



## Summary

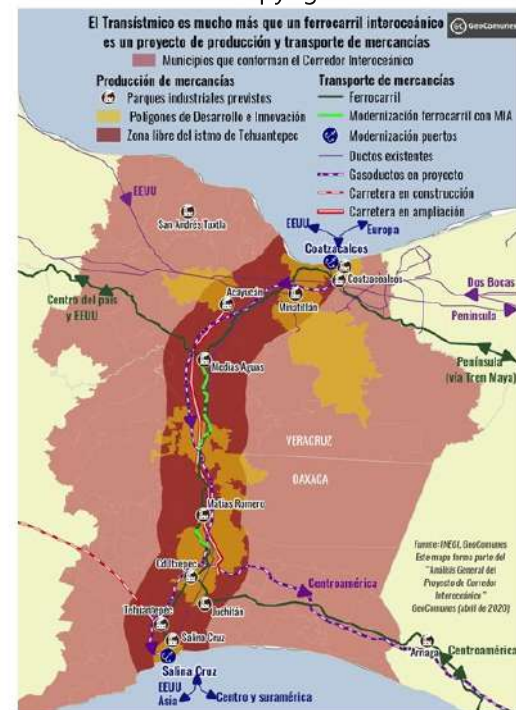
*This research found widespread discontent regarding the information about the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project that was disseminated by state agencies. Local residents felt they received more adequate and reliable information through social networks or civil society organisations. Whilst a series of information events regarding the project was carried out by government agencies, in 2019 and 2020 especially, there were reports of procedural flaws, violations, and exclusions of rights holders. Thus, these events cannot count to fully comply with the ILO standards for Indigenous consultations according to C169. There was a strong sense among a large part of the population in the Isthmus region that there would not be any concrete benefits for them from the project. Local business owners and unions with connections to the political elite were seen as principal future beneficiaries. There was a diverse range of negative impacts that were already experienced by some residents, among them eviction and displacement, loss of livelihood resulting from removal of vegetation, and disruptions of herding schemes through the construction work. A range of conflicts have emerged between different population groups, some to do with access to work or supplier contracts, and others with disputes over changes of land use, the latter leading to the most serious clashes. Even in its initial stage, the infrastructure project has caused security-related impacts among particular communities and actors. In particular, oppositional actors and social movement leaders suffered from verbal and physical threats, as well as rights violations. There were fears around the social, cultural, economic and environmental changes that this infrastructure project will entail. Among them were, in particular, an industrialisation and urbanisation of the region, which could lead to contamination and water scarcity, an increase in extractive megaprojects, and possibly even to cultural extinction of Indigenous populations. Different communities have existing, previous and historic grievances that they want addressed and remedied before agreeing to a new development project. These include oil spills, contamination from sulphur-mine waste, untreated wastewaters from a refinery, and loss of land and displacement resulting from past infrastructure projects. Respondents expressed a range of desired infrastructures and community visions. Among them were, in particular, a desire for improved basic and agricultural infrastructure, but also investment into health, education and housing fit for climate change. Overall, there was a strong aspiration to establish infrastructures that allow stewardship (of nature) and care (for others). Community infrastructures have the greatest chances of acceptance and sustainability. As genuine community infrastructure, we understand those that are designed, realised and maintained by the community, and of which the entire community benefits. Community infrastructures, based on diverse social, cultural and economic life projects, can enhance humanity's overall resilience in the face of climate change.*



## Context

The *Corredor Interoceánico del Istmo de Tehuantepec* (CIIT) project,<sup>1</sup> announced during Andrés Manuel López Obrador's (AMLO) presidential campaign, has been promoted as a multimodal road and rail transport corridor that will link the Gulf of Mexico with the Pacific Ocean. It is projected as a viable alternative to the Panama Canal, for the benefit of global corporate trade, which intends to speed up and amplify the circulation of goods and products and thereby simultaneously stimulate the local economy.<sup>2</sup> The Interoceanic Corridor includes the following central components: modernisation and expansion of the ports of Coatzacoalcos in the Gulf and Salina Cruz in the Pacific; improvement of the railway connection between both harbours; development of a new highway and widening of an existing one; laying of optic fibre; construction of a new gas pipeline; improvement of the regional airports; installation of logistics centres and the development of industrial parks along the Isthmus. The 10 polygons (sometimes called 'development poles' or 'welfare poles') are expected to receive industries from sectors such as the automotive (auto parts, transportation equipment), agribusiness (food, beverages and tobacco), manufacturing (leather, textiles, clothing), as well as transportation and logistics, among others.<sup>3</sup> In 2019, a presidential decree (DOF: 19/11/2019) replaced the previous Special Economic Zones (at the ports of Coatzacoalcos and Salina Cruz) to include future industrial parks and concession them under free trade conditions as well.<sup>4</sup> By granting fiscal incentives, an attempt is made to promote the arrival of private investment in the region. The project has been projected for a total investment of 250.000 million pesos of which

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1. [https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=5597712&fecha=04/08/2020#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5597712&fecha=04/08/2020#gsc.tab=0)
2. <https://www.cortamortaja.com.mx/el-istmo/10919-impacto-economico-del-corredor-interoceanico-del-istmo-y-el-tren-maya-mayor-al-del-canal-de-panama>
3. <https://www.eleconomista.com.mx/empresas/Gobierno-federal-impulsara-incentivos-fiscales-para-atraer-inversiones-en-el-Istmo-de-Tehuantepec-20220630-0051.html>
4. [https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota\\_detalle.php?codigo=5579365&fecha=19/11/2019#gsc.tab=0](https://www.dof.gob.mx/nota_detalle.php?codigo=5579365&fecha=19/11/2019#gsc.tab=0)

150.000 million is expected to come from the private sector, and 100.000 million will be contributed by the public sector.<sup>5</sup>

In the official discourse, the Programme for the Development of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec “will generate jobs and decent living conditions to attract and anchor those fleeing poverty.”<sup>6</sup> In the long term, the programme promises the development of urban infrastructure, educational services and human capital training, housing, mobility, as well as infrastructure for research and technological advancement. Critics of the project fear that the Interoceanic Corridor will boost the expansion of other extractivist and predatory megaprojects in the region, such as mining, wind farms, hydroelectric dams, and commercial forest and agro-industrial plantations (GeoComunes 2020). The Interoceanic Corridor entails secondary and tertiary impacts on an area encompassing 79 municipalities in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz. Almost 2.3 million people live in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region, of which more than half a million are Indigenous from 12 different nations, plus Afro-descendants (Sandoval Vázquez 2020). The Interoceanic Corridor strongly resembles previous national infrastructure projects such as: the Puebla-Panama Plan announced by President Vicente Fox in 2001; the Integral Development Program of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec of 1996 during Ernesto Zedillo’s administration; and the Alpha-Omega Project presented in 1978 under the administration of President José López Portillo (García Aguirre 2020). While there are specific differences in the implementation of the projects, they share an overall desire to exploit the Isthmus’ geopolitical and strategic position for business.

In 2021, the president announced that the Interoceanic Corridor project will be administered and managed by the Navy (SEMAR) and the governments of Tabasco, Chiapas, Oaxaca and Veracruz, officially, to guarantee that it will never be possible to privatise the project.<sup>7</sup> This received strong critiques by security specialists: Not only has AMLO’s government allocated larger budgets to the Armed Forces than previous administrations, but he has also given them now “autonomous financial sources”, and therefore effectively more power than ever before.<sup>8</sup> Recently,

5. <https://laprimerisima.com.mx/nacional/se-invertiran-250-mil-mdp-para-corredor-interoceanico-informa-sedecop/>

6. <https://lopezobrador.org.mx/wp-content/uploads/2019/05/PLAN-NACIONAL-DE-DESARROLLO-2019-2024.pdf>

7. <https://www.milenio.com/politica/amlo-corredor-interoceanico-se-va-a-escribir-a-marina-y-a-estados>

8. <https://www.ejecentral.com.mx/ejercito-leal-o-complice-fiel-de-amlo/>



there have been emerging concerns regarding security in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec region, including the Z railway line that reaches from Medias Aguas to Salina Cruz in the State of Oaxaca.<sup>9</sup> At the moment, 4,362 elements of the Marine have already been deployed to provide security in three sections of the Interoceanic Railroad of the Isthmus of Tehuantepec.<sup>10</sup> In the Isthmus of Tehuantepec, there are 4 coordination centres of the National Guard and 3 of the Secretariat of National Defence with together 2,584 elements.<sup>11</sup> Rafael Marín Mollinedo, director of the Interoceanic Multimodal Corridor, announced that in the future Marine elements will be stationed at all 10 industrial parks to guarantee investor security.<sup>12</sup> Some critics consider such developments and plans to be a concerning militarisation of the region.<sup>13</sup>

## Scope of the Issue

Providing access to appropriate, detailed and balanced information about a planned large-scale infrastructure project constitutes a mayor challenge, especially across large rural areas and among an ethnically diverse population. In the case of the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project, the research found widespread discontent regarding the information that was disseminated by state agencies. Some inhabitants of rural areas had not received any information from government agencies at all, even when being directly affected by construction works near their homes. Many respondents said they found out about the infrastructure project from television or social media instead. Some civil society organisations have made efforts to inform about the project and its impacts, enabling the members of their networks access to certain, albeit limited information. Both journalists and civil society organisations have found it difficult to access detailed information about the project, making complaints about a lack of transparency and collaboration of the respective government agencies.<sup>14</sup> President Andrés Manuel López Obrador made the attempt to classify information related to priority works by decree (DOF: 22/11/2021), including the Interoceanic Corridor, allegedly to protect the implementation of those projects from land speculation and oppositional actors. The Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (SCJN) later put this decree on halt due to its unconstitutionality.<sup>15</sup> In 2021, only a 26-page redacted version of the master plan (CIIT/CT-R05/2021) was made available to the public by the Transparency Committee, and a slide show summary of the master

### 1. Lack of & Quality of Information

9. <https://www.forbes.com.mx/asi-es-el-plan-de-la-marina-para-blindar-del-crimen-el-corredor-transistmico/>

10. <https://www.gob.mx/semar/prensa/marina-brinda-informe-mensual-de-operaciones-que-contribuyen-a-la-seguridad-del-pais?idiom=es>

11. <https://www.meganoticias.mx/salina-cruz/noticia/5-mil-elementos-de-guardia-nacional-custodian-a-oaxaca/311518>

12. <https://www.liberal.com.mx/contaran-los-inversionistas-con-seguridad-de-la-semar/>

13. <https://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/municipios/02-03-2020/corredor-interoceanico-despojo-de-tierras-y-militarizacion-del-istmo-fundacion>

14. <http://t21.com.mx/maritimo/2021/04/05/interoceanico-potencial-sin-vision>

15. <https://www.eluniversal.com.mx/nacion/suprema-corte-da-reves-amlo-suspende-acuerdo-que-blinda-megaobras>

plan, elaborated by the infrastructure firm SMEC/Surbana Jurong.<sup>16</sup> The slideshow provides a superficial overview of the vision (market positioning), strategy (structural plan) and implementation (conceptual master plan) of the project. Whilst this summary provides some data on the expected rise in water usage, wastewater and solid waste until 2050, for instance, there are no exact location details (coordinates) as to where the water is going to be drawn from, and where both solid and liquid waste will be deposited, neither detailed waste management plans. The Environmental Impact Assessment (MIA, by its acronym in Spanish) that the Secretary of the Environment and Natural Resources (SEMARNAT) received in 2020 with regards to the rehabilitation and modernisation of the trainline was riddled with irregularities and serious omissions, as different civil society organisations have denounced.<sup>17</sup> It did not address the protection of local flora and fauna in danger of extinction, and omits effects on the still water resources in the region. The MIA presented by Isthmus Railways (FIT) does not cover the full length of the trainline, leaving out 6 km from environmental considerations, and therefore making the assessment incomplete. To conclude, a lack of detailed and specific information about the infrastructure project makes it impossible for the public to assess and make informed decisions on the basis of the full scope of the project and its possible socioeconomic, cultural and environmental impacts.




## 2. Consultation & Participation

Whilst the responsible authorities insisted that the consultations were conducted in line with the ILO convention No. 169, there were reports of procedural flaws, violations, and exclusions of rights holders. The ILO C169, of which Mexico is a signatory, stipulates that Indigenous populations are to be consulted on matters that affect their territories and must provide their free, prior and informed consent (FPIC) on projects to be realised on their lands. In addition, consultations must be culturally appropriate, this means that both information materials and the relevant meetings must afford translation into the respective Indigenous We heard that a (good quality) translation was not always guaranteed. Respondents told us also that in some locations the authorities did not invite in time, in order to ensure that a majority of the members of the community would achieve to attend. In other cases, only specific rights holders, such as *comuneros* or *ejidatarios* were invited, and not the wider community of Indigenous residents.<sup>18</sup>


16. [https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/673314/Resumen\\_ejecutivo\\_completo\\_-VPWEB.pdf](https://www.gob.mx/cms/uploads/attachment/file/673314/Resumen_ejecutivo_completo_-VPWEB.pdf)

17. <https://www.cemda.org.mx/comunicado-de-denuncia-sobre-el-proyecto-del-corredor-interoceanico/>

18. Both *comuneros* and *ejidatarios* are rights holders of different kinds of social (or collectively held) property.



*I went to the asamblea de comuneros. When I got there, I realised that there were lots of people there who should not have been there. Paid attendees. Delinquents. Lots of people were not comuneros. The municipal president has invaded two town districts with his people. They work in the town council. He told each worker to take 2 or 3 other people. This is how the mechanics work. The president always works like that. About 20 marihuaneros were there who are at the command of the president and his brother, a known hit man.*



Overall, it seemed that only a small percentage of the local population took part in those ‘consultations’, more correctly called ‘information events’. There were complaints also about the quality of information provided at these events, which according to participants was not balanced enough, but rather only focused on the positives and possible benefits for the community. Information sessions were also one-off events; there was not enough time for in-depth community deliberation and assessment prior to the decision-making process. We heard reports of critics of the project who were expelled or not let speak at those meetings. Furthermore, proposals and petitions that were made during those meetings, for instance, the wish to become associates of the project or have a community store inside the industrial park, were not taken into account or secured through a valid contract. As women are often devoid of any form of collective land rights, they remained almost entirely excluded from the consultation process. Many therefore rightly felt that these were ‘simulated consultations’ that did not fulfil the ILO standards. Another complex issue that overshadowed the information meetings was the influence that powerful economic and political elites were able to exert, shifting public opinion and voting towards their interests. Individuals with economic interests in the project brought hired attendees to the meetings who would vote according to their wishes (either because they were paid to do so or because they owed them a favour that could be exploited). In this way, in some locations also the assembly, the only legitimate, decision-making institution in an Indigenous community, became corrupted. In the case of Puente Madera, a village in the southern Isthmus, which aims to protect their forest, El Pitayal, from becoming cut down for another industrial park, a list of fake signatories turned up, that included double signatures and signatures of deceased comuneros.<sup>19</sup> Carrying out Indigenous consultations correctly is a complex and challenging endeavour, and it is definitely not a legal instrument that is well-adjusted to the needs of Indigenous communities and their desire to self-determination, autonomy and protection of their territories and ways of life. The territorial rights of Indigenous peoples are in conflict with the interests of the state to realise large-scale, interregional infrastructure projects. To reduce future territorial conflicts and enable the cultural survival of the different Indigenous communities in Mexico, we suggest to change the parts of national legislation that are in conflict with or contradict the self-determination and autonomy of Indigenous peoples.

19. <https://piedepagina.mx/en-el-nombre-del-totopo-mujeres-binniza-defienden-el-pitayal/>

### 3. Lack of or Limited Benefits

There was a strong sense among a large part of the population in the Isthmus region that there would not be any concrete benefits for them from the project. This was even shared by some government officials who stated that the benefits of this infrastructure project are largely going to be for the Mexican nation-state in the form of economic growth and tax revenue charged that then could be used to redistribute through a plethora of social programs to the poor classes. Based on knowledge of the passenger train that crossed the Isthmus in the past, in particular, women had hopes that this new train would reinvigorate the local economy and stimulate their trade of local produce, such as cheeses, totopos, tamales, gueta bi'ngi', rice cakes and breads. Others had hopes that the project would bring more work opportunities to the region, but most were clear that this would be mostly short-time, precarious, and low-paid factory work or jobs for trained professionals in logistics, administration, management and engineering from other regions. Many thought only a few would benefit from the project and that it would eventually contribute to widening economic inequality. Local business owners and unions with connections to the political elite were seen as principal future beneficiaries. There was the anticipation that existing structures of *cacicazgo*<sup>20</sup> and corruption would influence the outcome of the project. Any infrastructure project that does not take into account local skills and knowledges and development visions from its inception will not truly benefit those local populations.

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*We have been critical of the consultation process since 2015. We have analysed it. Ultimately, it is a mechanism of neoliberal governance. We asked for it and lost. The consultation will not benefit the aggrieved. Other actors arrived that we did not expect. The main factor influencing a consultation is economic inequality. They know that these projects happen in poor areas. People can be influenced with money. To think that we are all equal and can sit down to negotiate as equals with AMLO and the companies is mistaken.*

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20. Chieftainship. *Caciques* are local chiefs or bosses that have power and influence over resident populations and political institutions.



*We are not against projects, but if there is talk of development, we want to see the development before these projects with their big businesses come here.*



## 4. Negative Impacts

*The implementation of infrastructures has been socially devastating for our communities. Promises are made that will never be kept. They only care about ensuring capital accumulation. There is no respect for human life.*

One mayor problem with the rehabilitation and modernisation of the trainline, that requires the full right of way (that is 15 metres to each side of the train track), and in some instances the modification of curves to enable speedier transport, are the customary practices that have established over the past decades. There are now locations in which a school, graveyard or houses have been built into the right of way. Overall, over 500 families might be affected and threatened by eviction and loss of their home. There has been scarce information regarding the compensation and resettlement of those families. In Sayula de Alemán, a small town in the state of Veracruz, those affected were notified very late and in some cases they were unable to remove all of their household goods and personal belongings, since the eviction was carried out very early, with the support of the State Police.<sup>21</sup> The evicted families request compensation for lost building material and relocation options from the federal government, as well as support for the purchase of new housing. Whilst invading federal property is illegal, some of those families have purchased those plots or houses, or built them in a lifetime. Some settlements are only accessible by walking along stretches of the trainline, and solutions need to be found for those. In such locations, individuals have established transport services for goods along the tracks with trolleys or horses. Those individuals will inevitably lose their livelihood with the arrival of the regular, highspeed train. Farmers have also established customary paths with their animals crossing the trainline at different times of the day, or accessing water wells. They worry how they might cross in the future, if bridges will be built for them or if they will receive funds for protective fences for their livestock. In some locations, construction work for the Interoceanic Corridor has resulted in the cutting down of woods that people use as part of their subsistence. Women in particular sell fruit from wild trees, and use common forests to extract wood for their totopo production, and to obtain materials for hammocks or houses. In times of scarcity they also trap wild animals like iguanas or deer for own consumption. Overall, the populations that live near the modernised trainline will be affected by noise and vibrations, especially considering that it is projected that 85 trains will pass through the Isthmus per day with 45 coaches each, at a maximum speed of 160 km/h.<sup>22</sup> In places where the trainline parts the towns and villages, like in Ixtepec, Matías Romero, Estación Sarabia, Palomares and Tolosita, for instance, pedestrians and cars experience already long waits at crossings, causing traffic chaos. In the future, with more and longer trains, this is likely to cause unacceptable disruptions of everyday life, which might make route deviations around settlements necessary.

21. <https://jornadaveracruz.com.mx/principal/desalojan-derecho-de-via-del-ferrocarril-del-istmo-de-tehuantepec/>

22. <https://www.educoaxaca.org/corredor-interoceanico-cada-17-minutos-trenes-de-carga-recorreran-el-istmo/>



The infrastructure project has generated polarisation and conflicts among the population. There have been conflicts around which village is contracted to provide rocks for the construction of the breakwater,<sup>23</sup> for instance. The resulting road blocks and protests have then affected the truckers who lose out on work and pay because they cannot deliver the materials.<sup>24</sup> The most intricate conflicts have emerged among proponents and opponents of the project, in particular, around the issue of land use. The development of 10 new industrial parks in the region is realised by the Government through a transformation of the applicable property regime, which implicates a change from social or collective to private property. The prospects of individual gains then have led to conflicts within the decision-making assemblies, the designation of false *comuneros* (persons with access to collectively held land titles) and the falsification of land titles, among others. There has also been discontent regarding the power of collective land holders (*comuneros, ejidatarios*) over the destiny of a community; those with land titles holding power over whether the project comes or not. Furthermore, there has been discord over whether to negotiate with the Government and accept the pay-outs offered for improvements of local roads or schools, for instance. There have been reports of oppositional *ejidatarios* who got assaulted and even threatened by exclusion from the community.

## 5. Conflicts & Division

23. <https://oaxaca.eluniversal.com.mx/municipios/bloquean-pescadores-ingreso-de-camiones-de-volteo-obra-de-rompeolas-en-salina-cruz-oaxaca>

24. <https://cortamortaja.com.mx/el-istmo/15172-transportistas-los-mas-afectados-por-el-bloqueo-que-provoca-la-obra-del-rompeolas>



## 6. Insecurity & Repression

The Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project has already in its initial stages caused security-related impacts among particular communities and actors. Those who are going to be directly affected by construction work, and as a result of it might be evicted or resettled, felt considerable insecurity with respect to not having sufficient information about the process, causing great worry and sleeplessness to some. Several oppositional actors have been verbally threatened, intimidated and insulted, both on social media and in assemblies. Some were discredited as 'terrorists' and marginalised within their own communities, causing emotional stress and feelings of isolation, especially when combined with threats of community expulsion.

A small number of individuals has made experiences with armed actors, who followed them around or damaged their personal property. One respondent, who opposed construction work near her home, got forcefully taken into custody by officers from the National Guard, who exposed her to humiliation and denied her access to a phone call and a lawyer. There are powerful economic and political elites in the region that have paralegal units, or 'hit men' available to them, that can be used to exert pressure over the general population – generating a climate of fear and compliance – but also to threaten or assault specific oppositional actors. It has been observed that arrest warrants against oppositional movement leaders have been used by the state to disarticulate community resistance. Furthermore, the denial of state resources for local services such as schools and hospitals was also considered a consequence of the community's resistance to the infrastructure project in one case. The presence of drug cartels is ever more strongly felt in the region, in particular in the cities of Coatzacoalos, Matías Romero, Juchitán and Tehuantepec, where local businesses must increasingly pay bribes, and actors with alleged connections to organised crime have expressed interest in the purchase of specific plots of land. A recent newspaper article about the security expenses related to the Interoceanic Corridor demonstrates the extent of the militarisation of the Isthmus region. Overall, over 11 million pesos were spent. President López Obrador has inaugurated 22 National Guard barracks in the states of Oaxaca and Veracruz, and it was reported that 4,362 Navy personnel were working at four points in the area.<sup>25</sup> In addition, the private security firm SEPIVER, S.A. de C.V. has received 5 contracts to support the work of the state security forces in the region. Feminists have repeatedly alerted against the impacts of militarisation against women, and in particular Indigenous women, as in the emblematic case of Ernestina Ascencio shows (De Marinis 2022). Ernestina, Nahuatl Indigenous woman from the state of Veracruz, died of the wounds resulting from the sexual assault that she had suffered by members of the Mexican Army.<sup>26</sup> The Mexican justice system has failed to convict the perpetrators.

25.  
<https://www.elsoldemexico.com.mx/mexico/sociedad/gastan-11-mdp-en-seguridad-privada-para-corredor-interoceanico-8706943.html>

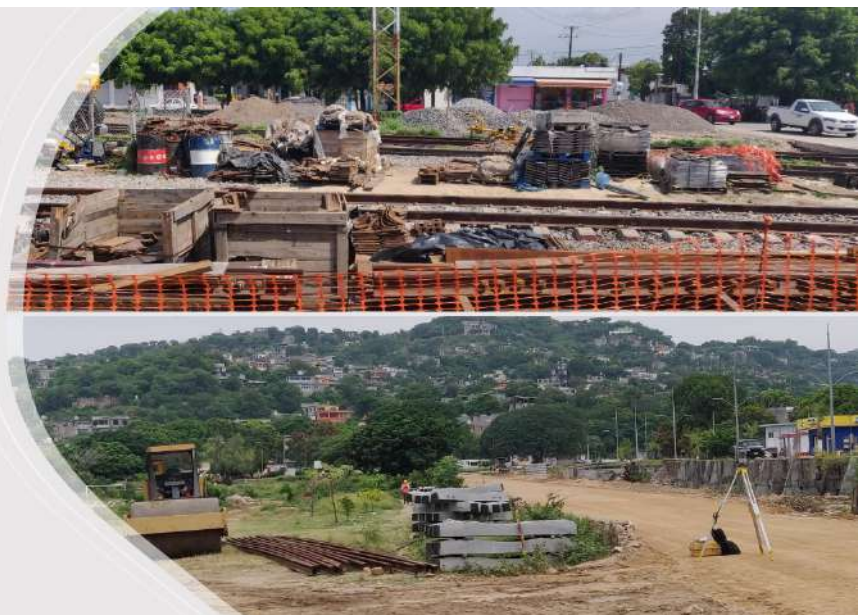
26.  
<https://www.jornada.com.mx/2020/12/06/opinion/014a1pol>



## 7. Feared Future Impacts

Across the Isthmus region there were fears around the social, cultural, economic and environmental changes that the Interoceanic Corridor infrastructure project will entail. Residents were concerned that overall insecurity and the activity of organised crime groups would increase, resulting in a militarisation of the region, which could lead to a rise in prostitution and violence against women. There is also a range of predictable, future impacts related to the project. For instance, if the project really takes off as planned, and both national and international firms decide to invest and operate in the industrial parks across the region, this will inevitably lead to a change of the landscape, resulting in an urbanisation, as well as industrialisation of the Isthmus. Likely, there will be a greater population density than currently, and migrant workers from across Mexico and beyond are expected to settle. The housing needs of this new population will further reinforce the transformation of the infrastructural landscape and urbanisation. Whilst local residents were by no means hostile towards migration and change generally, they thought that migration of a *mestiza* and foreign population would likely result in an eventual loss of traditional forms of social and political organisation. They also expect negative impacts on traditional cultural practices such as mutual aid, *tequio* (collective work for the community) and *fiestas* (considered a form of economic redistribution as well as method to cyclically strengthen social ties). In the worst case, this would lead to the cultural disappearance – or ethnocide – of Indigenous populations and a loss of their languages. It can also be anticipated that traditional forms of agriculture, such as the *milpa*, and fishery will diminish or vanish entirely, as a result of increased competition with industrial agriculture and fishing. In a more urban and densely populated region with intense economic activity, we can expect a steep rise in water and electricity usages. Water is already scarce in the area, which was a concern for many, and a rising electricity demand will require the installation of further wind parks, involving territorial changes that will

*Infrastructure for me is not just roads. It is not that, but it is a noble infrastructure and adequate for the living conditions. That is why megaprojects must not break cultural ties, they must not break ways of life. I don't know why when you ask people about infrastructure, in their heads they think of cement, right? And in my head, it is about adopting sustainable ways of life that that are possible. ... So I think that the forms must be adequate, not adopting infrastructure from the North, but respecting the ways of life from here, right? Without mistreating them, without damaging them, but taking care of them.*



necessarily bring more social conflicts (Dunlap & Correa Arce 2021; Dunlap 2020; Dunlap 2018; Sánchez Miguel 2016). Without doubt, the demands of incremented industrial production will require large amounts of natural resources, likely to result in an increase in the mining of metals and minerals in the region. Mining tends to engender the contamination of local water sources and a loss of biodiversity, eventually culminating, as some fear, in ecocide.

## **8. Previous Historic, Socioterritorial & Environmental Grievances**

Different communities have existing, previous and historic grievances that they want addressed and remedied before agreeing to a new development project. Communities deplored oil spills, for instance, that stem from a PEMEX pipeline over the period of ten years, contaminating their water sources and land, for which they have not received any compensation. Some villages have sold land to the Federal Electricity Commission (CFE) for the construction of substations in the past, but the electricity itself remains unaffordable for them or power lines don't reach. The communities want these issues resolved in their favour. Other grievances were the contamination caused by a sulphur mine in the past, the extreme air pollution caused by Salina Cruz' refinery that affects parts of the city and surrounding villages, and the contamination of the river Coatzacoalcos by several petrochemical plants located in the northern Isthmus. There are grievances that date back to colonial times, when some communities were forced to buy their own land from the Spanish crown in exchange for gold. In the 1950s, these indigenous communities were displaced due to the construction of the Miguel Alemán hydroelectric dam and a large part of their territory was expropriated. Compensation promises were not kept, and the communities demand the recuperation of 18,000 hectares of land from the Mexican government. These environmental and territorial grievances, some related to previous infrastructure projects, rightfully cause indignation and need to be resolved in favour of the affected communities, in order to restore social peace and justice before the proposal or initiation of any new infrastructure project in the region.



*For the Government, giving Indigenous peoples infrastructure means filling everything with cement. Creating cement blocks, filling the streets with cement. This is considered progress, and unfortunately this is what we get. I think desirable infrastructure would be the opposite. Moving away from these ways that are alien to our Indigenous peoples, which are precisely these. For example, when reconstructing houses after the earthquake, the support programs did not respect the communities' traditional forms of construction, and therefore many of the old houses were lost. The idea that they have of creating infrastructure for Indigenous peoples is not attached to the needs of the peoples or to their traditions. Considering cultural traditions, but also contemporary needs related to climate change, for instance. These traditional housing styles had their reason. We live in a very hot area and these houses are cool. The fact that they now make houses out of pure cement and metal sheets is not very favourable, neither regarding the heavy winds we have here. So, I think that it is possible to have good infrastructure for the Indigenous peoples without moving away from their traditions so much, but rather sticking more to the traditional, and respecting a little more the demands of nature.*

## Alternatives

Many current infrastructure projects, and in particular large-scale infrastructure projects, are based on an extractivist and urbanising model of capitalist development, in which resources, benefits and wealth are transferred from one region to another. The argument for doing this is a notion of the 'common good', allegedly referring to all citizens within a modern nation-state. A large body of literature on infrastructure megaprojects, however, shows that benefits rarely arrive at local communities where those infrastructures are built (Anand, Gupta & Appel 2018; Cowen 2020; Flyvbjerg 2014; Ceceña 2019; Ibarra García & Talledos Sánchez 2016; Gasparello & Núñez Rodríguez 2021; Hildyard & Sol 2017; LaDuke & Cowen 2020; Montalvo Méndez 2019; Rodríguez Wallenius 2015). Top-down designs, as well as infrastructural models that have worked in other cultural contexts tend to face rejection and experience failure. Instead, future infrastructure design and realisation should acknowledge and reinforce existing cultural models of life and social organisation. Community visions are generally not characterised by a desire to become salaried workers, but by the desire to live more prosperously in continuation of their current livelihood activities, as traders, artisans, peasants or fishers. Infrastructure by and for the people considers the local necessities and cultural profiles, as well as productive activities, skills and knowledges of the people, and aims to strengthen and promote this local productivity, thereby respecting

## Desired Infrastructures & Community Visions

the will and cosmovision of the people. A local and culturally appropriate infrastructure takes local desires for sovereignty (in particular food sovereignty) and self-sufficiency into account, as well as visions of a healthy life that respects the earth. This does not imply a rejection of technologies or commerce, but rather challenges us to take a territorial perspective, as well as reconceptualise infrastructural changes from and for the people who live in a particular region that has specific historic, cultural, economic characteristics that cannot be ignored.



In the following we have collected some of the infrastructural visions that our respondents mentioned. Respondents suggested as desirable infrastructures: phone services, internet access and affordable electricity, health services and well-equipped and staffed hospitals that provide medicines, specialist medical services, such as dialysis, and an ambulance, emergency shelters for women, sports facilities, libraries, and well-equipped and staffed schools of all levels and universities. Some public buildings and schools remain in terrible conditions as a result of the 2017 earthquake in the Isthmus region. People want them fixed or reconstructed so that they are safe to use. Of particular relevance to respondents was farming infrastructure that includes, repair of roads and construction of access paths for harvesting, machinery, agricultural equipment, biofertiliser, protection of traditional seed exchange systems, and the construction of watering canals. All farming infrastructures should take care not to erase tradi-

tional forms of agriculture, such as the *milpa* or itinerant, mountain agriculture, for instance, which uses the nutritious soils of steep mountain areas for the cultivation of diverse crops. Respondents were clear in their preference of traditional agricultural systems (which they want improved with relevant infrastructure) in contrast to profit and export oriented monoculture crop production. Access to clean drinking water was an issue in urban areas, where some settlements remain without supply. Salina Cruz, for instance, urgently requires the repair and recommissioning of the refinery's wastewater treatment plant (that got damaged in the 2017 earthquake), as currently contaminated water from the refinery is ejected into the sea, contaminating the coast, water and marine life. More water purification plants, proper waste management and better recycling schemes were demands across the region. Considering that the Isthmus is a region characterised by water scarcity, people expressed a desire to promote ecotechnologies that help save water. Housing fit for climate change was another recurring infrastructure demand. The reconstruction process after the earthquake in the Isthmus did no longer respect traditional forms of construction. However, the new, small, 'modern' stone houses with aluminium roofs are not suited to the region's hot and windy climate. New-built houses lack patios with plants and trees that could provide cooling and shade. Beyond that, the spacious traditional houses correspond with the conviviality and social life that nurtures social cohesion and thereby enhances security. Another desired infrastructure was a passenger train, which in contrast to a freight train, which the Interoceanic Corridor project currently prioritises, would enjoy great popularity. In particular women had the hope that they would benefit from this additional regional transport medium, enabling them to sell their food and artisan products across a larger distance and reactivate the local economy.

***In our village there are hardly any trees left and very few houses still have a patio. The patio has been an important element since pre-Hispanic times. Before, you had a patio because it gave you the possibility of having trees that gave you fruit and shade, of planting your vegetables. But houses that have a patch of soil inside are now considered a sign of poverty, and nobody likes being poor. Unfortunately, people have adopted this idea of progress. If they say that you live in a place that has no progress, then what do you do? You make the greatest effort so that your house has a cement floor too.***

When talking about desired infrastructure, several respondents made reference to the current legal order, drawing attention to the entanglement of imaginable and possible infrastructures with the law. In some areas of the Isthmus there are long-standing agrarian conflicts between communities, which need to be resolved before planning and realising a new project, generating new disputes and clashes. Linked to that was a demand to more accessible and reliable justice services in the region, as well as a call for overall accountability of state actors. Respondents reported that the government officials that they were confronted with did sometimes not identify themselves or their department (even when being asked) and give them no contact details. People felt that a local office in the Isthmus region could help their information and negotiation processes and improve government accountability. Overall, these proposals indicate the desire for infrastructures that promote the cultural survival of the different Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples. There was a strong aspiration to establish infrastructures that allow stewardship (of nature) and care (for others). New infrastructures should not negatively impact on established forms of social organisation through mutual aid, collective work and solidarity, neither contaminate the environment, nor erase local economies. There was an awareness regarding the capacity of infrastructures to either promote or impede the equality of power among local population groups, and a strong sentiment that infrastructures should bring holistic and sustainable benefits for the majority of the local population and not for only a few.

Community visions of alternative infrastructures are already available (Castro Rodríguez & Reyes Méndez 2019; Consejo Dueñas 2021; Morales & Esteva 2019), they just need to be sought and harnessed for realisation. Where not, they should be established prior to designing and implementing new infrastructure projects through processes of community analysis (*diagnóstico comunitario*) and the elaboration of life plans (*planes de vida*).





### **What is a life plan?**

A life plan describes in a general way the cultural foundations and principles of life to promote coexistence, foundations that are defined in the Law of Origin of the Indigenous peoples and that contain the guidelines for the management of the world and the ordering of the territory that was given to them in the beginning.

A life plan is a document that is based on the principles of balance and reciprocity between the beings that make up the territory and seeks collective benefit. Likewise, it reflects the feelings and expectations of its people, where they endorse their desire to continue being Indigenous in their territories, defining how they are going to express their cultural principles in accordance with the current context, to maintain the conditions so that life can be reproduced and shared its abundance.

### **What does it contain?**

All the reflections and decisions of Indigenous peoples in relation to cultural, social, economic, environmental and political issues, which become their current challenges, are collected in this document. There, they also state their purposes, forms of organisation, functions such as special public authorities, and mechanisms for operating and financing, as well as the actions necessary to achieve common purposes.

Source: Gaia Amazonas

## **Policy Recommendations**

- There is a general lack of transparency regarding project plans and advances, as well as local and regional officials in charge. Make all information available to the public on a single CIIT website, in order to generate trust. The content of this website should include: structural and conceptual master plans (full details and data), all information provided to the different communities where negotiations happened or are ongoing (slideshows, leaflets, Indigenous language materials), progress and evaluation reports, maps and data concerning the project implementation, and social and environmental impact assessments. The information should be continually updated and structured in a way that makes access easy for members of the general public.
- Enhance the accessibility of information materials by considering the particular needs of women, remote rural populations, Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples and illiterate individuals.
- Government agencies in charge (e.g. SEGOB, SEMARNAT) have not been sufficiently responsive to the communities, researchers and journalists. Install local offices in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec and publicise location, contact details and office hours. Ensure that all government officials that work with communities take an ID, and hand out contact cards when requested.
- Stop all criminalising pronouncements and measures against oppositional actors. Instead, we recommend to make sincere efforts of conflict resolution and mitigation of negative impacts with the affected parties and interest groups.

## **Immediate Measures for the CIIT Project**

27.  
[https://www.gaiamazonas.org/noticias/2020-08-06\\_que-es-el-plan-de-vida/](https://www.gaiamazonas.org/noticias/2020-08-06_que-es-el-plan-de-vida/)

## Long-term & General Recommendations for Infrastructure Projects

- Conventional, large-scale infrastructures have the tendency to bring benefits to local elites and those who have already established businesses of certain relevant sectors (esp. construction, supply of construction materials etc.). Conceptualise, strategically plan and promote the realisation of a cooperative economy that can boost individual traders and small businesses on a local level.
- Established structures of corruption, *cacicazgo* and extreme inequality must be addressed and eliminated before implementing infrastructure projects, otherwise, the compliance of poor populations can be purchased by affluent elites to skew the project outcomes and benefits towards the few. Such practices generate dangerous conflicts among population groups, thereby disturbing local social cohesion and peace.
- Consult communities from the initial stage of infrastructure planning through community analyses (*diagnósticos comunitarios*) and elaboration of life plans (*planes de vida*). Be aware that those processes require sufficient time and appropriate methodologies for implementation. This needs strategic planning, organisation and coordination. Communities – in particular those that have lost social cohesion or experienced processes of dispossession and displacement – will need to meet repeatedly in order to find and write down their collective vision for the future, and upon this, deduce their infrastructural desires and needs.
- Avoid community division and social decomposition by all means (for instance by selectively funding certain population groups and not others), as social cohesion has direct impacts on security. Instead, strengthen cultural identity, social and political organisation (*asamblea*), and established forms of reciprocity (e.g. *tequio*, *fiestas*) of Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples and peasants. This helps promote community cohesion, which in turn strengthens their capacities for self-protection. Where communities are united, they tend to be able to protect themselves, including from intrusion by organised crime groups. Influencing and persuasion techniques are core elements of community division, weakening community resilience, and thus, must be avoided.
- Women are largely excluded from (both traditional and state) decision-making institutions. Ensure that women's visions, desires and needs regarding their work and life plans are consulted and considered for the intended infrastructure project.
- Food sovereignty and health are big topics for communities in the Isthmus of Tehuantepec. Adhere to community demands in relation to the promotion of traditional food production and medical systems. Promote natural and local foods in contrast to imported and processed foods; this stimulates local trade and benefits local producers.
- Prioritise basic infrastructures (water, electricity, local roads), and promote the construction of traditional and climate-adapted housing that integrates contemporary living with land-based livelihoods.

- Plan and realise micro instead of mega or macro projects that are designed and driven by the communities themselves, and respond to their desires and needs. True ‘community infrastructure’ is designed, realised and maintained by the community. It is an infrastructure from which the entire community reaps the full benefits.
- Address and correct previous historic, territorial and environmental grievances before realising an infrastructure project in a region. This might require the establishment of a new agency and/or policy designated to the repair of existing grievances.
- Adapt or erase parts of national legislation that are in conflict with or contradict the self-determination and autonomy of Indigenous and Afro-descendent peoples.
- Consider local resistance to infrastructure megaprojects as a chance. Where there is resistance, there is power, and from a decolonial perspective, a wide distribution of power is a good thing. It means that only those projects that are truly beneficial for local populations can be realised. This, can lead to a diversification of social, cultural and economic life projects (or ways of life) – a world, in which many life projects persist simultaneously – which can improve humanity’s overall resilience in the face of climate change.

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