



Learning the Lessons from Chile's Alto Maipo Hydroelectric Project

Why the Paris Agreement's cooperative approaches to reduce emissions must include social safeguards, stakeholder consultation & an independent redress mechanism

The lack of even the most basic social safeguards for the Kyoto Protocol's carbon trading mechanism led to projects that have violated the rights of local communities—such as Chile's Alto Maipo Project—being touted as “clean development” projects. With the rules for the Article 6 mechanisms of the Paris Agreement under negotiation at COP25, it is imperative that the Parties learn the lessons from past CDM projects such as Alto Maipo in order to avoid repeating the mistakes made under Kyoto.

The Alto Maipo Hydroelectric Project

The Alto Maipo Project is a large-scale run-of-the-river hydroelectric project being constructed in the Cajón del Maipo, approximately 50 kilometers southeast of the Chilean capital of Santiago. The project consists of rerouting the three main tributaries of the Maipo River for 100 kilometers through tunnels bored in the Andes Mountains, using underground turbines to generate electricity. This massive intervention in the Maipo river basin will affect access to water for millions of people, undermine local economies, and exacerbate climate change. Opposition to the project has been ongoing for more than ten years, with legal challenges being paired with multiple marches held by a grassroots movement and joined by thousands of Chilean citizens calling for the project's cancellation and the protection of the Maipo River.

The Alto Maipo Project was verified under the Clean Development Mechanism (CDM) of the Kyoto Protocol, despite the fact that it violates Chileans' rights in the following ways:

The right to a healthy environment: The Alto Maipo project will reduce rainfall and aggravate the decade-long mega-drought that Chile has experienced, contribute to a process of desertification, prevent the recharge of underground aquifers, and increase the fissuring of Chile's glaciers – all of which exacerbate the impacts of climate change. Given these negative impacts, affected communities question the project's CDM designation under the UNFCCC.

The right to water: The Yeso, Volcan, and Colorado rivers, tributaries of the Maipo River, are the main source of drinking water for the 7 million people that live in the Santiago metropolitan area. The project is estimated to diminish the flows of these rivers by 60-90%, putting the right to water at severe risk.

The rights to life and health: Water is essential for the realization of all human rights, including the rights to life and health. By threatening access to water, this project also jeopardizes these fundamental rights.

The right to participate in decision-making: Despite the project's harmful impacts, affected local communities were not adequately consulted and have not been allowed to participate effectively in decisions regarding the design and implementation of the Alto Maipo Project.

The right to food: The Maipo river basin provides irrigation water for over 120,000 hectares of farmland. Rerouting its rivers will paralyze the region's agriculture, threatening the right to food.

The right to adequate housing: The construction of a forebay for the project severely affected the town of El Alfalfal, which has been surrounded by a barrier wall. Residents essentially live in the middle of a construction site, with increasingly limited access to their own homes.

The right to work: The Cajón del Maipo is one of Chile's most important tourist and recreational areas. Rerouting its rivers will devastate the livelihoods of residents of this area and undermine entire local economies, which have long depended on tourism.

The right to work in adequate conditions: Since project construction began, the workers' union has consistently denounced the insufficient safety measures for those working within the tunnels, as well as a lack of due diligence regarding excavation and construction methods. These dangerous conditions have resulted in several worker injuries and even one death.

The right to participate in cultural life: The project also threatens the Cajón del Maipo's monuments, natural sanctuaries, and protected heritage sites of archeological and paleontological value, which could be lost forever.

Recommendations for COP25

The Alto Maipo Project's adverse impacts for both the environment and Chileans' human rights are indicative of the long-term effects of hydroelectric projects and large-scale energy infrastructure, with impacts already being felt throughout Chile. **The Alto Maipo Hydroelectric Project in Chile should be removed from the list of projects verified under the "Clean Development Mechanism"; the construction of this project should be immediately halted in order to prevent further environmental and social harm; and redress should be provided for harms already incurred as a result of the project.**

Further, projects with such impacts must not be considered "sustainable development" projects under the mechanisms of Article 6. **To avoid repeating the mistakes made under Kyoto, any mechanism that the Parties might agree upon in Madrid must be governed by robust social and environmental safeguards, requirements for meaningful and effective stakeholder consultations, and independent grievance mechanisms.**

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For further information in Spanish, please visit:
<https://www.facebook.com/NoAlProyectoAltoMaipo>

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