

Deliberative ideals and hegemonic practices – political CSR in extractive industries

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practices

Sara Persson

School of Social Science, Södertörn University, Stockholm, Sweden

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Abstract

Purpose – Political Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR), based on ideas about deliberative democracy, have been criticised for increasing corporate power and democratic deficits. Yet, deliberative ideals are flourishing in the corporate world in the form of dialogues with a broad set of stakeholders and engagement in wider societal issues. Extractive industry areas, with extensive corporate interventions in weak regulatory environments, are particularly vulnerable to asymmetrical power relations when businesses engage with society. This paper aims to illustrate in what way deliberative CSR practices in such contexts risk enhancing corporate power at the expense of community interests.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper is based on a retrospective qualitative study of a Canadian oil company, operating in an Albanian oilfield between 2009 and 2016. Through a study of three different deliberative CSR practices – market-based land acquisition, a grievance redress mechanism and dialogue groups – it highlights how these practices in various ways enforced corporate interests and prevented further community mobilisation.

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Disclosure of potential conflicts of interest: This paper is based on my experiences as a previous employee in the oil company I am writing about. I have no current involvement in this company or any of its partner organizations and did not have so during the time as a PhD student when I conducted the research.

Research involving Human Participants and/or Animals (If applicable): No.

Informed consent (If applicable): All interviewees were informed about the purpose of interviews and the study as well as my change of roles from a company employee to a PhD student prior to any interview started. Only those who agreed to be recorded were recorded, otherwise I took notes.

Some narratives and interview quotes used in the paper have also been used in the dissertation. The general conclusions in the paper are based on the empirical material in three chapters of the thesis and well as the general theoretical frame.

Plagiarism: This paper is based on my PhD dissertation for Södertörn University that was published through the university and can be accessed in the following link: https://bibl.sh.se/skriftserier/hogskolans_skriftserier/Corporate_Hegemony_through_Sustainability/diva2_1485334.aspx



Findings – By applying Laclau and Mouffe’s theory of hegemony, the analysis highlights how deliberative CSR activities isolated and silenced community demands, moved some community members into the corporate alliance and prevented alternative visions of the area to be articulated. In particular, the close connection between deliberative practices and monetary compensation flows is underlined in this dynamic.

Originality/value – The paper contributes to critical scholarship on political CSR by highlighting in what way deliberative practices, linked to monetary compensation schemes, enforce corporate hegemony by moving community members over to the corporate alliance.

Keywords Political CSR, Laclau, Mouffe, Hegemony, Radical democracy, Extractive industries, Albania, Oil industry

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

Under the banners of “corporate citizenship” (Matten and Crane, 2005) and “political CSR” (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007; Scherer *et al.*, 2016), scholars have described a world in which state institutions are failing to deliver public goods and protect citizens rights, resulting in demands on companies to take on responsibilities traditionally belonging to the state domain. This has spurred an intense debate about the political role of the corporation, in particular when investment activities are carried out in weak regulatory environments (Frynas and Stephen, 2015). Matten and Crane (2005) emphasised that various stakeholders increasingly demand that multinational corporations take on the role of providing basic citizenship rights when they operate in contexts where such rights are missing. Similarly, Hilson (2012) described that when extractive industries operate in countries with high corruption and weak law enforcement, companies increasingly find themselves as a sort of alternative to the government, and corporate responsibility initiatives take the character of filling a “governance gap”. However, several scholars have raised concerns about the additional power that is transferred to corporations through ideas around corporate citizenship and political CSR (Banerjee, 2018a, 2022; Fleming and Jones, 2013; Rhodes and Fleming, 2020). Empirical studies of local contexts where multinational business ventures are implemented points to various issues connected to CSR activities such as co-optation of dissenting voices (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Kröger, 2017), enforcement of structural inequalities (Banerjee, 2018a; Roussey *et al.*, 2022) and prevention of collective action (Banerjee, 2018b; Haslam, 2021; Maher, 2022).

This paper aims to contribute to the general academic debate about political CSR by discussing the use of deliberative CSR practices to address community demands in extractive industry areas. Political CSR has since its’ conception been a widely applied but also highly contested concept. On the one hand, scholars have emphasised dialogue and negotiated solutions as a way to achieve a desirable corporate behaviour (Matten and Crane, 2005; Scherer and Palazzo, 2007; Scherer *et al.*, 2014), according to the deliberative democracy framework outlined by Jürgen Habermas. On the other hand, critical management scholars, many guided by the concept of radical democracy by Mouffe (2013), are unconvinced by the deliberative approach and emphasise that stakeholder engagement and negotiated corporate responsibility solutions most often function as tools to maintain corporate hegemony (Burchell and Cook, 2013; Dawkins, 2015) by diverting the public debate (Nyberg and Wright, 2022), preventing formal government interventions (Fooks *et al.*, 2013), silencing radical critique from civil society (Kourula and Delalieux, 2016) and quelling community resistance and mobilisation (Banerjee, 2018b).

In this paper, I examine the dynamics that took place when three specific CSR practices, based on deliberative ideals, were implemented by the Canadian oil company Bankers Petroleum Ltd. (Bankers) in their operations of Patos-Marinza Oilfield in Albania between

2009 and 2016. Based on the critique of CSR as a corporate power tool, the paper is motivated by the research question: In what way do deliberative CSR practices function as hegemonic articulations in an extractive industry context? As an analytical framework I make use of Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) theory of hegemony and Laclau's (2005) thoughts on popular movements to analyse three different deliberative CSR practices and their implication on company operations and social relations in the area. The paper's main contribution is to develop the understanding of *how* deliberative ideas and related CSR initiatives may undermine radical community demands, highlighting monetary compensation mechanisms as hegemonic articulations and community members as empty signifiers which may be incorporated into a corporate alliance.

The paper is structured in the following way. First, I discuss the general academic debate about political CSR, focusing on its application in so called "weak regulatory environments" and extractive industry areas. Thereafter, I outline my theoretical framework, focusing on Laclau's work on popular movements followed by a brief discussion of methodology and empirical material. The empirical section is thereafter focused on an analysis on three different deliberative CSR practices implemented in Patos-Marinza; *market-based land acquisition*; a *grievance redress mechanism* and *company-community dialogue groups*. I discuss how these were implemented by Bankers and what consequences they had for company-community relations in the area and residents' possibilities for collective action around radical alternatives to oilfield expansion. Thereafter, I discuss how these can be understood as hegemonic articulations based on Laclau's work on popular movements and Mouffe's concept of radical democracy. In line with previous scholars who have analysed political CSR through a lens of radical democracy, I conclude by underlining the importance of collective action outside deliberative arrangements in extractive areas and highlighting the need for further research on how monetary compensation schemes impact the dynamics and outcomes of deliberative CSR practices.

Varieties and critiques of political CSR

Although the seminal work by Scherer and Palazzo created a field of scholarship for understanding and addressing corporate involvement in public issues (Scherer *et al.*, 2016), political CSR has also been criticised for its idealism, lack of consideration for structural inequalities and ill suitedness to corporate-society relations (Rhodes and Fleming, 2020; Dawkins, 2022). Starting from Habermas' framework of deliberative democracy, Scherer and Palazzo argue that to fill regulatory gaps and gain legitimacy, business decisions should be based on "a communicative process of sensemaking and consensus building among the actors involved" (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, p. 1103). Furthermore, they argue that if a corporation acts in a context of cultural pluralism and fragmentation of values and interests, such as in weak regulatory environments, the only way to pacify conflicting demands is via such communicative processes. They see such processes as a way "to decide on the justification and reasonableness of social claims" (Scherer and Palazzo, 2007, p. 1103) to achieve greater democratic accountability of corporations and ethically justified business strategies. In this view, CSR is a process where multiple interests are taken into consideration and mutually beneficial solutions to business – society interactions can be found.

The critique of political CSR has often been based in the political theory tradition of radical democracy (Mouffe, 2013) and thus questions its very foundation in deliberative consensus finding models (Whelan, 2013; Dawkins, 2015; Fougère and Solitander, 2019). When advocates of deliberative democracy perceive consensus as a desirable and possible outcome, agonistic pluralists embrace struggle and conflict as a necessary and constitutive

part of pluralistic democratic societies (Laclau and Mouffe, 1985/2014). Accordingly, several scholars have highlighted the danger of deliberative CSR models and stakeholder engagement especially when these processes are focused on achieving consensus. The danger is that these processes reproduce asymmetrical power relations and corporate visions of society, especially in weak regulatory settings. Wilke and Wilke (2007, p. 35) argue that deliberative democracy is based on an idea of common goals and values when “the point of complex democracy is that there are no common goals, values and goodwill, but instead highly contested and competing goals”. Similarly, Dawkins (2015) underline that globalised capitalism and deliberative governance models do not satisfactorily fit together, because the interests of multinational corporations versus other stakeholders are fundamentally conflictual. Burchell and Cook (2013) agree, underlining that conflicts between corporations and communities are based on contesting understandings of reality, including fundamental conceptualisations of what “corporate responsibility” and “sustainable development” are.

The literature on political CSR is heterogenous and fragmented involving normative, descriptive and explanatory research (Frynas and Stephen, 2015; Scherer, 2017). A large stream is focused on suggesting various forms of amendments to the original works of Scherer and Palazzo, taking into consideration the critique it has spurred and trying to account for power imbalances and pluralism in values (Scherer *et al.*, 2016; Schormair and Gilbert, 2021; Barlow, 2022; Goodman and Mäkinen, 2023). Acknowledging the critique of consensus outcomes, Schormair and Gilbert (2021) outline a procedural framework that is not exclusively focused on the outcome of achieving consensus but also allows for “agreement to disagree” and “value compromise”. Goodman and Mäkinen (2023) respond to the calls for bringing the state back into the political CSR discussion, arguing for a “contestatory approach” which “would require meso-level processes to feed into a more highly contested deliberation at macro-level” (2023, p. 278) where state institutions are the main arenas for deliberation.

Others, often with an empirical footing in the extractive industry context, are more critical of the idea of corporate involvement in public deliberations and emphasise instead alternative ways to enhance democracy from below (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Kröger, 2017; Rhodes and Fleming, 2020; Barthold and Bloom, 2020; Banerjee, 2018a; Nyberg and Wright, 2022; Maher, 2022; Flores *et al.*, 2022). Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm (2023) argue that “participatory” CSR programs mould communities’ ways of thinking about their place and lives in a way that align with corporate agendas while visions about radically different futures (beyond the corporation) becomes unthinkable. Similarly, Banerjee emphasizes that deliberative democracy models fail to take into account the needs of marginalised communities who are struggling against resources extraction activities and underlines that “in its quest for consensus, deliberative processes elide legacies of colonialism and structural inequalities that persists in contemporary societies” (Banerjee, 2022, p. 284).

CSR in the extractive industries

The empirical research on political CSR has been focused on multi-stakeholder initiatives and deliberations on national or international arenas involving state, civil society and corporate actors (Levy, 2008; Alamgir and Banerjee, 2019; Nyberg and Wright, 2022; Fougère and Solitander, 2019). However, scholars have also highlighted deliberative ideals implemented at the local level such as various stakeholder engagement activities carried out by extractive companies (Banerjee, 2018a; Ehrnström-Fuentes and Kröger, 2017; Maher, 2022; Roussey *et al.*, 2022). These studies underline stakeholder engagement activities as corporate tools to maintain control over the local area through parentalism (Maher, 2022),

marginalisation of directly affected stakeholders (Roussey *et al.*, 2022) and the discourse of “Social License to Operate” (Ehrnström-Fuentes and Kröger, 2017; Banerjee, 2022). As such they echo studies within anthropology and development studies which speaks about the “anti-politics” (Sydow, 2016) and “micro-politics” (Haslam, 2021) of CSR as well as “the social engineering of extraction” (Verweijen and Dunlap, 2021).

As these studies show, extractive industry areas are often characterised by business–community conflicts as well as extensive CSR programs (Banerjee, 2018b). Extractive industry areas are thus ideal settings for understanding the contested nature of CSR practices and in what way deliberative CSR practices may strengthen corporate power at the expense of community mobilisations. On the one hand, extractive industry corporations are often powerful players in weak regulatory settings which would theoretically make them ideal players to carry out political CSR ideals of delivering public goods and self-regulate negative environmental and social impacts. On the other hand, the power and economic imbalances give extractive companies political authority to negotiate with state authorities and project impacted communities in a way that enforces their own strategic interests before public welfare (Banerjee, 2018a).

Although the critique of political CSR often includes a general argument about economic disparities as a hinder for free and equal deliberations (Banerjee, 2018a, 2018b; Maher, 2022), few studies have shown how monetary compensation from powerful actors have worked to support their interests in negotiations. As emphasised by Orihuela *et al.* (2022), such compensation schemes can be assumed to be even more important for outcomes of deliberations in contexts when economic disparities are large, such as often is the case in extractive industry areas. Salaries and employment benefits are one factor which hinder people in extractive areas up speak up against companies (Roussey *et al.*, 2022) and poverty creates incentives for communities to reframe ecological injustices as economic compensation problems (Haslam, 2021; Orihuela *et al.*, 2022). Understanding how monetary compensation flows are linked to deliberative practices is thus an important aspect for understanding in what way deliberative CSR practices function as a hegemonic articulations.

Theoretical framework

As underlined by Fougère and Solitander (2019), political discourse theory is a promising framework for criticising political CSR because radical democracy (Mouffe, 2013) is brought forward as an explicit critique of Habermasian deliberative democracy. Although I base my thoughts in this paper on the general theory of hegemony by Laclau and Mouffe (1985/2014), I make explicit use of Laclau’s (2005) work on popular movements because he provides an outline of a hegemonic struggle at the local level which have several resemblances with the situation in Patos-Marinza.

In *On Populist Reason* (Laclau, 2005), Laclau argues that instead of seeing groups as pre-constituted (as in classes), the smallest unit of analysis should be understood as the “demand”. Laclau depicts a situation in which residents in a local community have issues with housing and request local authorities to improve their situation. If nothing happens, this request may develop into a demand for change. If authorities ignore these demands, the local community may recognise that demands from other groups are also not being met by authorities. In this heightened state of unmet demands, “chains of equivalence” can start to form between groups. Laclau emphasises that if this goes on there will be a widening gap, an “antagonistic relation”, between the institutional system and “the people”. This dichotomisation of the local context through the emergence of an antagonistic frontier and an equivalential chain comprised of unsatisfied demands, poses a threat to dominant groups. The threat is that one group will act hegemonically over other groups by

formulating their demands in more general terms and thus creating a foundation for alliances to form that can oppose dominant institutions.

Laclau emphasised the Gramscian dialectic between “corporate” and “hegemonic” classes as important to understand the limits of one group to act hegemonically over other groups. A corporate group, in the Gramscian sense, formulates a project only for their own members, thereby limiting the group’s possibility to act hegemonically, i.e. to incorporate other groups within a larger alliance through chains of equivalence. A group thus has a higher chance of becoming hegemonic the more it can articulate demands in general terms and, in so doing, appeal to other groups. This is what Gramsci (1929-1933/1999) called a “universal” project.

The notion of a “corporate” class is also vital for understanding not only the ability to create counter-system mobilisations but also how those in power react to mobilisations. Laclau emphasised that “those in power” that have an interest to prevent “the political” to appear in “the social” as it reveals its contingency and possibilities for change. He wrote that: “The anti-political move *par excellence* consists in obtaining, as much as possible, a situation in which all interests become corporate, preventing the formation of a ‘people’” (Laclau, 2006, p. 113). This can be done by various techniques, such as the isolation of demands in a way that separates them from other demands or by the satisfaction of demands that renders them impotent to mobilise further. Another way to prevent the mobilisation of a counter-hegemonic alliance is to construct competing chains of equivalence in a way that disperses the antagonistic frontier, moving actors to the hegemonic side. Gramsci calls this process transformism and describes it as: “the formation of a ruling class [...] with the absorption of the active elements [...] from the allied as well from the enemy classes” (Gramsci, 1929-1930/1992, p. 137). The “absorption of the active elements” is thus a formula for co-optation; to include opponents in the alliance of the powerful with the intention of making antagonistic groups impotent. Laclau described this as a situation when the antagonistic frontier becomes blurred: “as a result of the oppressive regime itself becoming hegemonic – that is, trying to interrupt the equivalential chain of the popular camp by an alternative equivalent chain” (Laclau, 2005, p. 131).

Through applying Laclau’s thoughts on popular movements when analysing the dynamics in Patos-Marinza, I aim to better understand the dynamics of the deliberative CSR practices, and related monetary compensation schemes, implemented in the context.

Methodology

This paper is based on a retrospective qualitative study of Bankers’ operations in Patos-Marinza between 2009 and 2016. During this period, Bankers’ had a Canadian senior management and loan agreements with the international banks International Finance Corporation (IFC) and European Bank of Reconstruction and Development (EBRD). The loan agreements, which were signed in 2009, came with demands from the banks on the company to implement a Social and Environmental Management Programme, which makes this an ideal period to observe. By selecting this timeframe, it is possible to examine how deliberative ideals, outlined in the banks’ social and environmental management policies, were implemented as concrete CSR practices and the consequences of such in relation to community demands and mobilisation. The analysis of this period has been conducted based on three different sources of empirical material: autoethnographic vignettes, secondary data sources (documents/web pages/news reports/social media post) and interviews with company representatives, local authorities and local residents.

Generation of empirical material

The generation of empirical material for this paper was done in three stages. The first phase was an autoethnographic (Ellis *et al.*, 2011; Learmonth and Humphreys, 2021; Johansson and Jones, 2020) endeavour where I wrote down and analysed my previous work experience in the context I aimed to study. For almost five years (between 2010 and 2015), I worked with Bankers as a consultant and member of staff in Bankers' Community Relations department. As a consultant, I was involved in the implementation of the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) carried out in the area, which included consultation with around 500 stakeholders, and in the planning of Bankers' Social Management Program which was based on the findings of the SIA (Bankers, 2012). Followingly, employed as a Community Relations Coordinator, I took part in the implementation of all aspects of the Social Management Program including small scale SIAs for new operations, registering and addressing grievances from residents, on-going consultation with a broad range of stakeholders and implementation of Bankers' Community Investment Program. Part of the empirical material I base this paper on are vignettes which I wrote down shortly after leaving Bankers, with the intent to capture my thoughts and feelings as a CSR professional before being socialised into the academic realm. I wrote these vignettes from memory, with the help of memory joggers such as news reports, social media posts, photographs, diary notes and reports from various actors. In the empirical parts of this paper, some sections of these vignettes are included in shortened versions. Islam (2015) highlights that the line between the researcher and informant becomes blurred in autoethnography and involves a process where the researcher needs to engage in a process of distancing from the self. In the analysis, I view these vignettes as articulations of a corporate representative (me), and how I, as a practitioner, was part of reproducing and/or challenging corporate hegemony in Patos-Marinza through the implementation of deliberate CSR practices. Although the autoethnographic vignettes are highly subjective, based on moments of affect that function as anchors in my personal narrative of Patos-Marinza, they have been complemented by secondary material and interviews with other stakeholder to triangulate and validate my analysis.

The second phase was a systematic collection of secondary material including social media posts; new videos posted on YouTube; company reports/communication material; and reports from IFC and EBRD. Much of this material was available online whereas some of the company reports were sent to me after a formal request to Bankers management. This material was important in terms of triangulating both my own narratives and statements from interviews. It provided concrete figures and statements from actors at the time when events took place thus reducing the reliance on memories to reconstruct events. The secondary material that I have used in this paper are shown in Table 1 and those I have referred to are included in the Appendix.

The third phase was two rounds of interviews with stakeholders in Patos-Marinza including Bankers, contractors and government representatives, and residents. When interviews were planned, a letter explaining my new role as a researcher was sent to potential interviewees, and its content was also reiterated before each interview started, as part of obtaining participants' informed consent to undertake and record the interview. Three different ways of understanding community views were employed: pre-arranged group interviews at local cafés; spontaneous family visits; and as short chats on the local streets. As shown in Table 2 below, this paper is based on 11 interviews with managers and staff at Bankers and Bankers' contractors, two interviews with local government representatives, three group interviews with a total of 20 village representatives, nine interviews in local homes and eight informal chats on local streets. All interviewees are Albanian citizens and have been given pseudonyms.

Table 1. Documents, news reports and social media content	Authors	Source, type of document and information included
	Bankers	Bankers' website 2016. Pages describing the company history and operations and documents including news updates from earlier years
	Bankers	Email. Public information documents and internal reports which were sent to me by Bankers after a formal email request. These documents include reports about Bankers' grievance mechanism, and various stakeholder engagement material
	Compliance Ombudsman of IFC (CAO)	CAO webpage. Documents describing the complaint assessment process and results from dialogue groups
	IFC and EBRD	Websites of IFC and EBRD. Monitoring reports about Bankers' sustainability performance from 2011–2015
	UNEP	UNEP website. Environmental Assessment Report of Patos-Marinza from 2000
	Community members	Facebook groups created by anonymous actors from Patos-Marinza villages. Posts between 2014–2016 include photos from community protests and posts criticising the company for social and environmental impacts
	Local media	Local media YouTube-channels. Videos from four news agencies offering different perspectives on Patos-Marinza conflicts during the period 2009–2016
Source: Table by author		

Together with a local coordinator/translator, the community interviews were organised to highlight for participants that I now invited them for interviews as a university researcher and not as a company representative. As Bankers had changed its ownership/leadership at the time of interviews, from Canadian to Chinese, and many from the previous staff had left, it made it easier to explain my new role. However, residents sometimes fell into our old relationship where they explained their grievances to me, and I had to reiterate that I no longer held a role where I could address those. Managing residents' expectations and explaining the purpose of research was thus a continuous endeavour during interviews.

Analysis of empirical material

Through a content analysis, the empirical material was first categorised into eight concrete CSR practices, of which three were selected for further analysis: 1) market-based land acquisition; 2) grievance redress mechanism (including participatory air monitoring) and 3) dialogue groups. Each of these practices were guided by the IFC's Performance Standards for Social and Environmental Sustainability which made it possible to see how deliberative ideals were translated into concrete CSR practices. Each of these practices were also connected to concrete community demands on the company; for more land rental agreements, to stop air emissions, and to stop earth tremors. As such they provided an opportunity to see the dynamics between community demands and company responses, which other CSR practices did not. In two of these practices, the land acquisition and some parts of grievance management, monetary distribution schemes were activated. In contrast, no exchange of money was connected to the dialogue groups and the part of grievance management that used participatory air monitoring. This selection of CSR practices thus also made it possible to analyse and contrast the use of monetary transactions in relation to various deliberative practices.

Type of interview	Details of respondent	Documentation
Interview 1	Manager, Bankers' contractor	Verbatim
Interview 2	Former employee, Bankers' contractor	Verbatim
Interview 3	Manager, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 4	Senior representative, Local government	Notes
Interview 5	Manager, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 6	Employee, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 7	Employee, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 8	Manager, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 9	Senior representative, Local government	Notes
Interview 10	Manager, Bankers' partner organization	Verbatim
Interview 11	Former employee, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 12	Former employee, Bankers	Verbatim
Interview 13	Employee, Bankers	Verbatim
Group interview 1	Residents, 8 men (age 30–70)	Verbatim
Group interview 2	Residents, 7 men and 1 woman (40–70)	Verbatim
Group interview 3	Residents, 4 men	Verbatim
Family visit 1	Residents, 2 women and 3 men (20–65)	Notes
Family visit 2	Residents, 2 women and 4 men (age 20–50)	Verbatim
Family visit 3	Residents, 2 men (20–50)	Notes
Family visit 4	Residents, 2 women (20, 60)	Notes
Family visit 5	Residents, 2 men and 1 woman (50–60)	Verbatim
Family visit 6	Resident, 1 woman (40)	Notes
Family visit 7	Residents, 2 men and 2 women (60–20)	Verbatim
Family visit 8	Resident, Woman (50)	Notes + Verbatim
Family visit 9	Residents, 1 woman and 1 man (40–50)	Notes
Street chat 1	Resident, 1 man (60)	Notes
Street chat 2	Residents, 2 men (60) and 1 woman (60)	Notes
Street chat 3	Resident, 1 woman (40)	Notes
Street chat 4	Resident, 1 man (50)	Notes
Street chat 5	Residents, 2 women (30–40)	Notes
Street chat 6	Resident, Woman (50)	Notes
Street chat 7	Residents, 1 woman and 1 man (50)	Notes
Street chat 8	Resident, 1 woman (20)	Notes

Source: Table by author

Table 2.
Interviews

The categorised material was then coded according to Laclau's three steps of popular mobilisation to see how they supported or prevented community mobilisation: 1) The creation or hindering of chains of equivalence between demands – if demands from local residents were connected to or isolated from each other; 2) The formation or blurring of an antagonistic frontier – if demands were articulated to frame the company as 'the enemy' or if they were satisfied and included in the corporate alliance, and finally; 3) The creation of a universal signifier – if demands were reformulated on a universal level which could unite groups or if demands were prevented from reaching such universal level.

The analysis thus focused on understanding how different deliberative CSR practices were implemented and what they did to the social context and the relationship between the community and the company. In particular, I asked throughout the analysis if these CSR practices provided a ground for further community mobilisation, according to Laclau's framework or, in contrast, prevented such mobilisation to occur.

Implementing deliberative ideals in Patos-Marinza oilfield

Patos-Marinza is located in south-central Albania and is a vast plain where residences, agriculture and oil industry infrastructure lay side-by-side. Oil was discovered here in the 1930s and developed in the following decades during the communist regime of Enver Hoxha. When the Hoxha regime fell in 1991, the Albanian Democratic Party came into power and privatised the hydrocarbon sector as part of the efforts to introduce market economy in the previously closed communist system (UNEP, 2000). In 2004, the Canadian company Saxon (later renamed to Bankers) signed a concession agreement with the Albanian government that gave the company 100% control over the assets in Patos-Marinza. Bankers describe on their web page how the company in the following years revitalised the old oilfield with the help of investments in modern technology and remediation of the extensive historic pollution (Bankers Petroleum, 2016a). In 2009, Bankers signed a US\$110 m loan agreement with the international banks IFC and EBRD to support the revitalization and clean-up of the oilfield. In a press statement, IFC's Global Head for extractive industries explained that IFC provided this financing to support increased oil production, environmental remediation and improved living conditions in the surrounding area (Bankers Petroleum, 2009). By signing these loan agreements, Bankers also committed to follow IFC's and EBRD's policies and standards for social and environmental management (IFC, 2012; EBRD, 2008).

Deliberative ideals around CSR, similar to those advocated for by [Scherer and Palazzo \(2007\)](#), were leading ideals within the professional field of Community Relations that I worked with in Patos-Marinza. These ideals took the form of various stakeholder engagement activities guided by the standards of IFC and EBRD and motivated by obtaining and maintaining a Social Licence to Operate. Bankers' land acquisition practices, grievance redress mechanism and dialogue groups were three examples of how these deliberative ideals were implemented in practice. In the following sections I will outline how these practices were implemented and what social and political consequences they had in the context.

Dividing residents through market-based land acquisition

The expropriation of land is a controversial use of government force that IFC and EBRD advise corporate clients to avoid. Instead, IFC recommends that voluntary market-based transactions, defined as "market transactions in which the seller is not obliged to sell and the buyer cannot resort to expropriation" (IFC, 2012, p. 2), should be used when possible. In the cases where market-based transactions are implemented, IFC stipulates that no other mitigation measures are needed, because negative impacts are expected to be negligible as contracts are based on "free will". During the expansion of its operations, Bankers followed IFC guidelines and did not use expropriation as a way of accessing land. By not being able to rely on the Albanian government to expropriate land, the concession agreement was not enough for Bankers to ensure the expansion of its operations in Patos-Marinza. The company needed the agreement of residents to rent pieces of agricultural land for the construction of new leases.

The result of introducing IFC's and EBRD's sustainability standards to Bankers was that a *Project Information Document* was written with the aim of informing landowners about Bankers' land rental processes. In the document it is stated that: "All Bankers Land Rental Agreements are voluntary", and that Bankers is "Conducting prior and inclusive consultation with all residents" and "makes every effort to minimise impacts on residents land or access and includes this in Project design" (Bankers Petroleum, 2011a). The company thus committed to a deliberative land acquisition process that brought benefits to

the local population in the form of market-based land payments rather than harming them by forcibly moving people. "Obtaining consent" and carrying out land rental based on "free will" was thus important deliberative ideals in this process.

However, even though Bankers' land-acquisition process and the expansion of the oilfield was pictured as based on deliberations with and the free will of residents, a competing picture appeared during my time as a Community Relations Coordinator when I heard residents talk about Bankers' Land Acquisition practices. These stories often described what was perceived as unfair distribution of land rental payments and negative impacts from operations. This picture was repeated in interviews with residents when they spoke to me as a researcher. In a group interview, "Armand" explained:

So, the company rents someone's land but at the same time they destroy the structure of the land and they block the drainage system. When the river floods the land gets flooded and it takes one month for the water to get drained but this guy who has taken the money for the land, he is okay. But what about the other people who suffer the consequences? What about us? (Group interview 1)

Residents also described how land rental practices divided the community and incentivized certain people from speaking out against the company. The resident "Taulant", explained in detail about how company operations had impacted his agricultural land and told us that land rental contracts incentivised people from speaking openly:

Listen now, I will tell you something, if you go to a family who has rented land to the Canadians they will say good things [about the company]. Do you understand? It is because they have received money and if the company hear that they talk badly they will take back the land contract. (Family visit 7)

In another village, "Fatmir" complained about the smell of gas from wells and conveyed a similar view about peoples' unwillingness to speak up:

When the wind comes you can smell the gas. Some people do not complain because they have rented land to Bankers. (Group interview 3)

Posts in community groups on Facebook (@vetvetdyhere, 2014a, @vetvetdyhere, 2014b) told similar stories about how land payments hindered communities from speaking with one voice, about happy landowners receiving large payments from Bankers and neighbours being left with the consequences. My own experiences from working in Patos-Marinza, as well as these posts and interviews, indicate that Bankers' deliberative land acquisition practices legitimised a classic "divide and conquer" technique, separating "winners" and "losers" and making community mobilisation harder to accomplish. Some community members were isolated or included in Bankers' alliance through generous land payments whereas others were left with nothing but negative consequences of the expanding oilfield. A wide discrepancy thus existed between, on the one hand, the formal IFC documents where market-based land rental processes are described as beneficial and based on free will, and, on the other, the context of pressure and economic imbalances that local residents describe.

Isolating demands through a grievance redress mechanism

Even though Bankers' voluntary land-acquisition allowed oilfield operations to expand, continuous grievances and demands were raised by residents to improve the air quality in the area. Other CSR activities were thus needed to secure the company's "Social License to Operate".

IFC emphasises the importance of a grievance redress mechanism "since it creates opportunities for companies and communities to identify problems and discover solutions together" (IFC, 2009). A grievance mechanism thus corresponds to the deliberative ideal of

aiming for consensus solutions in corporate–community conflicts. Bankers describe on their website that the company established its grievance mechanism with the commitment to respond “in an appropriate and timely manner” to comments or questions from any project stakeholder, including residents of nearby communities (Bankers Petroleum, 2016b). Residents in Patos-Marinza were instructed to file their grievances at Bankers’ field office even though they also frequently visited the main office in Fier or called in their grievances. Residents would then be approached by a grievance officer, responsible for investigating the validity of the grievance and find appropriate solutions in case the grievance was found valid.

During my time working with Bankers’ grievance mechanism, air quality grievances were frequently filed by residents, a discontent which was also shown by social media posts concerning poor air quality (@vetvetdyhere, 2014c, @vetvetdyhere, 2015). Therefore, a participatory air monitoring program was developed as part of the grievance redress mechanism. Bankers informed residents about this programme in a public information leaflet:

As part of our ongoing commitment to improve environmental conditions in the Patos-Marinza area, Bankers will set up air quality monitoring points in vicinity to residential areas. The location of the monitoring points will be determined by Bankers environmental specialists in collaboration with local residents. (Bankers Petroleum, 2015)

The collaboration with local residents was a key feature of the air monitoring program in line with deliberative ideals. Our Community Relations Department collaborated with the Environmental Department for its implementation. When residents filed grievances related to air quality, tubes were placed in the yards of residents’ houses and the air samples were then sent to the UK for analysis. When results came back, they were shown to residents, to my knowledge always with the result that the air quality was within acceptable limits and according to international standards. To communicate these results, maps were produced by the environmental department showing that the air quality was worse in the nearby Fier Town due to the traffic. The conclusion was that the oilfield was safe to live in with regards to air quality.

Through the air monitoring program, many air quality grievances were disregarded as invalid, and no further action was taken. The grievance mechanism thus worked as a procedural technique to invalidate community concerns in a transparent and open manner on a case-by-case basis. This continuous registration and invalidation of grievances, which I was involved in, was emphasised by a man we met on a village road when I visited the field as a researcher. When we approached him, the man emphasised that he recognised me from before and that he had met me many times as a company representative. He stated that I had been writing and writing in my notebook to register his grievances but then nothing changed: “You could have done something, but nothing has been done. So, it does not matter if I speak to you or not” (Street chat 1).

The man’s frustration is in line with my own experience of Bankers’ grievance mechanism; we listened and registered and talked but the actions to address grievances almost never corresponded to the real needs and demands of residents. Patos-Marinza residents were thus not convinced by the participatory air monitoring practices but continued to file grievances about air emissions impacting their health and well-being. Their bodily experiences of poor air quality stood in contrast to the monitoring results and thus, the scientifically based “facts” produced by Bankers did not suffice to convince residents that their claims were illegitimate. Therefore, other responses in Bankers’ grievance mechanism were needed to manage residents’ demands, and those were connected to

monetary compensation schemes that led to real changes in people's lives as the vignette below describes:

In a grievance meeting with "Arber", my colleague and I could clearly feel the smell of gas from the oilfield while sitting at his veranda. We had brought maps from our environmental department specifying the air monitoring results of the area. The data showed that all air emissions were at acceptable levels and therefore not dangerous to the health of the communities. However, "Arber" was furious and told us that his children and elderly parents got sick with headaches and vomiting due to the air. We did not invalidate his grievance, but instead engaged in months of internal discussions which finally ended in a company decision to move five families from that particular area by providing compensation for alternative housing in Fier or Roskovec cities. "Arber" signed an agreement which made his small business part of the group of Bankers' generously paid sub-contractors. Thereby he could make enough money each month to rent an apartment in Fier for himself, his wife, parents and children.

To me at that time, the compensation and relocation of these families were a story of success, bringing a sense of meaning to what we did in Community Relations. This feeling was confirmed when I visited Bankers as a researcher and met "Arber" in the reception ready to hand in an invoice, expressing how happy he was with the arrangement. Bankers' grievance mechanism worked in the same way in several other cases; individual solutions were found, and money was transferred. During the village chats and interviews, it became apparent that this created a division between community members as those who were positive to Bankers had received various forms of compensation. One example is "Alkeida", a Patos-Marinza resident who told me that her family was happy with Bankers:

There is a bad smell in [our village] but we as a family are used to it, we have no problems with the environment or the health. We have been compensated by Bankers and have an apartment in Fier but go to the [village] house regularly. And of course, at our land it smells a lot because it is in the middle of the oilfield. But we have no complaints as a family. Though, if the company rented our land, we would be happy (Family visit 6).

As the examples of "Alkeida" and "Arber" show, flows of money strengthened the narrative of Bankers' operations as beneficial to the local environment and residents. The air in the field did not bother "Alkeida"s' family, as they had received compensation and rented an apartment in the city. Similarly, "Arber" and his neighbours became part of the satisfied corporate alliance.

Focusing on technical solutions through dialogue groups

In March 2013, the CAO received a complaint from an environmental leader representing Zharrza community in Patos-Marinza (CAO, 2013a). The resulting *CAO Assessment Report* stated that:

The complainant raises concerns about the extraction techniques of Bankers Petroleum Albania Ltd. and alleges several incidents and accidents may potentially be associated with those techniques. (CAO, 2013a)

The complaint was concerning tremors in the area, a phenomenon which Bankers referred to as natural earthquakes, but which community members were convinced were caused by Bankers' operations and extraction techniques. When the CAO receives a complaint from affected communities in an IFC client project area, they start an assessment to decide on the next steps. The CAO team concluded in their final assessment report that there "was broad agreement" among residents, Bankers and state authorities "that this question could be answered more definitively through better, more trusted technical information" and "that

any such inquiry should be cooperatively designed and should involve trusted, independent experts who specialise in seismology in the context of oil and gas development” (CAO, 2013 b). This conclusion became the start of ongoing dialogue groups led by the CAO where both community members and Bankers’ representatives attended to collectively discuss and find solutions to the seismic issue. The CAO concluded that the “composition of any potential working group should be decided collaboratively by the company, appropriate public sector representatives, and the complainants” (CAO, 2013a, p. 10). The responsibility of the Albanian government was thus generally undermined by this conclusion, depicted as an equal partner to the company and the community for finding a solution. In the following CAO dialogue groups, government representatives only played a minor role and rarely participated in further discussions.

A natural consequence of the conclusion of the CAO assessment – that the conflict could be solved through “better, more trusted technical information” and with the involvement of “independent experts” (CAO, 2013 b) was that discussions around technology dominated the proceedings. This can be seen in the following vignette from my participation in one of the dialogue meetings:

“Can you find a specialist who can look into how the oilfield has impacted ground stability over time?” the young woman on the other side of the room asked with a firm voice. She had read about the theory that cavities can be created because of oil extraction, resulting in tremors. “I believe that we have to find a specialist who knows about our technology”, the senior manager responded calmly, “and since it is heavy oil, we are producing here there are not many such specialists in the world”. He suggested that Bankers could do some research and come back to the dialogue group with suggestions of experts but emphasised that the company could not do this if there was a lack of trust in the process.

The focus on technology strengthened the position of the company in these dialogues as it had superior access to the knowledge and skills to understand oilfield technology. The community members tried to reinforce their position through reading up on oil technology and asking informed questions. However, the company easily dismissed such attempts by referring to the special technology used by Bankers and the few experts available worldwide. This skewed the balance of power balance, something also visible from the summary reports of the meetings. The *CAO Case Progress Report* from 2016 lists action items discussed in the dialogue groups and details how the company offered to organise “joint field trips”, to “provide information and documentation” and encouraged community members to “identify international experts with experience in the specific type of technology” (CAO, 2016, p. 5). The company’s focus on technological disclosure and the need for fact-finding can thus be seen as a strategy to shift opponents from a position of direct resistance to a process of finding mutual solutions.

Discussion

The vocal demands and protests in Patos-Marinza never led to a larger counter-hegemonic movement, and Bankers could continue to expand extraction activities in the area until I left in 2015. The aim of the deliberative CSR practices implemented by Bankers in Patos-Marinza was to maintain a Social License to Operate, a consensus situation where all main stakeholders were satisfied with the oilfield expansion or at least did not engage in violent protests to prevent it. In this section, I further specify how the implementation of Bankers’ CSR practices in Patos-Marinza can be seen as hegemonic articulations which hindered community mobilisation. The results of these articulations were: 1) The isolation of community demands through land-acquisition agreements and processing grievances on an individual basis; The incorporation of community members into the company alliance

through generous land-rental payments and compensation agreements, and; The depoliticisation of community demands and prevention of alternative visions for the area by focusing on technical issues through the air monitoring programme and CAO dialogue groups. The hegemonic effects on these three CSR practices in Patos-Marinza are summarised in [Table 3](#).

Deliberative
ideals and
hegemonic
practices

Isolating demands – preventing chains of equivalence

As emphasised by [Laclau \(2006\)](#), those in power have an interest in isolating demands and groups, thus actively preventing the formation of a general community demand, which could threaten the current hegemonic order. To this end, various techniques can be used to keep community interests “corporate”, preventing chains of equivalence forming between groups. Bankers’ grievance mechanism, which allowed community members to file their complaints individually, was one such mechanism through which community demands were isolated. Instead of protesting against the company as a group, community members could be dealt in isolation and tied to company processes in the hopes of finding an individual solution. Community members also speak about the land rental agreements as a mechanism in which residents were isolated and incentivised from speaking up against oilfield injustices. As highlighted by Dawkins: “its important to recognise that power dynamics present barriers to the airing of contested discourse” (2022, p. 382). When expropriation of land for industry purposes is an openly violent process in which people are resettled from their land, market-based land-rental practices, based on deliberative ideals of free will and consensus, is a hegemonic articulation which kept community demands on a corporate level. This is in line with previous studies which highlight deliberative practices as tools to demobilise community resistance ([Banerjee, 2018b](#); [Flores et al., 2022](#); [Ehrnström-Fuentes and Böhm, 2023](#)).

Expanding the corporate alliance – blurring the antagonistic frontier

The grievance mechanism was a way for Bankers to meet some of the most vocal voices, isolating some demands through individual processes and in some cases, transferring

	Isolation of demands	Expansion of the corporate alliance	Preventing an alternative vision
Market-based land acquisition	Silencing demands through fear of losing land payments	Inclusion of residents in corporate alliance through payments for land contracts	
Grievance mechanism	Isolation of demands through grievance redress on an individual basis	Inclusion of residents in corporate alliance and silencing of vocal residents through compensation agreements	Depoliticisation of community demands through participatory air monitoring and focus on monitoring results
CAO dialogue groups			Depoliticisation of community demands by focusing on technical issues such as instalment of seismometers

Source: Table by author

Table 3.
CSR practices and
negative effects on
community
mobilization

money through “joint solution” agreements, which moved residents into the corporate alliance of oilfield beneficiaries through contracting arrangements. Following the ideas of Laclau, these grievance compensation agreements, as well as payments for land-rentals, blurred the antagonistic frontier within the social field and connected some residents to the “winning side” of the corporate alliance. An antagonistic frontier between the community and the company was thereby weakened. As an example, “Arber” and his neighbours became part of the satisfied corporate alliance whereas thousands of residents remained in the smelly oilfield where air emissions continued.

Understanding the deliberative practices and money flows which contributed to the expanding oilfield is thus key for understanding the “relationships of dependence” (Maher, 2022) underlying company–community relations. As Maher (2022) and Orihuela *et al.* (2022) point out, community members dependence on companies for their livelihood can render any well-intentioned dialogue futile. The land acquisition process in Patos-Marinza and residents’ accounts of how these practices silenced critical voices is a clear example of the importance of understanding economic inequalities and money flows when examining deliberative processes.

Preventing an alternative vision – hindering an empty signifier

My analysis of the participatory air monitoring program and CAO dialogue groups is in line with previous research that show how stakeholder engagement and deliberation can become primarily a tool to control the discourse about company–society conflicts (Fooks *et al.*, 2013). As Cederström and Michael (2013, p. 416) describe, a core feature of CSR is: “that all problems are of practical nature, and hence best solved by corporate engagement”. The CAO conclusion was framed as a neutral, objective position focusing on finding answers through technological expertise. The technical focus in the CAO dialogue groups enhanced the powerful position of Bankers as the party with the best access to technological information about oilfield operations. By not addressing the general lack of trust for state institutions, the CAO process contributed to a situation in which the company could continue to act in a “vacuum”. In the gap left by Albanian state authorities, the company was placed in the position as the producer of “facts” and self-regulation, whereas community members had no neutral third party to turn to, and thus no epistemic and scientific support for their own claims. As corporate technology gained a dominant position over the bodily experiences of residents, the “objective” standpoint of the CAO can thus be seen as reinforcing corporate hegemony rather than challenging it.

In addition, the engagement of local residents in the dialogue groups and air monitoring program diverted their attention away from larger question such as if the oilfield should stop expanding and focused their attention on the technicalities of seismometers and oilfield technology. This dynamic is in line with the warnings of Banerjee that CSR may work as a counter mobilisation strategy “because the energies of the subaltern groups become dissipated not just in opposing development projects that threaten their livelihoods but also in resisting more manipulative and divisive practices of CSR” (Banerjee, 2018a, p. 5).

Conclusion

In line with the thinking of radical democracy (Mouffe, 2013) my analysis in this paper highlights how stakeholder engagement and deliberate CSR practices are hegemonizing and structuring the social in a way that is beneficial to corporate interest. Laclau’s model of populism has provided a useful lens to understand how deliberative CSR practices can be understood as hegemonic articulations which prevents chains of equivalence between community demands to form, blurs the antagonistic frontier between the community and

the company, and prevent a universal signifier to appear which could mobilise communities around an alternative vision of the area. By focusing on the dynamics of CSR practices rather than corporate intentions, my aim has been to show how hegemony unfolds regardless of if CSR practices are seen as purposeful techniques of depoliticization or well-intended attempts to build trust among stakeholders and a social licence to operate. According to agonistic pluralism, a situation where conflict is prevented and a Social License to Operate is achieved, is a hegemonic stabilization, no matter what the intentions are among actors. Accordingly, grievance management and land rental contracts isolated demands on a household basis and incentivised community members from speaking up, compensation and land payments moved residents over to the corporate alliance of satisfied oilfield “winners”, and dialogue groups and air monitoring techniques steered the debate towards technical issues while preventing an alternative vision of the area to be articulated. This is in line with the results of [Orihuela et al. \(2022\)](#) which underlines the importance of attention to the political economy behind extractive industry projects and why locals regularly frame ecological effects as economic compensation problems.

In line with [Dawkins \(2022\)](#) models of deliberation, my analysis shows that Patos-Marinza is a context where Deliberative Activism is the most suitable form of deliberation for communities that are challenging corporate hegemony, due to the economic inequalities in the area. Accordingly, local stakeholders, such as those in Patos-Marinza, should acknowledge that they have a conflictual relationship with corporations and focus on contesting corporate definitions of what responsibility is rather than participating in consensus-finding activities such as air-monitoring programs or grievance mechanisms. This stands in contrast with research that suggest amendments to deliberative forums and practices to increase or improve inclusiveness and representation ([Barlow, 2022](#); [Goodman and Mäkinen, 2023](#)). Instead, the results highlight the importance of resistance to political CSR through what previous research has underlined as practices of self-exclusion and alliances with legal, state and civil society human rights defenders ([Maher, 2022](#)). Attention to the larger political economy of extraction also underlines the importance for communities to seek alternative alliances with civil society or state actors to enforce alternative chains of equivalence and incentivise members to remain in the community side of the antagonistic frontier. The results also contribute to previous research that highlights the importance of non-extractive imaginations ([Ehrnström-Fuentes, 2022](#)) and “counterhegemonic alternatives for a democratization of democracy from below” ([Banerjee, 2022](#), p. 284). What was missing in Patos-Marinza was a strong counter-hegemonic voice, one that could gather demands of the community and put pressure on the Albanian government to stop oilfield expansion, or on Bankers to address oilfield impacts in a way that would benefit community as a whole.

Finally, what the analysis of Patos-Marinza shows is the contingent subject positions of the actors themselves and how this is at the core of a hegemonic struggle. Just as [Laclau and Mouffe \(1985/2014\)](#) argued, there are no pre-existing groups, but the very identities of actors are articulated in discourses competing for hegemony. This highlights the importance of understanding deliberative practices and money flows as hegemonic articulations and individuals as empty signifiers who can move over to new alliances based on how discourses are shaped and where money comes from. As studies of political CSR are often focused on analysing deliberative systems where economic inequalities are a core characteristic, future studies should examine of how money flows impact the conditions for and outcomes of deliberations. In line with what previous studies of extractive industries has shown ([Roussey et al., 2022](#); [Haslam, 2021](#)), the results from Patos-Marinza underline that monetary compensation schemes impact community members willingness to raise demands. In addition, practices of deliberation legitimise additional money transfers which

creates winners and losers and prevent further community mobilisation. Even if the result from this paper is most relevant in an extractive industry context, following flows of money should also be useful in other contexts where deliberation is upheld as an ideal to solve corporate-society issues.

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Appendix. List of referenced empirical material

Social media content (Facebook, Youtube)

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About the authors

Sara Persson is a postdoctoral researcher in Business Studies at Södertörn University, located in southern Stockholm, Sweden. She studies how discourses related to sustainability, CSR and circular economy are verbalised and materialised in different contexts and by various interest groups. Her current empirical research focuses on conflicts and justice issues in prospecting for “transition metals”, and the implementation of circular public procurement in Swedish municipalities. She is inspired by political economy and post-structuralist frameworks, feminist epistemologies and creative academic writing, including autoethnographic methods. Sara Persson can be contacted at: sara.persson@sh.se

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