

## **Linking “local” to “global”: framing Environmental Justice movements through progressive contextualization**

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### **Abstract**

*Many successful Environmental Justice (EJ) movements have explicitly connected local problems to wider power structures and institutions in order to challenge the latter. To leverage wider advocacy networks, some movements have appealed to both local needs and international sentiments, thereby building momentum by creating and broadening alliances. In this scoping review, I bring together observations from the field of Ecological Economics, Political Ecology, and Social Movements to describe and prescribe this process. I borrow “Progressive Contextualization” (PC) as an analytical method to repackage these observations under a guiding framework. The PC frame comprises four steps: i.e. (1) Identifying different actors and their intersectional experiences; (2) Learning the history; (3) Making connections to national and global institutions; and (4) Empowering different ways of knowing. Using evidence from around the world, with focus on two social movements i.e. the Narmada Bacho Andolan (NBA) in India and the Rubber Tappers’ movement in Brazil, I demonstrate how the four steps could be useful not only in terms of operationalizing environmental justice, but also in helping movements iteratively self-reflect and criticize to better address the issues at hand, both ethically and practically.*

**Keywords:** social movements, environmental justice, progressive contextualization, framing alignment, ecological economics, political ecology, Rubber Tappers, *Narmada Bacho Andolan*

### **Introduction: moving beyond local**

It is common to hear criticism that development programs are top-down, and not addressing local needs and realities (Li 2007). Some have suggested that such development practices reflect increasing control of people’s lives by states (Ferguson 1990; Paudel 2012), or a form of neo-colonization (Escobar 1995). In fact, nearly all analysts think that development projects have failed to fulfil what they promised (Edelman and Haugerud 2004). There are two kinds of responses to the problem of development. The Reformist Approach argues that we need to do development ‘better’ (e.g. Crewe and Harrison 1998) and as a result, many new development concepts such as ‘participation,’ ‘partnership,’ ‘sustainability,’ ‘good governance’ have been introduced into development discourse. However, there are criticisms that these concepts have been co-opted and thus, simply serve to distract from the problematic nature of development

practices and ignore power structures (e.g. Mischener 1998; Cooke and Kothari 2001). As a more radical alternative, the post-developmentalists (e.g. Escobar 1995; Rahnema 1997; Sachs 1992; Esteva and Prakash 1998) have called for the outright rejection of development writ large. The Post-developmentalists challenge the common 'market-based' view that underdevelopment reflects deficiency in standard of living and instead, regard it as a state of consciousness (Illich 1997; Peet and Hartwick 2015). By disentangling notions of development from market logics, Post-developmentalists see the potential for working with this consciousness to rebuild life at the margin (Esteva 1992).

Both Reformists and Post-developmentalists well-recognize the 'local' is an important level of analysis and action when it comes to working toward and implementing solutions to conflict. However, they have not quite explicitly connected the 'local' to 'global'. The reformists seem to take existing global and national institutions for granted, while the post-developmentalists, by proposing that the solutions can be found among the marginalized, seem to neglect the need for the marginalized to engage with wider institutions they are embedded in. Yet, development is not a simple antagonism between local and global, and the subjects of development are shaped by, and actively reshape development ideals, programs, and projects (Sivaramakrishnan and Agrawal 2003). The simplistic dichotomy of 'local' versus 'global', or "domination" versus "resistance" can potentially obscure the understanding of their dynamic interconnections essential for effecting changes.

On the contrary, many successful change-making activisms seem to be more willing to explicitly make such connections. This is especially true in situations where certain 'local' people (and their rights) are not recognized by state apparatuses, and the states themselves are somehow economically dependent on global institutions, such as the World Bank. For instance, the *Narmada Bacho Andolan* (NBA) in India and the Rubber Tappers' (RT) movement in Brazil had been able to reach out to their global allies and through foreign governments, pressured multilateral institutions i.e. the World Bank and the Inter-American Development Bank respectively to change their funding policies towards development projects back in India and Brazil. The strategy above has been named the 'boomerang' effect (Keck and Sikkink 1998). Environmental Defense Fund, for instance, is the international organization that lent its support to both the NBA in India and the RT movement in Brazil (Keck 1995; Dwivedi 1997). Indeed, while living movements around the world are responding to locally based ecological conflicts, they have formed global networks against the threats of similar actors (multi-corporations, funding by multilateral institutions) and development activities (resource extraction, waste disposal, infrastructure building, etc.) (Martinez-Alier 2016).

In order to make such local-global connections, movements need to tell stories that allow potential allies to connect with the circumstances and identities of the victims and villains in a situation. This process is dynamic, iterative, and sometimes incorporates external discourses or creates hybrid ones that appeal to a wider audience. In the social movement literature, this is considered an

important mobilization strategy named ‘framing alignment’, i.e. to link individual interests, values and beliefs with a movement’s activities, goals, and ideology (Snow *et al.* 1986). ‘Local’ issues could gain more significance if they are framed in terms where ‘local’ interests jibe with internationally resonant issues and broader NGO goals (Bob 2002). While international support can increase the magnitude of impact of local efforts, at the same time, local movements involved in direct action, and frontline activism also lend credibility and legitimacy to their transnational counterparts.

However, environmental issues are complex and entangled on the ground, often involving multiple perspectives and voices. Activists or movement organizers can face immense pressure to ‘simplify’ otherwise knotty issues, to highlight but a few (or in some cases, this becomes a single-issue) that are of particular interest to potential allies. This paper directly addresses this challenging task. Specifically, I propose ‘Progressive Contextualization’ as a method to help situate a local issue in a progressively larger context, thereby enabling researchers to make connections across different scales and levels, without losing sights to the intersectional needs of affected parties.

### **Operationalizing Environmental Justice (EJ) through Progressive Contextualization (PC)**

While a lot has been written about environmental activism, few have analyzed the techniques and strategies for operationalizing Environmental Justice (EJ). The reason for this absence has to do with the ways that technocratic, ‘how-to’ approaches to social movements, is often met with skepticism, particularly in terms of complex and context-dependent circumstances in which such efforts often occur. Nonetheless, I hold the position that some practical lessons could and should be drawn from the vast literature not only of social movements but other environment-related research. Thus, this article has taken the form of scoping review to take advantage of my existing grasp on research in the fields of ecological economics, political ecology, and EJ movements. In other words, rather than a mere methodological piece, this is a descriptive piece attempting to synthesize observations from both academic research and activism. However, it also intends to prescribe—to draw lessons for future application. I consider it part of a bigger effort to bridge research and activism.

By reviewing research in the field of Political Ecology and Ecological Economics, I was able to extract some understandings of human-environmental interactions, particularly the various ways environmental conflicts and injustice can be manifested. Among the predominant observations are (1) different social actors interact with and experience environmental changes differently, (2) historical marginalization of particular groups of people often limits their access to resources and power in affecting decision-making, and (3) unequal power between different knowledge systems. In addition, a review of major EJ movements around the world demonstrates to me how they have encountered and attempted to address those very same issues, using changing frames and

strategies which are increasingly targeting transnational audiences. I see how both literature can be more explicitly bridged—understanding how environmental injustice is manifested is helpful for social movements to come up with different framing strategies for mobilizing support and resources, while staying true to the multiple and diverse concerns and circumstances of those affected by their causes. The complementarity between these two literature seems especially pronounced as the lessons regarding environmental injustice are aligning with those calling for critical approaches to social movements, such as the use of intersectional analysis and decolonial analysis (see Chun, Lipsitz and Shin 2013; Lopez and García 2014; Watkins Liu 2018; Chiumbu 2016; Jaramillo and Carreon 2014).

“Progressive Contextualization” (PC) is an analytical method I borrow to help me further repackage these observations/lessons under a single guiding framework. Encompassing all observations mentioned, PC is potentially more comprehensive than other more fragmented approaches to analyzing social movements. Originally a method proposed in the field of Human Ecology, PC is an analytic process focusing on “significant human activities or people-environment interactions and then explaining these interactions by placing them within progressively wider or denser contexts.” (Vayda 1983, 265). By establishing causal connections to earlier events, PC constructs causal chains backward in time and outward in space from effects, to causes. As it does not follow any pre-existing model, PC is especially appropriate for analyzing an actual (and potentially messy) situation and allows for the incorporation of all relevant bio-physical and social information (Walters and Vayda 1999).

PC has several features (Vayda 1983). First, it does not presume existing units of analysis. The starting points are not particular villages or tribes, but interactions around a certain event/activity. Vayda, for instance, offers a case study of a logging dispute in East Kalimantan, in which multiple groups are identified (Bugis migrants, urbanites and rural people) as contributing to deforestation. Without making prior assumptions on one ‘problematic’ group or another, the study demonstrates how PC offers a more complex understanding of the empirical context, by bringing into focus a range of actors and institutions who are at times, unexpectedly involved in the situation. Such an approach allows a rich analysis that challenges oversimplified moral stories about who is ‘good’ and who is ‘bad’ in the situation. Second, PC’s methods are not guided by particular disciplines or programs, but through assessment of the utility and efficiency in answering questions of interest from a variety of disciplinary vantage points. Thus, the method is analytically flexible, and can incorporate qualitative and quantitative data, as well as different knowledge systems and ways of understanding. Third, one can pick and choose elements to focus on, for practical communication with different allies or decision-makers. For instance, an Indigenous rights activist might be drawn in by concerns about the historical oppression of Indigenous peoples and ontologies, but a land-use planner is more likely attracted to the issue with an interest on the current parties of conflicts and how to resolve them.

I outline four guiding steps under the framework of PC, i.e. (1) Identifying different actors and their intersectional Experiences; (2) Learning the history; (3) Making connections to national and global Institutions; and (4) Empowering different ways of knowing. Starting with the local level, PC draws attention to the different actors and their diverse experiences involved in an event. It can then help to trace the historical context to place contemporary circumstances and events into perspective. This may include uncovering the historical disadvantages suffered by groups of people and importantly, may reveal the ideological techniques used by those in positions of power to maintain those power imbalances. PC is further able to make connections between local events and conditions, and the activities/policies of institutions at the national, regional, and global level. Finally, in the process of further deconstructing these larger-scale institutions to reveal how they were often justified with certain ways of knowing while dismissing others, PC can help target and empower alternative ways of knowing in the quest towards achieving EJ.

Using evidence from around the world, my paper will demonstrate how a PC framework can support movements in providing multi-faceted understandings, which can then contribute to expanding movement network or realigning interests with groups that matter. In addition to showing how real-life movements (could) have benefited from one or more of the four guiding steps, I will demonstrate how movements, when only addressing one step in negligence of others, can miss some opportunities or face additional challenges. In this way, PC can be utilized as an inclusive toolkit not only for planning and operationalizing EJ via emerging movements, but also for reexamining shortcomings and strategies of ongoing movements.

PC has been fruitfully employed in rural development and environmental education research contexts (Guevara 2002; Vondal 2008). While focusing on applying the PC framework on specific cases or research can help me to illustrate its process and relevance more clearly, it would be redundant to some of the existing literature. A scoping review, on the other hand, allows me to draw diverse cases around the world to show how elements of the PC framework can support movements across different contexts over longer time periods. All steps under PC might not be evidently usable for a particular movement at once, but they could be very useful in guiding movements over changing circumstances in the long term. Presenting the framework both as a description of existing movements and prescription for future or ongoing ones also allows me to better situate the framework itself as an ongoing product of knowledge integration owing to the existing research and movements. This means that the framework can benefit from further refinement and extension as knowledge and experiences in the field continue to grow in the future.

In the process of PC, different forms of justice can be conceptualized at different levels (Harvey 1996; Walker 2009). Take as an example the proposition of the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) in the Narmada river flowing through the states of Gujarat, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra in India. The project could result in the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people and widespread

environmental damage (Narula 2008; Ekins 1992; Dwivedi 1997, 1998). Initially, Arch-Vahini, a Gujarat-based NGO, from the earlier phase was focusing on acquiring land compensation for many displaced tribal or *Adivasi* groups. Hence, it was more of a land rights and compensation issue at the local level. However, as more actors including environmental activists, and academic, scientific, and cultural professionals were involved in the movement, it became a movement opposing the dam construction entirely due to the uncertain risk and widespread socio-environmental impact it posed. It was primarily this later framing merging social and environmental justice that the *Narmada Bacho Andolan* (NBA), or the “Save Narmada Movement,” had used to reach international audiences. The leader Medha Patkar testified in front of the US Congress on the effects of the dam in 1989 (Narula 2008; Dwivedi 1997, 1998). Due to mounting international pressure, the World Bank as one of the funders was forced to form an Independent Review Mission for the project and eventually withdrew its support (Narula 2008; Dwivedi 1997, 1998).

Another example is the Rubber Tappers’ (RT) movement in Brazil. It started in the form of workers’ union in the 1970s, resisting ranchers from Southern Brazil who began to purchase massive land areas and forcibly evict rubber tappers from their forest land in Acre, Brazil. Hence, the movement was initially organized around class movements. Its central concerns were land and livelihood issues, and the movement had the closest relations with labor movements at the time (Keck 1995). In 1985, the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) was established by Chico Mendes and other key union leaders, and the First National Rubber Tappers Congress was organized. The congress produced a proposal for extractive forest reserves as a more sustainable solution to secure rubber tappers’ livelihoods (Schwartzman 1991). At this point, the movement started to enjoy progressively broader framing that resonated with both social justice activists and environmentalists. After various books and television documentaries began reporting on the movement as a metaphor for saving the Brazilian rainforest, it was effectively reframed as a part of the global environmental struggle. This has brought access to new allies and new institutional platforms for activism (Keck 1995). Chico Mendes was brought to the United States to present the proposal to the US Congress, the World Bank and Inter-American Development Bank, which were involved in funding a road project in the region (Keck 1995; Schwartzman 1991). Accordingly, the Rubber Tappers were able to successfully establish their extractive reserves with the support of the US Congress, the World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank (Keck 1995; Schwartzman 1991).

The rest of my paper will focus on demonstrating how the PC framework is applicable to these two existing, well-known movements i.e. the *Narmada Bacho Andolan* (NBA) in India and the Rubber Tappers’ movements. These two movements were selected as they had been quite comprehensively understood and studied throughout the last few decades from diverse perspectives, both as a movement as well as an EJ issue, with the earliest publications around late 1980s to the most recent ones after 2015. For instance, a 2017 publication on the NBA (Passantino 2017) utilizes an intersectional approach to understand

people affected by the dam project and their roles in the movement, while Schwartzman (2018) recently analyzed how the Rubber Tappers movement helps to reimagine conservation by incorporating different ways of knowing. I will demonstrate how these accumulated understandings over the decades are encompassed by the PC framework. The long-standing research interest in these two movements also suggest their significance in contemporary EJ discussion, and therefore their worthiness for engagement.

### **1. Identifying different actors and intersectional experiences**

As stated above, Progressive Contextualization uses an activity/interaction as a starting point, to uncover how various events, experiences and impacts are involved in an environmental change. For instance, while the NBA has been sometimes known as a movement by indigenous people/*Adivasi*, who constitute the majority being displaced and dispossessed by the dam construction, the supporters of the movement are much more diverse and less unitary than what was being presented. Throughout the years, researchers have revealed how different actors suffer differently as a result of the project. For instance, Hemadri *et al.* (1999) discussed the disproportionate impact of the project on landless laborers, sharecroppers, tenants, and even 'encroachers' whose cultivation practices and rights to land had not been legally recognized by the authorities. These groups of people are usually not considered eligible for compensation, though ironically, they are the most vulnerable groups in need of support. They will also be hampered the most by the loss of community assets such as common grazing grounds and forests. Kapur (1993) highlighted how women affected will not only lose farmland, but also access to water and forest resources. In addition, they are seldom entitled to compensation in a male-centric system and can face more likelihood of social isolation when displaced from familiar surroundings.

Similar observation has been widely reported in academic research. For instance, a study published in the journal *Ecological Economics* illustrates how women in Cameroon are affected disproportionately by deforestation due to gendered division of labor (Veuthey and Gerber 2010). Women usually do not have access and control to technology and land and are therefore limited to using basic tools such as wicker, bark or now, plastic baskets for livelihood, usually by collecting non-timber forest products. On the contrary, men with access to machines and market economy are more in favor of profiting from cutting down trees as timber. As a result, women value living trees much more as their source of livelihood and have been mobilizing against commercial logging operations. Likewise, a study on mining in the Indian forests also shows a disproportionate impact on women (Bose 2004). Women do not have the same opportunities afforded to some of the local men who may benefit economically from getting work associated directly or indirectly with the mining project. For women, destruction of the forest means losing access to medicinal plants and additional income from forest products. As forests are important mobility spaces for women, not only for daily labor but also companionship of

other women (Gururani 2002), deforestation also means the deprivation of those spaces and thus increased confinement to domestic spheres.

Another example is offered by Gerber *et al.* (2009), focusing on a commercial tree plantation in Cameroon. The authors identify different impacts on community members: some are directly affected in terms of land access, while others are affected by the scarcity of game and loss of medicinal plants. As it was determined, most of the community members were impacted indirectly in terms of water pollution produced as a result of industrial plantation practices in which latex and ammoniac residues cause abortions, skin burns and eye injuries. As environmental impacts are multiple, monetary reparation is only one of the reparative demands of the locals—they are additionally concerned with the environmental conditions of the work they do near the plantation, as well as their human and customary rights, and infrastructure needs (such as schools, health centers, electricity, roads).

Ecological economists have framed these understandings as the different ecosystem services provided (or lost) in an environmental change, such as provisioning, regulating, supporting and cultural services. These ecosystem services may include access to the provision of game animals for hunting, medicinal plants, and drinking water. These services are interconnected and sometimes, incommensurable (Satz *et.al.*, 2013). For example, the practice of hunting for food is interconnected with established ritual practices and identities. Hence game animals are not only a provisioning service, but also a cultural one. And where potable water is understood as essential for survival, it outweighs the importance of other considerations. Living in a forest also provides certain identities and attachments that shapes one’s world view, which cannot be substituted or replaced amenable to tradeoffs (Brosius, 2010; Chan, Satterfield and Goldstein, 2012). Thus, the loss of different services requires different compensation strategies, and where compensation is not possible, harms must be mitigated, instead. There are also group-oriented values--what is just or beneficial to the communities as a whole (such as the building of community infrastructure), instead of what is benefiting the individual (such as monetary reparation), especially in communities with tight cohesion (Chan, Satterfield and Goldstein, 2012).

The bottom line is people are affected differently by environmental changes due to their social positions and intersectional experiences. These differences are not always evident and therefore warrant research and analytical processes. The (in)ability to address these differences can affect the courses and impacts of movements. For instance, more recent research on the NBA demonstrates that there is much division among the *Adivasi* about whether to accept resettlement and rehabilitation provisions or to continue to oppose the dam, with their stances being shaped by their relationships with state functionaries and their power position in the village hierarchy. Some of them will be offered promising resettlement terms while others will never have the opportunity. This has resulted in some *Adivasi* leaving their villagers, some staying, and some returning due to unsatisfactory conditions in the new sites. Some *Adivasi*



communities over the years have gradually distanced themselves from the NBA (Gandhi 2003) which oppose the dam construction in its entirety. Similarly, Whitehead (2007) assessed that a representation of *Adivasi* through a discourse of ecological romanticism that did not reflect realities had partially caused the movement to lose support.

The Rubber Tappers' (RT) movement in Brazil, on the other hand, has faced criticism by feminist political ecologists about their negligence of the roles of women. Today, whenever the RT movement is mentioned, most would imagine the solitary man, Chico Mendes, saving the Brazilian rainforest. Discussions on the roles of women had been limited to those in *empates*, i.e. the strategy used by the RT to block laborers hired to clear the forests and attempting to persuade them to abort their work (Keck 1995; Schwartzman 1991). The movement had deliberately placed women and children up front in *empates* to deflect violence. Other stories about women however have often been sidelined out of the feminist circles. Feminist political ecologists have attempted to report the story of Women Rubber Tapper's Union, the woman congressional representative rising from it, and the gendered experiences on the extractive reserves established as a result of the movement (Campbell 1996). However, earlier discussions within and about the movement have not only failed to incorporate gender justice but have impacts on the long-term management of extractive reserves. As later scholars reported, when there is a lack of community organizing and women involvement outside of protected areas, communities face bigger threats of land use change and forest conversion (Shanley, Da Silva and Macdonald 2011). Women's plant resource knowledge has also been found to be valuable in supporting the sustainability of extractive reserves (Kainer and Duryea 1992).

These different understandings have not only pointed to the importance of recognizing intersectional experiences, but also provided political potential for linking rights of certain groups with environmental struggle. For instance, activists and scholars have highlighted the role of women in protecting forests in both the NBA and the famous Chipko movement preceding it (Jain 1984; Passantino 2017), which has come to resonate with multiple audiences of environmentalists, feminists and ecofeminists, i.e. those who see a connection between exploitation of nature and oppression of women (Warren 1987, 1990). Regardless as to which narrative frame is chosen as a movement strategy, movement organizers should strive to serve the needs of all and not essentialize people's experiences, needs and identities. In any case, an actor-oriented approach that provides an equitable platform for negotiations is helpful to guide the process. Ultimately, the primary purpose of seeking broader support is to serve local needs, equitably. And certainly, garnering the greatest local buy-in, means offering the movement the broadest base of legitimacy.

## 2. Learning the history

Progressive Contextualization also involves tracing an event back in time, sometimes exposing false ideological roots and narratives. For instance, it has been a persistent view that in West Africa, it is the local people that are causing deforestation. However, by simply looking at past satellite images, early archival records, and oral histories, researchers have traced an ecological change that has moved from savannah to forest, not the other way around. Such findings thus debunk the claim, and therefore the blame, for environmental harms placed on local populations (Fairhead and Leach 1995). Another example of a persistent but dubious narrative is that poverty causes environmental degradation. Major development actors such as the World Bank (1992) have expressed such a view, though several studies have clearly demonstrated the contrary. For instance, a study conducted in Southern Mali concluded that soil degradation is clearly linked to export-driven cotton production by relatively wealthy smallholder farmers (Moseley 2004). Another study in the Brazilian Amazon shows that deforestation is largely driven by capital-intensive production (Hecht and Cockburn 1989), which get blamed on the poor who have little choice but to continue exploiting their already degraded resource base and are suffering the most from environmental degradation (Duraiappah 1998).

These false ideas also sometimes stem from or serve to perpetuate racism and casteism<sup>1</sup>. In South Africa, researchers examined the history of the country to understand why the community they are working with were living on degraded lands (Stull et al. 2016). The analysis uncovered how Apartheid policies accomplished rural marginalization of Black farmers in South Africa by pushing them onto degraded land which also became overpopulated. The authors of the study coined the term “environmental apartheid”, to describe how the Apartheid policies of twenty years prior continue to have impacts on the quality of land available to farmers, their agricultural productivity, and their access to markets and healthcare. Such forceful displacement of people onto marginal lands has been well documented across Africa (Adams 2009). Yet, many contemporary environmental movements overlook these histories. Most focus on wildlife conservation or correcting so-called “environmental profligacy of African farmers” (Beinart 2003, 355), manifested by soil erosion, tree removal, and overgrazing, without contextualizing these problems within the history of oppression.

In a different region in the world in South Asia, caste is an important, though also often overlooked factor when discussing environmental issues. Some environmental discourses in modern India deem ecological degradation as “a result of a western, colonial imposition over a rooted, indigenous culture”

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<sup>1</sup> A form of historical social stratification in South Asia characterized by endogamy, occupations, and ritual status. The Hindu Varna system divides society into four castes in hierarchical order (Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishya and Shudras). Lower castes are generally considered more ‘polluted’ than higher castes, and excluded from participation in certain rituals, events, and spaces. Though caste-based violence and discrimination has been outlawed in contemporary India, practices persist unevenly in the region.

(Sharma 2012, 47). They imagine the past as a time when enlightened communities living in harmony with nature. However, Gail Omvedt (1987) criticized that such ecological traditions perpetuate caste hierarchy and untouchability, without addressing how Dalits (considered the 'outcaste' and 'untouchable' in the Hindu caste system) have been historically excluded from access to natural resources such as water and land. Mukul Sharma (2012) went further to demonstrate that environmentalism in India is lacking the Dalits' perspectives at best and defending the caste system at worst.

In the NBA case, the issue of dam displacement has been partially linked to the historical marginalization of indigenous/*Adivasi* people since the colonial period. A major problem in resettlement is the lack of proper record of their rights relating to land, water use and occupations. Many *Adivasi* groups, who have been cultivating land for generations, are considered encroachers by the authorities. As a result, tribal families displaced by the construction of earlier dams such as Tawa, Pong, Hirakud etc. have never gotten their compensation as their land was considered "illegal" and belonging to the state (Hemadri et al. 1999) This dynamic continued under the Sardar Sarovar project. For instance, Gandhi (2003) reported that during the reforestation activities by the government as part of the rehabilitation efforts, *Adivasi* have to pay bribes to forest officials to prevent them planting trees on productive farming and grazing land, or facilitate such activities after official tree planting had occurred. Without addressing the existing historical power relations, rehabilitation efforts including those advocated by environmentalists can simply worsen the plights of the already marginalized.

Similarly, for the RT movement, the RT have been repressed since the 19th centuries. In the 1870s, the RT migrated massively from Northeast to Acre and Amazonia and by 1920, formed a distinct population with their own beliefs and customs. They have been historically exploited by rubber barons through the *aviamento* system--a form of patron-client relationship in which the RT are not allowed to conduct subsistence activities and must obtain their daily necessities provided using credit at inflated prices. Only when the rubber barons abandoned the estates due to the collapse of the rubber boom in the 1920s that they began adopting subsistence activities. They continued to tap rubber albeit at a much-reduced scale. However, in the 1960s and 1970s, the military regime sold large pieces of land to national and foreign companies. New roads brought in huge resettlement schemes and cattle ranchers who displace the RT, who faced increased levels of poverty and violence (Stone 2003). It was after some years of collective resistance in the form of labor unions that they succeeded in establishing extractive reserves to protect their lands and livelihoods. For the RT, the shared history of oppression, peasantry and union activism had been instrumental in shaping their collective identities and resistances. In addition, generations of living in the forest had fostered their unique sense of belonging to the forest that foster their alliances with indigenous people and international environmentalism to conserve the Brazilian rainforest. History also reveals centuries of violence by global capitalism with states in complicity, as well as gender justice issues, as some RT have snatched indigenous women to be their

wives once they were liberated from the *aviamento* system and the RT largely remain a patriarchal community.

More recently reported movements such as the Hmong Millenarian Movement in Vietnam Highlands have also capitalized primarily from their historical marginalization as an ethnic group in Mainland Southeast Asia, both by the state authorities and sometimes by environmentalists who falsely characterize them as “forest destroyer” for their farming practices (Delang 2002; Forsyth and Walker 2008). Creation myth and revitalization theories were found to be important in mobilizing and recruiting movement participants. Some of the discourses circulating include the imminent end of hardship followed by prosperity of the Hmong people. The movement, however, does not seek to overthrow the states, but to be recognized and incorporated into the state system, i.e. the existing institutions. Many movements adopt such tactics, as I will elaborate in the next section. For now, it suffices to say that the experience of generations of marginalization has been powerful in mobilizing overseas diasporas, human rights agencies, and international religious networks (Rumsby 2018).

Given the above, learning and understanding history is not only helpful in terms of avoiding the negligence (or perpetuation) of systematic and historical injustice, but also in building collective identities based on the shared history of oppression. Mainstream environmentalism and conservation projects which ignore class and race history have been criticized, especially in political ecology, for perpetuating environmental injustice and dispossession of the powerless. Knowing the history can help activists form different narratives, which regard otherwise “illegal” practices in different lights. Encroachment, illegal harvesting, etc. could be legitimate protests, even while in some cases these practices have been taken up as indicative of ‘ignorance’ in need of ‘correction’. Movement planners can actively lend support to these efforts and acts of defiance by historically oppressed groups and connect them with a wider social justice agenda, such as by forming alliance with past or ongoing identity politics and minorities rights movements. For instance, the earlier US anti-environmental racism movement built on the momentum of the civil rights movement (McGurty, 1997). Contemporary slum-based collective actions in India have also drawn on identity-based movements, such as *Dalits*<sup>2</sup> rights which are supposedly guaranteed constitutionally (Kamath and Vijayabaskar, 2014). Beyond the mere purpose of strengthening their cases to alleviate ongoing environmental plights, movement planners can use historical evidence on the systematic exclusion of groups of people from environmental benefits, to assert

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<sup>2</sup> The name given to the those who fall out of the four-fold varna system in Hinduism and ostracised as outcastes (untouchables). Historically, the outcastes or *Dalits* have faced caste-based discrimination and violence and forced to carry out ‘polluting’ tasks to serve the upper castes. After independence, India introduced legislations and affirmative actions to promote better conditions for *Dalits*, secure their basic rights, and ban the practices of ‘untouchability’. However, caste practices persist unevenly in the region and cases of caste-based violence are commonly reported.

their rights to resources and well-being, as well as to motivate for compensation measures.

### **3. Making connections to national and global institutions**

Progressive Contextualization involves tracing the causes of actions outward in space and in terms of various levels of political and social organization. Many instances of injustice are made possible by national or global institutions in the first place, such as at the state level where laws may have been installed that recognize the property rights of corporations over the customary rights of locals. As a means of generating tax revenues that fuel governmental operations to sustain legitimacy, it is in the state’s interest to promote ‘regulated’ productivity of the population (Andreucci and Kallis 2017). Governments are often complicit with industry in reproducing self-interested social norms, which shape desire as well as habits and aspirations. Ideology, in this sense, becomes the hegemony internalized by populations without coercion (Li 2007). Resource-rich, peripheral states typically promote export-oriented extractive industries and simultaneously create conducive law, regulations, and property regimes to facilitate them. These regulatory frameworks are often employed to legitimize the displacement of people from their land, or destruction of their environment by corporations in the name of development. EJ activists have used the term ‘land-grabbing’ to describe a phenomenon they claim to be global (Martinez-Alier, 2016). The practice of land-grabbing has been responded to by many protests, including the NBA on behalf of the millions of Indian people displaced by the mega dam project, and the Brazilian RTs who were displaced from their forests by aggressive ranchers, etc.

The issue of displacement by development and resource extraction is further embedded in the international trade system. As global terms of trade favor core countries (Jorgenson and Rice 2007), periphery countries are required to produce and export more than what they import, resulting in a net outflow of material and energy (Hornborg 1998). Several empirical studies show the persistence of this kind of unequal ecological exchange (Oulu 2015; Samaniego et. al. 2017). To capture the problem, EJ activists use ‘ecological debt’ – a concept which was widely used during the alternative conferences established as a response to the meetings of the World Bank (WB) and International Monetary Fund (IMF) held in Prague in 2000 (Martinez-Alier 2016). To great effect, some Southern governments have also used the term ‘climate debt’ in international climate change negotiations (Bond 2010). Local activists can potentially leverage on similar language to build alliances or networks across the globe. For instance, there is now a global coalition on climate justice, which jointly released the Bali Principles of Climate Justice that “seek to broaden the constituency providing leadership on climate change...by linking local community issues to climate change.” (ICJN 2012).

The system of unequal exchange has been maintained and facilitated through global institutions such as the World Bank, and the World Trade Organization

(WTO). The former devises loans for infrastructural development projects in developing countries to facilitate extractive industries, while the latter undermines trade barriers in order to allow resources to flow unhindered, through a variety of multilateral agreements such as the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA). However, the presence of global institutions also means that there are multiple levels of law operating from international to local, providing opportunities for social movements to use legal institutions at one level against another. This is especially so following the growing international legal norms in areas such as human rights, environment, and sustainable development, which can be leveraged to contest domestic decisions (Rajagopal 2005).

The NBA and its allies, for instance, have engaged with normative and institutional framework at multiple levels. At the earlier phase when the World Bank was involved as a funder of the project, Survival International charged that the Indian government had violated rights of tribal groups under ILO Convention 107, which led to a warning from ILO to the World Bank and the Indian government. As a multilateral institution, the World Bank became an arena for contention especially for NBA's foreign allies at the international level. A Narmada International Action Committee comprising NGOs from India, the US, Canada, Europe, Australia, and Japan pressured against investment by their respective governments in the project via the World Bank on the ground of its social and environmental impacts. The World Bank was forced to establish an Independent Review Mission and found the evidence of the project to be flawed, eventually cancelling the funding agreement. The NBA then participated in the first international conference against big dams at Curitiba, Brazil and a meeting in Gland, Switzerland that led to the formation of the World Commission on Dams in 1998, provoking a global public policy discourse on development. One of the leaders of the NBA, Medha Patkar herself was among the commission members (Rajagopal 2005).

At the domestic level, the engagement by the NBA with legal institutions had resulted in a better resettlement and rehabilitation policy from Gujarat in 1988. The latter engagement with legal courts by the NBA were mostly out of desperation when submergence and displacement took place. They brought cases against forced eviction, deforestation and police brutality to local courts and the Bombay High Court. However, orders to halt construction from these lower judiciaries were ignored by state governments and dam developers. The NBA eventually resorted to the Indian Supreme Court, which then issued a stay order in May 1995. Though the Indian Supreme Court ultimately judged in favor of resuming dam construction, such engagement with broader institutions has not been useless. In fact, it has effectively mobilized local peoples, drawn national and international support, and significantly shaped norms relating to sustainable development and human rights in the country (Rajagopal 2005). In addition, by targeting wider institutions underlying economic globalization, NBA connected with others sharing oppositional politics to the same entities. It established the National Alliance of Peoples' Movements (NAPM), bringing

together grassroots movements and trade unions all over India to a common struggle against multinational companies (Rajagopal 2005).

In Brazil, the historical plights of the RT were evidently tied to global trade with periods of rubber booms and recessions, and then national policies that favored large-scale ranching that displace the forests. The RT’s efforts for resisting deforestation and protecting their livelihood were initially fragmented and ineffective. However, they later strategically involved themselves in the institutional processes towards establishing extractive reserves (Brown and Rosendo 2000) by forming new alliances in the process (Keck 1995; Schwartzman 2018). The most important alliance made, as noted by multiple scholars (Keck 1995; Schwartzman 1991, 2018; Rosendo and Brown 1998), is that with international environmentalism, which elevated their issues to international platforms for engagement with actors such as the US Congress, the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank. Domestically, the organization of RT into local associations and eventually the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS) was a response to legal requirements by the government for establishing extractive reserves. The rules stated that “only representative organizations of the local inhabitants of a given forest area can formally request that area to be declared an extractive reserve” (Brown and Rosendo 2000, 210), and to receive the land-use title from the government. In addition, the RT built new alliances with indigenous groups, forming the Alliance of the Peoples of the Forest (Schwartzman 2018). The RT also participated in the NGO Forum of Rondonia, which was created following the commitment of the World Bank and the state government to involve civil society in negotiating the Rondonia Natural Resources Management Project (PLANAFLORO) (Brown and Rosendo 2000). This platform has enabled them to channel their voices directly to the World Bank, which urged the Brazilian government to fulfil their terms of contract and immediately establish extractive reserves.

Both the examples of the NBA and RT movement show that movements do not only build alliances to jointly oppose institutions, but they leverage existing institutions and engage with them to claim spaces for themselves, thereby contributing to reshaping those institutions in the process. Resistance can therefore be redefined as negotiation. With the rising importance of law, it is possible for the subaltern or their allies to appropriate the language of law and rights to assert their demand (Chandra 2015). These processes of negotiation often involve changing frames by movements to incorporate languages recognized by their allies and the institutions they were engaging with. For both the NBA and RT, human rights and environmentalism are the two important frames used to challenge an otherwise hegemonic development discourse. The presence of public intellectuals, such as Medha Patkar and Arundhati Roy for the NBA, and academics supporting the RT movement, had been instrumental in supporting their respective framing processes. For instance, Arundhati Roy argued that to effectively protest big-dam construction or other development projects, the focus on *Adivasi* rights alone is insufficient (Bose 2004, 155). Instead, the NBA leveraged the already widely appealing though originally elitist Gandhian ideology of Sarvodaya, which calls for ascetic, egalitarian living, and

against ‘excessive greed and wealth accumulation’. (Dwivedi 1997). There have been monsoon camps where movement participants declared *jal samarpan*, i.e. self-drowning in the rising water of the Narmada. Such strategies directly challenged the legitimacy of the state as one of its obligation is to protect its citizens (Routledge 2003)

An example of more recent activism that actively engages with global institutions is seed activism. In 2003, *La Via Campesina* launched an international seed campaign, with the primary aim to fight for farmers’ rights to reproduce their own seeds. The campaign reached out to the UNESCO and FAO to declare farmers-selected varieties as the cultural heritage of humanity; and to the WTO to exempt agricultural products especially seeds, from their legislation and trade agreements; as well as resisting the introduction of intellectual property (IP) rights and patents on seeds in national legislations (Peschard 2010). These engagements with multilateral organizations and international law seek institutionalized protection of seed sovereignty and have galvanized a range of actors, from food rights activists, plant breeders, consumers, to students, academics, and NGOs (Peschard and Randeria 2020). The campaign also witnessed evolving frames as it grew and gained attention. While initially named “Seeds: the common heritage of humanity”, *La Via Campesina* remodified the campaign to be “Seeds, peoples’ heritage at the service of humanity”, in order to avoid appropriation of open-seed resources by corporations such as Monsanto, and made explicit that seeds belong to the communities that cultivate them, not everyone and certainly not the states.

#### **4. Empowering different ways of knowing**

The dominant national and international institutions are embedded in a very specific way of knowing--usually one that treats nature ‘rationally’ as a separate entity from which human beings draw life-sustaining services and resources. Some grassroots actors, in the process of Progressive Contextualizing, might quickly note that their communities hold very different understandings and relationships to their environment, than those endorsed by wider institutions. The dominant worldview holds the ‘universal’ and scientific experts higher than ‘specificity’ and local knowledge holders, thereby delegitimizing different ontologies and cosmologies. For instance, a case study on the Colombian Roundtable on Sustainable Palm Oil finds that different interest groups use different valuation languages (Marin-Burgos *et al.* 2015). When discussing impacts of expanding palm oil cultivation, industrial cultivators consistently present quantitative and statistical data to emphasize their positive impacts on rural development and employment, while local people recount their own experiences using narrative and stories. For example, they tell of the death of fish and livestock after pesticides are spread aerially over the oil palm plantations. Technical experts dismiss such stories as isolated and lacking robust, empirical evidence. Such a view aligns industrial interests with modern states and international institutions through a common and standardized language. As a result, their claims and perspectives appear more authoritative



and objective compared to those by rural people. Beyond the concrete details of the injustice being perpetrated, prejudicial views that only see legitimate authority as articulated through discourses of empiricism, quantitative data (and masculinity), cannot ascertain the credibility of experience articulated as a story (Fricker 2007).

Bernstein defines legitimacy as the shared acceptance of rules by affected groups based on norms they collectively recognize and endorse (Bernstein 2005). However, there has been little research on how local actors grant legitimacy to development programs (Marin-Burgos et al. 2015). In countries where education is not widespread and poverty is prevalent, states hold paternalistic attitudes and often dismiss the poor and other minorities as “backward”, and in need of “help” from the state and development projects (e.g. Li 2007). For instance, swidden agriculturalists in Southeast Asia are often classified as minorities and from a social-evolutionary perspective, viewed to be “primitive” (Cramb et al. 2009; Sturgeon 2005; Fox et al. 2009). As for instance, in Southwest China and Indonesia, swidden agriculturalists have been labelled in policy documents and law as “lower quality people” and “isolated backward populations” (Li 1999). Environmental injustice is often borne by such powerless groups, as they are considered incapable of effective opposition (Bell 2014; Kinyalocots 2000). Groups who resist are often labelled ‘anti-development’, ‘enemies of the people’, and ‘backward,’ especially if these groups comprise indigenous people whose lives are not familiar to the mainstream populations (Andreucci and Kallis 2017). Marginalized groups also face problems in accessing information. Some information is deliberately concealed by states and/or corporations. An example is the struggle to ban asbestos in the UK, during which the asbestos companies produced skewed epidemiological reports claiming that asbestos-related diseases were rare, and proper controls were already adequately in place, even when the number of cumulative asbestos-induced deaths in the country continued to rise (McCulloch and Tweedale 2008). Incomplete information and the purposeful dissemination of misinformation affects the range of available options people conceive of as possible, while it also limits their ability to assess the possible outcomes, benefits and potential harms associated with those options.

Nonetheless, the hegemony of western, scientific way of knowing does not go unchallenged. There have been fields of study critical of western science and knowledge, such as Science and Technology Studies (STS). The underlying argument from within this field of study, is that scientific knowledge, like any other system of knowledge, is produced in specific locals and cultural contexts, is always highly contested, and inherently political. Postcolonial STS further emphasizes the violent impacts of western-scientific practices on both people and the environment in the global South and strives to take multiple ways of knowing seriously (Goldman and Turner 2012). For instance, Mara Goldman (in press), during her conservation work in Tanzania, explicitly recognizes and incorporates *enkiguena*, a Maasai method of meeting and decision-making. Indigenous researchers now articulate new research agendas and indigenous methodologies, using techniques and methods drawn from their own traditions.

These include defining the research agenda and theory from an indigenous perspective, deliberating possible negative outcomes of research to indigenous peoples, sharing, and protecting knowledge, and communicating research results back to the people, etc. (Porsanger 2004). The entry of indigenous methodologies into academic discourse has brought some success at the level of research policy. For example, national research funding agencies in Canada are now recognizing the importance of involving indigenous communities in describing, defining, and developing research questions, as well as moving research results into transformative practice (Evans *et al.* 2009).

In addition, EJ movements have demonstrated how by contesting major institutions and ways of knowing, they are claiming spaces to gain information and validate alternative forms of knowledge. The NBA for instance, amidst the hegemonic discourse that worships large-scale infrastructure development and technology, brought to attention the political, ecology and cultural erasure of the indigenous people and other affected populations, human and non-human, in these mainstream discourses (Routledge 2003). The NBA used testimonials detailing harm caused by dam projects to mobilize participation and in big demonstrations and rallies, thereby highlighting the experience of those suffering. In addition, the NBA have been involved in creating new services in rural areas in the form of micro-hydel projects and schools that teach indigenous knowledge and languages. The first micro-hydel project was developed by two activist-engineers based in Kerala who learnt the techniques from a London-based group, the Intermediate Technology Development Group. Such efforts demonstrate alternative ways of development as a result not only of grassroots actions, but of knowledge convergence from multiple actors, international and local, who share similar visions of development (Gandhi 2001, cited by Routledge 2003).

For the RT, generations of living in the forest had established their sense of belonging and their desire to live lives not dependent on cash for more than a small part of one's sustenance (Schwartzman 2018). Their proposal for establishing Extractive Reserves (ER) presented an alternative approach to conservation, one that also emphasizes people's livelihoods and builds on their knowledge in using diverse forest ecosystems and resources sustainably. The concept of ER was inspired by the reserves of indigenous people, with whom Chico Mendes had formed alliances in defense of the Amazonia. The concept of ER paved the way for the establishment of other people-based protected areas and hybrid land tenure models (Ehringhaus 2005). The model has till date been established in a variety of ecosystems under various federal and state-level political context in Brazils, spanning over 14 million hectares as of 2018. In other words, the RT's desired way of living has not only been empowered and recognized, but successfully institutionalized at the national and international levels (Schwartzman 2018; Gomes *et al.* 2018)

Another exemplary movement that empowers different ways of knowing is the Zapatista movement, which have not only produced alternative discourses, but also created spaces for alternative practices that transform subjectivities.

Gahman (2019) gives three examples of the Zapatistas' way, i.e. 'We want a world where many worlds fit', 'Everything for everyone, nothing for us', and 'When a woman advances, no man is left behind'. These ways signify their emphasis on plurality, autonomy, mutual aid, and responsibility, as well as gender justice. Blume (2018) further demonstrated how the Zapatistas have exercised their power in creating self-governing communities and social services such as education and health, thereby denying both state legitimacy and power in those regards. The movement capitalized on information technology to spread their ideas and discourses, which are themselves dynamic and evolving, and served as an inspiration for other anti-hegemonic movements in the future.

Given the above, grassroots actors and movement planners can potentially empower different ways of knowing by their communities via two manners. First, they can strive to ensure extended participation by affected parties in decision-making, by bridging different languages, and supplementing adequate information (such as scientific data, international norms, diverse views on development) to local stakeholders for strengthening their positions or widening their options. Extended participation requires not only consultation and presence of societal actors in the decision-making process, but actual valuing and incorporation of their knowledge and experience (Arora-Jonssen 2016). For complex situations with high stakes, 'expert' knowledge alone cannot be the sole basis of ethical decision-making and may in fact require dismissing it for more grounded, experiential forms of knowledge (Takeda and Ropke 2010). Second, they can propose collaborative knowledge production efforts by drawing references from existing works with indigenous nations. For example, there is a collaborative land-use planning project unfolding in Haida Gwaii, Canada, which has been co-managed and co-organized by the Council of the Haida Nation (Takeda and Ropke 2010). The planning process emphasizes both the Haida Land Use Vision, that outlines the contemporary indigenous vision of nature-society relations, and a common set of scientific resources for ecosystem-based management. Another example is cross-cultural environmental research underway between Maori and settlers in New Zealand which has been organized around several useful principles. These include creating shared research visions with indigenous peoples, to design different 'spaces' for different knowledge systems to operate, to use a methodology compatible with indigenous' worldview, and to develop a set of indigenous values, beliefs and cultural norms, as guiding principles for decision-making (Hardy and Patterson 2012). The third way is to create territories, i.e. geographical and socio-material spaces to defend and enact ways of living that depart from the mainstream and hegemonic manner, such as those by the Zapatista and RT. However, it is important to remember that the operation of such territories often involve or even require support from and collaboration with others such as NGOs and academic institutions (e.g. see van den Berg et al. 2019)

## Conclusion

For social movements to make meaningful changes, I argue for an approach that actively links local problems outward in space and backward in time, including to the way in which wider institutions and structures pre-figure those problems. By progressively contextualizing a local problem, movement planners can see connections across different scales and levels, enabling more diverse conceptions of justice as well as possibilities in terms of broadening movements, solidarities, and political frameworks. This provides numerous possibilities for a movement to frame and, indeed reframe itself at different times and for different audiences. I outline four different ways of analyzing a local issue: (1) Identifying different actors and experiences (2) Learning the history (3) Making connections to national and global institutions, as well as (4) Empowering different ways of knowing. Each of these actions supports movement planners in understanding the complexity of the issue, while expanding the set of conceptual tools to draw from as movement strategies. By tapping into predetermined and widely accepted framings drawn from EJ activism and academic literature such as those of ecological economics and political ecology, local movements could draw upon the momentum of broader struggles and in doing so, can leverage greater support in local contexts, thereby strengthening the force of political, social and environmental demands.

Using existing movements as examples, my paper also suggests that the PC framework is more comprehensive than any single approach to social movements. It incorporates major movement theories of resource mobilization, political processes, and framing alignment, as well as critical approaches such as intersectional and decolonial analysis. It can be useful in both descriptive and prescriptive manners. Movements are likely to find all four steps in the PC framework to be relevant, and that one step leads quite naturally to the other-- intersectionality is embedded in historical experience of people's social positions, and historical marginalization is likely to be embedded in systemic forces, which are further built upon western, scientific and capitalist ways of knowing. In addition, existing movements also show that neglecting any of the four steps can pose a risk in alienating some supporters and jeopardizing long-term movement impacts. For instance, NBA has been criticized for neglecting intersectional experiences of *Adivasi*, while the RT had been negligent of gender justice. While both the NBA and RT movements had engaged with multilateral institutions, the latter had been able to empower their ways of knowing more sustainably by institutionalizing their proposal of extractive reserves at the national and state level. The former's engagement with the state governments involved and the Indian Supreme Court had been less successful, though it had certainly influenced discourses of development in the country. Therefore, the PC framework will be useful not only in terms of operationalizing EJ, but also in helping movements iteratively self-reflect and criticize to better address the issues at hand, both ethically and practically.

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