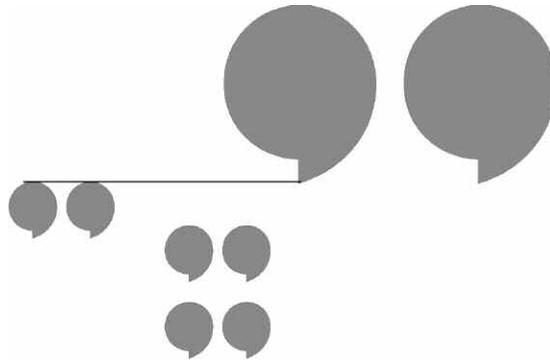


Extended abstract

*Socio-environmental Conflicts
in Southern Chile. Actors, Power
Mechanisms and Influence on the
Challenge of Reducing Rural Poverty*



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Highlights:

1. Analysis of the association between the persistence of poverty and socio-environmental conflicts in rural territories.
2. Theoretical discussion on socio-environmental conflicts and actors in rural territories.
3. Empirical results include interviews with key informants that employed Rapid Assessment Procedures (RAP).
4. We identify 34 socio-environmental conflicts associated with extractive economic activities, which have an impact on natural assets.
5. Territorial management requires political-institutional reformulations and new types of natural recurses governance.

Abstract: Chile has made vast strides in terms of the reducing of poverty. However, some rural areas of the country display persistent indicators of backwardness and poverty. Socio-environmental conflicts and their impact on residents' well-being are among the defining characteristics of these territories. Based on interviews with key actors associated with 30 rural territories in southern Chile, this study identifies 34 socio-environmental conflicts which are perceived as the main causes of socio-territorial inequalities and analyzes the mechanisms of influence that actors deploy in them. Thirty-two types of conflicts have an anthropological origin whereas that two of them are natural phenomena locally perceived as conflicts. Most of the conflicts with anthropological origin are related to loss of environmental assets. If environmental conflicts are the cause and effect of poverty tramps and territorial inequalities, then the management of such assets emerges as a major element in strategies aimed at poverty. The conflicts identified mostly derive from extractive, high-entropy economic activities that have formed the historical basis of the economic model in the area studied. It is concluded that environmental assets and territory management policies must be developed considering a revision of political-institutional arrangements and new governance models.

Keywords: Territorial inequality, functional territories, development, environment, elites.

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Extended Abstract

1. Introduction and justification

This study examines a set of inequalities under the conceptual framework of poverty traps. The aim is to clarify the relationship between inequalities and socio-environmental conflicts, analysing them as causes and effects of these situations based on the interactions among actors in the territories and through a literature review. This research evaluates the relationship between poverty in a group of rural territories in southern Chile, socio-environmental conflicts, and the interactions that actors develop to reduce them. An emphasis is placed on the views that local and regional decision-makers have about the dynamics and power relations in these territories and their perceptions about the types of conflicts they face. The sorts of socio-environmental conflicts and the interactions mechanisms used by economic and social players in the areas are given special consideration.

Three articulated notions are addressed here: (1) territories in poverty traps, (2) types of conflicts, and (3) actors interaction. These aspects rarely consider the asymmetries of power that exist in territories far away from centers of political and economic power, mainly characterised by their rurality, low population density and high poverty levels.

2. Objectives, methods, and sources

The research design is non-experimental and, in addition to the literature and documentary review, it includes key informants' interviews from 30 different rural territories in southern Chile. These interviews were part of a study on poverty reduction, developed in the southern regions of Chile. This area is characterized by high levels of poverty, rurality, the concentration of economic activity in primary sectors (forestry, dairy, fruit) and a high percentage of inhabitants belonging to the "Mapuche" people. To accomplish the purpose of this research, the territory units used here are not necessarily limited to a political-administrative area such as a region, but are composed of spatial units that share productive structures and functional relations.

The key informants interviewed were identified in each territory based on a stakeholder mapping exercise carried out in 2017 by the Foundation "Superación de la Pobreza". The actors' sample includes key informants from civil society, the private sector, and public administration at local and regional levels. The interviews were conducted using a semi-structured questionnaire based on nine topics (economic development, environment, public policies, services and programmes, poverty situation, cultural patterns, participation and social organization, interrelation of actors and territorial dynamics).

The interviews were conducted between April and December 2017. The interviews were recorded on audio files and analysed using a Rapid Assessment Procedures strategy. A total of 61 interviews were analysed.

3. Results

From the interview analysis, 34 socio-environmental conflicts were identified. These socio-environmental conflicts are linked to extractive economic activities (e.g., associated with forestry, agriculture, aquaculture, and energy generation) which impact natural assets or are a consequence of the loss of these assets (e.g., soil loss, biodiversity loss, livestock depredation), or both phenomena at the same time (e.g., pollution phenomena, native forest deforestation, climate change), or constitute natural events perceived as a conflict situation (e.g., meteorological events, tidal events and tsunamis).

Of the 34 conflicts recorded in this study, 32 would be the result of anthropogenic environmental transformations, including both planned/desired/accepted transformations (such as the establishment of hydroelectric infrastructure, forest plantations, changes in watercourses, loss of biodiversity, and deforestation) and unplanned/unwanted anthropogenic environmental transformations (loss of soil, loss of biodiversity, risks associated with agricultural activity, and risks associated with forestry activity, climate change among others). Because of the inadequate development of resilience practices, two additional non-anthropogenic occurrences (such as weather catastrophes and tidal waves or tsunamis) are also seen as conflicts by stakeholders.

Following Bächler's (1999) classification of socio-environmental conflicts, the conflicts recorded are mainly intra-state anthropogenic conflicts, characterized by the fact that they are confined to the internal level of a region and are generally non-vio-

lent, as indicated by interviewees from public administration and institutions. The intra-state conflicts that were recorded correspond mostly to central-peripheral socio-ecological conflicts, associated with pressures imposed from actors outside the territory, mainly from urban centres towards territories trapped in poverty (i.e., energy projects, forestry, etc.) and ethno-ecological conflicts, characterized by tensions in the use of natural assets resources between different cultural groups (i.e., Mapuche communities and forestry entrepreneurs).

4. Discussion

This study offers two main findings. First, the territories studied present a significant number of socio-environmental conflicts that need to be managed and addressed as they are the result of anthropogenic activities. Second, socio-environmental conflicts are mainly of central-peripheral origin, revealing socio-territorial inequalities that affect territories trapped in poverty.

The high number of conflicts within the territories can be explained by the effects of large economic conglomerates that develop extractive or intensive activities in primary sectors such as forestry, energy, and agriculture. These activities have been described as at the opposite extreme of added value since they are activities placed in the territories to take advantage of natural resources (land and water) as occurs with forestry plantations.

A high number of conflicts in the territories could be associated with a significant loss of natural assets or loss of ecosystem benefits, in direct relation to the presence of extractive and high entropy economic activities. For example, the ecosystem benefits most frequently impacted would include the provision of cultivated plants, decrease in nature's capacity to keep up with waste or toxic substances, changes in the regulation of water and other nutrient flows, decrease in soil quality, and changes in water conditions.

Furthermore, centre-peripheral conflicts underlie power inequalities in decision-making processes regarding the management of natural assets in the territories. Mainly because the actors who directly influence the management of the conflicts and their solutions are not located within the territory. On the contrary, they are based in the political decision-making centres far away from where the conflicts occur. It is in the political decision-making centres where the influential economic elites are concentrated, as was expressed by the local authorities and private sector representatives

interviewed.

The Persistent poverty is also explained by the persistent differences in the appropriation of natural wealth and influence on its management since the development of the territories is strongly based on extractive or intensive activities which rely on natural assets. It is based on these inequalities where political-institutional arrangements occur both inside and outside the studied territories, also in line with the interviewees' opinions.

These situations are associated with inequity in using natural assets, which would have their origin, in part, in the central-peripheral socio-ecological configurations influenced by institutions, social networks, and economic actors. Indeed, several interviewees were emphatic in recognising that some crucial assets to support human well-being, for instance, water and soil, are co-opted by a small number of actors, who often belong to an economic elite.

5. Conclusions

This study analysed the relationship between persistent poverty, inequalities and socio-environmental conflicts in 30 rural territories in southern Chile. It identifies 34 types of socio-environmental conflicts, mainly linked to extractive economic activities, which impact natural assets or are a response to their loss.

Economic actors are identified as central agents in the increase and/or reduction of poverty due to their capacity to manage "critical" environmental assets at the territorial level. In this sense, the governance analysis of these assets, including the type of ownership and management, evidence the tension between poverty traps and inequality within territories and their relationship with socio-environmental conflicts.

Some of the characteristics and dynamics of the actor-actor relationship that must be evaluated in order to tackle these traps and progress toward a new paradigm of governance are as follows: (i) attention to those vicious dynamics that do not allow for redistribution; (ii) strengthening the role of social and political actors in the territory by weakening the installed centre-periphery relationship; (iii) strengthening compensation and accountability mechanisms for economic actors that develop extractive activities in the territories; (iv) decreasing polarisation between sectors, and between groups in the territory; and (v) democratising the use of natural assets and their services among local actors, a situation currently limited to a small set of actors, mostly external to the territory.

6. Future directions

Natural assets management emphasises the significance of assessing institutional structures, practices, and methods for actor articulation, such as disputes over freshwater resources and water shortage, which disproportionately impact the rural regions investigated. In terms of water, Chilean public policy has traditionally prioritised hard infrastructure, or anthropogenic structures dedicated to storing and transporting available water to points of consumption, over green or soft infrastructure, which focuses on improving the capture, regulation, and provision of water resources by increasing the ecological resilience of ecosystems.

The successful management of natural assets must be examined, especially to offer the conditions for moving away from the current predominant centre-periphery paradigm and towards a governance that balances local and global interests.