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# Political practices between internal colonialism and global inequality: Energy infrastructures in Tunisia and Costa Rica

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ABSTRACT

Infrastructures are products of relational political processes. In this paper, we analyze the power dynamics around energy infrastructure projects at different scales. We aim at unpacking controversial global-local relations around renewable energy infrastructures by combining literatures on internal colonialism and global inequalities. Large scale infrastructure's dependence on global actors link practices of internal colonialism to global inequalities in the contexts of energy infrastructure expansion in Tunisia (solar plants) and Costa Rica (hydroelectric dams). Analyzing the political practices in these projects, we contribute a practices-based perspective to existing work on relations of coloniality perpetuated through contemporary infrastructure. These practices include cooperation between global, technical agencies with energy ministries and state discourses that frame resistance to energy infrastructure projects as backward or unwilling to contribute to a nation's electricity portfolio. (Il-)legal practices include the de facto transformation of land ownership for Indigenous communities in Costa Rica, and tribes in Tunisia. The socio-spatial asymmetries in these global and internal colonial relations are expressed in potential 'sacrifice zones'. Simultaneously, affected communities do practice resistance against planned infrastructures, from slow, everyday practices to formalized legal pathways.

## 1. Introduction

Political dynamics around energy infrastructure roll-out are neither exclusively local affairs nor simply imposed from a global power level. But how do global scales of action and the diverse practices that subvert, reshape or contest infrastructure projects really intersect? For a more thorough understanding of the intertwined local *and* global power relations that energy infrastructures fix in place, we draw on the notions of global inequalities (Boatcă, 2015), and internal colonialism (González Casanova, 1965), with a focus on the reproduction of internal socio-spatial asymmetries (Hesketh, 2023) through infrastructure projects. Internal colonialism and global inequality combined, offer a conceptual lens to study the politics of energy infrastructures. Both notions were prequels to or draw on dependency approaches, world systems theory, and decolonial approaches, complementing each other. To bring these to a concrete level of analysis, we situate actual political practices (Gurol et al., 2024; Koch, 2022) within a renewed, spatialized notion of internal colonialism (Lucio, 2016; Teixeira Delgado, 2021) as a lens to energy infrastructures which both take into account transformed global relations. For an empirically grounded analysis, we juxtapose political practices around energy infrastructures in Costa Rica and Tunisia.

This article contributes to conceptualizing the relationship between racialized communities bearing the burdens of energy production (De Coss-Corzo, 2023; De Onís, 2021; Kallianos, & DunlapDalakoglou, 2023), and spaces affected by energy production, the so-called 'sacrifice zones' (Juskus, 2023; Farrier, 2019; Sanz & Rodríguez Labajos, 2023). It also contributes a practices-based perspective to work on coloniality perpetuated through contemporary infrastructures (Enns & Bersaglio, 2020). Through these concrete practices by various actors, we can appreciate how the spatial expressions of internal colonialism in building infrastructures relate to global scales of action.

We argue that large scale infrastructure's dependence on global actors link practices of *internal* colonialism to *global* inequalities (Boatcă, 2015). Practices include the very close cooperation between global 'technical' agencies with energy ministries, and state discourses that frame resistance to energy infrastructure projects – even when unbuilt – as backward, anti-development behavior, or unwilling to contribute to a nation's electricity portfolio. (Il-)legal practices include de facto

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transformations of land ownership for Indigenous communities in Costa Rica, and tribes in Tunisia. Spatially, these global and internal colonial relations are expressed in 'sacrifice zones'. Disputed perceptions of what constitutes valid practices and land use are familiar in the internal colonialism and global inequality literatures. We argue that in our research contexts, they are spatialized as infrastructure projects in sacrifice zones which contribute to broader well-being only by being destroyed. Simultaneously, affected communities do employ resistant practices against planned infrastructures, from slow, everyday practices to formalized legal pathways.

In literatures on infrastructure and energy, scholars and activists have criticized the narrative of a smooth globalization of renewable energy production, framing the practices as energy colonialism (Batel & Devine-Wright, 2017; Dunlap, 2021), infrastructure coloniality (Enns & Bersaglio, 2020; Distretti, 2021; Tornel, 2023) and racial capitalism in geopolitics (Vasudevan & Smith, 2020). De Onís (2018), shows how US corporations took advantage of the energy disaster in the aftermath of Hurricane Maria in Puerto Rico, sidelining small-scale and decentralized energy projects (De Onís, 2018: 3). Existing work on "internal colonialism" in energy infrastructure (Lawrence, 2014) shows how the infrastructure "scramble" has contributed to internal colonial practices, shaping hierarchical visions of workers' rights and the nation-state (De Coss-Corzo, 2023).

The article is structured as follows: the first section discusses how "internal colonialism" as a concept that focuses on spatialized power relations, and inequalities on a global scale, are intertwined conceptually. We then briefly explain our case selection and data collection. The following two are the main sections, subdivided into three different sets of practices: In section three, we focus on training, planning and investing as practices that reproduce and take place at the scale of global inequalities in the politics of energy infrastructures. In section four, we focus on the material practices in each context, particularly legalizing land use change and privatizing communal land as aspects of internal colonialism, and on the rhetoric and discourses employed within Costa Rica and Tunisia.

## 2. Making sense of "internal colonialism" and repertoires of action on a global scale

The notion of internal colonialism allows us to focus on the socio-spatial aspects of asymmetrical energy relations. "Internal Colonialism" stems from 1960s efforts to nuance dependency debates by González Casanova (1965). He argued that the myth of developmental rationality, which for Latin American societies set a goal of "entering" modernity, was in reality "a relationship of domination and exploitation" which explained persistent societal contradictions and extreme inequalities (Lucio, 2016: 37). Postcolonial societies did not succeed in dismantling colonial inequalities, but re-configured them, re-inscribing persistent narratives and practices into state-society relations (Lucio, 2016). Internal colonialism is a set of practices "that continue to be carried out by the members of that society in spite of the change in status" (Teixeira Delgado, 2021: 45–46), a specific "system of inequalities" (Lucio, 2016; Pinderhughes, 2011), not an accident or side effect of colonialism. Internal colonialism explains some differences in possibilities to shape energy politics, "creating segregation at the core of that society, defining who can perform certain activities, who governs, who has access to certain goods and wealth" (Teixeira Delgado, 2021:32). A "rhetoric of otherness", which we observe across our research contexts, provides "a discursive continuum" (Lucio, 2016: 28).

Internal colonialism differs slightly from two other notions, frequently used in discussions on energy infrastructures, namely "energy colonialism" and "coloniality of infrastructures": "Energy colonialism" conveys an institutional dominance and overwhelming control of energy sources by a metropole. This is not entirely coherent with the empirics we find in our contexts – complex asymmetrical institutional arrangements and differentiated agency. "Energy colonialism" would empirically mean growing exports for Tunisia, while Tunisia has become a net importer of electricity (IEA, 2024). The notion of "coloniality of infrastructures" which draws on Quijano (2000), in turn has been very useful for us. However, in this article, we focus on the spatial aspects and the idea of people and places as reservoirs of resources, i.e. the asymmetry between cities and rural areas foregrounded by Stavenhagen (1963), rather than only the social classification of people (of course these are intertwined). Internal colonialism conveys these nuanced spatial aspects we observe more clearly than the other two terms do.

The global inequalities literature links these practices to global relations and historical trans-regional entanglements, adding the global scale (Boatcă, 2015; Mintz, 1986; Teixeira Delgado, 2021). Developing world-systems-theory further and informed by decolonial thought, global inequalities literature reaffirms the need to analyze a global capitalist system, in which different elements are mutually dependent, rather than only nation-states. We understand the production of energy as a commodity in locations where little of that is consumed, intended for locations where less of it is produced but which exert control over its sources, as a feature of global inequalities. These entanglements have long shaped unequal relations within both historically colonized and colonizing political contexts, in the form of unequal exchange, voluntary and forced migration, and vulnerabilities to violence. Internal colonialism is a result of these global entanglements but not reducible to them. Boatcă (2015) links the role of past colonial relations in today's global inequalities (i.e. an international division of labor) with racial/ethnic inequalities established during and reproduced after colonialism. These global relations are subject to change. In his work on political economy and agency, Bogaert (2013) analyzes the deep causes of the Arab revolts, which were not 'just' answers to rampant unemployment and illiberal regimes, but to decades of mainly profit-driven global *and* local economic policies, to the progressive retreat of the state from welfare and social policies. In energy, we similarly trace interdependent transformations between local *and* global contexts, where changes within environmental and energy governance have simultaneously progressed on multiple scales (Gurol et al., 2024).

Internal colonialism then, in conjunction with global inequalities, defines the material conditions for political practices; they are entangled in the process of spatial racialization across scales (see Boatca, 2015: 36–44; 83). Internal Colonialism enables us to focus on mid-scale spatial inequalities – in relation to national governments and urban centers, while global inequalities opens the focus up (scales it up) to the relations of energy at the global scale, i.e. between countries. Internal colonialism is more than a discourse that legitimizes dispossession, it means inequality in the practices and policies of institutions and a tendency of excluding some groups from political scenarios; it describes relations of structural violence. The globalized energy context draws more actors into these relations. In fact, infrastructures themselves act as scalar articulators.

In short, global inequalities and internal colonialism are entangled. Focusing on their specific *practices* enriches discussions on the possibly authoritarian political processes of planning energy infrastructures. Practices of internal colonialism mean those policies, laws, or bureaucratic processes that reproduce forms of marginalization based on racialization. These practices are authoritarian in that they localize global regimes of inequality without possibility for contestation, even disabling political agency and violating political rights for some groups, causing uneven experiences of violence or selectively distributing the costs of energy production (Gurol et al., 2024). Nevertheless, internal colonialism is a contradictory relation engrained with strategies of resistance that underline Indigenous peoples' capacity for agency over time (Lucio, 2016: 39).

Internal colonialism highlights energy infrastructures' unequal spatial effects. Stavenhagen (1963), in conversation with González Casanova (1965 [2000]), argued that in internal colonialism, a stark asymmetry exists between cities and the rural. Considering the racialization of space in internal colonialism, infrastructure building, with the

potential of some regions being sacrificed for others, can be read as a process of ordering social relations around differential energy use. This process shapes specific representations and policies towards "places and peoples to control different energy forms, ranging from humans to hydrocarbons" (De Onís, 2021: 3). Internal colonialism conveys the nuanced spatial aspects of infrastructures more clearly than notions of coloniality or energy colonialism.

Internal colonialism and global inequality in conjunction and across scales, create the risk that racialized actors at energy production sites will be disempowered because contemporary energy projects conceptualize these sites as 'dispensable'. They become potential 'sacrifice zones' (Farrier, 2019; Juskus, 2023). In a 'sacrifice zone', residents suffer the socio-environmental consequences "of living downwind and downstream from [ …] large industrial complexes of extraction, refining, energy generation, and petrochemical production" (Valenzuela-Fuentes et al., 2021: 1). State actors frequently frame sacrifice as a necessary price for a greater good, such as electricity for all, or as in our contexts, frame people in prospective sacrifice zones as tied to nature and thus averse to modernity's promises (both in Tunisian desert zones and Costa Rica's Southern tropical forest regions). Scholars have documented that these flows, even those that power low-carbon transitions, severely affect, alter and enclose specific spaces and people, from sourcing, transport, supporting infrastructures, to material remains (Greiner et al., 2023; Zografos & Robbins, 2020).

We understand the sacrifice zone as a spatial symptom of internal colonialism which emerges *in relation to* the centers of energy use and 'energy privilege' at national and global scales (see De Onís, 2021: 3). This relation ties energy consumers to spaces and people where energy is produced, through the infrastructures of energy supply (Gurol et al., 2024). Linking the notion of sacrifice zones to internal colonialism foregrounds the relational characteristics of both notions. Juskus (2023: 5, 10–11) traces how in the US, the term 'sacrifice zone' emerged from a livestock management term to denominating the destruction left behind by open-pit mining in the 1970s, intimately linked to Indigenous struggles against extraction on reservations and the realization that sacrifice (closeness to toxins or exhaust of extraction sites) was more readily expected from communities of colour. The so-called 'fenceline communities' illustrate the inability to contain the damage in a declared 'zone' (Juskus, 2023: 12; see Lerner, 2010).

However, the inhabitants of potential 'sacrifice zones' exert political practices, independent of whether infrastructure planners see them as political subjects at all. In the main section, we trace such relational practices within sacrifice zones. These practices address the state and themselves change social relations. For instance, "creative actions such as murals" have acted "to re-establish connections both among humans and between humans and the environment" in sacrifice zones (Sanz & Rodríguez Labajos, 2023: 1135).

In the next section, we explore the intersection between global actors and internal colonialism in Costa Rica and Tunisia, while in the last section, we analyze the practical effects on potential sacrifice zones.

## 3. Case selection and data collection

We juxtapose two contexts rarely discussed together (see Hooker, 2019). A unique research project gave us the opportunity to research the political practices around different energy infrastructures in a Latin American and a North African country. The method of juxtaposition, rather than classical comparison, allows us to put two contexts in conversation which are completely unrelated historically, particularly in their infrastructural development, historical conditions and timelines in infrastructural roll-out. Yet despite these differences, Costa Rica and Tunisia show similar patterns of change in how energy infrastructures are managed, which advance our understanding of how energy infrastructures are organized at a global scale. That case selection in consequence speaks to the theoretical argument and confirms it surprisingly clearly. Reading the two contexts together allows us to develop a more conceptual argument – the interrelation of internal colonialism and global inequalities in energy infrastructures – without ignoring contextual difference.

The prominence of state-owned electricity utilities with a symbolic role in the postcolonial state, STEG in Tunisia (Tunisian Company of Electricity and Gas) and ICE (Costa Rican Electricity Institute) in Costa Rica, is similar and makes the politics of energy infrastructures in both places comparable. Tunisia and Costa Rica share their global positioning in the so-called 'Global South'. Governments in both have pushed for intense infrastructural renewal and achieved relatively volatile foreign direct investments. Both state utilities are currently under pressure to outsource energy management and allow private participation in energy generation and distribution. Another reason to read them alongside each other is that neither of the projects analyzed has materialized, despite the more common authoritarian practices in Tunisia.

In Costa Rica, plans for large-scale dams in the country's south once and again have clashed with the land rights of Indigenous communities. While a law recognized Indigenous communal land titles in 1977, both informal land appropriation and state-planned infrastructure projects have fragmented these territories. In the case of the state-planned large dam project Diquís in the 2000s and 2010s, the ICE ignored the legally binding obligation to consult Indigenous communities whose territories would have been partly flooded, employing a discourse of the need for 'catching up' in terms of energy provision in the country's south, 'because there, nothing has been developed' (ICE director Carlos Obregón cited in Sancho, 2015).

The Tunisian state – independent from France since 1956 – reproduced the French colonial model of extractivism to the expense of its peripheral regions and communities. Since the 2011 Revolution, the state has developed (or maintained) authoritarian management of the southern 'communal' lands, an inheritance of the French colonization (Ayeb, 2012: 72–96). Tunisian presidents have somewhat reproduced this colonial system of land expropriation (Zemni, 2021), showing the internalization of colonial dynamics. In sum, in contexts as different as Tunisia and Costa Rica, with highly disparate degrees of the use of authoritarian practices by the state, these energy infrastructure projects have potentially reinforced relations of internal colonialism, with global participation.

This study is based on qualitative interviews during one-month fieldwork in Tunisia in February 2023 and online, and two research trips of three weeks each in Costa Rica in 2022 and 2023. Document analysis was complemented by extensive narrative and semi-structured interviews with 20 participants in Tunisia and 35 in Costa Rica of between 30 min and 2 h' length. In Tunisia, access to the actual location of planned energy projects was restricted – these are declared military areas –, so that empirical material focuses less on one location, but nonetheless offers comparable data on the political *practices* in energy infrastructures (also through online interviews). Projects remained unbuilt, and we focused on the (possibly colonial) practices in energy infrastructures and the electricity grid. These practices are empirically documented not only through interviews with 'locals', but through interviews with actors from a variety of fields (state energy institutions, advisors, engineers, EU representatives).

## 4. Reproducing global inequalities: Training, planning, investing

Global actors such as donors and corporations, and governments employ discourses of energy transition, usually to achieve populations' endorsement of new infrastructures. Discursive figures like modernity (as the goal to be achieved through infrastructural investment), an ideal stemming from a global scale, furnish states with arguments to counter protest. To varying degrees, such political discourses of modernity delegitimize people's claims against infrastructures by depicting protesters as backward and anti-modern. State and global actors' discourses converge, making similar claims.

### 4.1. Tunisia

In Tunisia, tensions between the Saied government and the Tunisian General Labor Union (UGTT) around energy recently intensified. Since 2020, the government approach concerning renewable energies has been to outsource the investments and delegate to the German Cooperation (GIZ) the training of the engineers within the Energy Ministry, the ANME, and STEG. The official plans seemed to be to privatize the national agency of Electricity and Gas (STEG). In December 2022, President Saied dismissed privatization rumors about the public companies STEG, water provider Sonede, and Tunisair (Webdo, 2022); yet in March 2022 the Deputy Secretary-General of STEG Monji Khlifa declared the authorities were open to accept the labor unions' demands only '(…) in exchange for the privatization of the company.' (Tunisienumerique, 2022). The UGTT has criticized the approach as undermining the national sovereignty over (renewable) energy production, claiming that the government strategy is to make profits from limiting people's energy autonomy. Here is how one UGTT member described the GIZ interference:

> 'We criticize GIZ on all these subjects on foreign influence […] for us, GIZ is German intelligence at the energy level […] it's catastrophic what it does! […] They [GIZ] are everywhere, they have cars with the logo of Tunisia, they want an office at the STEG, they do the planning, and they give recommendations […] For us, the GIZ is a colonization tool.' (Interview with union member in Tunisia, 28th February 2023)

RES4Med (2018) is the Renewable Energy Solution for the Mediterranean, a platform for public-private dialogue about the renewable energy sector in Southern-Eastern Mediterranean Countries (SEMC). The union member's harsh statement illustrates that part of the UGTT strongly disapproves of external actors such as the GIZ, and of the inertia of the union for the electricity sector (FGEG) and the government. The UGTT is very critical vis-à-vis the government's practices, especially concerning the ANME. ANME implements energy policies, is responsible for STEG's financial planning, and is directly linked to the Energy Ministry. The same union member declared:

> 'For us, the ANME is a branch of the GIZ […] they are tools of neoliberal propaganda in Tunisia […] the ANME, like the [Energy and Mines] Ministry, all of them. I will give you an example: we use the land while the consumption centers are the cities. To produce energy, what do we use? What do we exploit? Rural lands! In other words, the city, in order to satisfy its [energy] needs resorts to the countryside without giving back, in a logic of exploitation. We need to change the urban development model […] that is our approach. Why exploit the countryside to meet the needs of the city?' (Interview with UGTT member, 28th February 2023)

These critical assessments point to two intertwined dimensions, global inequalities *and* internal colonialism. It is visible that actors at the global scale co-shape energy practices (Bouattia, 2021): in Tunisia, these actors are the GIZ, the French Development Agency, the Italian Cooperation and ENI, and the European Union (Poletti & Delpuech, 2022). A large, building in Lac II hosts the official headquarters of German cooperation in Tunisia. The GIZ is present in Tunis' prosperous neighborhoods, has offices within the Energy Ministry and ANME in Montplaisir, and at STEG in the city-center. Two GIZ employees confirmed GIZ leads industrial cooperation to develop energy efficiency in public buildings such as those of ANME and STEG.

According to the employees, the GIZ mainly performs technical support for Tunisian institutions by organizing training for enterprises and engineers on energy efficiency and promoting the STEG program PROSOL ELEC. PROSOL provides incentives to STEG residential customers wishing to install solar photovoltaic systems to partially cover their electricity needs. These incentives consist of a subsidy representing 30 % of the investment cost of the photovoltaic installation; an additional premium of 10 % of the investment cost granted by the Italian Ministry for the Environment and Territory (MIET) through the Mediterranean Renewable Energy Centre; a 5-year loan of up to 3000 dinars per kWp, granted by Ettijari Bank and repayable on the STEG bill; and a subsidy of the entire interest on the loan, equivalent to a premium of 5 % of the investment cost, provided by MIET. PROSOL is older, but has 'a better-defined structure now thanks to the GIZ.' (Interview with ANME engineer, 21st February 2023).

The GIZ provides training to STEG or ANME engineers, and has its own engineers within those institutions, and state-appointed engineers who collaborate with GIZ (interview with engineer, 30th February 2023). One engineer at ANME sees 'the GIZ employees as more than colleagues, they are friends.' (Interview with ANME engineer, Tunis, 30th February 2023). GIZ's daily presence within state institutions, such as ANME or STEG, would explain the close collaboration in planning, managing, defining, and training between GIZ engineers and state civil servants and show the interference of global actors.

The GIZ organizes its energy policy in Tunisia around 'clusters' (GIZ, 2021) namely district business models, to increase competitiveness and develop clusters in size, memberships, and services. Cluster policies aim at establishing favorable business environments for innovation and new value chains. An interviewee, a GIZ engineer working within the Energy and Climate Cluster said the GIZ supports Tunisia in its renewable energies transition. He explains that GIZ has three partners, the Ministry, ANME, and STEG, with whom it works to support the private energy sector and build new solutions to improve staff qualifications and better software. As far as he alleges, the GIZ expertise is necessary to 'harmonize' the management of the energy supply in the North, Center, and South of Tunisia. Indeed, the GIZ staff work on the same techniques to implement the digitization of the STEG homogeneously in the whole country.

The European Union has been another determinant in Tunisian politics, claiming to protect and support democracy. Twelve years after the 2011 Revolution, that argument rings hollow. Indeed, the EU priority now seems aimed at preventing Tunisia's economic collapse, which would inevitably have repercussions on migratory flows to the northern shores of the Mediterranean. A meeting in Tunis in 2023 included the Italian prime minister Giorgia Meloni, her Dutch counterpart Mark Rutte, the EU Commission president Ursula von der Leyen, and the Tunisian president Kais Saied, using human rights discourses (instead of democracy) to establish yet more restrictive migration policies (Dahmani, 2023). In Tunis, we interviewed the EU Program Manager for Energy, Environment, and Climate Change in Lac II. He made clear that energy was a priority:

> 'We work bilaterally, so what we do here is that we support what Tunisia wants to do. These are Tunisian national programs and we support them with technical assistance from consultants who help them with the question of how to structure working mechanisms. […] with funds […] they train people to create green jobs. On the one hand, there are agreements between the managing agency and STEG.' (Interview with EU Program Manager, 7th February 2023)

According to the EU official, the STEG system needs a radical makeover: it has to be smarter and more flexible:

> 'The EIB or EBRD they have had projects to strengthen the infrastructure side, so transmission, distribution of electricity in Tunisia (…) clearly there's something to focus on, that is, if you want to integrate more renewables in Tunisia, you have to have a more flexible system […] there the whole smart grid thing opens up, so STEG has to be able to manage much more demand/supply flows of energy on fast timelines.' (Interview with EU official, Tunis 7th February 2023)

One shared declared aim of the EU and development agencies is a restructured, competitive STEG. However, foreign investment does not necessarily stimulate local productivity, but has fed existing wealth

networks and increased dependency on external financing. Foreign direct investment also reinforced regional asymmetries. It seems safe to say that global players do co-shape Tunisia's energy system, without an actual job creation impact, especially in Southern regions.

### 4.2. Costa Rica

Global actors' influence in Costa Rica's energy infrastructure landscape is less straightforward. Costa Rica has long drawn interest from global green finance actors, due to its narrative of being a 'pioneer' country in renewable energy roll-out. First based on conservation efforts and early national parks, "green exceptionalism" narratives in Costa Rica have been its major label towards global relations: investment attraction, the tourism sector, and international cooperation initiatives are all based on Costa Rica as a 'green' economy (Gutiérrez, & Grandos Chaverri, 2020). Costa Rica is part of the Clean Development Mechanism which establishes prices for carbon emissions, and has received payments via REDD++.

It is no surprise that US state institutions harbor some interest in the Central American electricity grid. The Americas Connect2022 Initiative the Bureau of Energy Resources at the US State Department (2015:2), explicitly wishes to 'create a business climate' across Central America 'that accelerates renewable energy development and attracts private investment'. However, the evaluation decries institutional weaknesses in SIEPAC and lacking long term transmission rights for international private investors. As its stakeholder, US Embassy staff through the initiative are part of the arena of energy politics in Costa Rica. However, stakeholders from Costa Rica, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Panama argued the growth in renewables reflected national priorities of energy security, not international pressures, neither Connect 2022, nor the Regional Market (State Department, 2015).

Our interviewees did not see global influence in renewables infrastructures as decisive as Tunisian interviewees did. Their critique is more general and draws historical continuities across ranges of infrastructures, for instance planned for the Southern Costa Rican region of Puntarenas:

> 'In 1939, the government gave land in the southern part of the country, which belonged to Indigenous people, to [United] Fruit Company to plant bananas. This region is still the country's poorest. In the 1980s they said they would develop this region by bringing in Pindeco, a pineapple company. And here we are in 2017 and Buenos Aires is still the poorest district, where is the development, who is taking the money from this region, who is being developed?' (Indigenous leader cited in Avispa, 2017).

There is, however, clarity as to who development agencies and investors want to work with. Rather than the ICE, which they see trapped in history-dependent pathways, driven by its unions and old-fashioned ideas of the state, they see the executive as obvious counterparts in the energy sector. In a long-term project called Acción Clima projected until 2026, the GIZ works directly with the Climate Change Department within the Energy and Environment Ministry (MINAE) (MINAE and GIZ, 2021). Representatives of the German International Chamber of Commerce in Costa Rica have argued for a strengthened Ministry.

> 'The MINAE, they should be saying which projects can be done, which won't. [ …] They should be overseeing this stage of digitalisation and should be dictating electricity policy. But MINAE has, I think, one electrical engineer. That's all. [ …] who is loaned to them by ICE!' (Interview with Chamber member, 28th February 2023).

Costa Rica is a counterpart in a GIZ-led project on Better Climate Services for Investments in Infrastructures (CSI) which aims to strengthen the cooperation between providers of climate data, decision-makers, planners and engineers in the infrastructure sector, for instance by including climate risk analyses into infrastructure project planning.

The influence of global actors such as technical and development agencies is less straightforward in Costa Rica, but different such institutions all aim to strengthen infrastructural investment and the role of the Energy and Environment Ministry vis-à-vis the ICE.

## 5. Practices of internal colonialism and resistance in Tunisia and Costa Rica

Internal colonialism is not only domination (Teixeira Delgado, 2021: 32), but the product of a 'mutual formation', involving both the state and Indigenous communities (Lucio, 2016: 42). In Latin America, since the 1990s, renewed outward-oriented extractive-export models have meant an increase in tensions between states and Indigenous communities insofar as "certain key resources for the national economy such as mines, oil fields, timber forests, bio-forestry reserves, and hydroelectric potential are located in areas of traditional settlement" (Iturralde, 1992 in Lucio, 2016: 34). Lucio's notion of the mutual formation of internal colonialism helps understand how energy infrastructure projects continue to impact state and collective land.

We read the dominant narratives around contemporary energy infrastructure projects in the historical, practical continuities of internal colonialism. Tunisia has capitalized on narratives of "exceptionalism", before and after the 2011 revolution, explaining Tunisian success as unique historical, political, and cultural dynamics. Via a political blend of reformism and tradition, Habib Bourguiba, Tunisia's first president from 1956 to 1987, developed the idea of *Tunisianité* (Zemni, 2016), qualifying Tunisia as the exception among its North African neighbors. The 2011 Revolution strengthened the myth, as Tunisia transitioned to democracy in contrast to others (Masri, 2017). The narrative worked to appease discontent, dispossessing southern regions of their contribution of resistance, where most political uprisings had sparked, as in 2011. The relative autonomy of southern family collectives had long made state governance highly complex in the south. After 2011, the government campaigned to re-nationalize southern lands controlled by tribes. Except for a few cases, the state encountered fierce resistance from locals. Ultimately, in 2019, president Kais Saied changed the 2015 law on common lands to allow the government to use them without consulting locals.

The dominant national imaginary represented Costa Rica as a 'democratic', 'peaceful' country, exceptional in Central America. Simultaneously, national myths were based on hard-working Spanish-descent farmers on the mountain slopes of the Central Valleys, which became the spatial symbol of superiority (Gutiérrez, & Grandos Chaverri, 2020:8). The Northern and Southern Pacific grasslands and Caribbean remained a refuge from which Indigenous groups resisted conquest. Such spaces were framed as inferior, 'anti-cultural', 'uncivilized': "The lowlands produce men endowed with immense vital energy, but they do not create culture. Civilisation does not come from the plains. It only arrives there. It comes from the valley" (Monge, 1943: 9; cited in Gutiérrez, & Grandos Chaverri, 2020: 9). The following example illustrates the material and discursive dimensions of internal colonialism: Between 1850 and 1950 the Costa Rican state, eager to exert territorial control and provide an escape from the unequal property relations of the dominant coffee sector, promoted the private appropriation of lands. These lands, while called *baldíos* (empty lands), were in fact frequently inhabited by Indigenous communities (Gutiérrez, & Grandos Chaverri, 2020: 9).

### 5.1. Legalizing land use change and privatizing communal land

Energy infrastructures reshape and connect the spaces around them. The question of land, core to internal colonialism (Stavenhagen, 1963), is necessarily profoundly affected by the infrastructure scramble. When state institutions allow corporations to install energy infrastructure on disputed land, giving the projects absolute priority, the government neglects local dissent.

#### 5.1.1. Tunisia

While modernization efforts after independence targeted large dams and expensive irrigation infrastructures (Elloumi, 2013; Ajl, 2019:6), land remained tied to unequal property structures and modernization narratives. After 2011, few efforts have aimed to redistribute land (Gana & Taleb, 2019). The mining basin of Gafsa, the sacrificed oasis of Gabes and Nefta, and the oil-polluted Kerkennah island are examples of sacrifice zones in Tunisia (Bouattia, 2021; Hamouchene, 2016). Not only has the state systematically exploited natural resources and contributed to ecosystem destruction in these places, but progressively liberalized land use. In 2019, President Kais Saied modified the 2015 law on renewable energies. The changes allow the Tunisian government to use common lands in the southern regions without consulting local communities when it comes to 'national interest'. This law is in continuity with the long-standing state neglect of areas and people considered to be 'sacrificable'. Another production of a potential sacrifice zone is the TuNur project, which would be built in the military zone of Rjim Matoug, but has not passed the planning stage.

Fautras (2015) explores the connection between land and inequalities in post-2011 Tunisia. She focuses on how land injustices and contestations in rural areas in Sidi Bouzid led to the 2011 revolution, analyzing how changes in land rights produce or prevent injustices. Collectives have maintained the tribal lands of internal and Southern regions undivided and managed them collectively for centuries, until the 20th century. Since land rights are so deeply connected to work, dignity, and consumption, state intervention to re-appropriate these lands or introduce state management is complex, reproducing inequalities between inhabitants of the center-south and the north coast.

> 'planning policies contribute to an overlap of injustice at several levels (social, economic, political, identity-related) and scales: the *fellahs* [farmers] feel deprived in the face of inequalities in access to resources, accentuated by public policies; the inhabitants of Sidi Bouzid disadvantaged compared with those of other governorates and particularly Sfax or Sahel' (Fautras, 2015:20)

In Tunisia, links between land, practices of internal colonialism and areas of sacrifice have a long history. The southern regions have always represented unruly, poorer areas. Land is crucial for the autonomy of families and their complex relationship with state power, shaped by the economic and infrastructural marginality of the South. This marginality gave origin to multiple sacrifice zones, where local populations survive almost 'without' the state and absorb the consequences of extractivism, while extreme levels of pollution and institutional abandonment intersect (Pepicelli, 2021).

With the structural adjustment plans of the 1980s, the state started a process of profound disinvestment from the public domain. State lands became managed by private societies (SMVDA), via thirty-year concessions. Frequently people close to political power then headed these societies, leading to progressive land grabbing from the Ben Ali family and friends, as well as to popular resentment, which partly resulted in the 2011 revolution (Elloumi, 2013). After 2011, the Troika government, led by the Islamist party Ennahda, organized public tenders to sell state land. However, Ennahda conceived the tenders to advantage its members and those from the coalition party, Nidaa Tounes (Gana & Taleb, 2019).

The liberalization of land property and land grabbing by wealthy individuals or societies close to political power is still visible today in renewable energies, like solar. The ENI-owned photovoltaic power plant in Tataouine is an example of such practices, built under the 'authorization regime' (Ben Ruine & Roche, 2022), after the state offered the land through a tender process. In Tunisia, concession, authorization and self-consumption are the three regimes of energy production. The authorization regime concerns those projects producing an amount of energy equal or inferior to 10 MW (Hamedi et al., 2021, p. 42), with contracts for 20 years. For instance, companies ENI and ETAP built the contested. but "largest private solar farm in Tunisia, using a solar tracking system technology to generate and sell electricity to STEG, at USD 24/MWh", considered "the lowest bid ever recorded in Africa." (El Amine, 2023). In consequence, STEG is legally bound to 20 years of energy purchase from ENI.

Historically, in Tunisia, state-owned land is the product of a process of appropriation by colonial authorities first, and by national public authorities after 2011 (Elloumi, 2013). The Revolution challenged the process of internal colonization by the urban 'bourgeoisie' and the government. After the Revolution, many were eager to reconvert state lands to centers of territorial development, to prevent land appropriations (Jouili & Elloumi, 2021). Despite promises and some exceptions like the Oasis of Jemna, territorial development has mostly not materialized. One UGTT member explains the genesis of land legislation:

> 'You have to understand the Tunisian context […] Since 2013, the Troika government proposed a bill on renewable energies entitled *Loi sur la production d'électricité à travers les énergies renouvelables par le secteur privé*. This included pre-revolutionary laws such as the 2009 law on auto production. Self-production means that civil society can minimize its energy bill by setting up a photovoltaic plant, a renewable energy plant for consumption or self-consumption. [It can be done by a] company or local community as in the municipality, the *baladiya*. This is the first axis. It's an old one, introduced by Benali in 2002. It was incorporated and reinstated in the 2015 law.' (Interview with UGTT member, Tunis, 27th February 2023)

The "communal" lands in the southern regions of Gafsa, Sidi Bouzid, Tataouine, and Tozeur, still belong to the local communities, and the state must consult them before making decisions (Jouili & Elloumi, 2021). Yet, recently the president has declared that the government can skip such consultation for those projects of 'national interest' (Decree law 2022-68, 2022). Moreover, the 2019 legal changes postulate that, to build a solar plant or wind park, there is no obligation to change the designated land use, making it more accessible to energy investors, and encouraging farmers to sell (Law, 2019–47). Whatever the land's vocation; the state can sell or rent it to produce energy. The law's article 11-bis says:

> 'The projects for the production of electricity from renewable energies provided for by this section, are carried out on real estate belonging to individuals. They may be authorized, where appropriate, to be carried out on parts falling within the domains of the State or local communities in the event that the opportunity for their realization is established, having regard to the national strategy set by the national plan of electrical energy produced from renewable energies. Notwithstanding the provisions of Article 8 of Law No. 83–87 of November 11, 1983 relating to the protection of agricultural land as amended by subsequent texts, the realization of electricity production projects from renewable energies planned by this section, does not require the change of vocation of the agricultural land.'

#### 5.1.2. Costa Rica

Similarly, in Costa Rica the most decisive state practice in energy infrastructure processes alludes to land management. From the early 2000s onwards, the state-planned 600 MW Diquís dam was projected to convert large parts of the territory of Teribe Indigenous communities in Costa Rica's south into a clear sacrifice zone. The dam lake would have flooded approximately 10 % of the titled lands officially under Teribe administration. The Diquís project illustrates spatial internal colonial relations, as it connects not only the metropolitan San José area to the Southern, non-energy producing region of Puntarenas, but would clearly have contributed to energy exports (Interview with state official, 03rd June 2022). The co-constitution of internal and global colonial relations in the political practices around energy infrastructures is starkly visible in the practices around the Diquís. But there is a difference: The project was archived in 2018, at least partly due to Indigenous communities

protesting against it. One Indigenous activist recollects how they started organizing when they realized that the planned project was going to flood part of their territory.

> 'We said no, because the Térraba river was a free river and its journey could not be truncated. So the struggle began, well, meetings, more than anything a lot of assemblies, marches … ' (Interview with Indigenous activist1, 04th March 2023).

The affected sites are of sacred, cultural and archaeological significance, fundamental pillars to Teribe identity and cultural integrity. This is why Teribe representatives in my interviews said the project would disappear Teribe culture (Interview with activist, 08th June 2022).

State practices in this infrastructure process were clearly authoritarian, with no regard for consultation with those inhabiting the sacrifice zone. So-called local liaison committees aimed at managing the project's reception in each community. But that did not mean agency. Initially, the ICE even denied that any affected land belonged to Indigenous communities, claiming only 482 'peasant' families had to undergo involuntary resettlement (Burgos, 2012: 37–40), ignoring both the state titles over Indigenous land from the 1950s and the 1977 Indigenous law awarding them sovereignty over those lands. The ICE denied having advanced construction work before obtaining the affected communities' approval; activists related it indeed constructed transfer tunnels for the dam, and dredged the Veragua stream (Human Rights Law Clinic University of, Texas., 2010). Indigenous women organizations claimed they had never been invited to the liaison committee at all (Burgos, 2012). In the early 2010s, Teribe communities related that ICE had – without prior and informed consent

> 'built infrastructure, including roads, a warehouse for heavy machinery and the construction of housing for approximately 3,000 workers and their families, the excavation of tunnels to be used for the dam, and concessions have been granted to extract materials for the construction of the dam on traditional lands.' (CIDH, 2016: 2).

Photos now exist of the tunnels which ICE actually built. Inhabitants, some of them Indigenous, worked in the tunnels and exposed this state practice. 'I had a brother who worked there. He was one of the young men who made the tunnels.' (Interview with activist, 4th March 2023).

Practices around land management are also implicated in the ways in which Indigenous communities – on the state's terms – were able to influence policies on Indigenous matters. The Indigenous Development Associations (ADI) legally 'govern' Indigenous territories – but ADIs are coordinated by a branch of the executive, the DINADECO. Indigenous communities consider this 'a negation of their own institutions and Indigenous authorities and a limit to their effective participation' in local and regional politics (CIDH, 2016: 1). ADIs intervene in extremely personal matters other citizens handle directly with respective institutions. Several Indigenous activists narrated how they had to ask permission from the ADI to put up electricity in a collective property (personal communication, 17th February 2023).

'Q: So you really have to ask the ADI for this type of permission?

A:Yes, they give us permission. Now. In the reclaimed territory, with the Carlos Alvarado government, we had been successful in asking for an electricity connection. But now with this government if the ADI does not give you a letter, you don't have electricity.' (Interview with Indigenous activist2, 04th March 2023).

During the mobilizations against the Diquís project, the ADI played the role of an extended state, almost fulfilling intermediary functions known from colonial times. Its practices amounted to threats and included creating social hierarchies within the community.

> 'They were in favor of the Diquís. [ …]The ICE gave them cars, for example to the ADI presidents. It was so extreme! In 2009, 2010[ …] this woman had a bodyguard. A bodyguard! In Costa Rica, those I have seen with a bodyguard were the president, a top judge who sometimes comes here, but these are people that you know that their work [ …] actually presents some degree of threat. [ …] The presidency's speaker from San José always used to come here. He would arrive and sit down with us for a coffee, right here. He never needed to, but the ADI president honestly walks around with three bodyguards[ …] But this is intimidating. Intimidating. This is where they mark the division. You are with the ADI, you are protected, you are against the ADI: "Look at me. Be careful."' (Interview with Indigenous activist 2, 04th March 2023)

### 5.2. *Employing and countering the rhetoric of internal colonialism*

The material infrastructures we refer to in Tunisia and Costa Rica have not been built. The discourses around them, however, have already had material effects. State narratives legitimize infrastructure construction yet also are their precondition, perceiving areas to be suitable for material construction necessitates a discursive construction of places as empty, unused, and communities as non-existent or less valuable. Energy infrastructures confronted Indigenous groups and ecological activists with state officials. However, a second division is between those Indigenous communities aiming to retain cultural heritage and recover land lost to non-Indigenous users, and to groups linked to livestock farming and semi-urban livelihoods.

#### 5.2.1. *Tunisia*

In Tunisia, not only would the planned TuNur project involve the construction of a concentrated solar power plant (CPS) occupying 3.5 million km2 in the Saharan desert (El Amine, 2023), but above all, it would have produced energy on Tunisian territory for European consumption only. One of the Tunisian partners of TuNur described the desert as a frozen asset: 'We have a desert with which we do nothing.' (Delpuech & Poletti, 2022), forging a narrative that allows sacrifice by depriving a specific territory of 'eco-dignity'. Like in Costa Rica, the issue of land intertwines with internal colonialism, in this case with a colonial idea of the desert: a vast, non-inhabited, and therefore 'empty' space, ready to be put to good use. This idea dates back to 'Desertec', a project to turn the vastness of the Sahara desert into a potentially infinite energy basin for Europe. Despite its failure, the world's largest concentrated solar power (CSP) was built in Ouarzazate in Morocco, with severe socio-ecological consequences.

In Tunisia, one UGTT member vehemently reacted to the exploitation of farms and common lands. In internal colonialism literature, one central dimension is 'forms of resource and commodity production and exploitation that subordinate colonial spaces' (De Coss-Corzo, 2023; see Lucio, 2016) not only to external metropoles but to urban centers. This participant was very vocal in relation to the dynamic of subordination countryside/city, claiming that such exploitation needs to be addressed and stopped:

> 'There's a lot of farmland out there. Why exploit it? To satisfy the consumption of urban life. It's unfair […} Installing photovoltaic panels […] Even the noise. I don't know how the landscape changes […] Yes, aesthetics change. That is, to exploit, to change the landscape of the countryside. And even the benefits are for the city, for people who live in the city, it's not normal, it's unfair. But we have. There will be technical problems, yes, but also solutions with smart grids, i.e. intelligent meters (Interview with UGTT member, Tunis, 28th February 2023)

Southern Tunisians have demanded changes in state energy policy for decades (see Poletti & Delpuech, 2022), as energy shortages and state absence are part of everyday life.

The UGTT is not only a trade union, but a crucial political actor with a vocation across scales of action. UGTT trade unionists played a considerable role in making people in the Southern regions aware of their right to access their resources. In fact, UGTT trade unionists

channeled people's grievances into active protest, to avoid that energy produced in planned Southern solar plants flow only to coastal cities with no gains for the South. The Tunisian Platform for Alternatives and UGTT have started a discussion on the 'right to energy', and constituted the Working Group for Energy Democracy (Ben Ammar, 2022; WGED, 2023), to empower people in the local communities, and to help them imagine a cooperative model of producing energy instead of the traditional public-private structure, as Poletti and Delpuech (2022) showed among local communities in Segdoud and Borj Essalhi. The Global Atlas of Environmental Justice maps the main 'sacrifice zones' in Tunisia, i.e. Tataouine and TuNur, close to the Algerian border. In fact, part of the UGTT, environmental activists and those engaged in food and energy sovereignty, demand that the state encourage local communities to self-produce energy, instead of further opening the market to external investors. They practice resistance against internal colonialism, focusing on local people's needs rather than maximizing foreign and Tunisian corporate profits.

#### 5.2.2. Costa Rica

Costa Rican state narratives of why ICE canceled the Diquís project in 2018 are ridden with colonial attributes. Some energy sector representatives doubt this resulted from Indigenous struggle against a colonial project and rather from cost-efficiency decisions. Indigenous communities felt 'resentment', and: 'they maybe wanted a lot and that wasn't possible. And it was a very, very expensive project!' (Interview with electrical systems engineer, 28th February 2023). The communities, the discourse implies, simply wanted too much. Institutional actors involved in planning saw the lack of representatives as problematic. This was '[ …]very complex, because there is not one single voice, but hundreds of voices [ …] So there is no clear interlocutor.' (Interview with environmental analyst, 17th May 2022).

We speak of sacrifice despite narratives of wellbeing which infrastructures supposedly bring about, because state officials treated the area as dispensable, as potentially sacrificed. Indigenous communities felt their region was to be sacrificed for energy exports (rather than national demand), and stressed once and again that they were not consulted in advance (i.e. Interview with Indigenous activist 1, 04th March 2023). In short, the disputed perceptions of what constitutes valid land use practices are spatialized into sacrifice zones.

In archival work in Costa Rica, the urban-rural contradictions also turned out to be a symptom of internal colonial relations. The urban, whiter population of nearby Buenos Aires, hoping to reap benefits or at least some energy privilege from the project was adamant in not letting it go, but employed different practices to achieve the project's completion. Writing letters to the Costa Rican president with a collection of signatories, they clearly thought they would be heard in San José – in contrast to the Indigenous activists. These letters by supporters of large-scale infrastructure show how intimately spaces of sacrifice and energy privilege are connected in infrastructure endeavors. On 23rd February 2016, the Comisión Cantonal de Buenos Aires (CCB, 2016a), an association supporting the Diquís dam, transmit their sense of entitlement to the project:

> 'Mr. President, by no means will we allow that by omission or premeditated action of your government officials opposed to the hydroelectric dams, the ICE will have to order a technical closure of the PHED, it is the Indigenous consultative process that determines the future of the DIQUIS initiative and its benefits for our district',

The association claims the Ministry of Environment and Energy declared the project of 'national interest' (CCB, 2016a). They demand 'development of the Rio Grande de Térraba basin' and, 'if our request does not receive the required attention, we will be resorting to de facto means to make the will of those people felt who elected him as president'; 25 people signed the document, among them a 2016 mayoral candidate (CCB, 2016a: 2).

The narrative of this commission in Buenos Aires is one of progress through infrastructure which necessarily includes sacrifices by 'others', while the committee members seem to feel the privileges that future energy production may entail are entitled to them. On 3rd March 2016, they again wrote to argue that the fact the government had 'initiated a process aimed at creating an instrument of consultation, which will be constructed jointly with the Costa Rican Indigenous peoples' had 'caused dissatisfaction in this Cantonal Commission', because they feared this meant consulting all 24 official Indigenous territories. They demand the president visit them 'in a timeframe of no more than 30 days after receiving this letter' (CCB, 2016b). Even if ineffective, the letter's tone is hostile towards Indigenous communities resisting the large-scale project and does not award them the same degree of agency.

The decisive turning point of mobilization occurred precisely when the activists succeeded in bringing in the power of a global institution. They successfully got the attention of the UN Special Rapporteur, beyond national state institutions that ignored their appeals, and used the possibilities that global asymmetries offered, to their favor. Power relations seemed to tilt when this UN official visited the construction site in 2011– which the state until then claimed was an exploration site only. Activists highlight this moment. 'I remember someone said to me "James Anaya just entered the tunnel construction for the dam."' (Interview with Indigenous leader, 03rd March 2023). This turning point is intimately related to both internal and global asymmetries of political agency, as illustrated by the power of the Special Rapporteur vis-a-vis state agents:

> 'James Anaya had spoken. He said ICE is violating the law and Convention 169. And at that moment the man from [the project] Diquís said just give us a chance between now and tonight and we'll take out all the machinery we have. [ …]we had been talking about this for so long. And Anaya had to come from the United States to tell them that they have to first consult us.' (Interview with Indigenous leader, Térraba, 03rd March 2023).

The ICE archived the project only in 2018, but the UN visit was decisive. Recalling relational practices from other sacrifice zones, activists in Southern Costa Rica constructed cross-scalar alliances, reaching outward from the potential sacrifice zone itself.

## 6. Conclusion

This article contributes to discussions on how global-local colonial relations and infrastructure construction in the energy sector intersect and curtail the political agency of some actors (see Gurol et al., 2024). The two intertwined dimensions of coloniality and "internal colonialism", we argue produce unequal socio-spatial conditions and relegate racialized populations to potential sacrifice zones of energy production (i.e. flooded areas for hydropower or land rendered unusable for agriculture through large-scale solar plants). The material infrastructures have not been built in our research contexts. Nonetheless, the discursive practices involved already have material effects. Discourses with colonial undertones legitimize infrastructure construction yet are also their precondition; perceiving areas to be suitable for material construction necessitates a discursive construction of places as empty, unused, and communities as non-existent or less valuable.

Reading the contexts of dam-building in Costa Rica and concentrated solar power in Tunisia alongside each other, we propose to link the notion of internal colonialism and sacrifice zones (as a spatial iteration of the former), to foreground the relational characteristics of both, in an arena clearly not limited to the local or national realm, but much rather co-constituted by global and local power relations. Global inequalities can be seen in the assessments of state-owned utility firms i.e. by the World Bank, recommendations for energy policy, and political initiatives for renewed investment in energy infrastructures in exchange for credit, i.e. by the EU in Tunisia. Technical agencies such as the German GIZ are closely intertwined with domestic institutions such as energy ministries and do shape the priorities for energy investments and

policies.

This article explores political practices around energy infrastructures which may reinforce spatialized internal colonial relations. State practices changing land management, i.e. utility declarations for energy projects, are unsurprisingly prominent in preparing the grounds for energy infrastructures. State discourses, for instance, range from emptying space to presenting protestors as greedy. If the political narrative frames resistance to energy infrastructure projects as anti-development, this is even stronger concerning renewable energies, which embody ecological progress and modernity combined.

Despite and within internal colonialism, local communities employ different repertoires of resistance, from slow, day-to-day practices to formalized legal pathways, including the weaving of cross-scalar alliances. In Costa Rica, Indigenous communities mobilized against a large-scale dam project by the state-owned Costa Rican electricity utility ICE, and successfully halted the project precisely by appealing to global actors to which internal colonial narratives of delegitimization could not be applied. Here, global entanglements contributed not to the expansion, but to limiting the actual materialization, the construction of infrastructures on the ground. However, colonial relations persist in the region, and both the idea that some should not possess the political agency they have, and that parts of the Indigenous territory could be sacrificed for an imagined energy modernity remain.

In Tunisia, the local trade union, UGTT, is the main actor supporting peasants and activists resisting the local energy enterprises. As shown, some UGTT members constantly reach the Southern regions to raise awareness about more sustainable energy production, focusing on self-production instead of leaning on foreign investments. Interestingly, the trade unionists did not receive unconditioned support from the locals. While some accepted the trade unionists' 'training', many Indigenous people favored foreign investments, hoping they would foster development in their villages. They do not see the energy projects as causing sacrifice.

However, the Tunisian example shows there is differentiated political agency in the face of such projects, those impacted by the energy projects employ different practices to respond to, use, reshape, or confront the planning process. This positions the resistance of Indigenous groups against energy infrastructure across scales rather than only as local and compels us to ask for authoritarian or democratic practices by actors beyond the state (Gurol et al., 2024). Both state institutions (like ICE and STEG), and private actors (corporations, associations, technical assistance) may employ non-democratic practices to further energy infrastructure projects, particularly in combination with narratives that draw on historical colonial relations.

## 7. Interview references

### 7.1. Costa Rica

Interview with activist 1, Térraba, 4th March 2023.

Interview with activist 2, Térraba, 4th March 2023.

Interview with Committee member, Indigenous communities support group, San José, 17th February 2023.

Interview with Indigenous leader, Térraba, 3rd March 2023.

Interview with electrical systems engineer, San José, 28th February 2023.

Interview with environmental assessment analyst, San José, 17th May 2022.

Interview with activist, Térraba/online, 08th June 2022.

### 7.2. Tunisia

Interview with UGTT member, Tunis, 27th - 28th February 2023.

Interview with Tunisian GIZ employee, Tunis, 30th February 2023.

Interviews with GIZ employee (ANME engineer) at STEG, Tunis, 21st February 2023.

Interview with the EU Program Manager for Energy, Environment, and Climatic Change, 7th February 2023.

## CRediT authorship contribution statement

**Alke Jenss:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Methodology, Investigation, Funding acquisition, Data curation, Conceptualization. **Alessandra Bonci:** Writing – review & editing, Writing – original draft, Investigation, Data curation, Conceptualization.

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