

Conference “The Political Economy of the Extractive Imperative in Latin America: Reducing poverty and inequality vs. ensuring inclusion and sustainability?”, Leiden, April 10, 2015

Lithium as a new strategic resource of the “green economy”: Persistent inequalities and new opportunities

The so called “lithium triangle” holds about 70 % of the worldwide exploitable lithium brine reserves. It encompasses the Salar de Atacama (Chile), the Salar de Uyuni (Bolivia), and a couple of smaller salars in northwestern Argentina. Lithium batteries play a crucial role in the development of more sustainable lifestyles and “green technologies” (transformation of the energy mix with more renewables and electric mobility). The expected increase of the demand for lithium triggered economic interests, raised political attention and societal awareness.

Based on research in Atacama the paper will analyze different scenarios of negotiation between local indigenous communities, mining companies and the state. They range from fast-track low compensations through clientelistic networks, long-term financial arrangements through various corporate social responsibility mechanisms up to open opposition of the communities towards lithium mining. On the one hand, I want to emphasize that, despite the different outcomes, these negotiations are embedded in persistent configurations of inequalities. On the other hand, I want to show indigenous actors strategically use the symbolic value of lithium in order to gain empowerment.

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