

What can an old mine tell us about a just energy transition?



Lessons from social mobilization across mining and renewable energy in Morocco

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When protests over a new solar power plant broke out in southeastern Morocco in 2011, state officials and rural residents alike compared the mobilization to longstanding conflicts over a nearby cobalt mine.¹ While the officials sought to manage the political dissent in order to protect these mega-projects, the residents had other concerns. They questioned who owned these resources, the land on which the projects were sited, and the wealth they created. They wanted jobs. They wanted the economic development such projects were marketed as promoting. Since then, conflicts have intensified over silver, cobalt and phosphate mining and renewable energy installations. Residents themselves point to similarities between the economic, ecological and political impacts of these seemingly disparate kinds of projects.² Residents are concerned about the material impacts – limited jobs, negligible investment in the local economy, and appropriation of scarce water – but they also contest how the familiar political dynamics across these different sectors echo longstanding forms of repression and marginalization. The apparent similarities between mining and solar energy production do more than rehearse power imbalances whereby marginalized rural residents are asked yet again to bear the costs of national

development for the benefit of private corporations and state power. Continuities between extraction and renewable energy also raise questions about how to work towards a just transition not only in Morocco but in countries around the world that are seeing a surge in renewable energy projects, often in areas with long histories of mining. How to advocate for new forms of energy that do not reproduce the same economic and political inequalities inherent in carbon-fuelled capitalism? Diagnosing what we need to ‘transition from’ is essential to identifying what we need to ‘transition to’. This diagnosis is about more than critique. It is also crucial for identifying the collective politics that can produce an equitable transition.

Working towards a just transition requires mapping out how energy production happens in particular places. Beyond high-level national or international policies, what are the bureaucratic and legal procedures that make these projects come to life for the people and places around them? Such mapping can also document how people mobilize at the local level in ways that are meaningful for them, even when they do not appear to have a lot of power. This political and analytic exercise is particularly important in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). Discussions of a just transition in the region often turn to democratic governance and how struggles for representation, transparency, redistribution and accountability take precedence in social mobilizations over climate justice or environmental framing.³ A focus on a just transition as a process that is at least in part worked out in the daily encounters between residents and powerful actors helps to shift the emphasis from democratization as a *prerequisite* for a just transition to democratization as *an important step in that transition*.

A just transition in Morocco

In the autumn of 2021, just as the United Nations climate talks (COP26) were getting under way in Glasgow, a collaborative action research project including Moroccan partners and the author began its own effort to address the urgent environmental justice demands of the moment. The goal of this effort is to capitalize on nearly a decade of experience of one particular dimension of democratizing the movement for a just transition. The new project aims to democratize knowledge about extraction and local governance in the southeast of Morocco in an effort to support diverse forms of resident engagement and mobilization. As part of a network of human rights and civil society activists, project partners had previously brokered relations between different groups of residents around the Imider silver mine and the corporation – *Société Métallurgique d’Imiter* (SMI) – they were protesting against.⁴ This earlier multi-year effort (2012–2015) included a corporate social responsibility (CSR) programme across the parent company’s southeastern Moroccan mines.⁵ While the results of this earlier effort were mixed at best, the activists did learn valuable lessons about how to have the impact they aspire to as brokers, mediators and social justice advocates. They have integrated these lessons in their newly formed *Association pour la Promotion de la Médiation au Maroc* (APMM) – established in 2017 – and in the action research initiative that they inaugurated in the autumn of 2021.

This action research project asks two kinds of questions crucial to a just transition in Morocco: 1) what are the laws, policies and bureaucratic regulations that govern large-scale extraction projects and renewable energy; and 2) how do power relations around extraction and renewable energy at the local level shape the daily lives of residents? The daily interactions that constitute rural politics are not just parochial or local: they matter at multiple levels, from recognizing the forms of political mobilization that are important to rural residents to identifying points of engagement or resistance that can often change the course of particular projects. A just transition programme for Morocco – and for the region as a whole – needs to widen the lens from an exclusive focus on energy or extraction to also understanding how residents incorporate these projects into their broader political goals. The rural southeast of Morocco is not simply a periphery for the high-income countries (or even for Morocco's urban centres) that are looking to displace the environmental costs of their energy transition onto the Global South. It is also a centre for political practice that should be considered as a starting point for what a just transition might look like for the arid lands of North Africa, particularly given the importance of Morocco's rural areas to the country's oppositional politics in the last decade.⁶

This essay lays out how power mapping and an account of bureaucratic procedures can help to democratize knowledge around extraction and energy production with the objective of supporting local and regional movements for a just transition. This mapping process must be a collaborative, critical project that involves residents of extraction zones regardless of their background, expert knowledge, or familiarity with the rights-based language of global social movements. Residents offer unique insights into the politics surrounding extraction, showing the importance of a broad contextual analysis of rural governance for a just transition. The programme laid out here is general enough to be applicable to other contexts and in fact grows out of the author's own involvement with just transition work in the central Appalachian coalfields of the US. The essay proceeds first by describing the contemporary context for conventional extraction and renewable energy in southeastern Morocco. It then outlines a methodology for mapping four continuities between mining and renewable energy production: similar actors and financial interests involved in both sectors; the legal and bureaucratic frameworks that govern both kinds of projects; local revenue systems; and political claims around representation and redistribution.

Diverse forms of extraction in southeastern Morocco

The impetus for this analysis and the broader action research initiative grows out of the parallels between solar energy and conventional mining identified at the beginning of this essay. The NOORo utility-scale solar installation in Ouarzazate was announced in 2010 as a 'clean break with the past'. The concentrated solar power (CSP) plant was heralded as the flagship project in Morocco's solar plan, which aimed to move the country from nearly complete reliance on imported fossil fuels to producing 52 per cent of its power from renewable sources by 2030.⁷ Despite international acclaim for this ambitious goal and the government's marked shift towards environmental framing for energy policy, the local and regional dynamics were ambivalent and conflictual from the beginning of

NOORo's construction. Activists, residents, and government officials who explicitly compared the protests around the land transfer with labour and environmental mobilizations around the cobalt mine at Bouazzer, less than 200 kilometres away, were deeply aware that the salutary discourse of energy transition notwithstanding, solar energy is embedded in a long history of extraction in the arid southeast of the country.

Extraction in this region goes back centuries. The silver mine at Imider is described by chroniclers in the classical Islamic period. In the project's preliminary research, residents in Zagora province also noted the possibility that some mines in their region dated from the Almohad period (twelfth century). However, modern-day mines in the region began with the French Protectorate and the aggressive extractivism of speculators, industrialists, and the regional rulers (*caids*) that imposed French rule on southeastern Moroccans.⁸ Initial research in the Archives du Maroc reveals the extent to which claims for prospecting and exploitation in the southeast predated both the formal establishment of the Protectorate and the final military victory of the French in Bougafer (current Tinghir province) in 1933. Mining was bound up with struggles over what kind of power the overlord of the region – the Pasha of Marrakech and the *Grand Caid*, Thami el-Glaoui – should hold. Some actors within the protectorate government advocated for enabling his rule while other actors aligned with European financial interests advocated for a purely private extraction sector. The former prevailed and the Bouazzer cobalt mine, established in 1928 through an alliance between French capital and el-Glaoui, became one site within the archipelago of mines owned by the company that would eventually be called Managem, the public holding company with majority royal interests. These mines – at Imider, Bouazzer and Bleida – were the site of social mobilizations in the 2010s.

Tracing this genealogy of extraction is an important component of the action research initiative commenced in autumn 2021 because it makes explicit the longstanding ideologies of rule that continue to govern extraction and natural resource management generally. It also reveals the brute relations of force involved in expropriating these resources on behalf of foreign interests or Moroccan elites. Even seemingly progressive initiatives like those related to solar energy should be contextualized within this history when they draw on the same legal frameworks and relations of power. Residents of the region have never seen the decrees, contracts, or other documents that formalized the land transfers and the export of wealth these projects effectuated. These documents live in French archives or in the recently opened Archives du Maroc, far from the people they affect. Democratizing knowledge of extraction means bringing documents home to the original resource owners and bringing to light a history that must be reckoned with in order to understand the contemporary social dynamics of large investment projects. The need for historical reckoning applies no matter the resource in question: cobalt, silver, the water used for commercial watermelon production in the arid Dra' valley, or the land used to house the infrastructure for harvesting the sun's energy. This history is also crucial for making sense of the continuities between mining and renewable energy, which is the focus of the next section, which documents the similar actors and financial interests that are involved in extraction and renewable energy.

Similar actors and financial interests in conventional extraction and renewable energy

There is a large amount of scholarship and activist research that tracks how corporations, international financial institutions and global capital flows are linked across extraction and renewable energy.⁹ This is an important avenue for understanding how and why transition efforts can deepen rather than challenge relations of dependency rooted in the colonial period. The continuities between fossil fuel commodity chains and those of renewable energies are striking. Geopolitical pressures towards transition in Europe, for example, are not just about meeting decarbonization targets: they also serve financial interests focused on diversifying portfolios and using renewables as a hedge or source of new capital accumulation.¹⁰ Even the surge in renewable energy projects in the MENA region reflects continuities in geopolitical relations between European governments and corporations and MENA fossil fuel producers. The availability of capital, expertise in energy infrastructure, and the goal of diversifying revenue sources mean that many fossil fuel producers are simultaneously leaders in renewable energy. One of the clearest expressions of this positioning is the Desertec Initiative, an effort to link the entire southern Mediterranean rim – and its deserts – to the European grid. Although formally defunct, Desertec's underlying logic informs Morocco's renewable energy policy and other regional initiatives, such as 'green hydrogen.'¹¹

Tracking these relations also sheds light on the technical and economic decisions shaping renewable energy policies and projects in Morocco and beyond. Utility-scale renewable energy, for example, is touted as a way of achieving economies of scale and utilizing existing infrastructure to channel renewable energy to the grid. These were the justifications for the Moroccan solar plan's technical choice to foreground concentrated solar power (CSP), a relatively new utility-scale technology with untested financial prospects when it was selected for Ouarzazate.¹² But choosing CSP over photovoltaic technologies *and* over decentralized renewable energy is as much about centralizing economic and political power as it is about economies of scale. Community solar or small-scale energy generation that avoids the grid forecloses the opportunities for capital accumulation presented by Morocco's mega-project approach to renewable energy development. Such capital accumulation can occur regardless of whether the projects themselves are profitable once in operation – existing projects are not, and the Moroccan state still must subsidize the energy produced in these new projects to make the power competitive with fossil fuel-generated electricity.¹³ Rather, the multiple contracts for the construction, and to a lesser extent the operation, of the plants creates various opportunities for profit (or, more precisely, rents). Many companies winning these contracts are subsidiaries of fossil fuel companies or, at a minimum, are financed by excess capital in the oil-producing Gulf (especially Saudi Arabia, home to Acwa power, which won the contract for the inaugural NOORo installation in Ouarzazate). These companies represent an effort to diversify out of fossil fuels and build on the strong geopolitical ties which the Moroccan government forged in large part through oil.

Understanding how these geopolitical calculations play out in people's daily lives is important. Documenting how these commodity chains work can democratize knowledge about state–corporate alliances for extractive capital accumulation. But documentation is not enough: how do we translate these complex relations for residents so that they can make the links between their local realities and global processes? At the local level, global commodity chains might not appear as relevant as the way state and private sectors obscure their roles and blur the lines of authority between them. The *makhzen* (the institutions of government associated with the King and unelected institutions of government) and the *sulta* ('authorities' – especially the Ministry of Interior and the security services) are often the frontline authorities responding to mobilizations and securing stability for Managem, the company that is formally private and listed on the Casablanca stock exchange but which, as noted above, began as a company of el-Glaoui, the regional *caïd* of the Protectorate period, and subsequently passed into the royal holdings. When residents talk of projects as coming from 'our Commander', referring to the King by the longstanding title of Commander of the Faithful, the distinction between the *makhzen* and the private company held by the King becomes difficult to discern.

However, it is not certain that exposing these global commodity chains is the most effective way to support just transition efforts in Morocco's rural southeast. For both the privately owned mines at Imider and Bouazzar and the parastatal solar energy installation at Ouarzazate, popular demands over the past decade have focused on employment, rural investment, and transparency about what resources (especially water) are being used to the detriment of local populations. These claims have been similar across sites and resources – the triggers for the eight-year-long sit-in near the Imider silver mine were water expropriation and the lack of employment at the mine, while ongoing concerns at the solar energy installation at Ouarzazate are water and the paucity of jobs for local residents.¹⁴ Although official estimates of water consumption at Ouarzazate are between 2.5 and 3 million cubic metres a year, actual consumption appears to be substantially higher, even by official admission. This is due to the high water requirements for washing the solar reflectors in the desert environment, and to possible inefficiencies in the steam turbine technology used in the Ouarzazate CSP installation. In preliminary research in Midelt, the site of the next installation in the Moroccan solar plan, local government officials commented that the plant under construction included newer, less water-intensive technologies, with the goal of producing 300 MW more than the Ouarzazate plant with one-sixth of the water requirement. The political troubles the current director of the Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy has encountered in the past year have been attributed by some in the southeast to geopolitical concerns relating to the country's fraught ties with Germany but also with the slow pace of the solar plan, as well as the economic inefficiency and resource intensity of the Ouarzazate installation.

A focus on one particular project or commodity chain, however, can obscure the similarities across renewable energy and conventional extraction. A place-based approach to a just transition broadens our focus to cover the range of resources and strategies for asserting the control necessary for such large projects, regardless of what

is being extracted. In Morocco, these strategies centre on controlling collectively owned land, perhaps the most hot-button issue in the rural parts of the country (and some urban areas) for the past two decades. This broader approach contextualizes the extracted resources within other resource politics, especially land and water. Beyond extraction companies and renewable energy contractors, actors include export agricultural investors vying for water, and members of ethnic collectivities or other social groups with historical grievances. This is not desk research: it requires extended engagement with residents and the different ways they mobilize ties to state actors or other authorities. Entering into research and activist alliances with diverse groups in the regions surrounding these mega-projects is one way to build an understanding of these complex local politics. This approach eschews talk of how projects impact 'the community', rejecting the idea that there is such a thing as one community, and instead actively searches out differing perspectives and positionalities.

Land conflict and resource politics in the legal and bureaucratic context

Mapping extractivism across conventional extraction and renewables becomes more concrete for rural residents when the focus shifts to the laws and bureaucratic procedures used to implement a particular project in their region. To be sure, the histories of the *projets structurants* (mega-projects) in the southeast of Morocco diverge significantly: from the cobalt mine of Bouazzer, inaugurated in 1928 before the French had even secured military control over the entire region, to the future-oriented, globalized discourse of renewal that frames the solar plan. However, mining and renewable energy are concentrated in the same regions and deploy the same laws and bureaucratic procedures for securing the resources necessary for extraction. Beyond tangible resources such as land, metals or minerals, these resources include public investment in infrastructure – the roads necessary to transport materials and the mined resource, for example – and the use of state power to control popular dissent. The history of mining from the colonial period to the present reveals a striking continuity in the way wealth is extracted from the poorest areas of the country with minimal reinvestment in social and economic infrastructure.

Histories of modern Morocco critique the colonial bifurcation of the country into a 'useful' (*utile*) centre that received resources and 'development' and a 'useless' (*inutile*) periphery that was neglected. These terms represent a particularly explicit description of the extractive capitalism common to all colonial contexts. However, such a neat binary does not fully describe how the colonial and independent states *did* invest in the rural margins of Morocco. Infrastructure and other economic investment in the rural periphery extracted resources and labour for the benefit of populations elsewhere. The southeast of Morocco was – and is – most definitely 'utile': the question is, useful for what and for whom? Understanding how histories of extraction intersect with land governance, agricultural policy, and state power in the southeast shows how similar strategies are used to secure state or corporate access to all sorts of resources.

Identifying continuities in the rules and procedures governing both mining and renewable energy projects is important because it makes it possible to document the full range of mechanisms used for expropriation. Some of these mechanisms are buried in the complicated language of regulations and administrative procedure, out of sight of local residents. At the same time, documenting bureaucratic frameworks can help to identify openings for making claims that expand the political tools at the disposal of residents living with extraction. The contemporary legal and bureaucratic framework for mining in Morocco has been influenced by the global expansion in metals and mineral mining, especially efforts to apply new technologies to make older operations viable again, and the rush to secure strategic sources for the rare earth metals so essential for the technology sector and renewable energy production.¹⁵ These novel ways of valuing extraction are evident in Morocco's new Mining Code of 2015. The code elaborates a detailed legal framework to encourage more investment in extracting metals and minerals – beyond the dominant phosphate sector – on the premise that a burdensome regulatory environment has suppressed full development of extractives.¹⁶ Conventional extraction is therefore not a 'legacy' sector, an outdated antecedent to renewable energy that will fade away as part of the transition away from fossil fuels: on the contrary, extraction becomes even more important to support the increased need for the metals and minerals that are key to renewable energy production. In addition, the huge complexes associated with the solar plan require standard building materials and carbon-intensive inputs, such as expanded paved road systems and high-voltage transmission infrastructure.

Efforts to grow the mining sector and renewable energy in Morocco parallel the country's agricultural development strategy over the past decade (the Plan Maroc Vert). The guiding philosophy of that plan was to map each agro-ecological zone in the country to find new ways to promote export agriculture for the benefit of commercial interests over small farmers.¹⁷ In the southeast, the *Plan Maroc Vert* has spurred the growth of large date, apple, and watermelon agribusiness farms that, along with mines and renewable energy installations, compete for water and land. This competition squeezes residents with a limited capacity to defend their land rights or secure their own livelihoods. Researchers documenting the legal and bureaucratic procedures at the root of extractivist policies therefore need to look beyond the recent flurry of legislation and investment facilities in emergent sectors like solar energy or rare earth metals. They also need to account for agricultural policies, new and old, as well as the archaic and ambiguous legal frameworks governing land and water. Here, the broad discretion given to state authorities by colonial policies designed to facilitate expropriation have contemporary benefits for powerful actors. State authorities use that discretion to quickly and quietly secure land and other resources.¹⁸

Thus, despite the distinctive nature of each form of extraction, the shared bureaucratic frameworks governing land, water, and natural resource extraction draw all these resources into the same political dynamics. But just as legal frameworks for land and water have been used to dispossess local residents, activists also wonder if there are any entry points citizens can use to contest how extraction projects are implemented on the ground. This requires sustained organizing, and a democratization of knowledge about

how to use legal codes for oppositional politics. State or corporate appropriations of sub-surface rights are difficult to contest: as in most countries around the world (the US is a notable exception, with some complexities regarding First Nations) the Moroccan state claims sovereignty and ownership over the sub-surface. While the French colonial state also claimed public domain over water in Morocco, water rights today are complex and subject to layers of positive, formally Islamic, and customary law. Social mobilizations such as the occupation at the Imider silver mine have foregrounded water depletion and contamination, but sovereignty claims over natural resources and extracted wealth have not figured prominently in Moroccan social movements.

Collectively owned land has also been the site of contestation for extraction projects. The solar installation in Ouarzazate, for example, used colonial laws to expropriate communal land in order to acquire its 3,000-hectare parcel.¹⁹ This is the legal framework that is used to govern property transfer in all of Morocco's collectively owned lands. But, like the Plan Maroc Vert and the Mining Code of 2015, a new collective land law was passed in 2019 to facilitate private investment and expropriation of land deemed underutilized for the purposes of national development.²⁰ There have been discussions for decades about the intractable problems associated with collectively owned land in Morocco. It is difficult to define who has rights in that land and proponents of privatization say that collective ownership precludes investment. These issues were used to justify the 2019 law, which ostensibly rationalizes collective land management. However, preliminary research reveals a widespread fear that it will only accelerate the transfer of land for large-scale investment projects and the imposition of market logics on land that was never subject to sale.

Documenting which bodies of law and administrative procedure govern a given project requires a deep dive into diverse areas of law, some directly related to the extracted resource and others spanning diverse resources, local government administration, taxation, and budgeting. These are dry and difficult areas for even the most experienced scholars or activists to penetrate without legal or fiscal expertise. They do not capture the popular imagination in the same way social mobilizations do. And it may seem like a questionable exercise to develop popular education materials on seemingly arcane corners of law. However, experience in extractives organizing in Latin America and elsewhere indicates that these legal and bureaucratic mechanisms can provide openings for popular resistance or civic engagement.²¹ The surge in civil society organizing in Morocco around decentralization, transparency, and the rule of law, especially among a handful of 'observatories' in rural areas and smaller regional capitals, shows similar potential. Democratizing knowledge of legal and bureaucratic frameworks is important in and of itself, but it can also be a tool for making claims for restitution or accountability, even if these openings are small and change occurs over long timeframes.

Why taxes matter, or an argument for reparations

A similar analysis applies to documenting the procedures and practices for allocating revenue from extractives and renewable energy. Public debates about the costs and benefits of both the Ouarzazate solar power plant and the southeastern mines have focused on how project operations affect residents in three key ways: environmental impact, employment, and other direct impacts under the control of the company or contractor. This has tended to limit the discussion of costs and benefits to the projects' direct operations and the CSR programmes for each site, which are similar across extractives and renewables. In the case of NOORo, the Moroccan Solar Energy Agency (MASEN) initially responded to unrest with ad hoc measures before transitioning to a formal community development programme anchored by AgriSud, a French NGO responsible for coordinating agricultural development initiatives in the commune surrounding the plant. Over time, however, as MASEN rebranded from the Moroccan Agency for Solar Energy to the Moroccan Agency for Sustainable Energy (the change took effect in 2016 and shifted its focus to financing and technology transfer), MASEN progressively distanced itself from direct involvement in CSR programmes. In Ouarzazate, Acwa Power, the Saudi lead contractor, is now charged with community relations and CSR initiatives. The political controversy swirling around MASEN in 2021, ostensibly related to slow progress in implementing the solar plan, financing issues relating to the COVID-19 pandemic, and operational inefficiencies, has also muted the visibility of CSR in the solar plan. For Managem, unrest around the mines in Bouazzer and Imider – and as preliminary research is showing, other mines in the company's portfolio – emerged around the same time as that relating to the solar installation in Ouarzazate. A two-pronged CSR programme was one of a series of responses from the company and the Ministry of Interior authorities charged with securing the sites in the interests of general social order. The first, a *Programme d'urgence* (2012–2013) aimed to reduce tensions with residents at Imider, although it also represented a company effort to redirect attention away from the highly visible occupation at Mount Alban. A broader *Plan stratégique* (2013–2016) involved all Managem's southeastern Moroccan mines and included a needs assessment process with each commune. This process produced a list of projects for which the commune governments needed to provide match funding, usually from the ministries associated with the intervention (especially education and public health). Discussions with participants in the coordinating committee and commune governments revealed a mixed experience, but also a sense that they learned much from the process of engaging with the company and government authorities.

However, all these initiatives were by definition voluntaristic, limited interventions, as is typical with CSR programmes. They involved no structural or systematic dialogue about how extraction fits into long-term rural development or relations between residents, the state, and the private sector. The quotidian operations of local government and revenue systems may represent a more fruitful site for making claims about returning wealth, sustaining investment, and involving residents in resource allocation. Here, the gaps between policy and practice are important, as is the changing landscape of decentralization reforms in Morocco's historically centralized fiscal regime. In the initial stages of the 'advanced project of regionalization', as the process that King Mohamed VI began after assuming power in 1999 is called, revenues from taxes paid on extraction

went entirely to regional governments, not local communes or provinces. The Mining Code of 2015 shifted this allocation and currently 50 per cent of tax revenues on mining production goes to the regions and 50 per cent to the communes. Information about this change is uneven, as there is widespread confusion among residents and some commune officials about what provisions of the new Mining Code have taken effect, and when. This new allocation regime, however, does raise questions and offer new possibilities for assessing how different projects relate to local economic development planning, service provision, and broader discussions about how much wealth is extracted from some of the poorest communes in the country.

In many sacrifice zones, such as the Appalachian coalfields in the US, the concessionary property tax and revenue regimes offered to extraction companies in one sector create a path dependence whereby new forms of extraction follow upon previous ones because they can take advantage of revenue systems designed for other resources.²² The long-term result is minimal investment in infrastructure or diversification because of diminishing tax bases or a lack of capacity or will among local officials, and even some activists, to demand redistributive measures that funnel accountable and transparent resources to extraction zones. It can seem unimaginable to demand reparations for decades, even centuries, of extraction and dispossession conducted for the benefit of others.

Project research into how this path dependence might work in the Moroccan context is only just beginning but documenting revenue systems for residents around these projects is an important step in democratizing knowledge about the relationship between wealth extracted and returned in the form of government revenues or investment. Initially, this has been only a descriptive exercise in Morocco – documenting production levels over time, taxes paid, and revenues allocated to the communes where projects are located – but a burgeoning academic literature on the effect of resource dependency on economic growth, government transparency, and other measures of well-being indicates further avenues for documenting how extraction affects residents and regional political economies.²³ Empirically describing the wealth effects and economic impact of extraction does not in and of itself offer a structural account of the historical dispossession associated with extractivism, but it can provide an additional tool for organizing and claims-making. Such applied research builds on civil society activists' strategies for participating in and contesting local politics to hold the state to its own promises regarding the rule of law and the devolution of fiscal responsibility to local communes. While the master's tools can never be used to dismantle the master's house, understanding and using these administrative frameworks can widen the space for popular participation and claims-making around extraction and energy projects.

The engagement of fiscal experts and legal scholars may be necessary to make sense of these regulations for activists and researchers, but popular education strategies are key to translating them for the broader public. In addition to documenting the formal procedures of revenue allocation, this involves accounting for direct and in-kind expenses associated with the extraction or investment projects that are shouldered by local governments, wealth generated and exported, and wealth returned in the form of tax

revenue, employment, and other multiplier effects (positive or negative). This is a highly political exercise that involves identifying how to account for externalities or ecosystem services that attempt to quantify values that are inherently unquantifiable for many, including the historical stewards of these resources. Variations of this cost–benefit accounting in other places and for other resources also reveal that the analysis looks quite different when conducted at a national scale or at the local and regional scales that are at the heart of the approach advocated here.²⁴ Mines that may represent a relatively small part of the country’s overall economy may have a transformative impact on regional and local socio-ecologies and relations of power. Consideration of this transformative impact is often dismissed as local or parochial, the unreasonable demands of uninformed local populations who should be willing to shoulder the inevitable cost of a necessary transition. A just transition depends not simply on acknowledging these demands or better distributing the benefits of renewable energy, but also on providing reparations for previous waves of dispossession and disinvestment. A just transition also depends on rethinking why and how these zones are being asked yet again to shoulder the burden of provisioning wealthy consumers elsewhere.

Social mobilization and shared political claims across extraction and renewable energy

For advocates of a just transition, one of the first indications that renewable energy might be repeating the historical inequities of mining has been the similarities in social mobilizations across both sectors. In the Moroccan southeast, participants and officials explicitly made these comparisons in the protests around NOORo and the mines in the region. A structural analysis of these similarities needs to go beyond the mere observation that rural peoples have always been marginalized and will continue to be dispossessed by dominant approaches to renewable energy production. That is an important observation, to be sure, but it does not answer the question of why histories of dispossession are repeating themselves. Nor does it allow for the agency of rural peoples and account for their often ambivalent relationship to extraction or energy production.

There are many possible ways in which both types of extraction (renewable energy and mining) might deepen inequality. The action research project in southeastern Morocco that commenced in autumn 2021 focuses on 1) the processes that naturalize and perpetuate a regional political economy dependent on exporting wealth with minimal reinvestment; and 2) dominant discourses that argue that marginalized residents must ‘sacrifice’ their resources or well-being for national development or a low-carbon energy transition. At the same time, a grounded analysis does not assume that extraction is the only – or even the most important – driver for local or regional politics. Both kinds of projects are drawn into a complex mosaic of political claims that extend beyond mining or energy. Rural politics, like politics anywhere, are multidimensional, and people factor these projects into different, often competing, aspirations and priorities. Documenting these diverse claims clarifies how and why rural residents mobilize in the way they do, or why they respond with other forms of political expression besides overt mobilization.

Recognizing the broader context for extraction politics acknowledges the sometimes overwhelming nature of state and corporate power but does not assume a predetermined outcome to the extraction encounter. Residents not only exert agency in their ability to resist or respond, they also negotiate or use the presence of large-scale projects to craft their own political projects. This approach also recognizes the possibility of internal dissension or differences among state and corporate actors and takes their own moral universes seriously.²⁵ Few people living in and around extraction in Morocco describe purely 'good' and 'bad' actors or institutions, reflecting the competing imperatives and moral complexities associated with these projects. These complexities produce 'multiple agencies' among residents and workers whose critiques or goals may not mesh easily – if at all – with social movement framing.²⁶

Popular responses to extraction are also diverse, running the gamut from organized resistance movements to a social fracturing that produces violent conflict.²⁷ In southeastern Morocco, the occupation at Imider captured the imagination of many Moroccans and international observers through the savvy and at the same time culturally grounded combination of customary idioms and globalized discourses of resistance. The protests at the Bouazzer cobalt mine or NOORo plant were similarly intelligible to social movement activists and observers. However, these were only a few among many responses, some of which were less visible to those not versed in the practice of rural politics in the Moroccan southeast.

Embedding extraction in broader claims around land, resource control, and political representation brings multiple forms of political practice into view, especially in areas where social movements or overt resistance are not prominent.²⁸ Even failures – of extraction projects or social mobilizations – can 'produce politics', enabling residents to build alliances or expertise and feeding into their diverse political projects.²⁹ So, for example, while the occupation camp at Imider might have been dismantled in 2020, the nearly decade-long effort can hardly be termed a failure. It was one of several forms of political expression that changed how local and communal politics unfold around the mine, as witnessed by a changing of the guard towards younger elected officials in the past two communal elections. Residents may work with timescales and aspirations that differ from those of climate justice movements. Just as extraction can enact a 'slow violence', so too can the environmentalism of the poor or other political responses unfold over extended timeframes.³⁰

This approach also avoids an *a priori* judgement about how residents should respond to extraction. They may balance critique with desires for development, the jobs that a large-scale project might bring, and an emotional connection with the people and identities associated with extraction.³¹ Preliminary research on resource conflicts in rural Morocco indicates that mining and renewable energy deepen inequalities, but that people can use these conflicts to imagine and experiment with a different kind of politics or approach to rural governance. This new imaginary can be considered 'an emergent politics of the commons,' which includes non-movement forms of political agency.³² In other words,

advocates for a just transition need to listen to people's diverse goals and acknowledge their preferred form of action rather than use a predetermined frame of analysis that privileges organized social movements.

Even resistance may not conform to dominant environmental discourses as some groups rely on customary or seemingly apolitical practices to articulate their political claims.³³ This non-movement social mobilization may represent an effective, culturally resonant set of approaches to engaging with extraction that recognizes people's complex relationships to large-scale projects – few want to reject them out of hand but rather try to reimagine what they do, how they operate, and whom they benefit. The project team's history of research and activism in the southeast indicates that discourses of environmental justice do not resonate with many residents in the region. The power of the analysis the team is engaged in lies in the way it engages diverse forms of political agency to render the push for a just transition less abstract – seeing it as a concrete, 'emplaced' encounter that does not need to look like other environmental justice movements for it to promote a just transition. At the same time, this approach is not a replacement for or argument against formal social movements. Rather, it represents an expansive and critical recognition of the necessity of diverse forms of political practice.

Conclusion

Given the seemingly overwhelming power held by the state, corporations and international finance institutions, the notion of working with procedure and law at the local or regional levels to influence the extraction encounter may appear naïve. On its own, this approach will not achieve a just energy or economic transition for Moroccans – or people anywhere – who are dispossessed through successive and seemingly unrelenting waves of extractivist policies. It is, however, a crucial step for engaging residents who live with the complex reality of extraction as both source of dispossession *and* development. Democratizing knowledge about extraction as a mode of governance that spans both mining and renewable energy is one way to recognize the people who live extraction as equal partners in social movements whether or not they adopt the frames of resistance or climate justice. For researchers and activists alike, honouring different modes of political practice means committing to critical engagement with the discursive frames residents themselves adopt. Understanding the history and social dynamics of a place beyond the extraction encounter de-centres extraction as the only political force shaping people's lives. Their agency unfolds alongside the imbalanced power relations that set companies and state agencies apart and above those dynamics.

However, developing place-based just transition strategies is not simply about extended engagement with local residents on their own terms. Such an approach also provides the grounds for solidarity with other place-based movements and strategies, where successful models for engagement can be used and adapted for new contexts and mutual reinforcement. When viewed in this light, the trenchant critiques, incremental

strategies and long-term visions of activists and residents in the Moroccan southeast are as essential a part of just transition efforts in Morocco and North Africa as any in the climate justice movement.

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Notes

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