

ARTICLE

## Social Assistance for Dispossession: Contradictions and Challenges of Social Work in the Context of Socio-Environmental Conflicts and Extractivism

### Asistencia social del despojo: contradicciones y desafíos del Trabajo Social en contexto de conflictos

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#### Abstract

Social work celebrates its one hundredth anniversary in Chile and Latin America, in a context marked by an ecosocial crisis and the expansion of socio-environmental conflicts inherent to extractivism, which entails both professional contradictions and challenges. Social work must address the disciplinary debate on its role within extractive companies operating in contexts of dispossession, as well as the associated ethical-political and theoretical-methodological dilemmas. Within this framework, the article analyses the role of social work practiced in companies that generate socio-environmental conflicts

**Keywords:**

social assistance  
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in Chile, identifying clientelist practices and their ethical-professional implications. From this perspective, it proposes the category of “social assistance of dispossession” as a critical and original contribution to describe the type of professional action co-opted by extractivism to legitimise processes of accumulation by dispossession within the framework of green somnambulism.

Along with characterisations and reflections, cases of malpractice and contradictions with professional codes of ethics are identified through a review of Latin American literature, document analysis, and the systematisation of participatory action research processes developed together with communities in resistance and the non-governmental organisation (NGO) Sustentarse. Nine cases of socio-environmental conflicts that occurred in Chile over the past two decades are examined. Likewise, the study demonstrated that the professional role—in its ontological, deontological, and methodological dimensions—aligns with the de-extractivisation of social work and the defence of territories and rights, fostering the collective construction of ecological, emancipatory, and postextractivist horizons. Finally, the article offers ethical-political reflections and inflections that encourage the reconciliation of the relationship between communities in resistance and social work.

## Resumen

El Trabajo Social conmemora cien años en Chile y América Latina en un escenario marcado por la crisis ecosocial y la expansión de conflictos socioambientales propios del extractivismo, lo que plantea diversas contradicciones y desafíos profesionales. En este contexto, el Trabajo Social debe asumir un debate disciplinar en torno a su rol al interior de las empresas extractivistas en contextos de despojo, así como los dilemas ético-políticos y teórico-metodológicos asociados. En este marco, el artículo analiza el rol de la disciplina en empresas que provocan conflictos socioambientales en Chile, identificando prácticas clientelares y sus implicancias ético-profesionales. Desde esta perspectiva, se propone establecer la categoría de «Asistencia Social del Despojo» como un aporte original crítico para describir el tipo de acción profesional cooptada por el extractivismo para legitimar procesos de acumulación por desposesión en el marco del sonambulismo verde.

### Palabras clave:

*Asistencia Social del Despojo; conflictos socioambientales; extractivismo; sonambulismo verde; Trabajo Social*



Junto con caracterizaciones y cuestionamientos, se identifican casos de malas praxis y contradicciones con los códigos de ética profesionales, mediante la revisión de literatura latinoamericana, análisis documental y la sistematización de procesos de Investigación-Acción Participativa (IAP) realizados con comunidades en resistencia y desarrollados junto a la organización no gubernamental (ONG) Sustentarse. Se estudian nueve episodios de conflictos socioambientales ocurridos en Chile en las últimas dos décadas. Asimismo, se demuestra que el rol profesional, en sus dimensiones ontológica, deontológica y metodológica, se alinea con la desextractivización del Trabajo Social y la defensa de territorios y derechos, apostando por la construcción colectiva de horizontes ecológicos, emancipatorios y postextractivistas. Finalmente, se plantean reflexiones e inflexiones ético-políticas que impulsan la reconciliación del vínculo entre comunidades en resistencia y el Trabajo Social.

## Introduction

Social work celebrates 100 years of history in Chile and Latin America, in a context marked by the eco-social crisis and the expansion of socio-environmental conflicts arising from extractivism. Although the discussion on the relationship between socio-environmental conflicts and social work has intensified in the last decade (Jerez, 2015; Marro, 2022; Panez & Mendoza, 2023), the specific discussion on the professional role within extractivist companies in contexts of socio-environmental conflict and the ethical-political and theoretical-methodological dilemmas that this entails still lacks depth.

In the context of this article, it is important to begin addressing this lack of development by considering two elements: on the one hand, the existence of a naturalisation of the professional practice of social work in processes of dispossession, described by Panez and Mendoza (2023), and, on the other hand, the growing professional devaluation in contexts of territorial resistance, as reflected in professional research experiences developed with the non-governmental organisation.<sup>2</sup>

This raises an unavoidable question: what is the ontological, methodological and deontological role of social work in the face of ethical and professional contradictions and scenarios of eco-social crisis and socio-environmental conflicts? This article aims

<sup>2</sup> The NGO Sustentarse advocates for human rights, sustainable development, and good socio-environmental governance at the local level. It also supports communities, especially the most vulnerable groups—such as women and indigenous peoples—in defending their rights, their territories, and the environment. For more information, visit: <https://www.sustentarse.cl/>

to critically analyse the role of social work in interventions carried out by extractive companies in contexts of socio-environmental conflict in Chile. The analysis focuses on clientelistic practices and their professional and eco-social consequences.

To this end, the proposed methodology, which is critical and qualitative in nature, draws on a review of Latin American literature on political ecology, extractivism, eco-territorial conflicts and social work, and a documentary analysis of primary and secondary sources, prioritising those that provide concrete evidence on the participation and characteristics of the discipline in corporate clientelism strategies. The material used includes information generated by the Sistema de Evaluación de Impacto Ambiental (SEIA)<sup>3</sup> (Environmental Impact Assessment System), such as Estudio de Impacto Ambiental (EIA) (Environmental Impact Studies) and technical annexes, including minutes of citizen participation and meetings, statements of consent and baseline documentation; public transparency documents from companies linked to the conflicts, such as framework agreements, collaboration regulations, institutional reports, and information on calls for socio-economic benefits; academic production, consisting of undergraduate and postgraduate theses, research, articles, and books on socio-environmental conflicts and social work; and, finally, publications by NGOs, communities in resistance, and socio-environmental organisations, including books, studies, opinion columns, public complaints, and reports.

126

Based on this review, nine episodes of socio-environmental conflict that have occurred in Chile in the last two decades are studied, selected for their public notoriety and social and ecological impact. In five of these cases, the presence of social work professionals was previously confirmed through fieldwork in the context of Participatory Action Research (PAR) processes with communities in resistance, developed in conjunction with the NGO Sustentarse. Based on this, the category of "Social Assistance for Dispossession" is proposed as an original critical contribution to describe the type of professional action of social work co-opted by extractive companies that legitimise processes of accumulation by dispossession within the framework of green somnambulism (Bonelli & Pavez, 2025).

<sup>3</sup> This is a preventive environmental management tool, regulated by Law No. 19,300 on General Environmental Principles, and defined in its regulations as a procedure carried out by the Environmental Assessment Service, which, based on an Environmental Impact Study or Declaration, determines whether the environmental impact of an activity or project complies with current regulations. It has been in force in Chile since 3 April 1997. Currently, the procedure is processed electronically through the e-SEIA.



Finally, ethical-political reflections and inflections are proposed that promote the de-extractivisation of professional action in the context of socio-environmental conflict and the reconciliation of the link between communities in resistance and social work.

## **Debates and Conceptualisations Around Extractivism and Socio-environmental Conflicts in Latin America**

The main conceptualisations of extractivism on the continent come from Eduardo Gudynas (2013), who defines it as the misappropriation of natural resources (hereinafter, natural common goods) in accordance with two pillars: the first consists of high volume and intensity, and the second, that more than 50% of what is extracted is destined for export. It also incorporates a variety of activities, including not only mining and oil, but also other hydrocarbons, monoculture, aquaculture and livestock farming. This process entails a high cost in terms of ecosystem degradation and impact on local communities (Gudynas, 2013).

This pattern of extractive exploitation stems from a global context based on two axes. On the one hand, there is the so-called Global North, made up of countries characterised as “developed” because they are centres of capital accumulation with high levels of consumption; on the other hand, there is the Global South, characterised as “underdeveloped” due to the plundering of its raw materials and the concentration of socio-environmental impacts (Escobar, 2010). This reflects an unequal global economic and ecological exchange, which has intensified and been reinvented since the 1970s through the neoliberal model. Harvey (2004) explains this as accumulation by dispossession, a cycle of expropriation and commodification that handed over public and collective natural assets to large transnational corporations for exploitation and export to the Global North. This form does not generate wealth through production but rather dispossesses a colonised Latin America and its rural and/or indigenous communities of resources, ecological wealth and rights in order to supply the needs of the Global North (Machado, 2013). This new imperialism is strengthened by three components: the value of neoliberalised local states; the expansion of financial capital for the appropriation of rents and assets (natural common goods) through credit mechanisms, debt and speculation; and the manipulation of crises—whether real or induced—by taking advantage of asset devaluation to consolidate processes of dispossession, forging capital accumulation and profitability through precariousness and sacrifice (Machado, 2013).

In this context, progressive governments in Latin America in recent decades have given rise to a form of neo-extractivism that reconverts the logic of accumulation, deepening



the neoliberal model through components of state administration of exploitation revenues. This extractivist model is legitimised by narratives of national sovereignty and technological advancement that are sustained by a context of traditional industrial change, involving the rise of mega-mining, fracking and hydroelectric megaprojects, in which, however, intensive commodification and the associated socio-environmental impacts persist (Gudynas, 2013; Svampa & Viale, 2014).

In response to these processes of dispossession, eco-territorial resistance movements have emerged, conceptualised as socio-environmental conflicts, which in Chile are defined by the National Institute of Human Rights (Instituto Nacional de Derechos Humanos [INDH], 2018) as disputes between actors over the use of resources and the environmental impacts of economic activities. However, there are other definitions that consider other aspects that enrich the conceptual discussion. Escobar (2014) defines them as struggles against the dominant model that imposes capitalist ways of life on local communities, specifying that not only territories are defended, but also relational ontologies. In the same vein, Svampa and Viale (2014) add that these disputes undermine the very scope of democracy when extractivism is imposed on territories without their consent, generating resistance, repression and community division. Considering these in-depth concepts, registers compiled by civil society organisations emerge that reveal a broader and more critical reality regarding socio-environmental conflicts in Chile. In contrast to the limited record of the INDH (2018), which documents only twenty-one cases in the Valparaíso region, the Aconcagua Observatory of Chile (2024) reports a total of two hundred and fifty in the same region.

Meanwhile, the maximisation of these dispossessions is spatially expressed in what Svampa and Viale (2014) conceptualise as sacrifice zones. These are spaces that concentrate the environmental damage caused by extractivism, which affects the health of the population and their quality of life as a result of pollution, under a logic of efficient occupation of territories that are considered expendable. This process also tramples on other local rationalities and ways of life.

In recent years, Chile has undergone a new wave of extractivism, this time cloaked in “green” and “sustainable” rhetoric and legitimised by global narratives of decarbonisation and energy transition. This phenomenon is manifested in the rise of industries such as green hydrogen (H2V), lithium, mega-mining and desalination (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024; Lueje & Standen, 2024). This reformulation of the same logic of accumulation by dispossession has been conceptualised as green extractivism, which also reproduces and deepens the so-called sacrifice zones, renamed “green” (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024). These dynamics are sustained by a collective automatism,



explained through the concept of “green somnambulism”, coined by Bonelli & Pavez (2025) to refer to sustainability rhetoric that constructs misleading narratives, imposing the adoption of these new industries as indispensable responses to the eco-social crisis, while obscuring possibilities for thinking about post-extractivist development alternatives.

In this scenario, it is necessary to specify that, for the purposes of this paper, extractivism is understood as the intensive appropriation and dispossession of natural common goods in dynamics of accumulation by dispossession, characteristic of globalised neoliberalism. This dispossession affects not only common goods, but also ancestral knowledge, cultural, subsistence and epistemic elements that express the symbiosis between ecosystem flows and local ways of life, a relationship that is also compromised (Escobar, 2016). In this context, there is growing socio-environmental conflict, understood as resistance by communities to the dispossession of their territories, bodies and ways of life by extractivism (Svampa & Viale, 2014).

Thus, in order to overcome this resistance, extractivism deploys mechanisms that co-opt territories, deny conflicts and demobilise resistance (Pavez & Mendoza, 2023). Machado (2012) proposes biopolitical expropriation to define elements of this extractivist *modus operandi*. Not only are territorial elements that enable certain material living conditions stripped away, but community fabrics and territorial roots themselves are broken down in order to dismantle resistance, encourage habituation and legitimise dispossession. In this context, authors warn that social work, captured by neoliberal companies, contributes to normalising extractivist violence, demobilisation and even counterinsurgency (Marro, 2018; Pavez & Mendoza, 2023).

### **Social Work and Socio-environmental Conflicts in Chile: History, Relevance and Contemporary Relevance**

Social work in Chile has an important historical tradition related to the environment. Although in its infancy, the discipline focused on promoting improvements in hygiene and health conditions, as well as, later, on promoting health infrastructure. However, its boom did not materialise until the 1960s, in the context of the Agrarian Reform, where it played a driving role in peasant unionism, community expropriation and the collective management of land and natural common goods. Nevertheless, with the coup d'état in 1973 and the subsequent forced imposition of the neoliberal model, the profession had to adapt in order to survive in a repressive context, leading to a setback in territorial intervention processes. From this point on, this historical ontology of social work, linked to socio-environmental work, faded away amid corporate co-optation (Castañeda-Meneses, 2024).



In the context of the centenary of the profession in Chile and Latin America, marked by the eco-social crisis described above, the discussion on the relationship between socio-environmental conflicts and social work has intensified, both in the field of academic production (Jerez, 2015; Marro, 2022; Panez & Mendoza, 2023) and, for example, in Chile, with the incorporation of the subject “Environment, Territory and Social Work” into the professional training curriculum of the University of Valparaíso (2020). However, the specific discussion on the professional role within companies linked to this type of conflict, amid the ethical-political and theoretical-methodological dilemmas that this entails, has not been explored in depth.

Given this conceptual gap, it is essential to identify two fundamental reasons for its relevance. Firstly, it is necessary to recognise that socio-environmental conflicts are intrinsic to professional practice for three main reasons: i) the rise and expansion of eco-territorial conflict derived from new forms of extractivism, such as green extractivism (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024; Gudynas, 2024); ii) extractivist domination exacerbates the problems and gaps of the contemporary eco-social issue (Marro, 2022); and iii) the triple planetary crisis—climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution— intensifies the generation of social problems, socio-environmental conflicts and socio-natural disasters (Organización de las Naciones Unidas [ONU], 2024).

Secondly, it is essential to demystify the idea that these phenomena and impacts are restricted exclusively to rural areas and marginalised regions. Although most conflicts occur in rural areas, the impact of extractivism is not limited to the extraction site but also affects the entire export chain and even beyond (Gudynas, 2013).

Thus, socio-environmental conflicts and the effects of extractivism are relevant to any area of social work intervention; moreover, they will profoundly impact and condition any case of professional action.

### **Corporate Clientelism: Extractivism Strategies to Demobilise Communities and Neutralise Resistance**

In the context of socio-environmental conflicts, one of the most effective—and at the same time most perverse—strategies of extractivism has been the use of corporate clientelism as a method of social control. When a community is promised high numbers of jobs, economic prosperity and social development projects, but the true socio-environmental costs are omitted, according to Garibay (2010), it becomes trapped in terms of organisation and collective resistance.



According to Tetreault (2013), these processes generate division and polarisation within the community, which falls within what Arriagada (2013) conceptualises as “corporate clientelism”, a deeply asymmetrical relationship between the company—with high capital, which provides resources—and the community, with limited access to them, which receives them in exchange for acceptance and loyalty. This practice constitutes a form of extractivist domination, based on the logic of feudalism and contemporary slavery, where the social urgencies of the community are instrumentalised as a way of legitimising extractivist violence.

“The classic clientelist practice to reduce local resistance, to buy leadership and to legitimise their projects. And they do this all over Chile, they go, they set up a headquarters for you, they buy shirts for sports clubs” (Social leader from Limache, 44 years old, quoted in Riveros & Vargas, 2018, p.77).

### **Socio-environmental Conflicts in Chile: Social Work in the Extractivist *Modus Operandi***

The *modus operandi* of extractivism is clearly evident in nine of the most significant socio-environmental conflicts of the last two decades in Chile. In all of them, social work professionals were found to be engaging in clientelist practices.

This is the case of HidroAysén (2007–2014), a socio-environmental conflict located in the Andean Patagonia. Jerez (2015) documents how the company deployed various clientelistic tools. These included the constant harassment of social professionals in the municipalities in order to gain their trust and obtain social approval through social benefit programmes, offering prizes for bingo games and financing popular festivals, while at the same time minimising the environmental impact on national parks and Mapuche communities.

For its part, the Alto Maipo hydroelectric project (2007–present), located in the Santiago mountain range, uses clientelistic strategies, including the AES Gener Competitive Fund, scholarships, community agreements, and the creation of viewpoints; actions that have been carried out by various social work professionals over almost two decades, according to their own information (AES Gener, 2010; 2014; Zaccarelli, 2016). These practices seek to generate social legitimacy, while at the same time concealing complaints about the destruction of Andean forests and glaciers and water hoarding (Servicio de Evaluación Ambiental, 2019). In an interview conducted by the author with Marcela Mella, the former spokesperson for the No Alto Maipo Coordination Committee (September 2025, in the context of territorial

accompaniment developed by the NGO Sustentarse) recounts the strong stigmatisation exercised against those who resist clientelistic practices, leading to family breakdowns, neighbourhood confrontations, divisions within neighbourhood associations, the municipality and social and resistance organisations, job dismissals and even physical conflicts. This dynamic coincides with that documented by Campos (2016).

The Central de Bombeo Paposo (CBP) (2022–2024) and the Integrated Energy Infrastructure Project (INNA) (2021–present), both energy generation initiatives, are located in the Atacama Desert, specifically in the municipality of Taltal. The companies promoted clientelistic relationship strategies with the communities of the Chango people and coastal localities. Through framework agreements and greenwashing tactics, they advertise the creation of viewpoints and electrical infrastructure, the allocation of jobs and gifts, as well as the supposed sustainability of the H2V and desalination industry (Illanes y Asociados & Colbún, 2024; Gisoc Consultora & AES Andes, 2024). However, these strategies hide the impacts on the archaeological and astronomical areas, as well as on marine-coastal ecosystems and livelihoods (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024; Lueje & Standen, 2024).

132

As a result, most of the changa communities rejected these agreements and broke off relations with the companies (Illanes y Asociados & Colbún, 2024; Gisoc Consultora & AES Andes, 2024). Similarly, in interviews conducted by the author with members of the Almendrales del Gaucho community in Paposo (17 October 2024, in the context of an IAP developed with Sustentarse), a collective narrative of discontent was expressed towards two communities that accepted agreements with the companies. In particular, they criticise the payments received for signing the project baseline, pointing out that this caused divisions and disputes between communities. As one member pointed out: “They already have electricity, they already have money, we still don’t.”

The sacrifice zones of Tocopilla (1915–present), Mejillones (1995–present) and Quintero-Puchuncaví (1964–present) are located on the coast of the Atacama Desert and on the coast of central Chile, respectively. These saturated territories share the presence of the same transnational companies. Energy corporations develop community outreach programmes through competitive funding, food box deliveries, visits to industrial facilities, and sporting activities such as the “AES Gener Cup,” aimed at promoting the health and recreation of children and adolescents (AES Gener, 2010; 2014; Engie, 2020). However, these legitimisation actions conceal the socio-environmental impacts of extractive companies: air pollution, chronic exposure to heavy metals and mass poisoning. One of the most emblematic cases is the poisoning of La Greda school in Puchuncaví, where serious health effects on children and adolescents linked to industrial emissions were documented (Viviani et al., 2021).



Dominga (2013-present) is located on the coast of north-central Chile. The mining-port project is supported by a framework agreement, through which food boxes are delivered, festivities are financed, free internet points are installed, and even direct payments are made to the parties participating in the agreement (Illanes, J. y asociados & Andes Iron. 2013; Andes Iron, 2016; Fuentes & Ergas, 2021). These patronage practices conceal the impacts on the Humboldt Archipelago and the indigenous biocultural heritage of the coast of the La Higuera-Los Choros sector (Greenpeace, 2025). As a result, the communities receiving financial payments have tended to support the project, leading to a fractured community, major internal divisions and conflicts between those who defend the marine environment and those who are subordinate to the company, resulting in symbolic and territorial violence (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1970; Fuentes & Ergas, 2021).

Finally, Pascua Lama (2000–2018), located in the Atacama Desert mountain range, is a mining project that has given rise to one of Chile's most emblematic cases of environmental conflict. Challenges to the industrial operation due to its responsibility for the destruction of Andean glaciers and its impact on the communities of the Huasco Valley led to sanctions and, ultimately, the cancellation of the project due to repeated breaches (Lobos, 2022). The company implemented clientelistic community relations strategies, but after a short time, agreements began to fall apart and social consensus was lost. The Diaguita indigenous community of Perales denounced the high payments made for attending meetings and signing consent agreements, without informing them of the consequences of the project and even falsifying an attendance list that included signatures of people outside the communities to legitimise decisions (Chile Desarrollo Sustentable, 2019). This led to polarisation, disputes and social divisions between those who denounced the breaches and impacts and those who received payments.

Taken together, the systematisation of these nine cases reveals a national pattern that shows how basic needs are transformed into a tool to divide communities and seek legitimacy. This process turns some community members into accomplices in their own dispossession, while social assistance is instrumentalised as a mechanism for validating extractive dispossession.

### **Green Somnambulism and the Conceptualisation of Social Assistance for Dispossession**

In this context, it is proposed that part of the social work carried out in extractive companies in Chile, by normalising this *modus operandi* laden with socio-

environmental impacts, is linked to the green somnambulism proposed by Bonelli & Pavez (2025). Within this biased perspective, it is assumed that there are no other alternatives for development, so it is thought that the best possible is being done and anthropogenic omissions, such as environmental damage and the fracturing of the social fabric, are accepted. This naturalisation leads social work to demobilise conflicts and manage the consequences of dispossession as an inevitable component of progress, given that its causes are not questioned and trust is placed in green, technological and local development discourses. Thus, the belief is maintained that the profits from extractivism will benefit the territory through a supposed spillover effect (Gudynas, 2013). As a result, social work becomes trapped in a technocratic practice that obstructs the imagination of transformative eco-political horizons. Its ontological, deontological and methodological role in social transformation becomes blurred and, paradoxically, it becomes the oppressor that seeks to assist the oppressed, acting as a neutraliser of the social and environmental suffering that it vocationally seeks to remedy. Given this conceptual analytical void, the term Social Assistance of Dispossession is proposed to describe these clientelistic practices based on green somnambulism.

Based on this conceptual proposal, a series of analytical characteristics are presented below to deepen our understanding. A first criterion of Social Assistance for Dispossession is that it operates as a facilitator of the legitimisation and acceptance of the installation of extractivism in the territories, acting in favour of its interests as a tool of dispossession, in an action forged by the logic of accumulation by dispossession. Accordingly, its methodology is based on welfare and clientelist practices, using social benefits such as competitive funds, scholarships, food parcels, gifts and cash handouts, through framework agreements and accords in contexts of power asymmetry, coercion and commercial dynamics.

In addition, it exercises epistemic violence, as it denies and subordinates ancestral, territorial and local knowledge, imposing external solutions and visions of development, excluding struggles, worldviews and alternative ways of life through technical terminology and interventions disconnected from structural problems and those brought about by the company's operations. All of this is framed within green somnambulism.

This exercise has territorial consequences, including: division and demobilisation of communities; co-optation of territorial actors; stigmatisation and violence; breakdown of networks and families; dismemberment of the social fabric; and depoliticisation of community resistance. It also neutralises suffering by appealing to meritocracy and compensation.

Among its ethical and professional consequences, Social Assistance for Dispossession devalues social work and limits its ontological transformative potential, encourages inequalities and social and environmental injustices, and replicates colonial and racist logics about the Global South, rural and indigenous communities, and natural commons.

These characterisations allow us to problematise and delineate what Social Work in extractivist contexts can constitute. It is a type of practice that perpetuates extractivist violence, instrumentalises social rights through clientelism, and hides its causes behind a façade of social intervention and corporate responsibility.

The formulation of the concept of Social Assistance for Dispossession, and each of its components, is a critical proposition for naming extractivist clientelist practices. The specific use of each term is described and justified below.

The component of “assistance” does not refer to solidarity aid, but to the practice of welfare, historically associated with charitable and vertical dynamics, typical of the beginnings of social work, especially in the Global North, as well as corporate clientelism. The categories of “intervention”, “accompaniment” or “social work of dispossession” are rejected because “assistance” accurately highlights the welfare and compensatory nature of this practice.

The adjective “social” represents uncritical neutrality, as it is not positioned as humanitarian, collective or community-based, but rather limited to being social, reflecting the dynamics of appropriation of beliefs and rhetoric of social benefits, instrumentalised for corporate legitimisation.

Finally, the proposed concept differs from necessary and classic social assistance in its central component, “dispossession,” understood as the consequences of extractivism in the territories. Social assistance becomes Social Assistance of Dispossession when, in contexts of socio-environmental conflict, instead of promoting social justice, it is captured by companies to use clientelist mechanisms that allow them to demobilise resistance and legitimise dispossession.

### **Social Assistance of Dispossession: Ethical-professional Contradictions and Malpractice**

In this way, Social Assistance of Dispossession generates contradictions with the foundations and ethical standards of social work. The International Association of

Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Work (IASSW/IFSW, 2018, art. 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 9) establish fundamental pillars such as recognising the inherent dignity of humanity; promoting and defending human rights; promoting social justice; promoting the right to self-determination; encouraging the right to participation; and maintaining professional integrity.

Meanwhile, the Chilean College of Social Work (2014, arts. 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 9, 20 and 23) reaffirms ethical duties such as promoting social justice; respect for the right to autonomy and self-determination of communities; promoting universality; guaranteeing civil, social and political rights; maintaining a commitment to environmental sustainability; respecting legislation and guaranteeing quality services to reduce poverty and vulnerability gaps; as well as not establishing economic relationships with subjects of intervention.

In this regard, Social Assistance for Dispossession denies the principle of dignity inherent to humanity and the universality of rights, considering that it facilitates the dispossession and segregation of communities. Based on the cases analysed, it is evident that these communities are treated as if they had less value and dignity than companies and social groups in the Global North, which benefit from extractive activities on the other side of the globe. In this context, their right to participation, consultation and self-determination is restricted, reducing them to objects of welfare intervention, without recognition of their own knowledge. They are dehumanised and treated as obstacles to be persuaded and managed, subordinating their human value and dignity to the interests of extractivism that dispossesses them.

The commitment to social justice and human rights is blurred by normalising projects that amplify inequalities and deprive communities of their rights (Gudynas, 2013). Guarantees related to indigenous consultation, participation, self-determination, a pollution-free environment and life itself are affected in most of the cases analysed (ONU, 2024). Likewise, consent is violated in the INNA and CBP cases (Cabaña & Balcázar, 2024).

Most of the companies involved in the cases analysed have caused widely proven and even sanctioned ecological damage, in breach of the Ley Indígena (Indigenous Law), the Ley de Bases Ambientales (Environmental Framework Law) and the laws on access to environmental and public information, as well as the Escazú Agreement and other international treaties (UN, 2024). In this context, Social Assistance for Dispossession violates respect for legislation, sustainability, and access to quality services. Similarly, according to the analysis, companies offered financial incentives for the acceptance of projects such as Dominga and Pascua Lama.

On the other hand, the proposed notion is also based on the criteria of bad practices in social work, developed by Sheafor et al. (1988). In this regard, the authors point out among their demonstrable causes of professional action that “it omits or restricts the generation of any offence, harm or damage” and that “its conduct causes some type of offence, harm or damage”. These causes are fully applicable to the damage and minimisation of socio-environmental impacts on ecosystems, ways of life, community resistance and territories.

In the same vein, causes Nos. 20, 21 and 31 establish “using a radical, unconventional or improvised procedure or technique in social work,” “providing false or inaccurate information or guidance,” and “carrying out social intervention actions that run counter to the established legal order”.

The first cause manifests itself in the adoption of clientelistic and welfare-oriented methods that lack scientific and transformative validity and are widely questioned in the specialised literature (Acevedo, 2024). The second is evident in the provision of partial and technical information about the project, emphasising social and economic benefits while concealing socio-environmental consequences (Fuentes & Ergas, 2021). This includes prohibiting access to opposition leaders and communities in resistance, as occurred with the Peralitos group in Pascua Lama (Chile Desarrollo Sustentable, 2014). This limits access to environmental information, which is protected in our country by Law No. 19,300 (amended by No. 20,417) and Law No. 20,285 on access to public information.

### **Ethical-political Reflections and Inflections for the De-extractivisation of Social Work**

This journey has verified and mapped how social work, in contexts of extractivist co-optation, has been instrumentalised as a means of legitimising dispossession through clientelist practices that blur its foundations and distance it from its historical vocation of social transformation. Social Assistance for Dispossession reproduces a fiction of development that, in order to sustain itself, requires constant destruction and dispossession, deepening its attempt to address the crises it creates. This dynamic fosters social problems such as poverty and inequality, precisely those that social work has historically sought to overcome. Therefore, these ontological contradictions call for the urgent need to repoliticise the professional practice.

The de-extractivisation of social work requires profound changes on three fundamental levels. On the one hand, the ontological level. As described above, social work stems





from a historical vocational ontology of territorial intervention, linked to socio-political processes of Latin American emancipation. Recognising that these practices are carried out in spaces that have been subjected to more than five centuries of colonial dispossession and commodification of natural common goods, abandoning uncritical neutrality means returning to the liberating horizon of the profession, forged in the 1960s from the popular, peasant and indigenous struggles of Latin America. Recognising that Latin American social work has been built in territories of the South, which have been turned into sacrifice zones to sustain an unsustainable global economic system, implies taking an ethical-political stance against processes of dispossession.

Secondly, the methodological level. Faced with these contradictions, a critical reappropriation of critical/radical, network and ecological intervention models is required, which strengthen community organisation and enable us to confront forms of extractivist clientelism. Added to these are the perspectives of *Green Social Work*, Popular Education, Latin American Political Ecology and Southern epistemologies, which contribute to understanding how the methodological role of social work in contexts of dispossession should be oriented towards facilitating collective processes of emancipation, the recovery of collective memories, the revaluation of biocultural heritage, and inter-epistemological construction between traditional Latin American science and ancestral, ecological, territorial, local, and socio-popular knowledge. Only through participatory and decolonial methodologies is it possible to confront professional co-optation and counteract community fracture, making memories and impacts visible in order to build alternatives for development and a concrete good life.

And finally, the ethical dimension. The role of social work in Social Assistance for Dispossession contradicts professional codes of ethics and constitutes malpractice. Recognising corporate co-optation and clientelism as such does not seek to discredit or defame the profession, but rather to denounce and demand that it be practised in accordance with its historical principles and values, its legal standards and respect for human rights. In this way, tangible consequences such as devaluation and loss of social trust due to complicity in dispossession processes will be inhibited. For all these reasons, it is important to promote disciplinary discussion and eco-political training on issues such as socio-environmental ethics, indigenous consultation and climate justice.

Consequently, these shifts require social work to abandon green somnambulism, which legitimises an unrealistic sustainable or green extractivism, and to take a position that not only denounces but also builds viable new approaches within the profession itself, allowing for the construction of ways of conceiving and reconciling the relationship



between social work and communities in resistance. This can be achieved through the articulation of research and professional intervention with local experiences and knowledge that facilitate the construction of social transformation and situated well-being.

In summary, this article has justified that the ontological, methodological, and deontological role of social work in contexts of dispossession must be aligned with the de-extractivisation of the profession and the defence of territories and rights, committing to the collective construction of ecological, emancipatory, and post-extractivist horizons.



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