


COMMUNITY PERCEPTION OF LITHIUM EXTRACTION IN SAN AGUSTIN METZQUITILAN, HIDALGO, MEXICO

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Abstract: The growing demand for lithium as a strategic resource has sparked interest in its extraction in various regions of Mexico, including San Agustín Metzquitilán, Hidalgo. This research is part of a mixed-methods study titled “Design of Sustainable Business Management Strategies for Lithium Extraction from the Social Perspective of the Community of San Agustín Metzquitilán, Hidalgo.” This article adopts a qualitative approach in its first phase, aiming to explore in depth the perceptions, meanings, and social experiences related to the potential lithium extraction in this community. The objective was to understand the perceptions of those holding public office or serving as community representatives. A phenomenological design was used to understand how local actors, including community authorities, experience, interpret, and evaluate the potential presence of lithium extraction projects in their territories. A purposive sampling method based on criteria was applied, prioritizing key actors with knowledge of the local social, economic, and environmental context. Semi-structured interviews were conducted. The topics addressed revolved around territorial identity, environmental concerns, development expectations, institutional trust, and past experiences with external actors. The findings revealed an ambivalent attitude within the community: on the one hand, there is recognition of lithium’s economic value as a development opportunity; on the other hand, there is intense fear of water pollution, the loss of communal land, and the disruption of the social fabric. A demand for more information, active participation in decision-making, and respect for community self-determina-


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tion was also expressed. These qualitative results provide the foundation for designing sustainable management strategies that respond to the social reality of the territory and to its inhabitants' voices.

Keywords: community perception, lithium, sustainable management

JEL Classification: L72, M14, Q01, Q556, R11

Introduction

Although global lithium production is dominated by countries such as Australia, Chile and China, Mexico has recently drawn attention for its emerging potential in the lithium sector. Unlike these established producers, Mexico faces unique socio-environmental and regulatory challenges linked to its mining governance structure and community relations. Therefore, examining the Mexican case, particularly in rural territories such as San Agustín Metzquititlán, provides valuable insights into how a new lithium-producing country may balance industrial ambitions with social and environmental responsibility.

The global energy transition has positioned lithium as a fundamental strategic resource for developing clean technologies, particularly in producing batteries for electric vehicles and energy storage systems. In this context, Mexico has emerged as a country of interest for lithium exploration and extraction, due to the presence of deposits in various regions across the country. In February 2023, a decree was issued declaring lithium as the nation's property. This decree modified the Mining Law and created a state-owned company in charge of lithium exploitation, named Litio para México. Specifically, the state of Hidalgo – and within it, the municipality of San Agustín Metzquititlán – has attracted interest due to its mining potential and rich biodiversity.

However, beyond the economic appeal of this extractive activity, it is essential to analyze the potential social and environmental impacts it may entail, particularly in rural communities that have historically faced external intervention processes without adequate consultation mechanisms or effective participation. Experience in other regions of Latin America has shown that mining projects that do not take local voices into account can generate socio-environmental conflicts, loss of institutional trust, and ecosystem degradation.

In this sense, social perception is a key component in understanding the viability of extractive projects from a sustainable perspective. The acceptance or rejection of such initiatives depends not only on the promised economic benefits but also on how communities assess risks, relate to their environment, and participate in decision-making processes.

Recent studies (Orozco Martínez, 2020; Fuentes Claros, 2020; Fernández Valdiviezo, 2021) have emphasized the need to incorporate participatory and ethical approaches in the management of natural resources, recognizing the right of communities to protect their territory, health, and way of life.

Within this framework, the present article is part of a broader research project titled Design of Sustainable Business Management Strategies for Lithium Extraction

from the Social Perspective of the Community of San Agustín Metzquitlán, Hidalgo. The research follows a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory sequential design. In this initial phase, a qualitative approach is adopted to deeply explore the perceptions, concerns, and expectations of key stakeholders within the community, mainly municipal authorities and local representatives, regarding the potential establishment of a lithium extraction project in the region.

The main objective is to understand how these actors interpret the possible arrival of lithium mining on their territory, what risks and opportunities they identify, and what conditions they consider necessary to accept the process from a socially responsible perspective. Through semi-structured interviews and a phenomenological analysis, the study reconstructs the meanings that the community attributes to territory, development, and mining activity, generating key input for the subsequent design of sustainable strategies that genuinely incorporate the community's voice.

Literature review

Lithium has emerged as a strategic mineral for the global economy in recent years due to its pivotal role in clean technologies and the energy transition.

The social perception of lithium extraction, akin to that of other strategic minerals, has become a decisive factor in determining the feasibility of mining projects. Contemporary debates on lithium exploitation extend beyond technological efficiency and supply security, encompassing broader issues of environmental integrity and social acceptance. Research indicates that in regions where local communities perceive mining as a threat to the environment, public health, or traditional livelihoods, resistance to extractive activities intensifies (Petavratzi et al., 2022; Graham et al., 2021). As Petavratzi et al. (2022) emphasize, social acceptance directly influences the operational viability of mining projects, making transparent and trust-based relationships between companies and surrounding communities essential. Public image, operational transparency, and genuine stakeholder participation in the industry are critical to acquiring and maintaining the social license to operate (SLO) (Thambi, 2019; Que et al., 2018). Without such engagement, socio-environmental conflicts may escalate, potentially delaying or halting projects altogether.

Therefore, sustainable lithium resource management must address not only economic considerations, but also the cultural and historical conditions specific to each territory (Barandiarán, 2019). Scholars such as Que et al. (2018) and Heredia et al. (2020) highlight that robust community consultation processes are crucial for preventing conflicts and fostering collaborative solutions. A co-responsibility model, where local communities are recognized as rights-holders rather than merely stakeholders, can enhance long-term trust and reduce the risk of conflict. Implementing modern, less invasive technologies with transparent consultation mechanisms offers a path to reconciling economic development with environmental protection and social well-being.

Recent literature also notes a shift in the mining sector, with companies increasingly prioritizing social and community issues under growing pressure to assume responsibility for the impacts of their operations (Thambi, 2019; Dong et al., 2024).

For example, Agusdinata et al. (2018) advocate for socio-environmental impact assessments guided by community engagement, ensuring that local concerns shape operational strategies. Likewise, Gundermann and Göbel (2018) point to the need to transform company–community relations from paternalistic models to partnerships based on shared values, which can significantly enhance cooperation and foster sustainable development in mining regions.

Ultimately, lithium extraction will continue to be scrutinized through the lens of sustainable development, requiring constant evaluation of technologies and practices that prioritize ecological preservation and community welfare. Effective collaboration among governments, industry, and local communities is essential to embedding sustainability into mining governance – promoting an approach that aligns economic growth with environmental stewardship (Petavratzi et al., 2022; Heredia et al., 2020).

Lithium is essential for producing batteries used in electric vehicles, mobile devices, and renewable energy storage systems. As nations pursue decarbonization and commit to reducing their carbon footprints, the demand for lithium has skyrocketed. This demand is projected to continue to grow exponentially over the coming decades (Ategui, 2023).

This mineral boom, however, is accompanied by growing concerns. One of the key issues is the concentration of lithium production. Currently, over 80% of the world's lithium supply comes from just two countries: Australia and Chile. This geographical concentration creates significant vulnerabilities in the global supply chain and increases the pressure to explore and exploit new lithium reserves, particularly in Latin America (Ategui, 2023; Sánchez-Mancera & Pérez-Garibay, 2003). Mexico is gaining strategic importance among the countries being explored due to its untapped lithium deposits, particularly in Sonora and other states such as Hidalgo.

The expansion of lithium mining has sparked debate among scholars and environmental advocates regarding its sustainability. Studies such as those by Barria Uribe (2021) and Sticco et al. (2021) document the serious environmental consequences of lithium extraction in South America. Research has shown that in the Salar de Atacama in Chile, the Salar de Uyuni in Bolivia, and the Argentine Altiplano, lithium mining depletes groundwater, contaminates water sources, and causes irreversible damage to fragile ecosystems. These impacts are magnified by extractive methods, such as evaporation ponds, which are highly water intensive.

Jiménez Montoya (2020) highlights that lithium extraction has compromised not only the ecological balance but also public health and traditional livelihoods, including pastoralism and small-scale agriculture in Bolivia. Similarly, Olvera (2020) warns that Mexico may face similar outcomes if lessons from neighboring countries are not considered. He points to a lack of preparedness regarding environmental legislation, oversight, and community consultation, which could exacerbate socio-environmental conflict.

Research conducted in Argentina by Fernández (2021) and Fernández Valdiviezo (2021) provides further insight into the social conflicts surrounding lithium mining. Their findings suggest that resistance to mining projects increases when communities are not adequately informed, consulted, or included in decision-making processes. These studies emphasize the symbolic value of the territories for local

populations, beyond their economic potential. The exclusion of indigenous and rural communities from extractive projects often leads to social fragmentation and mistrust.

The role of social perception is another critical aspect in evaluating mining projects. Orozco Martínez (2020), in her investigation of the 2014 toxic spill in the Sonora River, Mexico, demonstrates how public distrust can shape resistance to extractive industries. Using a mixed-method approach, she found that people's attitudes toward mining were influenced not only by direct environmental damage but also by past experiences, the perceived lack of transparency of corporations, and weak institutional accountability. Such perceptions directly impact the social license for mining companies to operate.

This underscores the importance of incorporating ethical and socially responsible frameworks into extractive strategies. Hernández Coronel (2020) argues that achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) requires companies to adopt a new organizational culture. This includes prioritizing social responsibility, sustainable innovation, and participatory governance. In this sense, extractive industries must move from an exploitation model to one of co-responsibility, where communities are recognized as rights-holders, not just stakeholders.

The academic literature also stresses the need for integrative methodological approaches. Hernández Sampieri et al. (2022) advocate using mixed methods to address the complexity of social phenomena linked to resource extraction. Their approach supports triangulating quantitative data with qualitative insights to fully understand how communities perceive, react to, and adapt to the presence of large-scale mining projects. This holistic view is essential in territories with layered historical, environmental, and cultural dynamics.

Moreover, environmental sustainability must be understood as interconnected with social justice. Fuentes Claros (2020), examining the Bolivian case, calls attention to the contradiction between economic development and water security. Lithium extraction often occurs in arid regions where water is already scarce, leading to disputes over access and rights. Local populations bear the brunt of these impacts, often without reaping the economic benefits promised by mining companies.

In addition, Sticco et al. (2021) present compelling evidence on how lithium mining affects wetlands and water systems, particularly in high-altitude environments where hydrological cycles are delicate and poorly understood. These authors recommend a moratorium on new lithium projects until rigorous environmental assessments can be conducted with local participation.

Finally, examining how national policies shape the mining landscape is essential. Sánchez-Mancera and Pérez-Garibay (2003) offer a historical account of lithium in Mexico, arguing that the country's mining laws and institutional frameworks have traditionally prioritized foreign investment over community rights. While legal reforms have attempted to address these imbalances, enforcement remains weak, and the power asymmetry between corporations and local populations persists.

In conclusion, the literature reviewed presents a multifaceted panorama of lithium extraction in Latin America, marked by environmental degradation, socio-political conflict, and ethical dilemmas. At the heart of these issues lies the need to redefine

how we conceptualize development. Rather than imposing extractive models that ignore local realities, sustainable mining must be grounded in intercultural dialogue, community empowerment, and respect for ecological limits.

The case of San Agustín Metzquititlán, in Hidalgo, Mexico, is emblematic of these broader regional tensions. As lithium exploration expands into new territories, it is crucial that communities are not only informed but also actively involved in shaping the future of their lands. This participatory approach, supported by robust environmental science and ethical business practices, may provide a pathway toward a more just and sustainable form of mineral governance.

Methods

From a methodological perspective, Hernández Sampieri et al. (2022) highlight the importance of using mixed and participatory approaches to capture the multiple dimensions of social reality. The combination of qualitative and quantitative techniques enables the identification of patterns and trends, while also facilitating a deeper understanding of the meanings that social actors attribute to territory, the environment, and the projects that affect them.

This research adopts a mixed-methods approach with an exploratory sequential design (DEXPLOS). In the first phase, a qualitative approach was implemented through semi-structured interviews with key individuals from the municipality of San Agustín Metzquititlán, including municipal authorities and public servants. The interviews explored topics such as community perception, knowledge about lithium, perceived impacts, community participation, and expectations toward mining companies.

The interviews were conducted in June 2025. A total of ten participants were selected through purposive sampling, including municipal authorities, local representatives, and public servants directly involved in community development. The inclusion criteria focused on individuals with decision-making responsibilities or relevant knowledge about the potential lithium extraction project. Each interview lasted between 45 and 60 minutes and was conducted in person at the municipal offices. The participants provided informed consent, and all interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim for subsequent analysis.

The data were analyzed using thematic coding based on a phenomenological approach, allowing the identification of discursive patterns, shared concerns, and community-driven proposals for action. To support this process, ATLAS.ti software (version 25) was used for data organization, coding, and visualization. Additionally, word clouds were generated to illustrate the most frequent terms and co-occurrences in participants' discourse, offering a graphical overview of the predominant perceptions of the community.

It is important to note that the quantitative phase will apply a correlational design derived from the variables identified in this qualitative stage, enabling the validation and expansion of the emerging findings.

Results

The gathered testimonies provide a broad and meaningful vision of the community of San Agustín Metzquitlán from the perspective of those holding key positions in municipal administration and actively participating in decision-making about potential lithium extraction. These voices reveal a community with defined characteristics, deeply rooted values, and legitimate concerns regarding potential mining development.

Respondents commonly described San Agustín Metzquitlán as a small community focused mainly on commerce and agriculture. The population is seen as friendly, supportive, and receptive, though also expressing concerns about the arrival of outsiders and the potential impact of mining on the environment and daily life.

Highlighted aspects include the presence of skilled human talent and a diverse natural environment, elements considered strengths for sustainable project development. However, concerns also emerged regarding environmental degradation, limited available information on the mining project, and uncertainty about how social and ecological impacts would be managed.

While potential economic benefits such as job creation and increased local economic flow were acknowledged, fears were also expressed regarding environmental risks, health impacts, and a possible rise in crime associated with increased human mobility.

In this context, the participants suggested various strategies to improve the relationship between the community, the environment, and the companies interested in lithium exploitation. These included consultation forums, active community involvement in decision-making, and demands for transparency and accountability from involved companies. The emphasis was placed on prioritizing the well-being of the population and protecting the natural environment in any development project implemented in the region.

The interviewees' expectations revolved around providing decent jobs, effective measures to mitigate extraction-related negative effects, and creating educational programs to prepare the local workforce for future opportunities.

Throughout the interviews, there was a recurring concern about the lack of clear information on the project and the need for constant dialogue between the community and the companies. This interaction with responsibility, fairness, and sustainability is the key to ensuring that any mining initiative is carried out.

In summary, the testimonies collected reflect a community that is aware of its strengths and concerns and expects to be heard and considered. Active participation in the planning and supervision of the project, along with access to truthful and timely information, are fundamental elements that, according to participants, will enable progress towards a more just and balanced development for San Agustín Metzquitlán.

Table 1. Thematic categories on community perception of lithium extraction

| Category | Interviewees' Perception |
|------------------------|--|
| Community Description | Small, united community focused on commerce and agriculture; friendly, receptive, cooperative population |
| Local Strengths | Skilled human capital, diverse natural environment, willingness to work, and the ability to generate employment alternatives |
| Environmental Concerns | Possible environmental degradation, pollution, and impact on residents' health |
| Social Concerns | Arrival of outsiders, potential increase in crime, and lack of information about the project |
| Economic Expectations | Job creation, increased local economic activity, and a boost to local trade |
| Demands to Companies | Transparency, social and environmental responsibility, and community inclusion in decision-making |
| Community Proposals | Informative forums, working groups, job training programs, and binding community consultations |
| Urgent Needs | Access to clear information, constant dialogue, and community oversight of company actions |

Source: (Hernandez, Gomez & Mendoza, 2025). Own elaboration based on interviews conducted in San Agustin Metzquitlan

Thematic analysis and concept visualization

As part of the qualitative analysis, a concept cloud was developed based on the most frequently used words in the testimonies collected through semi-structured interviews. This visual tool quickly identifies the terms that most often emerged in local actors' discourse, providing clues about their main concerns, expectations, and perceptions.

Figure 1 shows how terms such as community, extraction, company, municipality, and lithium stand out significantly, reflecting the central theme of the conversations: the relationship between the extractive project and the community environment. Likewise, words such as information, environmental, benefit, population, authority, meeting, fear, and participate reveal the most sensitive topics and key elements that participants consider relevant for accepting – or questioning – the project.

These words indicate not only frequency but also emotional intensity and symbolic value. For example, the presence of terms like fear, impact, protect, or problem reveals a latent concern about potential adverse effects. In contrast, expressions such as work, strength, benefit, and plan reflect the community's interest in actively participating in development processes, as long as their conditions are respected.

This concept cloud serves as an initial representation of the community's discursive universe. The visual findings reinforce the results obtained through thematic coding and constitute a solid foundation for designing the quantitative instrument in the following research phase. This will seek to establish correlations between variables such as information level, impact perception, and project acceptance.

tion, safety, and potential disruption of the social fabric reinforce the need for a preventive and comprehensive approach that considers both the benefits and risks of mining activity.

In this context, it is concluded that it is essential to promote sustainable business management strategies that incorporate genuine mechanisms for community participation from the early planning stages. Sustainability cannot be understood solely in economic or environmental terms, but also from a social dimension that values local knowledge, respects community identity, and promotes territorial justice.

Finally, the results of this qualitative stage provide key elements for the design of more inclusive business practices, which recognize communities not only as intervention settings but as legitimate actors, with a voice and the ability to influence decisions that affect their present and future.

As a limitation, this study focused exclusively on municipal authorities and local representatives, which may not fully capture the perceptions of the broader community, including residents without administrative roles. Future research should therefore expand the sample to include diverse social groups and quantitative measures that validate the qualitative findings.

As a projection, these findings will inform the next phase of the research, which will follow a quantitative and correlational approach aimed at analyzing the relationship between the variables of community perception, sustainability, available information level, and best practices. This upcoming stage will make it possible to validate the patterns and trends identified in the narratives, as well as to generate statistical evidence that supports and expands the comprehensive understanding of the social and environmental phenomenon under study, strengthening the proposal for sustainable management from technical, environmental, and social perspectives.

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POSTRZEGANIE WYDOBYCIA LITU PRZEZ SPOŁECZNOŚĆ SAN AGUSTÍN METZQUITILÁN, HIDALGO, MEKSYK

Streszczenie: Rosnące zapotrzebowanie na lit jako surowiec strategiczny wzbudziło zainteresowanie jego wydobyciem w różnych regionach Meksyku, w tym w San Agustín Metzquitilán, Hidalgo. Niniejsze badanie stanowi część badania mieszanego pt. „Projektowanie strategii zrównoważonego zarządzania przedsiębiorstwem dla wydobycia litu z perspektywy społecznej wspólnoty San Agustín Metzquitilán, Hidalgo”. W artykule przedstawiono pierwszą, jakościową fazę badania, mającą na celu dogłębne zbadanie percepcji, znaczeń i doświadczeń społecznych związanych z potencjalnym wydobyciem litu w tej społeczności. Celem było poznanie opinii osób pełniących funkcje publiczne lub reprezentujących społeczność. Zastosowano podejście fenomenologiczne, aby zrozumieć, w jaki sposób lokalni aktorzy – w tym władze wspólnoty – doświadczają, interpretują i oceniają możliwą obecność projektów wydobycia litu na ich terytorium. Zastosowano celowy dobór próby oparty na kryteriach, koncentrując się na kluczowych osobach posiadających wiedzę o lokalnym kontekście społecznym, ekonomicznym i środowiskowym. Przeprowadzono wywiady częściowo ustrukturyzowane. Poruszane tematy dotyczyły tożsamości terytorialnej, obaw środowiskowych, oczekiwań rozwojowych, zaufania do instytucji oraz wcześniejszych doświadczeń z podmiotami zewnętrznymi. Wyniki ujawniły ambiwalentną postawę społeczności: z jednej strony dostrzega się wartość gospodarczą litu jako szansę na rozwój; z drugiej – występuje silny lęk przed zanieczyszczeniem wody, utratą gruntów wspólnotowych oraz naruszeniem więzi społecznych. Zgłaszano również potrzebę uzyskania większej ilości informacji, aktywnego udziału w podejmowaniu decyzji oraz poszanowania prawa wspólnoty do samostanowienia. Uzyskane wyniki jakościowe stanowią podstawę do opracowania strategii zrównoważonego zarządzania, które odpowiadają realiom społecznym tego terytorium i głosom jego mieszkańców.

Słowa kluczowe: postrzeganie wspólnoty, lit, zrównoważone zarządzanie

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