water or not, and if there is a real conflict or not” (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

As this statement indicates, Rachel began by co-creating and validating local knowledge using scientific methods to shed light on a conflict that seemed to be about scarcity, but was also about unequal power relations in the area, namely the regional and local authorities who were not fulfilling their obligations to prioritise water for the community as stipulated by law, and the corporate actor who did not have to comply with national legislation.

The installation of the hydrological monitoring stations happened to coincide with the diversion of the river and the subsequent flooding. It soon became clear how crucial the parallelism of these events was. Only through the data collected by the project members could they prove the causal link between the construction of the mini-dam and the flooding, as Emily, the other activist from the US who joined the project in 2016, explained:

“The studies about water availability were and still are like one of the most important pieces of evidence of the cause of the damages from the flood. Why? The argument of the Water Ministry is: There was a natural, extraordinary rainfall event that never could have been predicted and that there was all the damage, but that it wasn’t their [Hidrotambo’s] fault. But with the hydrological model – that is basically a model of water availability over 60 years – we showed that there was no extraordinary rainfall event [in 2015], it was an event that happens every five or six years or that has a probability of 17% of happening every year. This is a giant probability of recurrence, and therefore a common flood event” (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

The data collected by the activists turned out to be an unintended pre-project baseline study that in many cases is the missing piece in assessing the negative impacts of hydroelectric power plants.

At this point at the latest, it became evident that both the company and the local and regional authorities were not interested in respecting the water rights of the riverbed residents or protecting them from flooding hazards. By entangling the people of the region in a situation of slow violence, they were even willing to ignore the scientific studies and base their discourses, decisions, and actions on claims that are demonstrably false in order to manipulate and circumvent national laws that are unfavourable to their business interests. The corporation becomes visible as a powerful actor in conflicts because it can ignore local knowledge and make slow violence invisible.

The activists' earlier focus on finding out whether there was a conflict over access to water and whether the diversion of the river had increased the risk of flooding for San Pablo was therefore not sufficient to resolve the conflict. Faced with this new situation, the four activists officially joined forces with 'Acción Ecológica,' a national NGO for environmental justice. This was the official start of the Dulcepamba Project.

The first strategy and the initial form of activism—indeed the very reason for the Dulcepamba Project's existence—is to collect and analyse data in order to coproduce and validate local knowledge. After the flood, the project members realised that, as Conde and Walter (2022) describe, collecting knowledge was not enough. Worse still, not even the interpretation of this knowledge in the context of the national legal framework was sufficient to stand up to the powerful actors in the area, as Emily explained:

"So, we started with the studies about availability and water needs, about land use, to prove or demonstrate how much water exists and how much water the people need, since they have the legal priority. And based on these scientific studies, we can demand the fulfilment of the law. But we learned on the way that the studies, the data, the facts are very good, but we have to accompany these studies with political efforts, legal efforts, administrative efforts, media efforts, academic efforts, efforts of national and international pressure [...], and the like" (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

As a next step, the project therefore communicated its findings to human rights groups and other NGOs to exert pressure on the state authorities. As Conde and Walter (2022) describe, they made use of the co-produced knowledge to mobilise action in different networks implementing the domestic loop variation of the boomerang effect. This strategy has proven effective, as studies based on data provided by the Dulcepamba Project and collaborating academic institutions have been litigated in national and international courts against Hidrotambo and several state authorities. Even though the project members are usually not the official plaintiffs, they provide information and incentives for nationally active human rights NGOs.

Another strand of legal activism is institution shopping from below. Local farmers in the Dulcepamba river valley often struggle to obtain their water rights because not only do they have to travel up to one day to reach the nearest office of the Ministry of Water, but they also have to pay for the expensive services of lawyers. It became clear that Hidrotambo and the local authorities were using this legal vacuum to de facto privatise the water resources in the valley. Therefore, the Dulcepamba

Project not only mobilised local people to go to the authorities and formalise their water rights, but also rented an office in the small town closest to the valley to help locals who wanted to get an official permit for their water use to navigate the complex bureaucratic process. As people from the valley regularly come to this town on market days, this office offers them a much easier and free way to formalise their water rights. This enforcement of national law by issuing water use permits to upstream residents has the effect of reducing Hidrotambo's legal water budget.

The combination of these two strategies of 'slow activism' led to the greatest success the project and its partners achieved. In 2023, after years of legal proceedings over several instances, the ministry responsible for deciding on water use cancelled the water use licence granted to Hidrotambo because, according to the water use hierarchy enshrined in the national constitution, the water of the Dulcepamba river is not sufficient to generate electricity, especially in the dry season. This court decision made the hydroelectric power plant illegal. It was due to the studies from the US American experts and the persistence of the Dulcepamba Project that this victory became possible. The NGO has been the main driver for keeping up the protest movement during almost a decade of legal proceedings.

To summarise, the Dulcepamba Project was unable to resolve the conflict in San Pablo—an almost impossible task—and parts of the local community are still at odds with each other. Nevertheless, the NGO confronted the devastating effects of the dam, the loss of food and water security and legal insecurity, in short, the corporate slow violence suffered by the people of the Dulcepamba river valley, by applying the domestic loop variation of the boomerang effect and by institution shopping from below. Both strategies enforced the rights of local communities, which are enshrined in the national constitution but ignored by local and regional authorities and the private company. They could thus change the power structures in the region and reframe the core of the conflict from a situation where the dominant actors can completely ignore local realities, to a situation in which they are confronted with their behaviour. For this reason, the project is at least partially a success story.

4.3 Time, residency, and stamina of the Dulcepamba Project

As mentioned earlier, time is the crucial aspect of slow violence, the timing as much as the passing of time itself. Therefore, perhaps the most important yardstick for judging the success of resistance to corporate slow violence is how long this resistance can last.

When asked about the importance and uniqueness of the Dulcepamba Project, Emily explains:

"I think it would be impossible to be effective or do something without the team members from here. [...] And I don't know about the opposite. [...] I believe that it would be possible to manage the project very similarly to how we are doing it now and the difference is not that we are foreigners, but it is the [education and professional] preparation that we have. And also, that we have been willing to work as volunteers for almost a decade" (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

In her opinion, then, there are two reasons for the success of the Dulcepamba Project: first, because the local activists have the local knowledge and the activists from the US have the formal preparation and expertise necessary to understand the environmental conflict in the Dulcepamba river valley, and second, because they are willing to live and work in resistance in the region for extended periods of time.

Similarly, Darwin, a local activist and founding member of the NGO, has a clear answer to the question of why the Dulcepamba Project has been important for the local community in the environmental conflict around the hydroelectric power plant: “From my point of view, this project is important because it brought us money, it brought us time” (Focus Group Discussion, 2 Sep 2020, Chillanes).

So, apart from the strategies mentioned in the literature on transnational activism, all project members emphasise the importance of *time*: time to be in the region, time to fight, time to network and apply for funding, in other words: time to not have to rely on intermediaries to mediate transnational activism in the conflict. In this sense, time is a resource.

But time not only means the possibility to understand the conflict without relying on mediators. It can be an aspect that helps to prevent the attrition of movements. As Auyero and Swistun (2008) point out, environmental conflicts are devastating because locally affected communities suffer from loneliness and fear as the often more powerful national and international actors usurp local resources, deny local expertise and create confusion within the community. Collaboration with people from outside is crucial to continue the struggle because they can bring new perspectives, resources and ideas. In this sense, the importance of transnational activism in cases of slow violence lies not only in the connection to globalised discourses to validate local knowledge and give more weight to the demands of local resistance movements, but also in the possibility of mobilising time as a crucial resource.

Therefore, a transnationally networked NGO like the Dulcepamba Project can serve to encourage the local communities and show them that they are doing something important, transcendent and necessary and that they are not alone. To do this, they need to spend time in the area to become *residents* and reliable partners for the locals. With short visits and working with local intermediaries, this kind of support would not be possible, or at least would risk losing sight of local goals and priorities.

Another reason why time and residency can be crucial to the success of a resistance movement against corporate slow violence is that the dominant actors, e.g. the private investors with the help of the regional authorities, will assert their interests in the long term by using their positions of power. As can be seen in the Dulcepamba river valley, even if national legislation supports the water rights of local communities, the dominant actors can easily circumvent these rights and the local protest movement can be expected to eventually die down. *Stamina* is therefore one of the most important prerequisites for changing power relations.

In the Dulcepamba river valley, it was the transnationally networked NGO that provided the necessary time, residency and stamina to continue the struggle and eventually achieve some success. Darwin concludes:

“So, we remain, the ones that are more – more convinced that we have to fight until we can. And eventually the moment will come where we will say: ‘Now

we are tired too, we did enough to – we won sufficiently, we achieved reparations for the damages,’ and once they repair all the damages and guarantee our – the right to live, the right for the good life, for tranquillity there won’t be any reason to say: ‘I will stay in this fight.’ There just will be an example provided for the world that one shouldn’t invade a community without authorisation and without previous consultation of the villagers of the area” (Interview 25, 12 Feb 2020, San Pablo).

To summarise, transnationally oriented activists who spend more time as residents in the region where the environmental conflict takes place can strengthen the efforts of local communities, help to avoid the attrition of resistance movements and provide the stamina needed to confront the dominant actors over a longer period of time. Like this, they can move closer to their goal step by step. This would also be possible for activists working exclusively within the national scene, but the transnational orientation of the Dulcepamba Project facilitated the inclusion of globalised discourses that ultimately helped to reframe the conflict as one of environmental justice. It would not be possible for transnational activists who rely on intermediaries to play the same role, as they lack local knowledge about the conflict and the affected communities and are not equally reliable partners for the locals. My analysis therefore shows that time and residency are crucial factors for resistance movements to deal with cases of corporate slow violence.

4.4 The Dulcepamba Project as a puzzling example of North-South relations

As mentioned earlier, North-South relations within transnational activism are considered complicated, especially for local partners who may lose sight of the interests of their communities. But what the embodiment of the white colonialist *other* means for transnational activism in the Global South has not been of interest in the relevant literature. This is surprising, because during my fieldwork I was more surprised by the extent to which the stereotype of being a white scientist from the Global North influenced my work and external perception than by the relationship between different activists. Most strikingly, people constantly categorised me as an engineer or doctor, even though I did not claim to be one. But because I was a foreigner, they assumed that I was better educated and therefore more knowledgeable than they were about water use, legal affairs, administrative issues and the like. Overall, my appearance alone gave me more credibility.

Above all, authorities are more respectful towards white people, as I was able to confirm during my field research in various circumstances, for example through the following episode:

“Rachel went to the hospital in Guaranda today with a villager who has not been able to walk for years, and they never properly attended to her at the hospital. They just told her that there is nothing that they can do for her. So, she accompanied them to put some pressure on the hospital, and to get the doctor to do his job properly. She succeeded; indeed, we are all quite intrigued how

much a ‘privileged’ face changes the doctor’s attitude. They didn’t attend to the villager properly until Rachel showed up. And when she left, they stopped attending to the villager properly” (Field Diary, 4 Feb 2020).

A local activist comments on this change of attitudes of local and regional authorities in the following words:

“In the government offices, they used to treat us very badly. If a farmer arrived, the person attending to the public at the office was already alerted when he/she saw the farmer from far away. He/she had to move back because they think the farmer stinks. Because he/she surely didn’t take a bath. [...] But what happened with Correa [and the leftist government]? This changed. And supposedly people from other countries now come to observe this change, and the employees are afraid, they are afraid of [being observed]. And the fear – sometimes they don’t attend to clients properly, but if another [foreign] person arrives, they say: ‘She/he will sue us,’ as they know that there is a law that protects us (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

Later, he added:

“And a lot of people – and I don’t want to minimize them – a lot of us farmers, don’t even know how to present ourselves in front of the lieutenant or the commissioner if there is a problem. We need to have other people that talk for us or tell us, because we really don’t know how to reach these people. And even worse, to reach the water ministry to transmit something” (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

So, if someone from a country of the Global North is present, there can be an immediate change of power relations, as the person is perceived as different, better educated, more aware of her/his rights, richer, in short: more powerful. In the Ecuadorian case, according to the local activist, the state representatives feel that they are being watched and judged more harshly. It is therefore not surprising that the regional power structures changed when the foreign members of the Dulcepamba Project became involved in the conflict in the Dulcepamba river valley. And the project members are taking advantage of this fact by accompanying the farmers to their administrative procedures over water use, establishing contacts with government officials and initiating court hearings of international interest.

‘Whiteness’ stands for expertise and authority, but coming from abroad as a white activist also raises expectations, as Rachel explains:

“And we had a bit of friction or problems in the community because when I arrived it was like: “The foreigner comes to give us charity.” Not everyone thought this, but some did. For example, I remember one villager that always said: ‘And what will you give us? What project? What will you bring?’ [...] So, it was like someone came from outside with other attitudes, other roots, and she will give us ... donations. And I remember, I mean, some people understood that I came to study this socio-environmental problem because of Hidrotambo

and support solutions, which is something not so visible as aid or charity ... I mean, but there was always this issue: ‘But where are the visible things?’ people would ask” (Focus Group Discussion, 9 Feb 2020, Chillanes).

So people in San Pablo categorised the activists as foreigners, therefore powerful and able to bring help to the region in the form of infrastructure.

‘Whiteness’ can also pose a threat. During a site visit, Hidrotambo mobilised people from other villages to come to San Pablo to demonstrate unity against the Dulcepamba Project. They brought banners with them, one of which read: “Go away, lying Gringas,” emphasising the supposed intrusiveness of the foreign NGO members. Rachel in particular, who has been involved in the project for over a decade, received countless threats in a similar style related to her role in the project, and she was even followed and constantly photographed over extended periods of time by people paid by Hidrotambo (Chérrez et al. 2023). As part of the significant change in the conflict induced by the Dulcepamba Project, the company took advantage of the fact that the transnational activists were from abroad and mobilised nationalist resentments.

Among the cases of transnational activism analysed in the literature, the Dulcepamba Project is a puzzling example. First and most importantly, as explained above, the project members from the US have actually stayed in the area for almost a decade now. Normally, the willingness of scientists from the Global North to stay in the area is limited to a few months, perhaps a year, but certainly not several years. Second, by being present in the area and working exceptionally closely with the activists, the entire project team manages to keep the interests of the local community in mind. This is all the more remarkable when dealing with a case of corporate slow violence, where the dominant private actors can push their interests further and further over time and concrete goals and eventual victories can easily be lost sight of.

To summarise, ‘whiteness’ and being from abroad is often perceived as a sign of expertise, knowledge, and power in racialised societies. As my analysis shows, these prejudices, although deeply problematic, can be converted into a decisive advantage in the context of transnational activism in cases of corporate slow violence because they are a great help in changing local power structures. It makes a difference when people from the Global North take notice of an environmental conflict and get involved, because the power structures at the local level and beyond are deeply stratified.

The inevitable embodiment of the colonialist *other* by activists from abroad is also an easy target for the dominant actors in the conflict to fuel nationalist and xenophobic resentment, as the case of the Dulcepamba Project emblematically shows. It can even become a threat to the activists and scientists involved in the project. To counterbalance these negative aspects and take full advantage of the positive ones, it is necessary for activists from abroad not to rely on local intermediaries, but to be directly present in the conflict and to act in a way that prioritises the needs and interests of the locally affected community in their activities and campaigns. Here, too, time spent in the area is the crucial factor in bringing about sustainable change.

5 Conclusion and final thoughts

With this contribution, I wanted to address the question: How does a transnationally connected NGO composed of local activists and activists from abroad influence resistance to corporate slow violence?

To this end, I first defined corporate slow violence in environmental conflicts and outlined the strategies of the Dulcepamba Project, namely the domestic loop variation of the ‘boomerang effect’ and institution shopping from below, which can best be summarised as strategies of ‘slow activism’. There is no doubt: the knowledge, expertise and courage of the local and foreign project members are indispensable for successfully reframing the conflict and protecting the water rights of the people living in the area.

In this article, I describe two additional aspects of transnational activism that my analysis shows to be crucial to success. First, resistance to corporate slow violence, like the violence itself, must be sustained over time and therefore requires residency and stamina. Environmental conflicts are often confusing and time-consuming for locally affected communities, and an activist who spends a lot of time in the area can empower these communities and help avoid the usual attrition of resistance movements that leads to acceptance of environmental damage, risk or pollution. The Dulcepamba Project has had ten years of tremendous stamina to constantly confront the dominant actors in the region.

Second, even though it is problematic that ‘whiteness’ and being from abroad often is perceived as a sign of expertise, knowledge and power in societies in the Global South, the Dulcepamba Project and other transnational activists have succeeded in transforming these prejudices into a tool for changing local power structures, be it in hospitals, water authority offices or courts.

These two factors are rarely mentioned in the literature, probably because it is uncommon for white scientists from the Global North to stay as activists in areas of environmental conflict for years. Therefore, the few who stay do not fit into the transnational/local dichotomy that is taken for granted in most literature and are not taken into account. As a result, time and ‘whiteness’ are overlooked as assets. In addition, time is difficult to grasp in the relevant comparative and ethnographic literature. However, for the situation in the Dulcepamba river valley, local activists and those from abroad significantly changed the situation of the conflict. Therefore, further research on transnational activism should take into account time as a resource and the ‘racial’ identity and personality of activists.

All accounts of transnational activism emphasise the importance of locally driven collaborations to avoid racism and tensions in such alliances (see e.g. De Waal 2015). My analysis shows the importance of the local presence of all actors involved to develop an understanding of how complex local demands are. Without spending time on the ground, activists from abroad rely on intermediaries who can only reflect disparate parts of corporate slow violence like the one in the Dulcepamba river valley. This is where long-term activism comes into play, proving particularly effective and important.

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