

SELF-PRODUCED SETTLEMENTS IN THE BAJO PIURA DESERT, PERU: BETWEEN THE EXTRACTIVE AND RISK SCALES ¹

ASENTAMIENTOS AUTOPRODUCIDOS EN EL DESIERTO DEL BAJO PIURA, PERÚ: ENTRE
ESCALA EXTRACTIVA Y ESCALA DEL RIESGO

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El objetivo del artículo es estudiar la producción del espacio en el Bajo Piura, territorio comunal híbrido (rural-urbano) donde se articulan el valle y el desierto y confluyen las dinámicas extractivas y los riesgos climáticos. Se aplican tres categorías de análisis: la escala extractiva, la escala del riesgo (ambas desde la relación capital-naturaleza) y los asentamientos autoproducidos, para examinar cómo se manifiestan los vínculos entre la acumulación del capital, la crisis climática y la autoproducción del hábitat, en condiciones de desregulación estatal y de mercados informales de tierra. La metodología mixta combina el enfoque cualitativo y socioespacial y se basa en entrevistas semiestructuradas y en la revisión de cartografía y de planes urbano-territoriales. Los resultados muestran la escala extractiva y la del riesgo como producto del espacio concebido, ignorando las prácticas comunitarias frente a la incertidumbre. Los instrumentos de planificación respaldan esta lógica y naturalizan el riesgo al proponer áreas de expansión del capital que estimulan la especulación en el mercado de tierras. En la nueva ruralidad, los asentamientos-refugio del desierto manifiestan la reapropiación del territorio comunal según criterios resilientes. Se propone reconocer el territorio del Bajo Piura como unidad intermedia de planificación, en la política de desarrollo sostenible, que considere la cultura ambiental local y el derecho a un territorio seguro.

Palabras clave: relación capital-naturaleza, escala extractiva, escala del riesgo, asentamientos autoproducidos del desierto, territorio híbrido

This article aims to study the production of space in Bajo Piura, a hybrid (rural-urban) area where the valley and desert intersect, and where extractive dynamics and climate risks converge. The analysis is structured around three analytical categories: extractive scale, risk scale (both approached through the capital-nature relationship), and self-produced settlements. The objective is to analyze how links between capital accumulation, the climate crisis, and habitat self-production manifest under conditions of state deregulation and informal land markets. The mixed-methods approach combines qualitative and socio-spatial perspectives, drawing on semi-structured interviews, cartographic data, and urban-territorial plans. The results reveal that the extractive and risk scales are a product of the conceived space, ignoring community practices amid uncertainty. The planning instruments reinforce this logic, naturalizing risk by proposing areas for capital expansion that stimulate speculation in land markets. In the new rurality, desert refuge settlements exemplify the reappropriation of communal land in line with resilient principles. The study proposes recognizing the Bajo Piura as an intermediate planning unit within a sustainable development framework that considers local environmental culture and the right to a safe territory.

Keywords: capital-nature relationship, extractive scale, risk scale, self-produced desert settlements, hybrid areas

I. INTRODUCTION

In Latin America, extractivism is a structural phenomenon historically found in the mining, hydrocarbon, and agricultural export sectors, all of which have substantial socio-environmental effects. Its intervention in rural communities is one of the starkest expressions of the capitalist model (Gudynas, 2015; Svampa, 2013). In this context, a phenomenon that needs to be analyzed is the relationship among extractivism, the climate crisis, and territorial transformations (Bebbington, 2015), which holds that accumulation entails not only the overexploitation of natural resources but also the over-determination of capitalist production by marginal rural groups and their cultures. These develop appropriation practices within ecosystems (Leff, 2004) in the face of recurrent climate crises, drought, and extreme weather events, which are intensified by extractive dynamics. Thus, the destruction is not only material but also social and cultural (Bebbington, 2025), creating structural conditions that enable the emergence of self-managed habitats as living spaces. In this process, the conceived space is structured by the rationality of extractive capital that reorganizes the area, by the State (Gonzales-Comín, 2023), and by the naturalization of risk through technocratic planning devices (Swyngedouw, 2010).

In predominantly agricultural communal areas, both agro-extractivism and mining and hydrocarbon extraction operate, above all, through symbolic deterritorialization processes of dispossession, achieved through effective physical displacement. Most residents remain in the area, embodying a community value rooted in ties to the land that resists extractive logics (Giraldo, 2015; Bebbington, 2025). This phenomenon is understood in terms of new rurality, characterized by a greater presence of transnational (extractive) companies and rural productive diversification, with an increasing role for the service sector (Gaudin, 2023). The case of the Bajo Piura Valley on the Peruvian north coast, in the department of Piura, the second most populous department in the country, is paradigmatic for the following reasons: i) its high vulnerability to the El Niño Phenomenon (ENP); ii) the accelerated expansion of towns; iii) the concentration of different extraction activities, and iv) the presence of rural communities with small production units. Likewise, the growing transnational intervention in the formulation of planning instruments under the "Reconstruction with Changes" program (Law N° 30556, 2017; Ministry of Housing, Construction and Sanitation [MVCS], 2019) regularizes the rearrangement of space that capital had previously consolidated. Although there are studies on the transformation of the region (Revesz & Oriden, 2011), changes in rural communities, conflicts over land and water grabbing (Diez Hurtado, 2024; Burneo, 2020), land trafficking (Diez Hurtado, 2023) and state disaster management (Castillo Fernández, 2023; Escobedo Vargas, 2022), the particularities of the production of space, marked by the confrontation between an extractive

rationality and everyday practices that are based on necessity and community reappropriation, have yet to be analyzed.

This article analyzes how the links among self-produced settlements (SS), intensive extractivism, and extreme climate risk manifest in Lower Piura, in the context of state deregulation and informal land markets. Based on the capital-nature relationship (Harvey, 2014), three analytical categories are proposed: a) the extractive scale as the territorialization of capital; b) the risk scale, reinforced by the capital-State relationship, which involves planning instruments developed by transnational agents (IPATs), linked to the extractive sector; and finally, c) the SSs as a lived space, where resilient strategies emerge. A mixed methodology, combining qualitative and socio-spatial approaches, is applied, based on semi-structured interviews with key actors and the review of cartography and urban-territorial plans. The aim is to understand the implications of these changes in regional restructuring for community culture, social capital, and agency capacity in the SSs, with respect to planning and sustainable development.

II. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

The reflection considers three categories: extractive scale, risk scale, and self-produced settlements. It starts from the capital-nature relationship, whose contradictions are exacerbated in regions with localized climatic risks and extractive dynamics. Thus, disasters are exploited for capital accumulation, nature is reconfigured, climate crises are framed as investment opportunities, and socio-environmental costs are externalized (Harvey, 2014).

The **extractive scale** and the **risk scale** are conceived as socio-spatial and relational constructs grounded in power logics (Brenner, 2001; Swyngedouw, 2010). The **extractive scale** entails the consolidation of areas of exception (Gudynas, 2015) through the dispossession and enclosure of land and water, revealing an environmental structural violence that subordinates ways of life to capital accumulation. Knowledge and ways of inhabiting the area that are linked to ecosystems are ignored (Sassen, 2015; Svampa, 2013; Leff, 2004), and inequalities in access to and control of natural resources appear, thereby worsening vulnerability to climate crises (Bebbington, 2025). The **risk scale** is exacerbated by the extractive scale, especially in coastal areas facing water scarcity, justifying the displacement of inhabitants through capitalist expansion facilitated by the capital-state relationship (Gober, 2010; Swyngedouw, 2010). From the conceived space, both scales generate fragmentation, transforming the ties among territory, local environmental culture, and sustainability, showing that capital's material reorganization of space precedes its representation in planning instruments (Lefebvre, 1974).

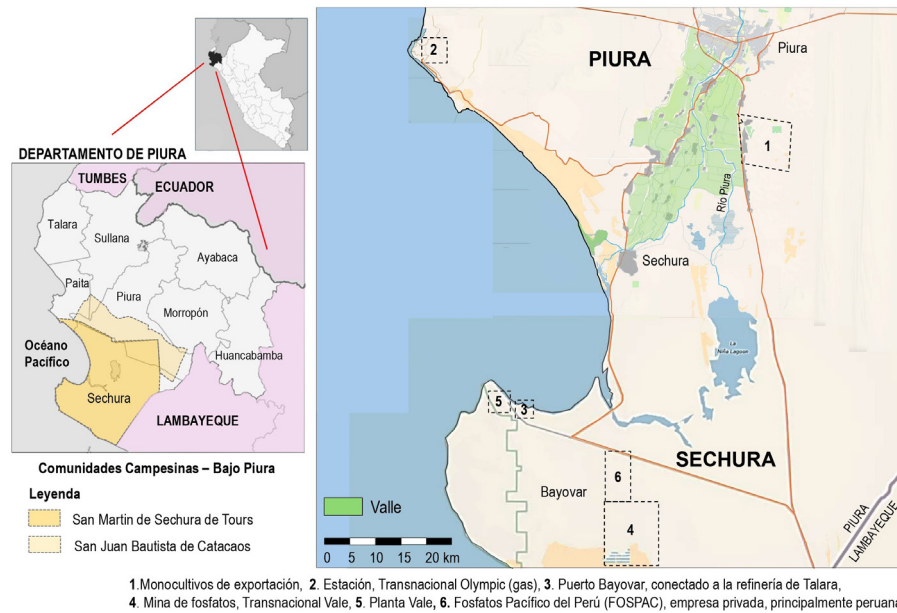


Figure 1. Map of extractive activities in Bajo Piura. Source: Prepared by the authors using information from the National Geographic Institute [IGN] (2025a).

The concept of *self-produced settlement* (SS) in rural environments is also introduced as a living space where extractive dynamics erupt, and its relationship with climate vulnerability is examined. In the new ruralities, the SSs reflect the reconfiguration of the rural as a space of productive diversification, traversed by global dynamics and urban expansion processes, as a case of rural-urban hybridization (Gaudin, 2023; Pérez-Martínez, 2016). In Peru, these changes also include the increase of communal population inhabiting informal settlements, greater interaction between rural and urban spaces, and greater socio-environmental conflicts due to the overlap of extractive uses over traditional communal land uses (agriculture, grazing, and shelters against climatic events) (Diez Hurtado, 2023; Burneo, 2020). These transformations show how the intervention of capital generates territorial exclusion, especially where extractivism is based on pre-existing power structures. In response to these conditions, most residents remain on communal land. For them, destruction is ontological, leading them to develop forms of space control that are strongly intertwined with the land (Diez Hurtado, 2024; Giraldo, 2015; Bebbington, 2025). Thus, they reterritorialize marginal spaces where precariousness coexists with subaltern means of territorial appropriation (Santos, 2000).

The rise of new forms of precarious urbanization in rural areas stems from extractive logics and risk policies that fail to identify the causes of socio-natural disasters (Castillo Fernández, 2023) or to consider local practices and knowledge

related to climate adaptation. SSs are understood as a form of self-resolution of housing needs, configured as an alternative for shelter. From the vulnerability conditions associated with poverty emerges the active and creative role of its residents as producers of the habitat. Thus, they configure spaces amid uncertainty, guiding their socio-spatial construction through resilient social practices and patterns of occupation (Araya Ramírez, 2018). Participation and their appropriation strategies are key to confronting the opportunities and adversities inherent in the territory they inhabit. Thus, to shed light on the transformation of the territory by the intervention of capital and the agency of the inhabitants, the categories of conceived space and lived space of Lefebvre (1974) have been incorporated.

III. CASE STUDY

Bajo Piura covers approximately 5,544 km² in an area between the city of Piura (158,495 inhabitants), the regional capital and the main pole of attraction, and the city of Sechura (44,590 inhabitants), the provincial capital and coastal node (National Institute of Statistics and Informatics [INEI], 2018). Its communities, San Juan Bautista de Catacaos (SJBC) and San Martín de Tours de Sechura (SMTS), have economies based on small family farming and artisanal fishing (Revesz & Oliden, 2011), within a department with high rates of monetary poverty (25.4% - 29.65%) and extreme monetary poverty

(2.9% - 4.3%) (INEI, 2026). It concentrates export monocultures, hydrocarbon (gas) reserves, and one of the largest phosphate deposits in South America, which is key to fertilizer production (Figure 1). Sechura stands out for the aquaculture boom that has consolidated a highly specialized sector, and for being the province with the highest population increase in the region between 2007 and 2017 (27.05%), surpassing that of Metropolitan Lima (12.35%) (INEI, 2018). The informal expansion characterizes the urban growth of Sechura, which has increased its surface area fivefold between 1990 and 2024. At the same time, conurbations such as Cura Mori-El Tallán and La Arena-La Unión-Vice have been configured along highways on the valley's edges. Bajo Piura is highly vulnerable to ENP, which causes recurrent impacts, including floods and droughts (Ministry of the Environment [MINAM], 2014).

IV. METHODOLOGY

A mixed-methods approach was applied, combining a qualitative, socio-spatial approach with semi-structured interviews, cartographic analysis, and the interpretation of secondary sources. The interviews were conducted during the fieldwork, in June 2022, under the following selection criteria: local stakeholders with life experiences regarding extractive activities and the ENP, including villagers, farmers, members of the local community, and specialists in research and promotion of rural groups, in environmental issues, and in territorial management (provincial municipalities of Sechura and Piura). The analysis took place in two stages: systematizing the collected information into categories and conducting content analysis. An interpretative mapping was also developed by combining official geospatial databases and institutional mapping with satellite imagery (Google Earth 2005-2024), which demonstrated the tensions of territorial dynamics, extractivism, and climate risk. The triangulation of sources, on the one hand, the official cartography; on the other hand, the sources of civil society (CooperAcción, 2024) and local media (podcasts, Radio Cutivalú (Jimenez Arévalo, 2024)), allowed the incorporation of qualitative dimensions, conflicts, and territorial perceptions. Cartography was used from the National Geographic Institute [IGN], the Ministry of Agrarian Development and Irrigation [MIDAGRI], the Geological, Mining and Metallurgical Institute [INGEMET], the National Institute of Civil Defense [INDECI] (2018), and the Ministry of the Environment [MINAM]. For territorial planning, instruments developed by transnational agents, which we have called IPATs, including the Urban Development Plans of Sechura (MVCS, 2023) and of the Cura Mori-El Tallán conurbation, and the Territorial Conditioning Plan of Piura (PAT) (MVCS, 2020a), were selected.

V. RESULTS

a. The extractive scale as the territorialization of capital

The extractive scale in Bajo Piura, a historically communal area, is characterized by the concentration of monocultures, hydrocarbons, and enclave-type mining, which generate cumulative territorial impacts. In Cura Mori, located in the SJBC community, capital produces its own space by reconfiguring nature as a commodity under an agro-extractive logic that appropriates resources such as water and land. This dynamic is facilitated by the state hydraulic works (Escobedo Vargas, 2022), which alter the Piura River's channels, thereby increasing the vulnerability of farmers and villagers in Catacaos and Sechura to floods and droughts (Alex, personal communication, June 6th, 2022). The traditional practice of harvesting rainwater generated by the ENP is marginalized. At the same time, a system of ditches in the valley and the Ramón and Ñapique lagoons in the desert consolidates the use of the river's natural overflow. Modern technology blocks both forms of water control, as it shows that the extractive scale not only depletes natural resources but also erodes sustainable local knowledge.

A new phase of extractive capital development begins with the dispossession of communal lands, legitimized by regulations that classify dry forest lands as "barren lands", which encourage their commodification (Legislative Decree No. 653, 1991, Article 23). The lack of official registration of the SJBC community's lands has facilitated dispossession (Burneo, 2020). In Cura Mori, the environmental and cultural value of this ecosystem as a refuge from the ENP is rendered invisible by capitalist rationality, which, by seizing land to expand monocultures, installs a new form of production on communal land that the inhabitants conceive as a common good.

In contrast, in the SMST community, the lands are owned, and the mining fee is a new collective good in dispute. Extractive rents are negotiated, although inequalities and material vulnerability persist (Diez Hurtado, 2017), as manifested in poor living conditions and casual, precarious employment. The phosphate deposits eliminate a grazing area between the mine and the Virrilá estuary, and the mining concessions occupy natural conservation areas (Fernando, personal communication, June 7th, 2022), as part of the usurpation process, with environmental impacts that pollute the air and water and cause biodiversity loss and fisheries degradation. The Vice district is losing more than half of its surface area near the hydrocarbon station of a transnational company, the same one that is installing a gas pipeline in Chusis, appropriating an agricultural strip (Gonzalo, personal communication, June 7th, 2022). These forms of predatory extractivism (Gudynas, 2015) exacerbate territorial fragmentation and marginalize local communities (Figure 2).

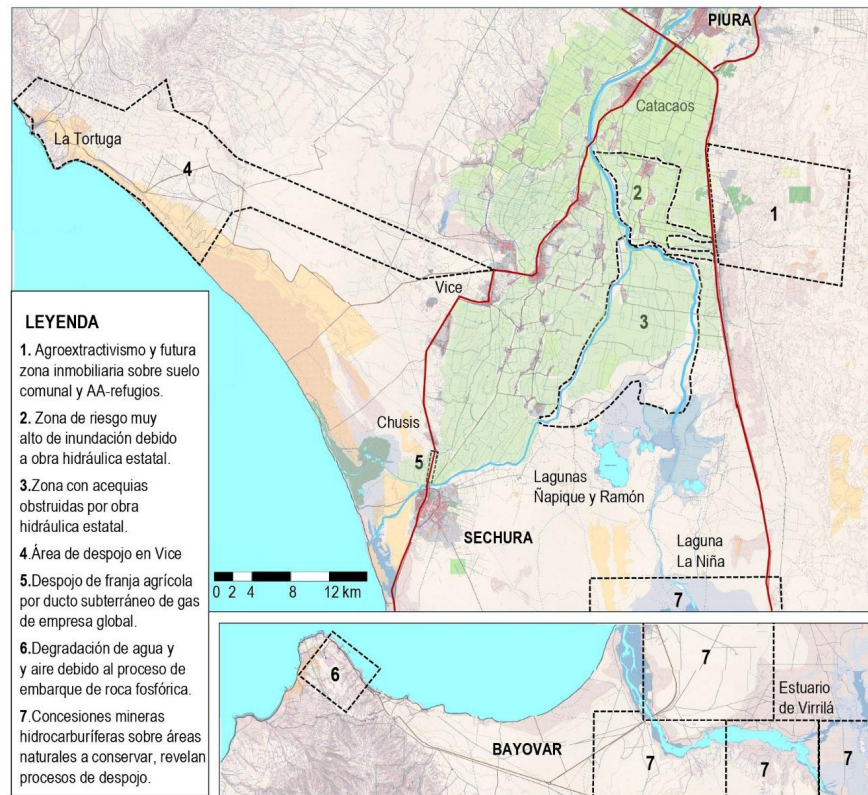


Figure 2. Map showing the extractive scale in Bajo Piura. Source: Prepared by the authors considering the District Municipality of Cura Mori (2020); MIDAGRI (n.d.); Intercultural Communication Services [SERVINDI] (2023); CooperAction (2024).

b. The risk scale and the capital-state relationship

In Bajo Piura, the inhabitants recognize both the positive and negative impacts of the ENP: they value rainwater that supports pelagic fishing, aquifer recharge, and the regeneration of dry forests, but they suffer the loss of agricultural land, infrastructure, and basic services (MINAM, 2014). The unpredictability of natural disasters is exploited by capital, which transforms environmental crises into opportunities for accumulation (Harvey, 2014). “Disaster capitalism” is combined with a “disaster policy”; the State instrumentalizes the discourse of risk to legitimize interventions, without addressing the structural causes of the vulnerability. While the capital-State relationship reinforces risk exposure (Castillo Fernández, 2023), the inhabitants reaffirm community ties that promote territorial defense practices, especially of refuge spaces, where the SSs, despite the precariousness, reveal a “geographical wisdom” in the resilient occupation of the desert (Burneo, 2020; Díez Hurtado, 2023).

After the ENP of 1997-1998, the State, taking advantage of the uncertainty, encouraged the conversion of dry forest into monocultures, for the sake of agricultural modernization. Companies expanded cultivation areas that reserve real

estate areas of interest (Jimenez Arévalo, 2024). During the 2017 ENP emergency, thousands of residents of Cura Mori moved to the dry forest to seek refuge after facing expulsion (Carmen, personal communication, June 5th, 2022). A form of accumulation by dispossession that benefits from the disaster is revealed (Harvey, 2004; Burneo, 2020), thereby increasing vulnerability. The SSs on communal lands sheltered the victims of villages affected by the floods and the Yaku Cyclone associated with El Niño 2023. The failed state housing project “*Una sola Fuerza*”, located on the edge of the city of Piura, far from the living areas of the affected population, exemplifies the disconnect between reconstruction policies and ways of inhabiting the desert, connected to the agricultural valley (Beberly, personal communication, June 8th, 2022). Similarly, it is shown that state risk management does not propose preventive strategies; it reproduces risk socially by focusing on post-disaster reconstruction based on physical works, often marked by corruption and technical deficiencies (Castillo Fernández, 2023).

In Bajo Piura, there is a “conceived space” that is intervened in by capital in line with its interests. In the monoculture area of

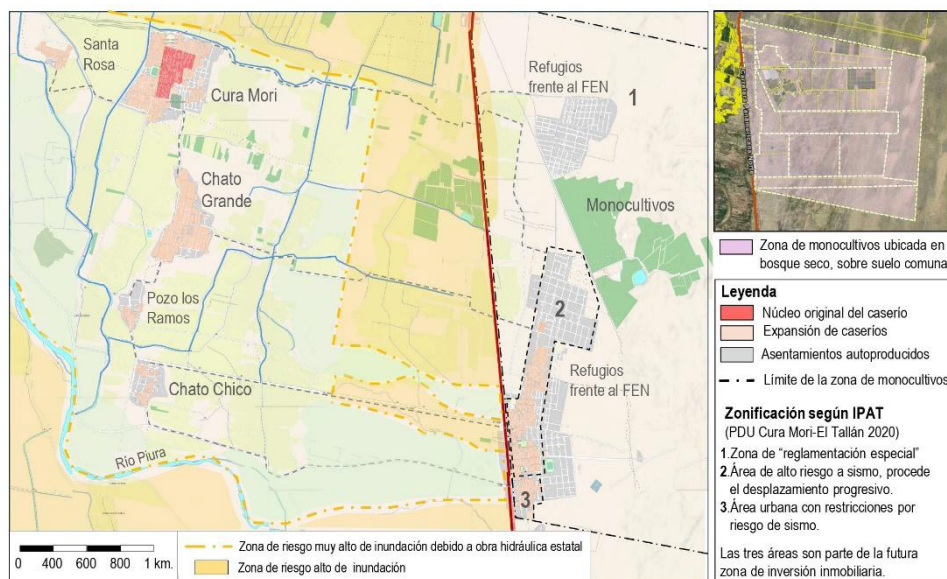


Figure 3. Map of the risk scale in Cura Mori. Source: Prepared by the authors using information from the National Geographic Institute [IGN] (2025c).

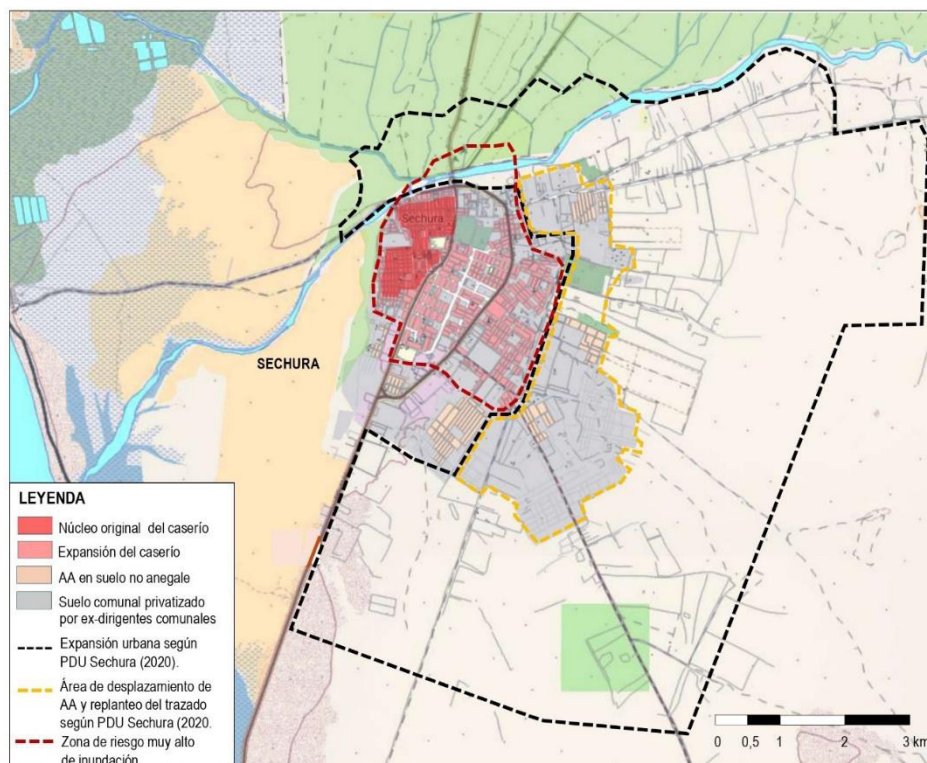


Figure 4. Map of the risk scale in Sechura. Source: Prepared by the authors using information from the National Geographic Institute [IGN] (2025b).

Cura Mori, urban expansion is determined by new geographies of exploitation of agro-extractivism surpluses (Gonzales-Comín, 2023). The IPATs define a territorial regulatory framework that prevents the official recognition of shelter settlements or proposes displacing them, and prioritize future areas of capitalist accumulation, thereby further relegating local environmental culture. The Urban Development Plan (PDU) of the “Cura Mori- El Tallán” conurbation (2020-2030) (MVCS, 2020b) uses risk to justify progressive displacements of SSs, by freeing urban land for real estate valorization (Figure 3). The Sechura PDU (2020-2030) (MVCS, 2023) quadruples the existing urban area by replacing the SSs, arguing that the disorganization of its layout comes from the informal land market (Figure 4). The proposed zoning supports territorial exclusion, exacerbates risk exposure, and stimulates informal markets of eroded land in areas reserved for urban expansion, leaving non-waterlogged soils increasingly vulnerable to land trafficking.

c. Self-produced settlements (SS) and community culture

In the communal system, the high-lying desert areas serve as shelters against ENP-induced floods, form spaces for dual residence or temporary relocation, and foster ecological complementarity between the valley and the desert (Burneo, 2020). This rotating occupation pattern connects the space inhabited by families with agricultural work, grazing, and fishing, facilitating survival and the seasonal diversification of economic activities to cope with climate uncertainty (Revesz & Oviden, 2011). In Cura Mori, the SSs are extensive occupations of the valley’s hamlets, where the inhabitants defend territorial rights against agro-extractivism. In Sechura, they occupy the edges of the valley and the city, in a context where communal land shifts from a collective good linked to traditional ways of life to an asset subject to informal transactions (Diez Hurtado, 2017). The local concept of territory is highly dynamic due to the alternation of subsistence activities across the coast, the valley, the desert, and the city. In both communities, territorial mobility is altered by agro-exports and phosphate mining, respectively.

In Sechura, phosphate mining has spurred small-scale economic ventures, and the aquaculture boom is boosting urban growth through the privatization of communal lands. The rural-urban relationship that attracts migrants living in the urban periphery is intensifying. Thus, urban infrastructure and basic services are under pressure, resulting in drinking water coverage for only 40% of the population (Levith, personal communication, June 8th, 2022).

In the new rural world, the SSs emerge from the need to connect the rural world with the urban one, given the lack of public investment in the countryside, because, despite the insertion of rural residents into the market, well-being conditions have not improved (Julio, personal communication, June 6th, 2022). These settlements show forms of reappropriation of territorial control and tensions in the production of space, marked by extractive and risk scales. There is a tendency to stay and take advantage of

proximity to the highway, family farms, villages, and hamlets, by setting up a kind of “living hedge” that surrounds the valley. This strengthens social ties and community identity.

VI. DISCUSSION

The analysis of the relationship between the extractive scale, the risk scale, and the self-produced settlement in a communal territory has allowed us to understand how the links between extractivism and climate crises affect the production of space. Both scales restructure the territory according to the accumulation of capital in scenarios of state absence. The result is a profoundly unequal geography, in which the SSs, based on ancestral knowledge, sustainable practices, and collective forms of reappropriation of communal territory, are subordinated to extractivist and speculative logics. According to the singularity of Bajo Piura’s coastal context exposed to the ENP, the intertwining between both scales is seen in the metabolic contradiction between capital and nature, visible in the enclosure of water and communal land, dispossession, ecological degradation, the social production of risk, and the instrumentalization of disasters as an opportunity for capital valorization, where these act as catalysts for accumulation.

The analysis allows us to identify self-produced settlements as a form of resistance, territorial organization, and climate adaptation in the face of both scales and state abandonment. The occupation patterns of the SSs configure a kind of “living hedge” of the valley in the face of dispossession, revealing resilient strategies to reappropriate common goods that produce spatial mobility and complementarity within the valley, the desert, and the coastline.

From the perspective of new rurality, the study shows that the convergence of the extractive and risk scales does not cancel out local territorialities, but reconfigures them in a conflictive way. The social production of the territory in Bajo Piura can only be understood in terms of this convergence: a dispute between competing territorial projects in which capital, the State, and local communities coexist and confront one another amid structural inequality.

The study’s implications for urban-territorial planning suggest that even in contexts of low implementation, planning is not neutral. Through categories and omissions, it can contribute to rendering settlements that constitute shelter spaces invisible and to generating favorable conditions for the capitalist valorization of the territory. Technocratic devices that indirectly align with these dynamics are evident. This raises the need to rethink planning through an integrated approach that combines the rural and the urban, recognizes the links between ways of living and ecosystems, and places these vital spaces at its heart amid climate uncertainty.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

The case of Bajo Piura shows how the relationship between the extractive scale, the risk scale, and the self-production of the habitat reorganizes the territory, subordinating it to accumulation circuits, and how the affected inhabitants, especially farmers and fishermen, resist these logics.

The transformation of Bajo Piura by the intervention of capital, through simultaneous intensive extractivism and risk capitalization, is part of the global capital logic that commodifies resources and even natural disasters, based on the reproduction of capitalist accumulation. The particular aspects of this experience lie in the invasive territorialization of capital, state permissiveness, and the reaction of excluded residents who produce the habitat, as a sample of rural territorialities.

The conceived space presents a differential production of risk, treating territories as financial assets rather than living spaces. It ignores the local environmental culture and redefines communal territories as spaces available for land valorization and the exploitation of natural resources.

The urgency of rethinking planning as an integrated, participatory, and ecosystemic process that connects the valley-desert-coastal unit and recovers environmental knowledge and practices of community culture lies in the need to respond to social and climatic crises. Thus, the SSs are strategies for controlling the lived space in the face of the brunt of capital, which ignores and renders invisible the capacity for agency and the resilience of those who conceive the territory as a repository of their sense of belonging.

VIII. CONTRIBUTION OF AUTHORS CRediT:

Conceptualization, P.C., E.A.; Data Curation, P.C.; Formal analysis, P.C., E.A.; Financing acquisition, P.C.; Research, P.C., E.A.; Methodology, P.C., E.A.; Project management, P.C.; Resources, P.C., Software, P.C.; Supervision, P.C.; Validation, P.C., E.A.; Visualization, P.C.; Writing- original draft, P.C., E.A.; Writing- revision and editing, P.C., E.A.

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