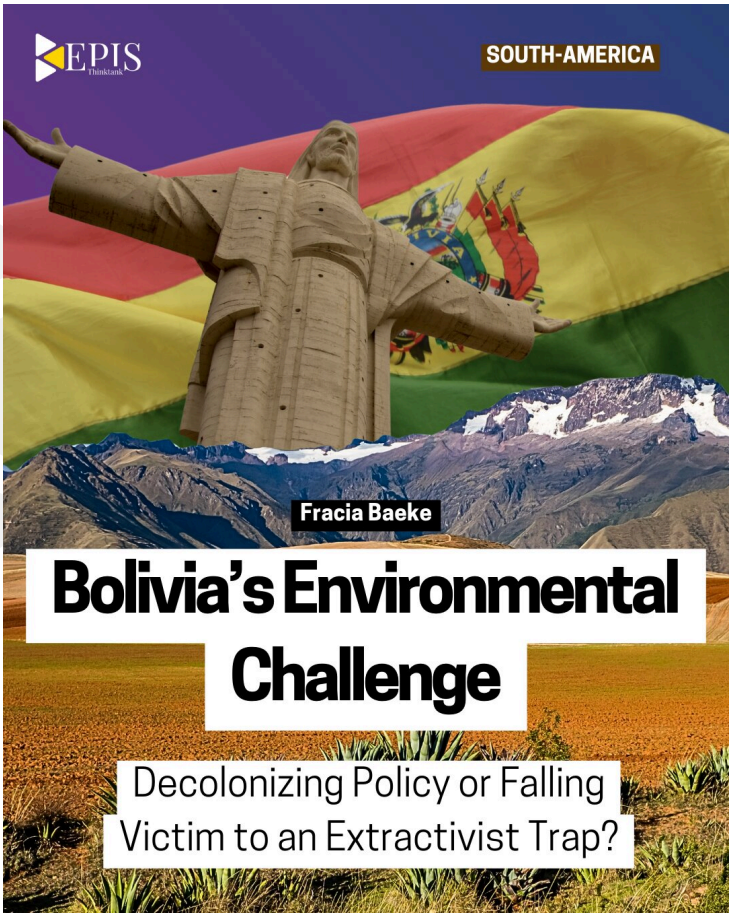
Bolivia's Environmental Challenge

29 JULY 2025

Fracia Baeke



Bolivia's Environmental Policy Since Evo Morales: Decolonising Policy or Falling Victim to an Extractivist Trap?

Text

In Latin America, economic models have been long approached from the perspective of dependency on the capitalist economies of the Northern Hemisphere and the need to follow their development trajectory (cf. Cardoso & Faletto, 1979 Frank, 1966). Development in this sense had been understood as the maturation of economies through dynamic capital accumulation and expansion within an economic system that stimulates

technological innovation, the production of capital goods, and the presence of a robust banking system (Stallings, 2020). Failing to do so threatens becoming dependent on the more mature economic systems for technology imports and foreign capital, essentially becoming an economic failure.

Alternative political movements challenging conservative politics hit South America like a wave in the early 2000s. Disenchanted with the misgivings of the neoliberal agenda and inspired by indigenous customs, several countries broke away, eager to redefine their politics and highlight an alternative approach to what was viewed as a colonial agenda.This dramatic leftist shift in political thought in the early 2000s, called the Pink Tide, centered a social focus on policy and challenged the neoliberal model pushed in the 1980s and 1990s. Bolivia was one such country, eager to redefine the Western and capitalist approach to national development and environmental policy, introducing an alternative that centred an indigenous approach in a world system that seemed to clash with it on a fundamental basis. Challenging the traditional understanding of development, the Tide offered the alternative of the indigenous concept of Buen Vivir (Living Well) (Arsel et al, 2016 Restrepo Botero & Peña Galeano, 2017). This understanding of development was rooted in the goals of overcoming socio-economic problems and a coexisting relationship between humans and Nature while emphasising the centrality of extractivism to tackle challenges of poverty reduction and funding social policies.

This emphasis on the historical extractive model simultaneously further embedded the challenges of dependency and exposed the challenges of marrying indigenous worldviews in a capitalist ecosystem. Known as neo-extractivism, the progressive governments appropriate the economic extractive model to direct rents from commodity exports to finance social structures favouring national development aimed at reducing poverty and increased national (economic sovereignty) (Gudynas, 2009). This exploitive extractive model further designated extractivism, and the consequential environmental degradation, as an unavoidable evil to achieve economic development by financing social programmes and generating income and employment, successful only in times of economic expansion (Arsel et al, 2016 Acosta, 2013 Restrepo Botero & Peña Galeano, 2017 Svampa, 2012 Burchardt & Dietz, 2014).

But will it ever be possible for Bolivia to promote an environmental-forward political agenda while reproducing the structures of a neoliberal-capitalisit world system?

The Morales Presidency (2006-2019)

Evo Morales' self-description as Bolivia's first indigenous president in 2006 marked a shift in the political discourse through a strengthened attempt at decolonising Bolivian and Latin American politics. Spearheading a political movement rooted in indigenous principles and beliefs, Morales considered the intersectionality of policies, particularly related to the environment.

As the leader of the Movimiento al Socialismo (Movement to Socialism; MAS), Evo Morales marked a new chapter in Bolivia's struggle to ensure a space for its indigenous population. This social movement sought to further emphasise the 'multi-ethnic' and 'plurinational' character of the Bolivian state as being two distinct worlds, the rural indigenous and the urban white-mestizo, that exist on equal footing (Albro, 2006 Schaefer, 2009). At the core of Morales' indigenous movement was ensuring that the intersectionality of historical and cultural indigenous elements were pronounced and reflected in his politics, emphasising this intersectional and dual role as a social movement and a political party. In doing so, the environment became a focal point, often overlapping the political indigenous movement.

The early 2000s were a period of economic boom in Latin America as global demand for raw materials soared. Bolivia's indigenous movement stressed having a strong environmental focus and ensuring its protection in this increasingly liberal and exploitative context. This environmental movement stressed the protection of customary rights and the defence of the biodiversity of the Andean region. The 1996 land law reform officially recognised the application of customary law and indigenous-owned lands in the highlands and lowlands. This already marked a shift in the political discourse regarding the Bolivian indigenous heritage and ideas of land 'ownership', shaping the interaction of indigeneity and democracy as fostering a culture of participation (Albro, 2006). Under demands of social movements, Morales further developed a political agenda that sought to balance environmental protection – and indigenous territorial holdings – with a communitarian national development. During his tenure as President, Morales constructed and led a global environmental-conscious movement in close collaboration with other social movements and indigenous groups in Bolivia as well as at the international level.

Furthermore, in 2010, Law No. 071 the Law of the Rights of Mother Earth (Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra) was passed, based on the indigenous concept of Pachamama – Mother Earth – by bestowing rights to Mother Earth. This was followed by the 2012 Law No. 300 in Framework Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well (Ley Marco de la Madre Tierra y Desarrollo Integral para Vivir Bien) which puts into operation the rights of Mother Earth recognised in the 2010 Law of the Rights of Mother Earth. These legal frameworks built on indigenous values and worldviews, a discursive shift that was further reflected in the Popular Participation Law, extending social inclusion of historically marginalised indigenous peoples by redefining Bolivia as "multi-ethnic and pluricultural". This was a monumental change in environmental policy as it had been understood up to this point in classical dogma and attempted to consolidate this shift with the economic model and policies. Responsibility for the environment was placed at the individual level as humans, according to the Bolivian Constitution, were allowed to exercise these rights on behalf of Mother Earth. This shift of power to the individual level, one of the

many trademarks of Latin America's new constitutionalism, highlights an evolution in the understanding of ecological justice and the recognition of fundamental rights for nature.

Despite some initial successes, the People's Climate Summit and the failed 2009 Copenhagen Climate Summit outlined Morales' struggle in maintaining and finding the balance between ensuring environmental protection according to indigenous customs and national development in a neoliberal world. Critiques in Bolivia of Morales' environmental policy became stronger with the organisation of Mesa 18 (Table 18). A parallel discussion referencing the People's Climate Summit's 17 discussion tables, Mesa 18 addressed the persistent environmental challenges in Bolivia, highlighting the contradictions in Morales' design of national development plans and his discourse on environmental sustainability. The development of economic projects to extract raw minerals continues to be a particularly hot topic. Moreover, the TIPNIS project, the construction of a highway through a highly biodiverse protected area and indigenous territory, and the Bala-Chepte project, a hydroelectric mega-dam project in the Amazonian region threatening two national parks and indigenous territory, highlight the prominence of an exploitative extractive economic model. Indigenous peoples have been particularly vocal about the continued dominance of the extractivist model and the increasing economic activity that threatens protected and customary indigenous territory, risking renewed oppression of historically neglected people.

Bolivia's environmental policy post-Morales

The evolution of environmental policies in Bolivia have clearly left a lasting mark on the democratic and political culture since Morales' presidency. However, like other Pink Tide countries that adopted similar discourses, paradoxes remain in the underlying principles of the rights of nature as policies and legal frameworks fail to find a balance between pro-nature frameworks and the extractivist model at the core of Bolivia's national economy.

After Morales' resignation, Jeanine Áñez acted as interim president in 2019. Critical of Morales' presidency, Áñez suggested a shift back to more conservative politics. Áñez had been accused of having anti-indigenous politics and was accused of staging a coup d'état and the "genocide" of 20 protestors. In 2020, following elections, Luis Arce, also from MAS, stepped in as president. However, during the electoral campaigns, the topic of environmental policy was left to the side, lost to the broader context of a global pandemic and economic shutdown. Instead, there seemed to be a renewed political focus on agriculture and livestock as cornerstones of the Bolivian economy. While stressing sustainable development, Arce risks environmental damage with his focus on the mining sector, especially for lithium. Since 2022, environmental activists and indigenous peoples have been victims of increased violence as extractive activity continues to expand and impact the environment.

Studies have shown that the protection of indigenous lands has actually led to higher deforestation in non-protected and non-indigenous lands. According to Global Forest Watch, in spite of a newly reinstated leftist government, Bolivia has been hitting record-high losses in primary forests since 2022. According to the same dataset, the agriculture sector remains the driving reason for the growing loss. Villavicencio-Calzadilla and Mauger (2021), analysing Bolivia's alternative approach to the energy transition with the Bala-Chepte project, emphasise the paradox, underlining that ensuring safeguards and protection of Mother Earth is only successful on paper, but not in practice. There is an ultimate lack of enforcement as policy documents contradict legal frameworks.

Still, the Rights of Mother Nature continue to be a monumental step in the direction of recognising indigenous values and worldviews with the perspective of establishing a modern legal framework seeking to personalise the responsibility of environmental exploitation and degradation. In 2021, an agro-environmental court ruled in favour of '44 trees' which would have been impacted by the planned construction of a vehicle corridor.

Nevertheless, the extractive model remains alive and well in Latin America. The case of Bolivia highlights the difficulties in coupling indigenous worldviews and principles with a capitalist economic world system. As explored by Arsel et al (2016) and Burchardt & Dietz (2014), among other scholars, extractivism remains the dominant design of the Bolivian economy. It underlines the central question of how to make space for decolonising approaches and alternative world views within an established and contradicting discourse. Evo Morales' policies, among others of the Pink Tide, proved to be an ambitious attempt to unroot a historically entrenched and repressive system. Contradictions between the social goals and political economic ideology ultimately left room for policy interpretation and implementation while minimising the fundamental problems that underlay the political ideological shift.

The question remains, can Bolivia successfully promote an environmental-forward political agenda while still reproducing and maintaining the structures of a neoliberal-capitalist world system?

Bolivia is still very much on the journey to find the balance between a capitalist world system and maintaining its indigenous values and unique frameworks. However, while failing to successfully complete the decolonisation experiment, Morales and MAS succeeded in further underscoring the indigenous struggle as a Bolivian, and international, struggle – at least in the environmental policy arena. The attempts at ecological justice and fundamental rights for Mother Earth embedded in the legal frameworks are clear efforts at decolonising policy and governance. However, it faces a characteristic challenge for dependent economies trying to break free from a dominant exploitative economic system while staying true to its indigenous values and worldviews.