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From Local Activism to the Global Agenda: Case of the Cabildo
Popular por el Agua de Cuenca versus the Right to Water and
Sanitation of the United Nations Organization

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I dedicate this work to my parents Marta and Marco, and to my sister Pauleth. I owe them absolutely everything.

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Abstract

The United Nations' recognition of water as human rights has sparked an important debate on the relationship between territorial struggles and global human rights agendas. In this context, this study analyzes the case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca, with the aim of understanding how the actions of this citizen movement have made it possible to link the local defense of water with the international debate surrounding the human right to water and sanitation. The study is grounded in the approaches of water justice, water governance, and socio-environmental activism, which helps to understand the role of social organizations in defending the commons and in building new forms of citizen participation. The research was conducted using an exploratory-descriptive approach with a mixed-methods methodology. To this end, a triangulation of information was employed, including a literature review, case study analysis, and semi-structured interviews with actors linked to the Cabildo Popular por el Agua. Based on the analysis, the results show that the Cabildo has successfully coordinated processes of social mobilization, citizen participation, and political advocacy to defend water sources against extractive projects. In this regard, the study concludes that local activism can help place the defense of water on global agendas related to environmental justice.

Keywords: socio-environmental activism, popular council for water, human right to water, water governance, water justice, citizen participation.

Resumen

El reconocimiento del agua como derecho humano por parte de las Naciones Unidas ha abierto un debate importante sobre la relación entre las luchas territoriales y las agendas globales de derechos humanos. En este contexto, la presente investigación analiza el caso del Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca, con el objetivo de comprender cómo las acciones de este movimiento ciudadano han permitido vincular la defensa local del agua con el debate internacional en torno al Derecho Humano al Agua y al Saneamiento. El estudio se sustenta en los enfoques de justicia hídrica, gobernanza del agua y activismo socioambiental, los cuales permiten comprender el papel de las organizaciones sociales en la defensa de los bienes comunes y en la construcción de nuevas formas de participación ciudadana. La investigación se desarrolló mediante un enfoque exploratorio-descriptivo con metodología mixta. Para ello se utilizó una triangulación de información que incluyó revisión documental, análisis de estudio de caso y entrevistas semiestructuradas a actores vinculados con el Cabildo Popular por el Agua. A partir de lo analizado, los resultados evidencian que el Cabildo ha logrado articular procesos de movilización social, participación ciudadana e incidencia política para la defensa de las fuentes hídricas frente a proyectos extractivos. En este sentido, el estudio concluye que el activismo local puede contribuir a posicionar la defensa del agua dentro de agendas globales vinculadas con la justicia ambiental.

Palabras claves: activismo socioambiental, derecho humano al agua, gobernanza hídrica, justicia hídrica, participación ciudadana.

1. Introduction

The recognition of the Human Right to Water and Sanitation by the General Assembly of the United Nations in 2010 marked a normative milestone by placing access to drinking water and sanitation as indispensable conditions for human dignity and life. Although Human Right to Water was recognized internationally several years ago, in practice there are still many difficulties in guaranteeing its fulfillment in different territories. This situation is particularly evident in Latin America, a region where significant social inequalities persist and where water sources face increasing pressures due to intensive economic activities. In several countries in the region, including Ecuador, the expansion of extractive projects such as mining and oil exploitation has generated tensions between communities, companies and the State, especially when these activities are carried out near water ecosystems. In this regard, various studies indicate that there is still a gap between the international commitments assumed by States and the real conditions of access to and protection of water in the territories (Medina-Peña et al., 2022).

In this scenario, social movements have assumed a relevant role in the defense of water as a common good and as a human right. In different Latin American countries, local communities and citizen organizations have promoted mobilization processes to protect water sources and demand that their management prioritize the needs of the population and environmental sustainability. These struggles not only seek to stop projects that may affect ecosystems but also question development models based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources. As Acosta et al. (2010) point out, the recognition of water as a human right implies rethinking the traditional forms of resource management, prioritizing its social, environmental, and cultural function over merely economic interests.

In the case of Ecuador, this debate acquires special relevance due to the current constitutional framework. The 2008 Constitution explicitly recognizes the human right to water and establishes that this resource constitutes a strategic heritage for public use, whose management must be oriented to the collective interest. However, different studies have indicated that, despite this regulatory recognition, there are still significant challenges to guaranteeing equitable water management in the country, particularly in rural territories or in areas where extractive activities

are carried out (Escobar, 2016). This situation shows that the legal recognition of the right does not always automatically translate into its effective compliance.

Within this context, the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca has established itself as one of the most representative experiences of a citizen organization in defense of water in Ecuador. This group has promoted processes of social participation, community mobilization and political advocacy aimed at protecting the city's water recharge areas. One of the most important milestones promoted by this movement was the Popular Consultation held in Cuenca in 2021, in which the population decided to prohibit metal mining in areas considered essential for the provision of water. This process evidenced the capacity of citizens to intervene in decisions related to the management of natural resources and the protection of strategic ecosystems.

In addition to its impact at the local level, the Cabildo Popular por el Agua has sought to align its demands with international frameworks related to Human Rights and sustainability. In this sense, the language of the Human Right to Water and the principles promoted by the United Nations have been used as tools to strengthen their arguments and project their demands in broader scenarios. The United Nations General Assembly officially recognized in 2010 that access to safe drinking water and sanitation is a fundamental human right for the full enjoyment of life and all other human rights (United Nations, 2010).

From these experiences, there is a need to understand in greater depth how territorial struggles are related to the international normative frameworks that recognize the right to water. Although there is research on environmental conflicts and water management in Ecuador, there are still limited studies that analyze how social movements use the international instruments promoted by the United Nations to strengthen their strategies for defending their territory. Analyzing this relationship allows us to understand that human rights are not only constructed by international organizations or by the State, but also by the practices and demands of communities.

In this context, the general objective of this research is to analyze how the actions of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca have contributed to linking local struggles for the defense of water with the Global Agenda promoted by the United Nations around the Human Right to

Water and Sanitation. To this end, first, the international and national regulatory framework that regulates this right is examined, identifying its main principles and protection mechanisms. Second, it analyzes the strategies of organization and resistance developed by the communities in the face of the expansion of extractive projects. Finally, the contribution of local activism to the construction of global agendas related to water management is evaluated, considering its social, political and symbolic implications.

2. Theoretical Framework and State of the Art

2.1 The Human Right to Water and Sanitation: Conceptual and International Foundations

The Human Right to Water and Sanitation [DHAS] has established itself in recent decades as a central issue in the international debate on human rights and sustainable development. In general terms, this right is based on a series of principles that guide the way in which States must guarantee access to water for the entire population. These principles include universality, equality and non-discrimination, citizen participation, sustainability and accountability. Together, these elements seek to ensure that water is understood as a basic right to life and not only as an economic resource or a service subject to the ability to pay (United Nations, 2010).

One of the most relevant principles is that of universality, which establishes that all people have the right to access drinking water and sanitation regardless of their social, economic or cultural status. However, in Latin America there are still significant inequalities in access to these services, especially in rural communities, indigenous territories and peripheral urban areas. In many of these areas, access to water is still limited or irregular, which shows the gap between the legal recognition of the right and its compliance in practice (Justo, 2013).

Linked to the above, the principle of non-discrimination states that States must adopt specific measures to reduce the gaps that affect historically excluded groups. This implies not only guaranteeing basic infrastructure, but also designing public policies that consider the social, territorial and cultural particularities of each community. In this sense, several studies on water governance in Latin America indicate that inequalities in access to water resources are closely related to historical processes of social exclusion and to development models that prioritize

productive uses of water over human consumption (Water Sustainability Network and Observatory, 2024).

Another important aspect within the human rights approach is accessibility, which includes several dimensions. On the one hand, it refers to the physical availability of water in adequate conditions of quality and safety. On the other hand, it also implies that the cost of the service is affordable for people and that access to it does not compromise the satisfaction of other basic household needs. In this sense, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2002) states that water intended for personal and domestic use must be sufficient, safe, acceptable, and economically accessible to the entire population.

Citizen participation also occupies a central place within this approach. From a human rights perspective, individuals and communities should not be considered only as users of water services, but as actors with the capacity to participate in decisions related to their management. Various studies on water governance highlight that social participation strengthens decision-making processes and contributes to a more democratic and transparent management of the resource (Water Sustainability Network and Observatory, 2024).

In Latin America, these principles have increasingly been linked to debates about social justice and environmental justice. In the case of Ecuador, this approach acquires relevance because the 2008 Constitution explicitly recognizes water as a fundamental human right and as a strategic heritage for public use. In addition, the constitutional text incorporates the principle of Good Living, which proposes a balanced relationship between society, nature and development (National Assembly, 2011).

The recognition of the right to water within the international human rights system was significantly strengthened in 2010, when the United Nations General Assembly passed Resolution 64/292, which explicitly recognizes that access to safe drinking water and sanitation is a human right essential to human life and dignity. This resolution also calls on States and international organizations to intensify efforts to ensure universal access to safe water (United Nations, 2010).

Since this recognition, several countries in the region have begun to incorporate a human rights approach more strongly into their water-related policies. In Ecuador, for example, the constitutional framework recognizes not only the human right to water, but also the rights of nature, which introduces a broader perspective on the management of natural resources. From this point of view, water protection not only responds to current human needs, but also to the conservation of ecosystems and the well-being of future generations (Martínez-Moscoso, 2017).

Another fundamental instrument within the international framework is the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (ICESCR). Although this treaty does not explicitly mention the right to water, the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (2002) has interpreted this right as deriving from the right to an adequate standard of living and the right to health. For this reason, access to drinking water is considered an indispensable condition for the guarantee of multiple human rights.

Within this interpretative framework, one of the most influential documents is General Comment No. 15, in which the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights establishes that the human right to water implies that all people have access to sufficient, safe, acceptable, accessible, and affordable water for personal and domestic use. The document also points out that water should be understood primarily as a social and cultural good, which limits its treatment exclusively as a commodity within markets. This approach has had a strong influence on public policy discussions in Latin America. In this regard, Justo (2013) points out that recognizing water as a human right implies prioritizing its use for human and domestic consumption over other productive uses, especially in contexts where there are conflicts over the distribution of water resources (Committee on Economic Rights, 2002a).

In addition, the right to water is closely related to other fundamental rights, such as the right to health, food, housing and a healthy environment. When access to water is limited or affected, these other rights are also compromised, highlighting the interdependent nature of human rights. For this reason, different international organizations have insisted that water must be analyzed

within a comprehensive approach that considers its multiple social, environmental and cultural dimensions (United Nations, 2021).

In the Ecuadorian context, various studies have analyzed how the constitutional recognition of the right to water has generated important advances at the normative level, although challenges related to its effective implementation still persist. Some studies highlight that tensions between extractive activities, agricultural expansion and protection of water sources have caused socio-environmental conflicts in different territories of the country. These situations reflect that the guarantee of the right to water depends not only on its legal recognition, but also on the existence of adequate public policies and mechanisms of social participation that allow this right to be defended and demanded (Martínez-Moscoso, 2017).

2.2 Water Management, Human Rights and Sustainable Development

Talking about water management from a human rights perspective implies changing the way in which the management of this resource has traditionally been understood. For a long time, access to water was primarily treated as a public utility or even as an economic resource. However, in recent decades, the idea that drinking water and sanitation are basic rights that must be guaranteed for all people has been strengthened. From this perspective, access to water should not depend on the ability to pay or market conditions, but on the State's obligation to ensure minimum conditions of dignified life for the population (Arrojo-Agudo, 2010).

This approach also shows that the role of the State goes beyond managing water resources. Its responsibility includes respecting the right to water, preventing third parties from violating it, and developing public policies that guarantee access to it in adequate conditions. Despite these advances in the recognition of the human right to water, several studies have pointed out that there is still a considerable gap between what is established by the rules and what happens in practice. In many regions of Latin America, especially in rural areas or indigenous territories, access to safe drinking water remains limited or irregular, demonstrating that legal recognition alone is not sufficient to guarantee the right (Saravia, 2022).

The concept of sustainable development also appears in this debate. Water management is directly related to the international commitments adopted in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Within this agenda, Sustainable Development Goal 6 (SDG 6) proposes to guarantee the availability of water and its sustainable management for all people. This goal recognizes that water is critical not only for human life, but also for public health, food production, and the protection of ecosystems (United Nations, 2021a).

However, different regional reports warn that progress towards these goals requires much more than improving infrastructure or expanding the coverage of drinking water services. It also implies recognizing the social inequalities that affect access to resources and designing public policies that consider the territorial realities of each country. In other words, water management must incorporate approaches that address the needs of historically excluded groups, such as rural communities or indigenous peoples (Saravia, 2022).

In the case of Ecuador, the recognition of water as a human right in the 2008 Constitution represented an important step within the country's legal framework. The regulations establish that water is a public and strategic good that must be protected by the State. However, recent research has indicated that there are still difficulties in guaranteeing equitable access to the resource, especially in rural territories and communities where drinking water systems have technical or institutional limitations (Cedeño Castillo & Esteves-Fajardo, 2023).

Faced with this scenario, the human rights approach to water management becomes an important tool to move towards greater water equity. In addition, the 2030 Agenda proposes a global framework that seeks to reduce inequalities and promote more sustainable development. In this context, SDG 6 sets targets related to universal access to safe drinking water, improved water quality, integrated water resources management, and the protection of water-related ecosystems (United Nations, 2021a).

From a rights-based perspective, these goals reinforce the responsibility of States to ensure accessible, safe and adequate water services for the population. At the same time, regional organizations have pointed out that in Latin America there are still important challenges to

achieving these objectives, including territorial inequalities, lack of investment in water infrastructure, and institutional weaknesses in the management of the resource (Pan American Health Organization, 2020) . In Ecuador, SDG 6 has been incorporated into national development planning instruments. However, recent reports indicate that in order to advance in its compliance, it is necessary to strengthen water governance mechanisms, improve coordination between public institutions and promote a more active participation of communities in decisions related to water resource management (Molina-Vera et al., 2018).

In this sense, water governance refers to the set of processes through which different actors such as the State, communities, social organizations and the private sector participate in decision-making on the use, distribution and protection of water. Effective governance requires principles such as citizen participation, transparency, equity, and sustainability. These elements are increasingly relevant in the face of current challenges, such as climate change, population growth and pressure on water ecosystems (Pan American Health Organization, 2020).

Studies in Latin America have shown that many water-related conflicts arise when communities do not participate in decisions about water management. The lack of space for dialogue and participation can generate tensions between different actors competing for control of the resource. For this reason, several authors highlight that social participation is a key component in achieving fairer and more sustainable water management. In the Ecuadorian context, strengthening water governance implies improving coordination among the different levels of government, promoting mechanisms of social oversight, and prioritizing the protection of water sources. Only through participation and inclusive management will it be possible to guarantee that water continues to be an effective right for present and future generations (FAO et al., 2013).

2.3 Ecuadorian Context of the Water Boards

In Ecuador, the Drinking Water Administrative Boards (JAAP) have played an important role in the provision of water service, especially in rural and peri-urban areas where the direct presence of the State has been limited. In many territories, these community organizations are responsible for managing, maintaining, and distributing water to families in the community. Their operation is mainly based on collective work, the participation of users and local

organization, which has allowed many communities to guarantee access to water through their own management systems (National Assembly, 2014).

Various studies indicate that community water management has been an important feature of the water governance model in Ecuador. Unlike other countries where the service is usually managed exclusively by public or private companies, there is a strong presence of community organizations in the country that actively participate in the management of the resource. These forms of organization respond to the social, cultural, and territorial particularities of each community, which explains why water systems can vary considerably between regions (Manosalvas, 2013).

In addition to the service they provide, the boards also function as spaces for community participation. Through meetings or assemblies, users can discuss issues related to the maintenance of the system, the protection of water sources, or the administration of the board's economic resources. In this sense, the authors Perugachi & Cachipundo (2020b) explain that community water management is not only limited to the distribution of the resource but also involves collective decision-making processes where the community has an active role in the administration of the system.

In some cases, cultural practices and traditional forms of organization have contributed to the care of water sources. Research conducted in Andean communities shows that water management is often linked to community norms, local agreements, and cultural values that promote responsible use of the resource. These elements strengthen community management and help maintain the sustainability of water systems in the long term (Perugachi & Cachipundo, 2020a).

However, despite their importance, Drinking Water Management Boards also face several challenges. Among the main ones are economic constraints, lack of technical assistance and the need to improve administrative and internal control mechanisms. Some studies on community water systems in Ecuador have shown that when boards have more training, institutional support

and better management processes, the service tends to be more efficient and sustainable for the community (Aigaje & Rosero, 2023).

Together, the JAAPs represent a significant experience of local water governance in Ecuador. Their existence shows that community organization can play an important role in guaranteeing access to water, especially in territories where state systems do not reach with sufficient coverage. In addition, this management model allows for the integration of social, cultural, and environmental dimensions in the management of water resources, which is essential to move towards more sustainable management.

2.4 Environmental Activism and Socio-Environmental Movements in Latin America

2.4.1 Extractivism and Socio-Environmental Conflicts in Ecuador

In the case of Ecuador, different studies agree that the expansion of extractive activities, especially mining and oil exploitation, has generated socio-environmental conflicts in several territories of the country. These tensions tend to appear more strongly in rural and indigenous areas, where water has a value that goes beyond its domestic or productive use. According to Pinto (2014), for many communities water is linked to their way of life, agricultural practices, social organization, and even to cultural and spiritual elements that are part of their relationship with nature.

Although the 2008 Constitution recognizes water as a fundamental human right and establishes the rights of nature, various studies show that there are still contradictions between this legal framework and some economic policies that promote the intensive exploitation of natural resources. As Gudynas (2012) notes, in several territories disputes have arisen between local communities, extractive companies, and the State, especially when productive activities may affect water sources or sensitive ecosystems.

These situations have led to the debate on extractivism not only being limited to environmental impacts, but also to the social, economic and political implications of the control of natural resources. In Latin America, several studies point out that environmental conflicts often arise when different actors such as communities, governments, and companies have different visions

of how territories and natural resources should be used. In this context, water becomes a central element of dispute, since its access and control are directly related to the daily life and development of communities (Rodríguez-Garavito & Baquero-Díaz, 2020).

Faced with these scenarios, in Ecuador and in other countries of the region, various forms of social organization have emerged aimed at defending territories and water sources. Communities, citizen collectives and social organizations have resorted to different strategies to make their demands visible, including social mobilization, legal actions and political advocacy processes. These actions seek to strengthen compliance with rights recognized in national and international legislation, such as the right to water, citizen participation and prior consultation with indigenous peoples and communities (Gudynas, 2015).

In this sense, socio-environmental struggles not only express local concerns about the protection of water and territory but also reflect broader debates about development models in the region. From the perspective of several Latin American social movements, the defense of water is related to proposals that seek to balance the use of natural resources with environmental sustainability and respect for collective rights, principles that are close to the ideas of good living raised in several Andean countries (Martínez-Alier, 2014).

2.4.2 Socio-Environmental Movements against the Extractivist Model in Latin America

In recent decades, different social movements have appeared in Latin America that question the effects of the extractives model. This model is mainly based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources aimed above all at the exploitation of raw materials. Although many governments have defended this model as a strategy to boost economic growth, several studies show that it has also generated strong environmental and social impacts in the territories where these activities are carried out (Falconí & Funtowicz, 2025).

In several countries, extractive projects have caused conflicts related to water pollution, the degradation of ecosystems and the effects on communities that depend directly on these territories for their subsistence. Recent research in Ecuador indicates that oil and mining activities have produced socio-environmental disputes in different territories, especially in

indigenous areas, where communities have responded with processes of social organization, legal actions and mobilization to defend their rights and their environment (León et al., 2025).

Faced with this scenario, many rural communities, indigenous peoples and social organizations have promoted different forms of resistance and political participation. These initiatives not only seek to stop extractive projects, but also to propose development alternatives that prioritize the care of nature, the protection of water and respect for local ways of life. In this context, the debate on the commons and the defense of territory has become a central axis of socio-environmental movements in the region (Urrutia-Guevara et al., 2025).

Within these discussions, the concept of environmental justice has also gained relevance, which makes it possible to analyze how environmental impacts are not distributed equitably. In many cases, the most vulnerable communities are the ones that end up bearing the brunt of the negative effects of extractive activities or large-scale projects. From this perspective, environmental justice states that decisions about the use of natural resources must consider social equity, community participation, and the protection of ecosystems (Ituarte-Lima & Mares, 2024).

In this context, the creation of regulatory frameworks that seek to guarantee rights in environmental matters has also been strengthened. An important example is the Escazú Agreement, considered the first environmental treaty in Latin America that recognizes the right of people to access environmental information, participate in decisions that affect the environment and go to justice in cases of environmental damage. In addition, this agreement recognizes the importance of protecting those who defend the environment, since the region registers numerous conflicts related to the use of natural resources (United Nations, 2018).

In this sense, socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America are not limited only to disputes over natural resources. They also reflect broader debates about who has the power to decide the fate of territories and what kind of development is to be built in the region. For this reason, socio-environmental movements have managed to position issues such as the defense of water, citizen participation in environmental decisions and the search for more sustainable and fair development models on the public agenda.

2.4.3 Water Governance, Decentralization and Territorial Conflicts

In Latin America, conflicts over water are not only explained by the availability of the resource, but also by the way in which decisions are made about its use and management. In many territories, the problem is related to who controls water, who decides on it and whose interests end up prevailing. In this context, some studies have analyzed how the processes of decentralization of the State do not always manage to resolve socio-environmental conflicts associated with water (Becerril-Mercado, 2025).

In fact, in several cases the opposite occurs, decentralization can reconfigure existing tensions. The research by Becerril-Mercado (2025), comparing the cases of Azuay in Ecuador and Cajamarca in Peru, shows that subnational governments are often caught between different pressures. On the one hand, they face the demands of communities that defend water and their territories; on the other, they must respond to economic interests linked to extractive projects promoted from national levels or by private companies. This situation shows that the redistribution of institutional competences does not guarantee, by itself, a more democratic or participatory governance of water.

In the specific case of Azuay, the defense of water has been closely linked to territorial identities and to the Ecuadorian legal framework, which recognizes water as a human right and a strategic good for public use. However, various studies indicate that this normative recognition does not always translate into effective participation of communities in decisions that affect watersheds. Power inequalities persist that limit social impact in the face of mining or extractive projects that can impact water sources (Becerril-Mercado, 2025).

Within this debate, the concept of water justice emerges, which is part of the broader discussions on environmental justice. This approach seeks to analyze inequalities around access, control, and management of water, recognizing that the resource cannot be understood solely from an economic or productive logic. In the Latin American context, water justice proposes to consider water as a common good, closely linked to the life, territory and collective rights of communities (Guzmán-León, 2021).

From this perspective, guaranteeing water justice does not only imply ensuring access to drinking water. It also involves discussing how the resource is distributed, who participates in decisions about its use, and what development models are prioritized in the territories. For this reason, several authors, for example, point out that water justice implies both an equitable redistribution of water and the recognition of the rights of peoples and their participation in the management of the resource (Roca-Servat & Botero-Mesa, 2020).

In Ecuador, these discussions have intensified in recent years due to the expansion of extractive projects in areas where important water sources are born or located. In several Andean regions, conflicts over mining have driven processes of community organization and social mobilization aimed at protecting watersheds (Roca-Servat & Botero-Mesa, 2020).

In these scenarios, water acquires a meaning that goes beyond its value as a natural resource. For many rural and indigenous communities, water is linked to daily life, agriculture, cultural practices, and territorial identity. For this reason, Guanoquiza (2025) explains that water conflicts tend to reflect deeper disputes related to the control of the territory and the development models that are sought to be implemented.

From the perspective of political ecology, these processes have also been interpreted as forms of water dispossession, where extractive dynamics generate an unequal appropriation of natural resources. Maldonado et al. (2022) argues that many conflicts over water in Ecuador reveal a structural tension between policies aimed at extractivism and the effective guarantee of human rights and nature.

Recent research on metal mining in the south of the country reinforces this idea. Roca-Servat & Botero-Mesa (2020) based on an ethnographic work in the province of Azuay, shows how water becomes a central axis of dispute between different social actors. While the State and mining companies often present extraction as an opportunity for economic development, local communities question these narratives because they consider that they make environmental and social impacts on watersheds invisible.

In this sense, the conflict does not only revolve around the use of the resource, but also around the different ways of understanding water and territory. For some institutional actors, water is a resource that can be technically managed to boost productive activities. For many communities, however, water is a fundamental part of collective life and the ecological balance of the territory (Roca-Servat & Botero-Mesa, 2020).

In the face of these tensions, water conflicts have also driven the creation of spaces for social organization. In Ecuador, popular councils, citizen collectives and water defense networks have emerged that seek to influence public policies related to the management of the resource. These spaces not only channel local demands but also generate new forms of knowledge and alternative discourses on water as a common good and human right (Quizhpe & Vallejo, 2022). A significant example of these forms of resistance is the Amazon Women movement, made up of indigenous women of different nationalities from the Ecuadorian Amazon. Since its formation in 2013, this group has denounced the social and environmental impacts of extractive activities in their territories and has linked the defense of water with other fundamental rights, such as health, education and cultural preservation.

Through their actions and public pronouncements, Amazonian Women have questioned the granting of oil and mining concessions without adequate prior consultation processes. Their mobilizations have contributed to making visible, both nationally and internationally, the demands of indigenous peoples for the protection of the Amazon and the water sources that sustain life in these territories (Amnesty International, 2019).

2.4.4 Violence, Criminalization and Power Disputes in the Defense of Territory

Violence against environmental defenders in the region is an alarming phenomenon that has intensified in recent years. A global environmental advocacy report revealed that more than 80% of cases of killings or disappearances of land and environmental defenders occurred in Latin America during 2024, with Colombia, Guatemala, and Mexico as the main sites of lethal violence (Grattan, 2025).

In several Latin American territories, water-related conflicts cannot be understood solely as environmental problems. In reality, behind these disputes there are often deeper tensions linked to economic interests, state decisions and the lack of effective mechanisms to protect people who defend common goods, such as water and territory. Different studies in the region show that this type of conflict intensifies when extractive projects are developed in areas where communities depend directly on ecosystems for their subsistence and productive activities (Quizhpe & Vallejo, 2022).

From the institutional discourse, both governments and companies tend to present mining as an activity that can coexist with environmental protection. To this end, it is argued that there are modern technologies, environmental regulations and control mechanisms that would reduce impacts. However, several recent studies indicate that such approaches tend to simplify conflicts and treat them as if they were only a technical problem related to water management or pollution control. In practice, many of these disputes are caused by power relations, by political decisions on the use of the territory and by inequalities in access to and control of natural resources (Becerril-Mercado, 2025).

Faced with this situation, different communities have developed discourses and organizational strategies to question the idea that the State acts neutrally in these processes. In many cases, local organizations denounce that public policies end up prioritizing extractive interests over collective rights and the human right to water. For this reason, the defense of water is not only considered an environmental concern. Rather, it becomes a form of political and social action aimed at protecting territories, community ways of life, and livelihoods that depend on local ecosystems (Quizhpe & Vallejo, 2022).

On the other hand, recent literature on environmental citizenship in rural areas shows that the defense of the environment is also built on daily practices and local organizational processes. Community leaders and territorial organizations often combine traditional knowledge, community experiences, and local knowledge to manage water, protect water sources, and conserve ecosystems. In many cases, these actions are not limited to protests or public

mobilizations but are also reflected in daily practices related to the care of the territory and the community management of natural resources (Pilquimán-Vera et al., 2026).

Within these processes, different studies highlight the role that rural women have assumed in the defense of water and the environment. In several Latin American territories, women are actively involved in community organizations, in the management of local water systems, and in the protection of ecosystems that are fundamental to daily life. Their participation is usually linked both to responsibilities related to domestic water use and to forms of leadership that seek to strengthen community organization and promote sustainable practices in the territories (Duque et al., 2024).

Taken together, these processes show that conflicts over water in Latin America go far beyond a simple dispute over natural resources. They reflect broader debates about environmental justice, social participation, and development models. The experiences of community organization, in this sense, show the need to rethink the ways in which territories and natural resources are managed, incorporating with greater force the participation of communities and the recognition of water as a fundamental human right.

Thus, socio-environmental activism has been widely addressed in Latin American literature as a collective response to the social and environmental impacts of extractivism, the commodification of the commons, and the global ecological crisis. In the case of water, numerous studies agree that the struggles for its defense articulate local demands with global discourses of human rights, environmental justice and sustainability (Gudynas, 2019).

In Latin America, the defense of water has become one of the most visible axes of socio-environmental struggles. In many cases, these mobilizations arise when communities perceive that their water sources are at risk due to extractive activities, infrastructure projects, or changes in land use. For this reason, much of water activism has a strong link to the territory and to the forms of community organization that have historically existed in rural and indigenous areas. Saravia (2022) states that water is not only conceived as a natural resource, but as a fundamental element for life, culture and the continuity of communities.

Several studies carried out in the region show that movements that defend water do not only react to specific projects, such as mining or hydroelectric dams. Frequently, these organizations also question the development model based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources. Based on these experiences, different groups have begun to propose alternatives that prioritize the care of ecosystems, community participation and local water management. These proposals are related to approaches such as Buen Vivir, which proposes different forms of relationship between society and nature (Roulier & Katishi, 2022).

In Ecuador, the defense of water has played an important role within the processes of social organization in the face of environmental conflicts. Research carried out on political ecology and socio-environmental studies highlights that communities, water boards and local organizations have managed to position this issue within the public debate. Through mobilizations, organizational processes and collective actions, different social actors have sought to influence decisions related to the management of the territory and the protection of water sources (Lalander & Ospina, 2012).

In several areas of the country, especially in Andean regions where water plays a key role in agriculture and community life, conflicts related to extractive projects have promoted new forms of articulation between social organizations. In these processes, Rodríguez-Garavito & Baquero-Díaz (2020) explain that the defense of water usually becomes a meeting point between different groups, which allows for the construction of support networks between communities, environmental organizations and academic spaces that investigate these conflicts.

However, the literature also warns that socio-environmental movements face different challenges. Among the most mentioned are the criminalization of social protest, the asymmetries of power vis-à-vis companies and state actors, as well as the difficulties that may arise within the organizational processes themselves. Despite these obstacles, many organizations have managed to maintain their territorial defense processes and position the issue of water within broader debates on sustainability, environmental justice, and human rights (Gudynas, 2015).

2.4.5 Environmental Citizenship and Community Management

The participation of communities and the consolidation of an active environmental citizenship are central elements in the generation of alternatives to the extractivist paradigm and in the defense of natural resources. Environmental citizenship, understood as the capacity of social groups to influence decisions about the environment and claim ecological rights, constitutes a form of collective agency that transforms the relationship between society and nature. This form of citizenship involves not only protest actions, but also daily practices of management and care of the territory (Rodríguez-Garavito & Baquero-Díaz, 2020).

In many regions, communities have developed organizational spaces to manage water resources collectively, defending their access against centralized or privatizing policies. In Ecuador, the inclusion of water as a strategic patrimony of the State in the Constitution and the prohibition of its privatization underscore the importance of a management model that recognizes both public institutions and community organizations in decision-making (National Assembly, 2014). The active participation of communities in water management agencies has been key to addressing challenges associated with pollution, scarcity, and inequity.

Likewise, the analysis of water justice Velasquez (2022) allows us to deepen the understanding of water justice as a field of struggle that transcends the physical distribution of the resource and is inscribed in disputes for legitimacy, knowledge and authority. The author shows how the communities of Azuay not only resist mining projects, but also produce alternative knowledge about water, based on daily experience, territorial memory and ethical values of collective care. Thus, the work dialogues with the approaches of environmental justice and good living, by showing that the dispute over water is, ultimately, a dispute for the very meaning of development and for the right of communities to decide on their territorial future.

Thus, socio-environmental activism has been widely addressed in Latin American literature as a collective response to the social and environmental impacts of extractivism, the commodification of the commons, and the global ecological crisis. In the case of water, numerous studies agree that the struggles for its defense articulate local demands with global

discourses of human rights, environmental justice, and sustainability (Perugachi & Cachipuendo, 2020a). In Latin America, water activism is characterized by its strong territorial anchorage, its link with community and indigenous identities, and its ability to articulate itself in national and international networks. Empirical research shows that these movements not only question specific extractive projects but also question the dominant development model and propose alternatives based on Good Living, community management and water sovereignty (Roulier & Katishi, 2022).

In Ecuador, socio-environmental activism has been analyzed from interdisciplinary approaches that combine political ecology, the sociology of social movements, and environmental law. Authors such as Perugachi & Cachipuendo (2020b) highlight that the struggles for water have been fundamental in the construction of an active environmental citizenship, capable of influencing public debates and regulatory processes. In the words of Acosta et al. (2010) "the defense of water has become one of the articulating axes of territorial resistance against extractivism" (p. 112). However, the literature also points to the limitations and risks faced by socio-environmental movements, including the criminalization of protest, organizational fragmentation, and power asymmetries vis-à-vis state and corporate actors. In this context, the analysis of local activism is key to understanding how strategies of resistance, political advocacy and articulation with global agendas such as the one promoted by the UN around the human right to water are built (Agustín & Spivak, 2024).

2.4.6 Ecofeminism and the Socio-Environmental Defense of Water

Ecofeminism is a theoretical and political current that articulates the reflections of feminism with ecological critique, this highlighting the structural relationships between the exploitation of nature and the historical forms of domination over women. From this perspective, the environmental crisis cannot be understood only as a technical or economic problem, but as the result of power structures that have promoted development models based on the domination of territories, bodies, and common goods (Miranda, 2020) .

Ecofeminism is based on a central idea: the way in which nature has historically been dominated is related to the same logics of power that have subordinated women. From this perspective, the

patriarchal system and the extractivist economic model share similar forms of appropriation and control. Both prioritize the exploitation of nature and bodies, without considering the ecological limits or the interdependent relationships that sustain life. In this sense, different studies indicate that the current environmental crisis is also linked to an anthropocentric and androcentric vision of development, where nature is seen mainly as a resource available to be used (Carcaño Valencia, 2008).

Faced with this panorama, ecofeminism proposes to rethink the relationship between people and the natural environment. Instead of a relationship based on domination or the unlimited use of resources, it proposes the need to build more balanced relationships with nature. Concepts such as care for life, sustainability and environmental justice appear as central principles within this view. From this perspective, the protection of the environment cannot be separated from the defense of community life or respect for the territories where the populations live (Roulier & Katishi, 2022).

In Latin America, ecofeminism has gained special relevance in recent years due to the increase in socio-environmental conflicts associated with extractive activities such as mining, oil or the expansion of monocultures. In many of these processes, women have assumed an important role in the defense of water, land and ecosystems. Through community organizations, social mobilizations and territorial networks, they have denounced the environmental and social impacts of these projects. For this reason, several studies highlight that environmental struggles driven by women not only seek to protect nature, but also to defend human rights, community ways of life and social justice in the territories (Salgado Álvarez, 2022).

Another aspect that has gained importance within contemporary ecofeminism is the ethics of care. This approach invites us to recognize that many of the practices that sustain daily life have historically been carried out by women and, at the same time, undervalued by the dominant economic models. According to Castro-Bernardini (2024), incorporating the ethics of care into the environmental debate makes it possible to question traditional forms of development and open space for proposals that prioritize the sustainability of life, the protection of common goods and more respectful relations between society and nature.

2.5. Local Activism as a Form of Political and Multi-Scale Advocacy

Local activism arises when people in a community organize to confront problems that directly affect their territory or way of life. These actions do not necessarily begin as large political movements; they are often born from everyday concerns, such as access to water, the defense of the environment or the demand for better social conditions. Over time, these initiatives can grow, add more participants, and become collective processes capable of influencing broader debates within the country (Svampa, 2016).

In Ecuador, this type of social organization has become visible in different spaces. For example, feminist collectives, indigenous organizations, water boards or environmental groups have developed various forms of participation to express their demands. These actions can include marches, community meetings, social media campaigns, or dialogues with authorities. The important thing is that they allow communities to make their voices heard and put forward their own proposals in the face of decisions that affect their territory (Seoane, 2003) .

In the literature on social movements, it is pointed out that collective action appears when different groups manage to coordinate efforts to defend common interests and question decisions that they consider unjust. It is not only about protesting, but also about building new forms of participation and public debate. In Latin America, these experiences have gained greater strength in recent years, especially on issues related to the environment, access to natural resources and the defense of collective rights. A clear example in Ecuador were the social mobilizations of October 2019 and the protests of June 2022. During these events, different sectors of society mobilized to express their disagreement with certain economic and social policies. These protests not only evidenced the discontent of various sectors but also forced the government to open spaces for negotiation with social organizations (Svampa, 2016; Soliz Carrión, 2023).

Local activism, moreover, adopts multiple organizational forms, from feminist collectives to community associations that operate outside the classic party structures, taking politics as a field of daily dispute. In this sense, social mobilization is not an isolated event, but a permanent

process of interaction between local actors, institutions, the media and citizens that redefines public agendas (Lago-Martínez, 2015).

Political advocacy from the local level usually arises when communities, collectives and social organizations seek to influence public decisions that directly affect their daily lives. In many cases, these processes are born in territories where people perceive that their needs or rights are not being met by state institutions. From there, different forms of organization are generated that seek to draw attention to these problems and promote changes in public policies or in the forms of territorial management.

In Ecuador, various studies show that this type of participation has been strengthened in recent years, especially around issues such as the defense of the environment, access to social rights and gender equality. According to Soliz Carrion (2023) , collective actions in the country are usually articulated based on specific demands to the State, such as the implementation of public policies, attention to social problems or the protection of violated rights. These mobilizations not only seek to obtain institutional responses, but also to make visible situations that affect certain social groups and that often remain outside the public debate.

Another relevant aspect is that the forms of mobilization have changed over time. Although protest in public space continues to be an important tool, social movements also use digital media and social networks to disseminate information, generate citizen support and position their demands. According to the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC] (2016), the use of digital platforms has allowed many local struggles to achieve greater visibility and connect with broader debates within the region.

In this context, political advocacy is not limited only to protesting or demonstrating but also involves building discourses that question traditional forms of public decision-making. Social movements often propose other ways of understanding the development, participation and management of natural resources. In Latin America, these debates have taken on special importance in the face of conflicts related to extractivism, the use of water or the protection of the territory. As Seoane (2003) points out, many of these struggles have managed to position

new discussions on environmental justice and collective rights, expanding the scope of local demands to national and even international scenarios. This type of activism translates into an exercise in political agency that challenges traditional models of participation and generates direct bridges between local communities and political decision-making spaces.

Likewise, citizen participation in the formulation of local public policies, as highlighted by research on neighborhood councils in Ecuador, reveals that political advocacy from the local level requires organizational capacities, resources, and articulation with formal and informal actors to achieve effective insertion in decision-making processes (Toala & Macías, 2020).

Various studies on social movements indicate that the political advocacy that emerges from the local level is not always based solely on confrontation with the State. In many cases, community organizations also seek to influence public institutions through other strategies, such as participation in spaces for dialogue, the generation of social pressure, and the presentation of proposals that make problems in the territory visible. From this perspective, local collective action combines different forms of participation to try to have certain issues considered within public decisions (Seoane, 2003).

At the same time, many territorial struggles do not remain only at the local level. They often end up connecting with broader debates related to human rights, environmental justice, or climate change. When this happens, we speak of multi-scale activism, that is, actions that start from a local reality but that manage to link up with networks, organizations or discussion frameworks at the international level. This type of articulation allows local conflicts, such as the defense of water or territory, to be integrated into global debates on sustainability and collective rights (Gudynas, 2015).

In Latin America, various indigenous and environmental movements have developed strategies to internationalize their demands. This includes participating in international forums, linking up with global organizations, or using international law to support their claims against extractive projects. In this way, the communities seek to expand the visibility of their conflicts and strengthen the legitimacy of their demands beyond the national level (Nahuelpan, 2023b).

Several examples of this type of articulation can be found in Ecuador. Eco-territorial movements have managed to position their demands in international debates on climate justice and indigenous peoples' rights. In some cases, social media has played an important role in spreading these struggles. An example was the #SOSPuebloShuar campaign, which was used to make visible conflicts linked to mining projects in Amazonian territories. Through these digital strategies, a local issue can quickly circulate in international spaces and generate support from organizations, activists, and the media (Dialogue Earth, 2024).

All this shows that current socio-environmental activism works on several scales at the same time. Struggles remain deeply tied to territories and community experiences, but at the same time they rely on global networks, international discourses, and human rights frameworks to bolster their arguments. Thus, environmental conflicts not only question specific projects, but also open broader debates on the development model and the relationship between society, nature and collective rights in Latin America (Gudynas, 2015).

In this way, activist networks constitute spaces of cooperation and solidarity that operate across local, national, and global scales, contributing to the dissemination of knowledge, strategies, and resources to strengthen political practices. This phenomenon is observed in social movements that cross borders and establish alliances with transnational organizations. It describes how non-state actors [NGOs, community collectives, indigenous movements] operate beyond the state sphere to influence global norms, values, and policies (Publications - Transnational Social Activism, 2025).

In Ecuador, several social movements have sought to have their demands also discussed in national and international scenarios. This connection occurs when community organizations, environmental collectives, or indigenous leaders participate in international meetings, networks of organizations, or spaces where issues such as climate change, environmental justice, or human rights are discussed. This articulation has allowed conflicts that initially develop at the local level to achieve greater visibility outside the country. In many cases, communities use these spaces to raise awareness of the problems faced by their territories, such as the impacts of extractive projects, the contamination of water sources or the lack of consultation with local

populations. In addition, participation in international networks facilitates the exchange of experiences with other social movements that are going through similar situations in Latin America.

According to recent studies on socio-environmental conflicts in Ecuador, articulation with national and international networks has become an important strategy to strengthen the processes of defense of territories. These networks make it possible to disseminate information, generate political support and make visible the demands of communities vis-à-vis state or corporate actors. At the same time, they also function as spaces where learning about forms of organization, legal strategies and mechanisms of political advocacy is shared (Morales-Naranjo, 2023).

In recent years, the use of digital tools has further expanded these possibilities of articulation. Social media, community media, and digital platforms allow local organizations to communicate their complaints and position their demands before wider audiences. Thanks to these channels, many territorial struggles are able to connect with international debates on environmental justice, sustainability and human rights. Various studies on communication and activism in Latin America indicate that the digital environment has facilitated new forms of political participation and has strengthened solidarity networks between social movements in different countries (Martens et al., 2022).

The academic literature has also pointed out that these connections between the local and the global generate mutual learning processes. On the one hand, Hincapié (2022) explains that the experiences of communities contribute important elements for international discussions on sustainability, environmental governance and collective rights. On the other hand, the normative frameworks and discussions that take place in international spaces also influence the strategies adopted by social movements at the local level. In this sense, transnational networks can be understood as spaces for exchange, cooperation and political strengthening for those who seek to defend territory and the commons.

In this way, the struggles for water and the defense of the territory are not limited only to the local level. Rather, they are part of broader dynamics where actors, discourses, and strategies connect across different scales. This articulation between the local and the global allows community demands to be inserted into international debates on human rights, environmental justice and sustainability.

2.6. Regulatory and Institutional Framework: Ecuador

2.6.1 National Legal Framework on the Right to Water and Citizen Participation

In Ecuador, the right to water is directly recognized in the 2008 Constitution. This document establishes that water is a fundamental human right and that access to it cannot be denied to any person. Article 12 states that water is indispensable for life and that it constitutes a strategic national heritage for public use, which implies that its protection and management must respond to the collective interest (National Assembly, 2011).

The incorporation of water as a human right represented an important change within the Ecuadorian legal framework. Before the 2008 Constitution, water was mainly understood as a natural resource subject to administrative regulation. However, the new constitutional approach recognizes it as a right linked to human dignity, health and basic living conditions. According to Martínez-Moscoso (2023) this recognition, it was also influenced by the development of international human rights law and by the global debate on equitable access to water.

In addition to recognizing the right to water, the Constitution establishes that this resource is part of the strategic sectors of the State. Article 318 states that water is national heritage for public use and cannot be privatized. This means that its administration must be kept under public or community control, preventing access to it from depending exclusively on market mechanisms (National Assembly, 2011).

Another important element within the Ecuadorian legal framework is social participation in water management. In many regions of the country, especially in rural areas, the management of the resource is done through community organizations such as water boards or community irrigation systems. These forms of organization have made it possible to guarantee supply in

territories where the presence of the State is limited, while strengthening citizen participation in decision-making on the management of the resource (Zabala, 2025).

Various studies on water governance in Ecuador also indicate that citizen participation is key to improving water management and ensuring its sustainability. In this sense, the governance of water resources requires articulation between public institutions, local governments and social organizations, with the aim of guaranteeing equitable access to water and protecting water sources against environmental and economic pressures (Marcillo-Barahona & Vélez-Moreira, 2024a).

Despite the regulatory advances, several authors agree that there are still significant challenges to fully guarantee this right throughout Ecuadorian territory. Problems such as inequality in access to drinking water, the lack of infrastructure in rural areas or socio-environmental conflicts linked to the use of the resource show that the legal recognition of the right to water still faces difficulties in materializing in practice (Jaramillo Mejía et al., 2024). The figure of strategic heritage implies that water resources have a supra-personal character: they are oriented to the common good, prioritizing human consumption, food sovereignty and ecological flows, which constitutes a significant regulatory advance in the protection of essential natural resources.

Overall, the Ecuadorian legal framework proposes a vision of water as a common good that must be protected by the State and managed with social participation. This perspective seeks to ensure that access to water is maintained as a human right and not as a resource subject solely to economic interests.

2.6.2. Mechanisms for Citizen Participation in Water Resources Management

Citizen participation plays an important role in water management, especially when it comes to the fulfilment of the human right to water. In Ecuador, the management of this resource does not depend solely on public institutions. In many territories, especially rural ones, communities, water boards and local organizations participate directly in the administration, care and control of water resources. From a rights-based perspective, citizen participation should not be understood only as a consultative act, but as an active mechanism of social control that allows

communities to influence the planning, execution and evaluation of water policies. In this sense, he argues that "water management requires the direct intervention of users and communities, especially in territories where the resource is vital for subsistence" (Martínez-Moscoso, 2019b, p. 7).

Thus, water governance in Ecuador is configured as a process that articulates the State, communities and other social actors under the principle of co-responsibility. This model recognizes that the protection of water resources cannot fall exclusively on public institutions, but requires shared management, based on local knowledge and collective action. From the water governance approach, several studies indicate that water resources management works best when there is social participation in decision-making processes. This means that water users and community organizations can get involved in spaces where issues related to the planning, use and protection of the resource are discussed. This type of participation makes it possible to improve transparency in public management and, at the same time, strengthens the co-responsibility between the State and society (Marcillo-Barahona & Vélez-Moreira, 2024b).

In the Ecuadorian case, according to Nieto (2022), community organizations have historically been important actors in water management. In many rural areas, drinking water management boards are responsible for organizing the service, maintaining the infrastructure and coordinating the maintenance of water sources. This type of community management has allowed communities that do not have direct State coverage to access water through local administration systems. However, despite the fact that Ecuadorian regulations recognize citizen participation in water management, in practice there are still several limitations. According to Marcillo-Barahona & Vélez-Moreira (2024b), the main problems, among the main problems are the lack of coordination between public institutions and community organizations, as well as the centralization of decisions at some levels of the State. These situations can reduce the ability of communities to influence decisions related to water use and protection

When social participation is limited or ineffective, conflicts related to access to or control of water resources are more likely to occur. This occurs more frequently in territories where water is also used for productive or extractive activities, since communities consider that these

activities can directly affect their water sources and their ways of life (Cruz Machacuay & Reátegui Lozano (2025).

On the other hand, free, prior and informed consultation (FPIC) is a collective right that protects indigenous peoples and nationalities when the State plans to make decisions that may affect their territories or their way of life. This right is based on Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, which establishes the obligation to consult indigenous peoples whenever they adopt legislative or administrative measures that may affect them (International Labor Organization, 1989).

In the Ecuadorian case, according to Ayora Cevallos et al. (2024), it is understood as a participation mechanism that seeks to ensure that communities can have their say and be taken into account before projects or policies that impact their territories are approved. From this perspective, this right is also linked to the possibility for indigenous peoples to decide on their own development and to protect their territories, their culture and the natural environment where they live (Vázquez-Martínez et al., 2020).

FPIC has constitutional status and is integrated into the model of a plurinational and intercultural State. Judgment No. 001-10-SIN-CC of the Constitutional Court of Ecuador set a relevant precedent by recognizing the mandatory nature of consultation, stating that "prior consultation does not constitute a formality, but a guarantee for the effective exercise of collective rights" (Constitutional Court, 2010, p. 30).

2.7 Application to the Case Study on the Defense of Water

In Ecuador, the defense of water has become one of the most visible issues within social and environmental struggles. This occurs especially in territories where there are extractive projects, such as mining, which can affect páramos (high-altitude ecosystems), rivers and areas that supply water to cities and rural communities. In these contexts, many social organizations, citizen groups and communities have promoted actions to protect water sources and prevent their contamination.

A very representative case was the Popular Consultation held in Cuenca in 2021, where the population voted on the prohibition of metal mining in several areas considered to be of water recharge. In this consultation, more than 80% of voters supported the prohibition of these activities, which meant a clear citizen position in favor of the protection of water and the ecosystems that generate it (Vásquez-Ávila, 2022). This process was the result of several years of social mobilization, public debates, and legal actions driven by community organizations, environmental collectives, and local authorities.

Different studies such as Solano-Paucay & Cordero-Pozo (2023) on socio-environmental conflicts in the country, as explained by this type of citizen consultations, show how Ecuadorian society has begun to participate more actively in decisions related to the territory and natural resources. In these processes, citizens not only express political opinion, but also seek to protect collective rights linked to water, nature, and the well-being of communities.

On the legal level, the importance of water has also been recognized within the Ecuadorian constitutional framework. The National Assembly (2011) 2008 Constitution recognizes water as a fundamental human right and establishes that its management must prioritize human consumption and the protection of ecosystems. From this perspective, the care of water sources is not only an environmental issue, but also a necessary condition to guarantee a dignified life and the well-being of the population.

In addition to these political and legal actions, the defense of water in Ecuador is also expressed in daily practices that take place in many rural communities. A clear example is the drinking water management boards, community organizations that are responsible for managing access to water in places where the State does not always arrive with sufficient public services. These organizations work through the participation of the inhabitants themselves, where they make collective decisions about the use of water, the maintenance of infrastructures and the care of natural sources.

Various studies on water governance in the country highlight that these community systems have been key to guaranteeing access to water in many rural areas. In addition, they help

strengthen social organization and promote forms of management based on solidarity, collective work and the protection of the territory (Martínez-Moscoso & Abril Ortiz, 2020).

In many Ecuadorian communities, water is not only understood as an economic resource, but as an essential element for collective life and coexistence. For this reason, their care is usually linked to community values such as shared responsibility, respect for nature and the defense of the territory against activities that may put ecosystems at risk.

In other words, these processes show that the defense of water in Ecuador is built from different spaces. On the one hand, there are mechanisms for citizen participation such as popular consultations that allow the population to influence public decisions. On the other hand, there are also the forms and community management that are developed daily in the territories. Both dynamics reflect the strengthening of environmental citizenship that seeks to protect water as a common good and as a fundamental right for present and future generations.

2.7.1 The Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca: Academic Approaches

Although specific academic production on the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca is still limited, some studies and articles mention it as an emblematic reference of water activism in Ecuador. This research highlights its role in the defense of water sources against mining projects, as well as its ability to articulate urban and rural actors around a common agenda (Vásquez-Ávila, 2022). The Cabildo has been analyzed as a form of non-institutionalized citizen participation, which recovers historical practices of collective deliberation and resignifies them in the contemporary context. From this perspective, it is conceived as a space for the exercise of participatory democracy and the enforceability of the Human Right to Water (Quizhpe & Vallejo, 2021a). However, the existing literature focuses mainly on general descriptions or normative analyses, leaving a void in terms of empirical studies that examine in depth how the Cabildo Popular del Agua de Cuenca articulates its local struggles with global frameworks, such as the UN discourse on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation.

2.7.2 The Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca as a Space for Citizen Articulation

The Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca is configured as a space for citizen articulation and collective action that arises in response to the socio-environmental risks associated with mining activity in water recharge areas of the Ecuadorian Austro. Its origin is linked to previous organizational processes of territorial and environmental defense, consolidating itself as a mechanism of non-institutionalized social participation that allowed collective demands to be channeled in the face of the threat to strategic common goods. In this sense, the Ecuadorian literature highlights that these spaces, according to Quizhpe & Vallejo (2021a), strengthen the deliberative capacity of citizens and reconfigure the relations between civil society and the State.

From its organizational characteristics, the Cabildo is distinguished by its plural, intersectoral and territorial character, integrating rural communities, urban organizations, environmental groups and academic sectors. This diversity made it possible to build a common discourse around the defense of water sources as a condition for life, which translated into sustained actions of social and legal impact. In this regard, (Soliz Carrion, 2023) points out that "the defense of water in Cuenca was constituted in a collective struggle for the reproduction of life and territorial self-determination" evidencing the political and ethical character of this mobilization (p. 281).

The Cabildo's actions are directly linked to the defense of collective rights, as it promotes mechanisms of direct democracy to protect natural goods of common use. This process is articulated with the constitutionally recognized Human Right to Water and with the Rights of Nature, by placing water ecosystems as subjects of protection. In Ecuador, the defense of water is closely related to the recognition of nature as a subject of rights. Since the 2008 Constitution, it has been established that water is a fundamental human right and that the ecosystems that produce it must also be protected. This has led to the care of rivers, moorlands and water sources being understood not only as an environmental task, but also to guarantee the life and well-being of the communities that depend on these territories (Martínez-Moscoso, 2019a).

From this perspective, for Martínez-Moscoso (2019a), protecting water also implies taking care of the natural spaces where it originates, such as moors or water recharge areas. In the country,

legal tools have been created for this purpose, including water protection areas, which seek to conserve strategic ecosystems to ensure long-term water supply, especially in the face of pressures such as the expansion of extractive projects or climate change.

A case that clearly shows this relationship between rights, territory and social participation is what happened in Cuenca. For Montaña (2021), in this city, different social organizations, rural communities and citizen groups promoted a process of mobilization to protect the páramos against metal mining. These actions led to the popular consultation held in 2021, where most of the population decided to prohibit mining activities in areas considered to be of water recharge

What happened in Cuenca shows how citizen organization can become an effective tool to demand respect for environmental rights. When communities participate in decisions about their territory, democratic processes are strengthened and real mechanisms are generated to protect water and the ecosystems that sustain it. In this sense, this case shows that the defense of water not only responds to an environmental concern, but also to the search for water justice and more sustainable development models for territories.

2.7.3 Action and Advocacy Strategies in the Face of Extractive Policy

Social mobilization is one of the main advocacy strategies against extractive policy in Ecuador, especially in indigenous and rural territories where mining and oil expansion has generated persistent socio-environmental conflicts. These collective actions emerge as organized responses to the impact on territorial, environmental and cultural rights and are articulated from a logic of defense of territory as a space of life. In Ecuador, socio-environmental conflicts linked to extractive activities have generated various forms of social organization. One of the issues that appears most often in these struggles is the defense of water, since many communities consider that pollution or the impact on water sources put at risk not only the environment, but also their ways of life and their local economies. In this sense, the human right to water has often been used as a central argument within social demands against extractive projects (Martínez-Moscoso, 2017).

From this perspective, social responses are not limited only to protests or public mobilizations. In many territories, community organization processes have been developed that include local assemblies, spaces for dialogue between communities and the formation of leadership within the social organizations themselves. These processes allow communities to collectively analyze potential environmental impacts and discuss alternatives to the prevailing extractive model. As pointed out, several social movements in the country have questioned the idea that economic growth necessarily depends on the intensive exploitation of natural resources (Falconí & Funtowicz, 2025).

At the same time, networks of articulation have been built between communities, social organizations, environmental groups and citizen platforms. These alliances have been important in expanding the visibility of socio-environmental conflicts and placing them within the national public debate. In Latin America, these types of networks have made it possible to connect territorial struggles with broader discussions on environmental justice, defense of territory, and alternative models of development (Roulier & Katishi, 2022).

Another relevant strategy has been the use of legal mechanisms. In the Ecuadorian case, the constitutional recognition of the rights of nature and the human right to water has opened new possibilities for the legal defense of ecosystems. Various communities and organizations have filed legal actions when they consider that certain extractive projects may affect rivers, moorlands or water sources. According to this type of environmental litigation, it has allowed several socio-environmental conflicts to be transferred to the judicial sphere, generating important precedents in the protection of the rights of nature (Gudynas, 2014).

Along with legal strategies, socio-environmental movements have also developed forms of advocacy in the realm of public discourse. Through campaigns, research, forums and community communication processes, different organizations have sought to question the narrative that presents extractivism as a necessary activity for economic development. Instead, several authors raise the need to think of alternatives that prioritize ecological balance, social well-being, and environmental sustainability. Within these proposals, the concept of Good Life has been one of the most widely used frameworks in the Latin American debate on development

and nature (Acosta, 2025) . When these strategies are combined, their capacity for political advocacy tends to be strengthened. This is because socio-environmental conflicts are no longer just local problems and begin to influence broader debates on public policy and natural resource management.

In recent years, moreover, some social movements have begun to link their demands with international environmental governance frameworks. An important example is the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In particular, SDG 6 raises the need to guarantee access to drinking water and ensure its sustainable management. From the perspective of environmental activism, these international commitments have been used to highlight the tensions that may exist between the sustainability discourses promoted by States and the environmental impacts associated with certain extractive activities (United Nations, 2018b).

In this context, the relationship between the local and the global becomes especially relevant. Communities and social organizations not only defend their territories but also manage to situate their demands within international debates on human rights, environmental justice, and sustainability. In this way, the defense of water and ecosystems is articulated with regulatory frameworks and global agendas that strengthen their political and social legitimacy.

Table 1
Action and Advocacy Strategies in the Face of Extractive Policy in Ecuador

Strategy	Main actors	Central objective	Impact on the defense of water
Social mobilization	Indigenous communities, environmental organizations	Making impacts visible and stopping extractive projects	Protection of water sources and territories
Strategic judicial action	NGOs, legal groups, communities	Demand compliance with constitutional rights	Recognition of water as a human right
Discursive strategy	Social movements, academia	Questioning the dominant extractive model	Change in the public perception of extractivism
Articulation with SDGs	Local and global networks	Influencing policies from international standards	Linking water to global sustainability

2.8 Activism as a Global Impact

In recent years, environmental activism has been gaining strength and is no longer limited to local protests. Many times, struggles that begin in a community end up connecting in regional

or even international networks. This is especially true for issues related to water, the environment and climate change. When different organizations are articulated, their demands achieve greater visibility and can influence broader policy debates on natural resource management (Svampa, 2016).

In Latin America, this has been clearly seen in the movements that defend water against extractive projects. According to Gudynas (2015) several countries, peasant communities, indigenous peoples and citizen groups have organized to protect rivers, moors or water sources that they consider fundamental for their territory. These actions not only seek to stop projects that could pollute or affect water sources, but also to question the development model based on the intensive exploitation of natural resources.

One organization that has documented many of these processes is the Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America (OCMALL). Their reports show that in different countries in the region there are conflicts related to mining and access to water. In several of these cases, communities have developed forms of organization to defend their territories, and it is often women who lead these processes of resistance and care for water (Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America, 2019).

Importantly, these local struggles do not remain isolated. Over time, many communities manage to connect with organizations in other countries or with international networks that work on environmental issues. This allows their complaints to have a greater reach and for issues such as water pollution, the rights of nature or environmental justice to be discussed in broader spaces, including in international organizations or in debates on public policies (Water Sustainability Network and Observatory, 2024).

Similarly, independent environmental journalism such as Mongabay Latam has made these struggles and their social impact visible by spreading stories about communities defending ecosystems and water sources, as well as covering the challenges faced by community water boards and management committees. Among the relevant cases, it documents how in Latin America there are at least 145,000 community organizations that manage and guarantee access

to water for nearly 70 million people, pointing out that collective action not only responds to immediate needs, but also influences the formulation of public policies and recognizes water as a common good. beyond the logic of the market (Ortuño, 2026).

In Ecuador, these dynamics have also become visible in several socio-environmental conflicts related to mining and the protection of water sources. A well-known case, as already mentioned, was the Popular Consultation of Cuenca in 2021, where the population voted overwhelmingly to limit mining activity in areas of citizen recharge and social participation can influence important decisions about the territory and natural resources (Montaño, 2021).

In addition, different studies on socio-environmental conflicts in the country indicate that the defense of water has become one of the main axes of community organization. In many cases, these struggles combine different strategies such as social mobilizations, legal processes, information campaigns and alliances with national or international organizations (Martínez-Moscoso, 2017).

In this sense, current environmental activism is not only about denouncing problems. It also involves seeking changes in laws, public policies, and the way decisions are made about the use of natural resources. When communities manage to organize themselves and connect their demands with broader networks, their capacity to influence increases considerably.

Finally, the defense of water has become one of the central issues of socio-environmental activism in Latin America. Based on local experiences, many communities have managed to position debates on environmental justice, rights of nature, and more sustainable development models. This shows that collective action can have real effects when it is sustained in community organization and in articulation with other social actors.

3. Methodology

3.1 Type of Research

This research was developed under an exploratory-descriptive approach. It is exploratory because the link between Local Water Activism and the United Nations Global Agenda for the

Human Right to Water and Sanitation has still been little studied from empirical case studies in Ecuador, which justifies the need for initial approaches aimed at identifying categories, relationships and social dynamics (Hernández et al., 2020).

At the same time, it is descriptive because it seeks to characterize the forms of organization, advocacy strategies and discursive frameworks used by the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca, as well as its relationship with international standards of the Right to Water, which is typical of research that aims to detail how phenomena manifest themselves in specific contexts (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014) . This design allows us to understand the phenomenon without pretending to establish causal relationships, but by identifying patterns, practices and meanings constructed by social actors, which is particularly relevant for the study of processes of social mobilization and collective action (Lopezosa, 2020).

3.2 Research Focus

The approach adopted is qualitative, using triangulation to articulate the interpretative richness of social discourses with verifiable empirical data. The qualitative component allows us to explore the perceptions, narratives and strategies of collective action of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua, particularly in the context of the popular consultation on mining held in Cuenca in 2021 (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014). The focus of this research was chosen because it allows us to understand how the Cabildo Popular por el Agua y Cuenca interprets and defends the Human Right to Water, as well as to analyze to what extent its actions have had had some impact in the social and political sphere.

From this perspective, qualitative research is appropriate because it allows us to observe social phenomena within their own context and to understand the meaning that people or groups give to their actions. In the case of this study, it is interesting to know how water defense discourses are constructed and how they are related to processes of citizen participation and mobilization.

In this sense, qualitative studies help to analyze social realities in a more in-depth way, considering the context in which they occur and the interpretations of the social actors themselves. According to this type of research, it allows us to understand the phenomena from

the perspective of those who participate in them, which makes it easier to analyze complex social processes such as community organization or political advocacy (Hernández-Sampieri et al., 2014).

3.3 Universe, Population and Sample

The universe of study is made up of social; community and institutional actors directly or indirectly linked to the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca. The population is defined as active members, community leaders, environmental defenders and citizens who participated in the mobilization processes and in the popular consultation on the protection of water sources. The sample was selected through a sampling by criteria or convenience, prioritizing people with direct experience in the organization and execution of actions of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca. Among others, leaders of the movement, environmental activists and citizens who intervened in spaces of public deliberation were considered. This type of sampling is suitable for qualitative and exploratory studies, as it allows access to key informants with in-depth knowledge of the phenomenon under investigation until the saturation point is reached (Lopezosa, 2020).

3.4 Data Collection Techniques and Instruments

The research used methodological triangulation based on three main instruments: documentary review, case study and semi-structured interviews, in order to guarantee the validity, depth and consistency of the analysis.

3.4.1 Documentary and Literature Review

The literature review was the first step in data triangulation and aimed to contextualize the phenomenon of environmental activism in the framework of the Global South and the Human Rights to Water and Sanitation. The review of documents and literature was a key stage in the research, as it allowed us to gather background and theoretical approaches related to the topic. As he explains, this type of review helps to recognize central ideas, trends in studies and also aspects that have not yet been researched. These elements serve as a guide to better understand the data that is then analyzed in the work (Guirao-Goris, 2015).

In this study, different types of sources were reviewed. On the one hand, recent reports prepared by international organizations such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), and the United Nations Special Rapporteur on the Human Right to Water were consulted. On the other hand, academic research from Latin America and Ecuador that addresses issues such as water conflicts, extractivism and forms of social organization in the face of these problems was also analyzed.

This review allowed us to understand that the case of Cuenca is not an isolated event but is part of a broader dynamic present in several countries. In many of these contexts, water becomes a strategic resource that not only has an environmental value, but also a social, cultural and political one, especially when it is related to extractive activities and the defense of territories (Acosta et al., 2010).

3.4.2 Case Study

The second methodological component was the case study, understood as a research strategy that allows analyzing a phenomenon within its real context through the use of multiple sources of evidence. In this research, the phenomenon under study is the *Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca*, a citizen and environmental movement based in the city of Cuenca (Ecuador), recognized for its leading role in the defense of water sources and its political advocacy against mining extractivism. This approach made it possible to examine the articulation between local collective action and the global agenda of the Human Right to Water (Soto-Ramírez & Escribano-Hervis, 2019).

3.4.3 Semi-Structured Interviews

The third instrument of triangulation corresponded to semi-structured interviews, applied through sampling by criterion or convenience. Depending on the type of interview, it combines previously designed open questions with the necessary flexibility to adapt them to the development of the conversation, which makes it possible to obtain in-depth and detailed information (Lopezosa, 2020).

For the development of the study, semi-structural interviews were conducted with members and representatives of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca, as well as with people who have participated in environmental defense processes and in community water management. Through these conversations, we sought to learn about their experiences, opinions and ways of understanding the relationship between the local struggle for water and the broader debates on the Human Right to Water at the global level. The interviews followed a previously developed guide, which guided the main questions and allowed for some flexibility during the dialogue with the participants. This guide is presented in Annex 1.

In addition to the information obtained in the interviews, the study also considered secondary data. In particular, the official results of the popular consultation held in Cuenca in 2021, published by the These data allowed us to observe from a perspective, the level of citizen support for initiatives to protect water sources. These data were analyzed considering the corresponding electoral period and the territorial scope of Cuenca, which allowed complementing the qualitative evidence with empirical information of a quantitative nature (National Electoral Council [CNE], 2021).

3.5 Data Processing and Analysis

The information was processed using an integrated analysis strategy. The qualitative data obtained from the interviews and documents were systematized through thematic analysis, identifying categories such as the right to water, defense of the territory, political advocacy and linkage with the UN. The analysis of the information made it possible to interpret the discourses of the interviewed actors and relate them to the international principles and standards related to the Human Right to Water. The integration of qualitative information made it possible to compare what was expressed by the actors of local activism with the concrete results of citizen mobilization, which provides greater solidity to the analysis of the study, as expressed by Solano-Paucay & Cordero-Pozo (2023).

4.Results

The analysis of the results is structured based on the categories defined in the qualitative analysis matrix such as Human Right to Water; water justice, socio-environmental activism, water

governance and articulation with global agendas, with the purpose of responding to the objectives of the research. Through the triangulation between interviews, documentary reviews and recent academic literature, it examines how the actions of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca have contributed to linking territorial struggles with international regulatory frameworks related to the Human Right to Water and Sanitation.

Table 2
Category Matrix

Central Category	Subcategories	Analytical Description	Related Questions
Human Right to Water	Universality, accessibility, sustainability	How the movement conceives of water as a fundamental right and not as a commodity	P2, P3, P4
Water justice	Equity, redistribution, territorial protection	Relationship between water defense, social inequality and territorial conflicts.	P2, P5
Defence of the environment and natural resources	Participation, organizing, resistance	Collective strategies against extractivism and state policies	P1, P6, P7
Water governance	Institutionality, participation, social pressure, popular consultation, social control	Relationship between the State, Citizenship and Water Management	P6, P7
Connecting actors from different countries	UN, SDGs, international networks	Relationship between local struggles and global issues or debates	P8, P9

4.1 Human Right to Water

4.1.1 Universality

From the analysis of the interviews carried out, it is observed that the participants of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca understand water as something more than a natural resource. For them, it is a fundamental right that sustains people's lives and dignity. This vision coincides with the international recognition of the human right to water and sanitation, which states that all people should have sufficient, safe and affordable access to this resource to meet their basic needs (Justo, 2013).

During the interviews, several participants pointed out that the defense of water also implies protecting the conditions that make life possible in the territory. One of the interviewees expressed it as follows: *"We see the right to water as a matter of absolute dignity of the human being... but we also understand that all beings need water for life"* (E5). This interpretation is

related to the approaches to water justice, which consider water as a common good whose management should be oriented to collective well-being and not only to market criteria (Guzmán-León, 2021).

In the case of Ecuador, different studies have indicated that the constitutional recognition of the right to water has contributed to strengthening social participation in the management of water resources. This has allowed communities and citizen organizations to have a greater presence in the processes of surveillance and defense of water sources against political decisions or projects that may affect these ecosystems (Martínez-Moscoso & Abril Ortiz, 2020)

In the interviews conducted for this research, this vision appears recurrently. Participants not only refer to water as an individual right, but also as a necessary condition for collective life and the continuity of communities. In the words of one of the interviewees: "*water is not only a natural resource, but also a condition for the life of the communities and for the future of the city; to defend water is to defend life itself*" (E1). This interpretation coincides with international standards that indicate that access to water must be sufficient, safe and accessible to all people (Justo, 2013).

4.1.2 Accessibility

Another issue that frequently appears in the testimonies is related to water accessibility, especially in the face of the development of extractive projects. For several interviewees, one of the main risks is that certain industrial activities may alter the availability of water resources or prioritize their use for productive purposes. In this regard, some participants mentioned the Loma Larga mining project. According to the testimonies collected, this project would require approximately 22 liters of water per second, which would be equivalent to the daily consumption of tens of thousands of people. From the perspective of local actors, this situation raises concerns regarding the distribution of the resource.

The interviewees also pointed out that this type of scenario could conflict with the principle of priority of water established in Ecuadorian regulations, according to which human consumption should take precedence over other productive uses. As one of the participants put it: "*the issue*

of human consumption comes first" (E3). Various studies on socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America, such as the author's, show similar situations in territories where extractive projects exist. In these contexts, disputes over water often arise when different actors compete for its use or when communities perceive risks to the future availability of the resource (Gudynas, 2015).

4.1.3 Sustainability

In addition to access to water, the interviews reflect a constant concern for the sustainability of the resource in the long term. In particular, the participants highlighted the importance of the ecosystems in the páramo in the regulation of the water cycle.

In the Andean region, the páramos play a fundamental role in the collection, storage and regulation of water that subsequently supplies cities and rural communities. One of the interviewees explains it simply: *"the páramo ecosystem is fundamental for the production of water... it works like a natural sponge that preserves the water cycle"* (E1).

This vision is in line with the thought of that for social actors, the defense of the right to water cannot be separated from the protection of the ecosystems that guarantee its existence. In other words, ensuring access to water also implies taking care of the territories where water sources originate (Quizhpe & Vallejo, 2021b).

The interviews also relate this concern to the potential impacts of metal mining on these ecosystems. According to participants, the economic benefits of these projects are often temporary, while environmental damage can last for decades. One interviewee put it this way: *"the economic benefits last 30 or 40 years, but the deterioration and pollution last for hundreds of years"* (E1).

These reflections coincide with the approaches of, who point out that many socio-environmental conflicts in the country are linked to extractives development models that generate tensions between the economic use of natural resources and the protection of ecosystems (León et al., 2025).

4.2 Water Justice

4.2.1 Equity

The analysis of the testimonies of evidence that the defense of water promoted by the Cabildo incorporates elements of the water justice approach. This approach states that conflicts over water cannot be analyzed only from the environmental dimension, but also considering the social, territorial and gender inequalities that influence access to and control of natural resources.

In the case of Cuenca, the interviews show that rural communities have played an important role in the defense of the areas where the main water sources are located. Within these processes, the leadership of women's organizations is also recognized. One of the participants said: *"We have been impressed by the example given to us by the comrades of the peasant organizations, especially the defenders of Quimsacocha"* (E2).

This female protagonism can be interpreted from the ecofeminist approach, which states that women usually play a central role in the defense of territories due to their daily relationship with the management of water and other natural resources (Castro-Bernardini, 2024).

The testimonies also show that the defense of water has contributed to strengthening the articulation between rural and urban actors. As one of the interviewees explained: *"the mobilization managed to build a bridge so that there is a dialogue between rural and urban areas"* (E5). This process reflects the importance of social alliances in socio-environmental conflicts, as proposed by Latin American political ecology (Gudynas, 2015).

4.2.2 Redistribution

From a water justice perspective, water-related conflicts are also linked to the way in which the benefits and impacts derived from the use of natural resources are distributed. The study on the political ecology of water points out that in Latin America, extractivist models tend to concentrate on economic benefits while socio-environmental costs fall mainly on local communities. In this sense, water justification implies not only guaranteeing equitable access to

water but also ensuring the effective participation of communities in decisions about the use of territory and natural resources (Gudynas, 2015).

4.2.3 Territorial Protection

The results also show that the defense of water is closely linked to the protection of the territory. In particular, the interviewees pointed out that many of the areas where mining activities are planned coincide with strategic ecosystems for the water regulation of the territory, such as moorlands and water recharge areas. One of the participants explained this situation as follows: "the areas where mining is intended are precisely the areas where the water sources that supply Cuenca are born; if that ecosystem is affected, the entire water system of the territory is affected" (E2).

This type of concern coincides with various studies on socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America, which indicate that water disputes tend to be concentrated in territories where strategic ecosystems, economic interests, and communities that depend directly on these resources for their assistance converge (Guanoquiza, 2025).

The idea that some territories could become what participants called "sacrifice zones" (E3) also appeared in the interviews. This expression refers to places where the environmental impacts derived from extractive activities are concentrated, especially affecting rural populations that depend on the territory for their subsistence.

From this perspective, Roca-Servat & Botero-Mesa (2020) they express that water justice is understood by social actors not only as equitable access to water, but also as the right of communities to participate in decisions about the use of the territory and the development model that is implemented in their regions. This type of approach is linked to the current debates on environmental governance and participatory democracy in Latin America, where various citizen movements have promoted initiatives aimed at the protection of natural commons (Marcillo-Barahona & Vélez-Moreira, 2024a).

4.3 Socio-Environmental Activism

4.3.1 Movements and Organization

The results of the study show that the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca has established itself as an important space for citizen organization in defense of water sources in southern Ecuador. From the interviews conducted, it can be observed that the movement brings together people from different social sectors who share the concern for the protection of water and territory.

One of the features most mentioned by the participants is the diverse character of the Cabildo. According to the testimonies, peasant communities, social organizations, professionals, environmental groups and young people participate in this space. This diversity allows the movement to incorporate different knowledge and forms of action. As one of the interviewees explained: "the Cabildo Popular por el Agua is a group of people of different ages, generations and professions, all concerned with protecting the water of Cuenca" (E1).

Another outstanding element is its way of organization. Participants describe the Cabildo as a horizontal space, in which decisions are made collectively and do not depend on a single leadership. According to one of the interviewees, it is "an absolutely horizontal organization" (E2), while another defined it as "a citizen, plural and self-convened space" (E5).

This type of organization is common in many contemporary socio-environmental movements. According to horizontality, it allows for expanded participation and strengthening the legitimacy of social organizations, since it promotes the construction of consensus among diverse actors (Roulier & Katishi, 2022).

In the case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua, this organizational structure has made it possible to articulate community knowledge with technical knowledge and organizational experiences from different sectors. As a result, the movement has managed to position itself as a relevant actor in the local public debate on the protection of water sources (Vásquez-Ávila, 2022).

4.3.2 Action Repertoires

The interviews also identified various collective action strategies used by the movement. Among the most mentioned are marches, mobilizations, sit-ins, public information campaigns and political advocacy processes aimed at making the risks associated with extractivism visible.

These strategies are part of what the literature calls socio-environmental movements, which are characterized by the articulation of social actors who seek to defend common goods against development models considered environmentally unsustainable (Agustín & Spivak, 2024).

In the case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua, Lalander & Ospina (2012) they explain that the actions of the movement are not limited to protest. The testimonies show that processes of citizen participation and public deliberation have also been promoted. Among the initiatives mentioned are the drafting of the popular consultation project of Cuenca in 2021, the preparation of press releases and press releases to position the issue on the public agenda and the organization of citizen assemblies.

Social mobilization is another central element within these strategies. One of the most representative events was the mobilization known as "El Quinto Rio", in which thousands of people participated in defense of the canton's water sources. One interviewee described this event as "one of the largest environmental marches in the history of Ecuador" (E4), reflecting the broad social support achieved for the environmental cause (Solano-Paucay & Cordero-Pozo, 2023).

4.3.3 Resistance

The interviews also show the important role that women have played in the processes of social mobilization in defense of water. In many cases, women have assumed leadership roles in communities, promoting organizational initiatives and raising awareness about the importance of protecting water sources.

This phenomenon can be analyzed from the perspective of ecofeminism, an approach that states that women usually play a central role in the defense of the environment due to their daily relationship with water management, food and the care of community life.

Various studies on socio-environmental movements in Latin America indicate that ecofeminism has contributed to broadening the debate on environmental justice by incorporating the experiences and knowledge of women in the defense of territories (Observatory of Mining Conflicts in Latin America, 2019).

In the case of the *Cabildo Popular por el Agua*, women's participation not only strengthens social organization, but also makes visible the gender dimensions present in socio-environmental conflicts. In this sense, organizations such as Women Environmental Defenders in Latin America often face particular risks, including threats, criminalization and stigmatization for their participation in the defense of territory and natural resources. These reports highlight that their leadership is essential for the protection of ecosystems and for the strengthening of human rights (Amnesty International (2019)).

4.3.4 Criminalization

Despite the advances in social organization, the testimonies also show that the defense of the territory has been accompanied by situations of criminalization of environmental activism.

Some participants noted that members of the movement have faced legal complaints, smear campaigns, and other forms of political pressure. Among the mechanisms mentioned are the opening of judicial processes, the freezing of accounts linked to social organizations and the dissemination that describe activists as "radical" or anti-development actors.

This type of situation has been widely documented in Latin America, where environmental defenders often face contexts of criminalization and violence due to their opposition to extractive projects (Grattan, 2025).

Faced with these risks, the *Cabildo* has developed collective protection strategies. One of them has been the diversification of spokespeople within the movement. As one of the interviewees explained, the idea is that *"not only one person should be visible"* (E3). In this way, the aim is to reduce the risks associated with the individual exposure of social leaders.

4.4 Water governance

4.4.1 Legal and Institutional Mechanisms

The results show that the Cabildo Popular por el Agua is not limited to social mobilization but has also used institutional and legal mechanisms to influence local water governance. Among the most relevant strategies is the imposition of the popular consultation in Cuenca held in 2021, through which citizens decided to prohibit metal mining in water recharge areas of the city. This process represents an example of the use of direct democracy mechanisms for the defense of territory and natural resources.

According to one of the interviewees: "the Cabildo was certain to use actions of direct democracy to defend the human right to water" (E2). The Popular Consultation is an instrument recognized by the Ecuadorian Constitution that allows citizens to participate directly in decisions of public interest. In this sense, this process became an important precedent in the country's environmental governance.

Various studies indicate that these mechanisms can strengthen environmental democracy by expanding citizen participation in decisions related to the management of natural resources. From this political ecology perspective, these types of conflicts also reflect broader disputes over development models, Maldonado et al. (2022) argue that conflicts over water in Ecuador cannot be understood only as problems of environmental management, but as disagreements about the use of territory and natural resources (Nalegach & Astroza, 2020).

4.4.2 Citizen Participation

Despite the citizen support obtained in popular consultation, the interviews show that there are still challenges to its effective implementation. One of the interviewees pointed out that, although popular consultations are binding, in practice there are institutional obstacles to their implementation. As he said: "the Constitution says that consultations generate bodies of law and are immediately applicable, but there are still obstacles to their full compliance" (E4).

This type of situation reflects tensions between the mechanisms of participatory democracy and the institutional dynamics of the State. Although the Ecuadorian constitutional framework recognizes the right to water and the rights of nature, its implementation depends to a large extent on the capacity of mobilization and vigilance exercised by civil society (Rodríguez-Garavito & Baquero-Díaz, 2020).

From this perspective, citizen mobilization not only functions as a form of resistance to extractivism, but also as a mechanism to strengthen water governance at the local level. Similarly, Figuera-Vargas & Ortiz-Torres (2019), point out that, although legal frameworks recognize a mechanism for citizen participation, their effective implementation often faces tensions with the institutional dynamics of the State and with economic interests linked to extractive models. In this context, the collective action of civil society becomes essential to demand compliance with democratic decisions and guarantee the protection of common goods. In the case of Ecuador, recent studies also highlight that the defense of the human right to water depends not only on its legal recognition, but also on the capacity for social organization related to the management of water resources (Martínez-Moscoso, 2017).

4.5 Global Articulation

The interviews show that the Cabildo has also incorporated international regulatory frameworks into its discourse. Several participants mentioned references to documents prepared by international agencies, especially within the United Nations. One of the interviewees said: "We have been attentive to the documents that have been presented at the level of the United Nations Organizations" (E1).

The use of these global frameworks makes it possible to situate local demands within international debates on human rights, environmental justice and sustainability. In particular, the defense of water is linked to Sustainable Development Goal 6, which raises the need to guarantee universal access to clean water and sanitation (Ortiz Félix et al., 2020).

Finally, United Nations (2021a) argues that social movements often use international instruments, such as human rights or the Sustainable Development Goals, to support their

demands and situate them within broader discussions on environmental justice and water management.

In this sense, the Case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua shows how a local struggle can be connected to global agendas related to the right to water and the protection of the commons.

4.5.1 Internationalization

The results also show that the activism of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua has managed to transcend the local level and establish links with international networks for the defense of water and the environment. One of the interviewees pointed out that the experience of Cuenca has been shared with organizations from other Andean countries: "what has been done by the Cabildo has been disseminated in South America, especially in countries such as Colombia and Peru where there are also páramo ecosystems" (E1).

The interview also shows that the participants interpret the conflict over water as part of global processes linked to extractivism. In this sense, some interviewees consider that the expansion of mining activities responds to international economic dynamics oriented to the exploitation of strategic minerals.

These results can be understood from the approaches to multi-scale activism that were explained. Various studies León et al. (2025) indicate that many current socio-environmental movements do not remain only at the local level but seek to connect their struggles with broader networks at the national or international level, especially when conflicts are related to extractive activities. In this sense, what is happening with the Cabildo Popular por el Agua shows how a problem that arises in a specific territory can also be related to broader debates on the protection of water and the environment (Gudynas, 2015).

4.5.2 Networks

The movement has also received support from international organizations that have contributed to making visible the socio-environmental conflicts related to extractive projects. According to

one participant: "We have had solidarity from citizen organizations in Canada and Europe that have helped to socialize what is happening with these mining projects" (E1).

The articulation of the movement with organizations and collectives from other countries also coincides with what the literature describes about transnational networks of activism. According to Nahuelpan (2023), socio-environmental movements usually establish links with international organizations to share experiences, disseminate their problems and strengthen their strategies for defending the territory. From this perspective, the support of international organizations helps to give greater visibility to local conflicts and to legitimate the demands of communities in the face of political and economic actors.

In the case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca, these connections are also reflected in the relationship with different spaces of social and environmental articulation. There are links with platforms and organizations such as Mongabay Latam, the Observatory of Mining Conflicts of Latin America [OCMAL], the Lacta collective, the Red Savia Foundation and Yasunidos Guapondeling. Similarly, interaction with community organizations linked to water management, such as the water boards of the Portete sector, is recognized.

5. Conclusions

From the analysis carried out in this research, it can be pointed out that the experience of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca constitutes a significant case within the processes of social defense of water in Ecuador. Throughout the study, it was evident that the actions promoted by this citizen space are not limited only to the protection of a natural resource but are also linked to broader discussions related to human rights, environmental justice, and the democratic management of common goods. In this sense, the case analyzed allows us to understand how a problem that arises at the local level can be connected to global debates on the Human Right to Water and Sanitation.

During this research work, it was observed that the actors linked to the Cabildo interpret water mainly as a fundamental right for life. This vision coincides with the principles established in international instruments and in the Ecuadorian Constitution, where water is recognized as an

essential element to guarantee human dignity and collective well-being. From the interviews conducted, it was identified that the participants do not conceive of water only as a natural resource available for economic use, but as an asset that sustains the life of ancestral communities, since it is part of something natural and that, therefore, must be protected as a priority. From this perspective, the right to water is also related to the need to conserve the ecosystems that allow its existence, especially those that fulfill important functions within the water cycle.

This analysis made it possible to identify various strategies of organization and resistance developed by the communities in the face of the expansion of extractive projects. The results show that the Cabildo Popular por el Agua has consolidated itself as a broad space for citizen participation, where different social actors who share the concern for the protection of water and the territory converge. Within this process, the forms of collective organization, the horizontal nature of the movement and the diversity of sectors that participate in it stand out. These characteristics have allowed the Cabildo to articulate community knowledge, organizational experiences and technical knowledge from different fields.

Similarly, it was identified that the movement has developed various repertoires of collective action, including social mobilizations, public information campaigns, the generation of spaces for citizen debate and the use of institutional mechanisms to influence decision-making. The interviews show that social actors link the defense of the right to water with the protection of strategic ecosystems such as the páramos, which play a fundamental role in the capture and regulation of water resources. From this point of view, the defense of water necessarily implies the protection of the territories where water sources are born. In this way, the activism of the analyzed group reflects tensions between different development models, particularly between extractive capital models and proposals aimed at the conservation of ecosystems and common goods.

Finally, the contribution of local activism to the construction of global agendas, the results show that the Cabildo Popular por el Agua has managed to link its demands with international frameworks related to human rights and sustainability. Throughout the testimonies collected, it

was identified that the social actors refer to documents and principles promoted by international organizations, especially those linked to the Human Right to Water and the Sustainable Development Goals. This articulation allows local demands to be placed within a broader context, contributing to strengthening their legitimacy and making visible the socio-environmental conflicts that develop in the territory.

Likewise, it was observed that the experience of the Cabildo has transcended the strictly local level, establishing links with social and environmental organizations in other countries. These support networks allow for the sharing of experiences, exchange strategies for the defense of the territory and generate greater international visibility in the face of problems associated with extractivism. In this sense, the case analyzed shows that many current socio-environmental movements operate at different scales, articulating local actions with dynamics of regional and international cooperation.

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7. Appendices

Appendix 1

Informed Consent for Research Participation

Through this document I declare that I have been informed about the study entitled: "From local activism to the global agenda: the case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca versus the Human Right to Water and Sanitation of the United Nations". It has been clearly explained to me what the research consists of what its objectives are and what the scope of the study is.

I understand that this research seeks to analyze how the actions carried out by the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca have contributed to connecting local struggles for the defense of water with the international agenda promoted by the United Nations in relation to the Human Right to Water and Sanitation. It also aims to understand how the activism that emerges from the territories can influence the construction or strengthening of political norms that are discussed at the international level.

I understand that my participation in this research, whether conducting the interview, sharing testimony, or other form of collaboration, is for academic purposes only. This means that the information will be used for the analysis of the subject within the study and does not imply any type of personal evaluation, political judgment or legal consequence for me.

I have also been informed that all information I share will be handled confidentially and responsibly. The data will be used only for academic purposes, and my anonymity will be respected if I request it. The research will follow ethical principles of social studies and respect for human rights. I understand that my participation is entirely voluntary. I can decide not to answer any questions or withdraw from the study at any time, without this having any negative consequences for me.

Therefore, I give my free, prior and informed consent to participate in this research, understanding that its objective is to contribute to knowledge about the defense of water as a human right and about the role that citizen movements can have in the construction of broader environmental justice agendas.

Date:

Participant's signature: Researcher's signature

Appendix 2

Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Title of the study:

From local activism to the global agenda: the case of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca versus the Human Right to Water and Sanitation of the United Nations.

Dear Participant,

My name is Yareli Aguirre, a student of International Studies, I am currently doing my degree work with the theme "From local activism to the global agenda: Case of the Cabildo popular por el agua de Cuenca frente al Derecho al Agua de la Naciones Unidas" the objective of this interview is to analyze how the actions of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca have contributed to local struggles for water with the global agenda of the United Nations Organization around the Human Right to Water and Sanitation. Ten open questions have been designed, aimed at exploring the principles that sustain their cause of struggle, the organizational dynamics of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua de Cuenca and its projection towards national and international spaces and the perspective on the participation of environmental movements. We thank you in advance for your valuable cooperation. In anticipation of your willingness to participate in this interview, we thank you for the time provided for it. The information provided will be used exclusively for academic purposes, guaranteeing confidentiality, anonymity and informed consent.

Block I. Identity and structure of the Cabildo Popular por el Agua

1. What is the Cabildo por el Agua and how is it formed?

(Question aimed at identifying the origin, social composition and organizational structure of the movement)

Block II. Activism, water justice and human rights

2. What is the importance that the Cabildo por el Agua and other environmental movements have had in the framework of water justice?

(Explores the social, political, and symbolic impact of the movement in defense of water as a human right)

3. From your perspective from the principle of universality, how is environmental activism in favor of the right to water sustained?

(Investigates how the movement conceives access to water as a right for all people)

Block III. Extractivism, exclusion and socio-environmental conflict

4. How do mining projects threaten accessibility to water resources?

(Seeks to understand the relationship between extractive activities and the impact on water in the territories)

5. Within the framework of equality and non-discrimination, how do you consider that different population groups are affected or excluded?

(Analyzes the differentiated impacts of water conflicts on rural communities, indigenous people, women, and other groups)

Boque IV. State, governance and social mobilization

6. What are the challenges that environmental movements face in the central state?

(Identify institutional tensions, legal barriers, or public policies)

- 7. How is social mobilization for this cause necessary to influence the political sphere in a context of institutional weakness?**

(Explores the role of protest, citizen organization and social participation in water governance)

Block V. Articulation with the Global Agenda for the Right to Water

- 8. What do you think are the contributions that the Cabildo por el Agua has made to the global agendas around water?**

(It investigates how the local movement is linked, dialogues or influences international frameworks such as those of the UN)

- 9. What international organizations, NGOs, articles or international press have supported or financed your cause?**

(Seeks to identify transnational networks of support, cooperation or international visibility)