6 Country case studies

The following paragraphs present the case studies by illustrating, for each, the key points around which the conflict can be read and understood. Following this overview, a cross-reading of the most prominent dimensions that emerged from the qualitative analysis of the case studies is proposed.

6.1.1 Argentina



Context

The case centres on high-altitude salt flats (*salares*) across the northwestern Argentine provinces of Jujuy, Catamarca, and Salta, located within the "Lithium Triangle" alongside Bolivia and Chile. As the world's fourth-largest lithium producer holding roughly half of global reserves, Argentina has granted over 1.5 million hectares in mining concessions to supply the surging global demand for electric vehicle battery manufacturing driven by the global energy transition. National and provincial governments actively promote lithium extraction as an economic savior, framing mining as a catalyst to overcome structural poverty and severe fiscal deficits through resource-driven development. However, these vast mining concessions directly overlap with the ancestral territories and customary land tenure systems of Indigenous and pastoralist communities, including the Kolla-Atacameños and Atacama ethnic groups, who have inhabited the region for centuries. Local livelihoods depend on transhumant livestock grazing of llamas, sheep, and goats, small-scale agriculture like alfalfa cultivation, artisanal textile weaving, and seasonal movements between high-altitude pastures and wetlands (*vegas*). Although Indigenous territorial rights and the requirement for Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) are recognized in Argentina's 1994 National Constitution, ILO Convention 169, and the Escazú Agreement, national regulatory enforcement remains sparse. Under Argentina's federal Mining Code and National Mining Investment Law, original domain over natural resources belongs to the provinces, enabling provincial authorities to issue perpetual private concessions with 30-year fiscal stability, low 3% royalty caps, and minimal centralized regulatory oversight.

Conflict description

The principal land and environmental conflict stems not merely from physical site expansion, but from the systemic disruptions lithium extraction imposes on fragile desert hydrology and community livelihoods. Extensive brine extraction and freshwater diversion severely alter high-altitude ecosystems, drying up critical wetlands depleting freshwater aquifers, and threatening Andean flamingo habitats alongside local livestock pastures. Contamination risks from unmonitored waste, dead fish sightings, and dust pollution further heighten environmental insecurity, while state oversight remains dangerously weak due to reliance on corporate self-reported data. These ecological pressures are compounded by severe socio-economic

inequities and labor precarity. Corporate promises of local economic inclusion frequently fail as companies circumvent provincial requirements for 70% local employment, impose strict educational prerequisites that exclude uneducated residents, and subject subcontracted workers to long shifts, wage theft, racial discrimination, and dangerous working conditions. Furthermore, corporate hiring preferences for specific villages near mine sites trigger deep inter-community friction and financial instability for local vendors facing suppressed prices and delayed payments.

Beyond immediate economic strains, the industry drives profound cultural erosion and social instability across host communities. As younger generations abandon traditional pastoralism and agricultural work for temporary mining wages, elderly community members are left to maintain herds and fields alone under extreme hardship, leading to a rapid decline in ancestral skills such as vicuña shearing, loom weaving, and traditional food preservation. Social cohesion is further undermined by off-shift substance abuse, as introduced alcohol and drugs generate domestic turmoil and youth dependency without corporate or state intervention. Revenue sharing remains highly opaque, with legally designated departmental royalties diverted to distant municipal projects, alongside documented instances of corporate tax underreporting and export value fraud. These structural defects reflect widespread governance failures, as public consultations are routinely conducted after permits are granted, turning FPIC into a performative, non-binding exercise. Environmental Impact Assessments remain buried in distant capital offices or written in inaccessible technical language, while local government corruption, vote-buying using corporate funds, and fear of political retaliation effectively muzzle community dissent.

Resistance and pathways forward

Community responses have combined legal empowerment, territorial assemblies, and strategic resistance rather than relying solely on direct street protest. Through traditional local assemblies (*comuneros*), affected populations organize to assert land rights, negotiate demands, and challenge state-corporate overreach. A major legal victory occurred when the Atacameños del Altiplano community secured a judicial injunction halting all new mining approvals in the Salar del Hombre Muerto until comprehensive cumulative environmental impact studies are completed. Similarly, communities in Salinas Grandes have mobilized road blockades to defend their salt flats, while groups across Olaroz-Cauchari continuously leverage legal frameworks to demand institutional accountability. These movements do not necessarily reject economic development, but argue that energy transition projects must respect local sovereignty and environmental limits.

To avoid total post-boom vulnerability and cultural loss, communities actively advocate for sustainable livelihood alternatives rooted in their heritage. Key community-led proposals demand state and financial support for regulated livestock meat processing, vicuña wool harvesting, artisanal textile marketing, community-managed eco-tourism around archaeological and natural sites, and agricultural training programs. Achieving an equitable pathway forward requires fundamentally restructuring regional governance around local participation and benefit-sharing. The report emphasizes that future governance must enforce mandatory, binding FPIC prior to any concession approvals, establish independent state-funded environmental monitoring to replace corporate self-reporting, and provide formal legal recognition for customary Indigenous land tenure. Furthermore, strengthening peer-to-peer information networks among Puna community leaders, reforming subcontracting practices, and transparently reinvesting mining revenues into local healthcare and educational infrastructure are essential steps toward securing long-term regional development.