Navigating Sustainability: An Activist Ethnographic Study Exploring Discourses, Identities, and Online Learning Networks in Latin American Activism

Abigail Martinez Renteria

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Abstract

Sustainable development has become a central framework for addressing socioecological challenges in Latin America. Activism in the region has long played a crucial role in challenging dominant development models, including their "sustainable" variants. While research has explored activist networks, there is little understanding of how they evolve as communities of practice, particularly regarding the learning processes that sustain them. The ways activists engage with and navigate diverse Discourses of "sustainable development" over time remain underexplored, limiting insights into how online learning networks (re)shape activism and socioecological transformations.

This thesis examines how activists in Mexico and Colombia engage with "sustainable development" Discourses and identities. Using a conceptual framework that links Discourse, power, and knowledge, it investigates online learning networks through a communities of practice framework where activists negotiate and (re)shape these Discourses. An activist ethnography approach is applied, focusing on two networks: a national youth led initiative in Mexico and an international organisation's Latin American branch. Through multi-sited ethnography, including digital and in-person observations and semi structured interviews, the study analyses how activists learn, navigate, and strategically engage with Discourses to construct and reconstruct their identities.

Findings reveal that while online learning networks provide resources, training, and visibility, they also promote institutionalised Discourses, often encouraging activists to legitimise their positions through certifications, reinforcing hegemonic Discourses. However, activists also use these networks to negotiate, challenge, and strategically align with or resist dominant Discourses based on power dynamics in their socioecological contexts. Strategic flexibility enables them to navigate these complexities in pursuit of transformative change.

This research contributes to the field of "sustainable development activism" by highlighting the Discursive and identity-based negotiations activists undertake. It underscores the risks of co-optation and institutionalisation within online learning networks while demonstrating how activists maintain agency and adapt to engage with diverse communities of practice.

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Chapter One

Introduction

1.Introduction

Amid an intensifying socio-ecological crisis marked by climate breakdown, biodiversity loss, and deepening inequalities, the urgency for systemic transformation has never been greater. As institutions falter in their responses, social movements and activists have emerged as central agents of change. At the heart of these efforts lie questions of sustainability, activism, and learning, questions that confront whose voices are amplified, whose realities are erased, and what forms of knowledge and action are legitimised. In Latin America, activists are reclaiming and reshaping the Discourses and identities of "sustainable development activism", crafting alternatives to dominant paradigms while resisting entrenched systems of oppression. Online learning networks, as dynamic yet contested communities of practice, have become pivotal sites for this transformation. However, these networks are not neutral; they reflect and respond to specific interests, often reshaping activism in ways that both empower and constrain its possibilities.

This thesis investigates the Discourses[1] and identities surrounding "sustainable development activism" in Latin America, with a specific focus on Mexico and Colombia. It examines online learning networks through the lens of a communities of practice approach, exploring how activists engage with and challenge these Discourses. My primary focus is not only on understanding the Discourses and identities that activists construct around "sustainable development" but also on analysing how these constructs are embedded in and shape their everyday activism and learning practices. Furthermore, I aim to explore the underlying reasons driving these practices.

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[1] I use "Discourses" with a capital "D" to refer to Gee's (2014) concept, which argues that Discourse consists of distinctive ways of speaking, listening, writing, and reading, along with ways of acting, interacting, valuing, feeling, dressing, thinking, and believing (p. 183). This approach highlights that meaning making involves more than language. Further discussion is provided in Chapter 3.

In my engagement with sustainability-focused activism, I have developed a deep appreciation for the resistant, dynamic, collaborative, and community-based approaches that emphasise diversity and acknowledge "alternative" ways of living. Growing up in a Mexican city bordering the United States, I have long found myself situated between the Discourses of the "developed" world and our "underdeveloped" status. I have witnessed first-hand the inequalities resulting from racism, poverty, and environmental degradation. For example, my city has become a dumping ground for U.S. waste and a host for highly polluting industries that exploit cheap labour, contaminate our air and water, and violate the human rights of workers.

Yet, amid this challenging reality, I have observed and participated in collective actions where people come together to organise, strategise, and demand dignified lives. These groups question our imposed status as "developing" or belonging to the "third world". We ask why we, and our environments, bear the burden of others' economic greed while benefiting so little from promises of "improvement" and "development".

A review of the literature on activism and sustainable development reveals the central role activism plays in confronting hegemonic processes of "development", even in its "sustainable" iterations (Seoane, 2006; Svampa, 2010; Toledo et al., 2014). These studies emphasise the importance of grassroots activism in defending common goods, such as land and water, which are vital for survival (Martínez Alier, 2002; Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2018). In this context, the strategic formulation of Discourses and identities emerges as a key form of participation for historically marginalised groups (Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2018).

Activism within Latin America has been characterised by its plurality of forms of resistance (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016) and its enhanced capacity for representation through diverse discursive platforms, which feature social crossovers and multiple affiliations (Svampa, 2010). Digital technologies have played a significant role in activist movements since the mid-1990s (Karatzogianni, 2015; Gerbaudo, 2017). While many authors have contributed to the literature on changes in organisational forms, mobilisation strategies, and political actions driven by new technologies (Neumayer & Raffl, 2008; Somma, 2015; Lago Martínez, 2015; Fuentes, 2019), the intersection of activism mediated by digital technologies and learning, particularly non-formal and informal learning, remains underexplored. The digital age is not merely a technological phenomenon but a matter of social transformation (Castells

& Catterall, 2001). Despite the rise of online learning networks centred on sustainable development, these remain relatively understudied, particularly in terms of their links to activist Discourses, practices, and learning processes.

The central question driving my research is: *How do activists engage with Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism", and what role do online learning networks play in facilitating or constraining this engagement?* The sub- questions are:

1. What are the Discourses surrounding "sustainable development activism", and how do activists navigate them in their practices?
2. What identities are present within "sustainable development activism", and how do activists navigate them in their practices?
3. What roles do online learning networks play in shaping the utilisation of Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism"?

To address these questions, I adopted an activist ethnographic approach, which, as Hale (2001) describes, entails political engagement with organised activist collectives. This approach enabled me to move beyond the traditional distance often maintained between researchers and communities, instead embracing a mode of knowledge production rooted in collaboration and shared political commitment. I positioned myself as both an activist and a researcher, critically engaging with participants throughout the process (Reedy & King, 2019). Over six months, I conducted fieldwork within the online spaces of two learning networks in Latin America: The Climate Action Coalition and MexiSustain[2]. Alongside this, I spent eight months engaging with activist movements across Mexico. My participation included grassroots efforts such as the "Action for Sustainable Development Goals Festival" organised by MexiSustain, itinerant campaigns and an art festival in Tlaxcala, a women's learning collective for socio-ecological justice in Zapotitlán Salinas, Puebla, reforestation efforts at a water dam in Naucalpan, Estado de Mexico, a walk for the environment in Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua and "climate talks" in Tlaxcala, Tlaxcala and Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua. These experiences provided a snapshot of how activism expresses a "nomadic vocation" through the

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[2] These names are pseudonyms for the online learning networks involved in this research study.

cultivation of relationships and networks across diverse sociopolitical, economic, artistic, and symbolic forms of resistance and practice (Svampa, 2010; see Section 1.3).

This methodological decision, to adopt an activist ethnographic approach and observe a wide range of activist activities, enabled the production of original and much-needed activist scholarship. This approach stemmed from two sources: my personal experiences as a sustainability activist and researcher, and my desire to address a gap in the literature at the intersection of "sustainable development activism" and online learning networks in Latin America. I begin by recounting my personal journey, followed by an overview of the relevant literature, highlighting the gaps I have identified. Finally, I explain how these debates shaped the development of my research questions and the contributions of this research project.

1.1 My Personal Journey into Activism

In this section, I share my experiences with activism, which have significantly shaped my research decisions and methodology (see Chapter 4). By adopting an activist-researcher perspective, I aim to contribute to the broader scholarship on online learning networks and "sustainable development activism". My approach bridges academic rigour with the practical needs of activists' communities, ensuring its relevance to both academic literature and activists' movements (Reedy & King, 2017). This process also involves developing a political understanding of, and from, my own standpoint, critically questioning and deepening my political subjectivity, which shapes my research stance (Dorion, 2021).

My journey into activism began at a very early age. It started with observing my grandmother as she actively participated in a political party challenging the ruling government, which had been in power for over 30 years. I saw her collaborating with neighbourhood committees to secure a decent social centre where we could enjoy leisure activities like Zumba. This early exposure inspired me to engage with grassroots movements during my teenage years, including Corazón con Ángel, a local community initiative for women

with Down syndrome seeking engagement and representation within the Charro[3] community in Mexico.

As a university student, I joined various movements, including initiatives to provide literacy classes to adults in "marginalised" communities, and participated in an emerging group focused on "sustainable development" within my higher education institution.

Initially, I did not critically question some of my activism practices. For example, I uncritically assumed that "marginalised" adult communities needed to adopt the knowledge and ideas I or my university provided. Over time, I realised that being perceived as "marginalised" or "illiterate" depended on dominant positioning. For the higher education institution, it meant targeting communities from areas categorised as "marginalised" due to their limited access to "quality" formal education. However, this perception was shaped more by institutional definitions than by the lived realities of the communities themselves.

Over time, I began to understand that activism in my local context was far more complex than I initially realised. Living in a highly unequal industrial city in northern Mexico, bordered by drug cartels and other powerful groups, I came to see that activism required navigating intricate social and political landscapes. These dynamics were further shaped by my identity as a border-dwelling, working-class woman.

Years later, I joined an online learning network on a volunteer basis, where I served first as a programmes' assistant and later as a programme coordinator. Unlike my previous experiences, where I engaged as an active member of a community or group, this role involved hierarchies and structures that my peers often referred to as "professionalisation". In this environment, my role shifted from "doing" activism to "teaching" the "how-to".

I noticed a significant change in focus within this structured and "professionalised" environment. Rather than centring education to bring about grassroots social change and addressing local needs, I found myself delivering a vague, preset agenda created without my input or consultation with those I was "teaching". Furthermore, the network appeared to

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[3] According to Palomar Verea (2004), the Charro community should not be viewed merely as a stereotype of regional folklore but rather as a social and cultural group with extraordinary richness and complexity, closely associated with the development of regional livestock farming.

engage only certain individuals, and many participants, including myself, seemed to use this platform to "professionalise" ourselves in hopes of securing future opportunities. These observations prompted me to repeatedly question: What am I working towards? What are we working towards?

This environment sparked my interest in the discourses surrounding sustainable development. Within the online learning network, sustainable development was framed through various lenses, including international agendas like the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), conservation-focused initiatives, and justice-oriented perspectives like *Buen Vivir*[4]. These discourses often shifted depending on context: SDGs were emphasised in interactions with international agencies, while *Buen Vivir* resonated more with local communities. Such variations revealed how Discourses not only shaped perceptions but also influenced identity formation within the network. Participants often entered as activists or volunteers but developed more "specialised" identities, gaining recognition as "sustainability professionals" and accessing spaces like international forums and government consultations. This transition marked a shift towards professionalised activism, raising questions about the interplay between identity, Discourse, and power.

These observations fuelled my research interest in exploring the intersections of activism, development, power, and communities of practice[5]. During my master's program in Adult Education for Social Change, my dissertation examined an online learning network's influence on sustainable living practices among adult Mexicans. This small-scale study highlighted discrepancies between the network's Discourse on sustainable development and participants' practical understandings. It also challenged my assumptions about the transformative potential of online learning networks in activism.

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[4] *Buen Vivir, Vivir Bien,* or *Buena Vida* represents an alternative to conventional "development" paradigms, challenging traditional notions of "development" and "progress". It draws on alternative knowledge systems that prioritise a harmonious relationship with the environment and advocate for a holistic understanding of well-being (Gudynas, 2011).

[5] Communities of practice can be defined as groups of individuals engaged in similar activities who share knowledge, enhance expertise, and collaboratively solve problems (Groff, 2023), such as those formed within online learning networks, further explored in Chapter 3.

I share these experiences because they shaped my research questions, methodology (see Chapter 4), and critical approach. The dilemmas I faced as a practitioner revealed gaps in scholarship, particularly at the intersection of activism, digital technologies, learning processes, and sustainable development. This research thus serves both as a critique of my own practices and as an inquiry into broader patterns within these fields.

Furthermore, my positionality as an activist-researcher aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of sustainable development activism and education, bridging the gap between researchers and activist communities, and generating knowledge that is academically rigorous yet practically relevant (see Chapter 8). By situating myself within the research, I critically engaged with the political objectives of sustainable development activism, enriching my analysis of how activism and education intersect.

This dual engagement also allowed me to interrogate the limitations and assumptions inherent in both academic and activist spheres. As I explore in Chapter 4, this perspective deepened my examination of educational initiatives within activism and their alignment with activist goals. By reflecting on these intersections, I aim to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of sustainable development, activism, digital technologies, and their implications for practice and scholarship.

In constructing the literature review that follows, I adopted a critical literature review approach to examine existing research critically and holistically. Rather than merely summarising the literature, I engaged with key debates, inconsistencies, and gaps to construct a foundation for the thesis. Drawing on the work of scholars such as Torraco (2005) and Grant and Booth (2009), this approach enabled me to map the intersections between activism, sustainable development, and digital learning networks, while interrogating dominant Discourses and assumptions within these fields. I organised the review thematically, focusing on key areas such as activism in Latin America, the dynamics of sustainable development, and the role of digital technologies in learning processes. This thematic structure provided clarity and coherence while highlighting opportunities for original contributions.

The remainder of this chapter presents the findings of this critical literature review, mapping current debates and situating this thesis within ongoing scholarly conversations.

Organising the Thesis: Structure

Before delving into the core of the research project, I offer an overview of the thesis structure to provide the reader with a roadmap of what lies ahead. The first three chapters, Introduction, Context and Background, and Conceptual Framework, establish the contextual and conceptual foundation underpinning this research. These chapters serve as crucial references for understanding the findings and discussion sections that follow, offering a comprehensive grounding in the themes and frameworks central to the study.

Chapter 4 focuses on the methodology employed in this thesis. As highlighted earlier, the research focus is shaped not only by the questions posed but also by the methods used to answer them. In this chapter, I engage with the process of activist ethnography, detailing not only what I did but also the rationale behind my methodological choices. I reflect on the challenges and complexities encountered, discussing how I navigated these hurdles, or, in some cases, failed to address them effectively. This reflexive approach provides insight into the dynamic and iterative nature of the research process.

These foundational chapters set the stage for the findings chapters, which I have organised around three main themes:

Chapter 5 explores the multifaceted Discourses surrounding "sustainable development" activism and their ongoing (re)shaping within activist practices. This chapter examines the complex interactions with diverse stakeholders, institutions, and communities that characterise activism and learning processes. By highlighting the fluidity of these Discourses, I demonstrate how they evolve as activists navigate their struggles and engagements across varied contexts.

Chapter 6 investigates the identities and self-portrayals of activists engaged in "sustainable development". This chapter examines how activists construct and negotiate their identities to connect with different communities and institutions, navigating power systems. Additionally, it explores what it means to be an activist and the interplay with other roles, such as "climate champion" or "ambassador", shedding light on the dynamic and strategic nature of these identities.

Chapter 7 examines the role of online learning networks in "sustainable development activism". Using the cases of the Climate Action Coalition and MexiSustain, I analyse how

activists interact with specific Discourses and identities to achieve distinctions, certificates, and roles like "climate champion" or "ambassador". This chapter explores the motivations behind participation, the benefits activists perceive, and the activities they undertake, highlighting the learning processes and *strategic flexibility* within these spaces through a communities of practice framework.

Finally, Chapter 8, the Conclusion, synthesises the key contributions of this thesis to the literature. It discusses the findings in relation to the theoretical framework, drawing together the central themes and concepts explored throughout the thesis. This chapter also outlines the broader implications of the research for various stakeholders, including academics, policymakers, and practitioners, offering actionable insights and directions for future inquiry.

1.2 Activism *for, within*, or *beyond* Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is a widely used yet deeply contested concept, embraced across various sectors but subject to multiple interpretations (Singh, 2014). In this section, I explore how the term sustainable development has been defined and applied in existing development literature, how it intersects with activism, and its relevance to this research project.

The term "development" carries significant historical weight. I draw on a body of literature examining its colonial roots (King, 1976; Dixon & Heffernan, 1991; Escobar, 1995; Ziai, 2016), its relationship with modernity (Spybey, 1992; Hintzen, 2005; Samson & Gigoux, 2017), and its ties to capitalism (Larrain, 1989; Spash, 2022; Marquetti, Miebach & Morrone, 2024), which subordinate local cultures, knowledge systems, and ecosystems (Escobar, 2014) (see Chapter 2). These perspectives provide essential context for understanding the complexities of development as a complex Discourse (see Chapter 3). The historical roots of sustainable development trace back to the late 1970s and early 1980s, amid rising global concerns about conservation and ecosystem preservation. In 1987, the Brundtland Report formalised the concept of sustainable development, defining it as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs". This definition introduced two critical dimensions: addressing the "needs" of the world's "poorest" and fostering "growth" that ensures future "opportunities" (United Nations, 1987).

While this framing has shaped global priorities, some scholars, such as Esteva and Prakash (1998), Mota Díaz and Sandoval Forero (2016), and Jabareen (2008), critique its focus on serving the interests of a few. Others, such as Dodds (2000), argue that poverty and environmental degradation must be addressed as interconnected crises.

Other scholars define sustainable development more simply as development that can be continued indefinitely or for a specified period (Dernbach, 1998, 2003; Stoddart, 2011). Despite its widespread adoption, the concept faces criticism for its inherent contradictions (Redclift, 1987, 1993; Escobar, 2014; Esteva, 2023). For instance, Checa Artasu (2012), through a quantitative analysis of the Xcaret eco-archaeological park in Mexico's Riviera Maya, reveals that while the project claims to follow sustainable development principles, it facilitates a "more or less controlled" exploitation of natural diversity and cultural wealth to promote regional development. Similarly, Marín Marín et al. (2020), analysing major tourism

projects in Cancún, Riviera Maya, and Costa Maya, highlight the colonisation of territories and exploitation of nature and Mayan communities, integrating them into capitalist circuits of valorisation. These cases demonstrate how sustainable development often attempts to reconcile economic growth with environmental concerns but prioritises the effects of environmental degradation on economic growth rather than addressing how economic growth itself causes environmental and social harm (Escobar, 2014). Critiques of sustainable development also challenge its failure to question foundational elements of Western societies, such as modernity, capitalism, and anthropocentrism (Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2019). By centring on human needs (often for a privileged few), sustainable development overlooks the intrinsic value of non-human life, raising ethical questions about its priorities (Giddings et al., 2002). My research investigates how activists navigate these competing priorities, what drives their approaches, and the learning processes they undergo in their practices.

The lack of a cohesive theoretical framework for sustainable development is another critical issue, with many scholars highlighting its vagueness (Gow, 1992; Qizilbash, 2001; Jabareen, 2004; 2008). There is little agreement on what exactly should be sustained (Redclift, 1993; Sachs, 1999). For example, Castro Escobar (2015) categorises labour market sustainability in Latin America, while García Romero (2013) focuses on forest sustainability in Colombia, emphasising biodiversity loss and its intersection with social challenges. These differences underscore the diversity of interpretations in sustainable development frameworks. There is significant literature exploring activism *for, within, or beyond* sustainable development, particularly in Latin America, which is central to this thesis. Sustainable development's colonial, capitalist, and modernist roots and its inherent contradictions raise a key question: What needs to be sustained: life itself or development? This question underpins my distinction between activism *for, within*, and *beyond* sustainable development.

Some scholarship examines activism as a means to achieve sustainable development, or what I call activism *for* sustainable development. For example, Torres (2013) and Castañeda (n.d) document the rise of international activism in Mexico, framed around universal binding rules, particularly for climate change and sustainable development. These frameworks often prioritise "green growth" strategies through technical interventions, such as pollution reduction and waste management, while placing responsibility on individuals rather than addressing systemic power dynamics. (e.g. Gay et al., 2024; Buntaine et al., 2024; Ulloa-Murillo et al., 2022). For instance, who benefits from such frameworks, corporations with

access to/ producing green technologies or grassroots communities? Who gains access to international spaces, and whose interests are ultimately served? These are some of the questions this thesis seeks to unravel using a development as a Discourse theoretical approach, as discussed in Chapter 3.

The literature on activism *within* sustainable development examines engagements that operate within the framework itself, particularly through NGOs and partnerships with diverse institutions like governments. While these approaches may appear to challenge certain aspects of the hegemonic roots of sustainable development (e.g. inequalities), they often remain confined within its established boundaries. For instance, Liberti (2018) examines how the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) create opportunities for local activism while fostering transnational connections. However, his "activism in spiral" model reflects a top-down approach where activists adapt international agendas to local communities rather than using local needs to influence international frameworks. Similarly, Marzano Ramos (2017) highlights how NGOs in Peru engage with the 2030 Agenda by emphasising local awareness and program implementation. Yet, this approach reinforces a hierarchical structure, with international agreements dictating grassroots priorities.

Moller (2006) and Navarrete Peñuela (2017), in their studies of sustainable urban development activism in Colombia, emphasise the importance of community involvement in decision-making processes around sustainable development policies. While these scholars focus on activism as a mediator that incorporates "alternative" Discourses, such as local voices and indigenous approaches, they still position these perspectives as complementary or peripheral to mainstream sustainable development frameworks, rather than treating them as central or standalone alternatives to the hegemonic sustainable development Discourse. My research interrogates why "alternative" Discourses (e.g. local grassroots and indigenous Discourses) are treated as complementary rather than central to sustainable development activism. It further examines how activists navigate these dynamics and attempt to reshape or disrupt established frameworks.

Further scholarship highlights movements *beyond* sustainable development, challenging its premises, and advocating for alternatives to development itself (Escobar, 2018; Svampa, 2010; Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2018; Rojas, 2016). This distinction aligns with what I frame as activism *beyond* sustainable development.

For instance, Kruse (2005) examines the 2000 events in Cochabamba, Bolivia, known as the "Water War". This grassroots movement successfully annulled a water privatisation contract and prompted significant legislative changes that had previously supported such ventures. Similarly, Svampa et al., (2009) explore three social movements in Argentina that resist transnational mining companies. These movements prioritise territorial rights, local sustainable natural resource management, and the acknowledgment of indigenous communities' cultural heritage and worldviews, which have historically been overshadowed by dominant development Discourses, including sustainable development. Similarly, Busconi (2017) addresses the ecofeminist activisms of indigenous collectives in Latin America, highlighting alternative approaches to development, such as *Buen Vivir*, and the relationship between body and territory for a sustainable environment.

However, much of this literature tends to centre on social movements rather than other forms of activism. Social movements, understood as networks comprising a plurality of groups, individuals, and organisations united by a common cause and possibly a collective identity (Jordan, 1995), have been the primary focus. In contrast, less attention has been given to other forms of activism, particularly the experiences of individuals involved in social movements and their practices. Hernández Castillo and Cruz Rueda (2021) advance this conversation with a collaborative study rooted in legal activism. They investigate the impacts of, and resistance to, the Tren Maya project in southern Mexico, imposed on indigenous peoples under the guise of a "development" initiative. Their research highlights the profound tensions between state-led "development projects" and indigenous communities striving to safeguard their territories, livelihoods, and cultural autonomy. While this study highlights the tensions faced by local indigenous people in Mexico, it falls short in addressing how local grassroots actors have navigated these tensions within their activism practices. My research seeks to address these gaps by focusing on activism, their Discourses, and identities in navigating sustainability.

Activism challenging hegemonic "development" often faces repression. Villareal Villamar and Echart Muñoz (2018) document widespread criminalisation of resistance movements defending land, ecosystems, and cultures. Global Witness (2023) reported 177 environmental defenders killed in 2022, with 88% of these killings in Latin America. This raises critical questions: Do activists *for* or *within* sustainable development face similar risks as those opposing it? What power dynamics underlie these disparities? And how are activists navigating these complexities?

These distinctions and gaps within the literature led me to critically reflect on the diverse Discourses surrounding sustainable development activism in this thesis. Any discourse risks oversimplifying or overlooking key aspects of the complexity inherent in sustainable development. To address this, I chose to use quotation marks for "sustainable development activism" as a way of acknowledging "sustainable development" as a contested and evolving set of Discourses, rather than a fixed concept. Section 2.2.1 explored this more in depth within the Latin American context. This approach enables the thesis to critically engage with the term's various applications and limitations within the broader landscape of activism.

1.3 Activisms and Digital Technologies in Latin America: The Overlooked Dimensions

In addition to exploring "sustainable development activism" as encompassing contested and evolving Discourses within activism, my research examines the role of digital activism within this phenomenon, as it has been a central aspect of activism in the region (as discussed in Chapter 2). The aim is to produce a research account that investigates the intersections between digital and face-to-face spaces where activism practices operate. While numerous scholars have explored how online and digital environments (re)shape activist efforts, critical gaps remain in the literature that this study aims to address.

This section highlights several overlooked dimensions of digital activism in Latin American. These include a predominant focus on isolated media or platforms, the fragmentation of activism, where different causes often operate in silos rather than being analysed comprehensively, and the application of ahistorical approaches that neglect the historical roots of social movements. Additionally, there is a tendency to adopt uncritical perspectives on the role of digital platforms, often viewing them solely as positive or negative tools for communication, mobilisation, and organisation. This critique aligns with Treré and Harlow's (2023) critical meta-analysis of digital activism literature in the region.

As noted earlier in this Chapter, Latin American activism is characterised by its diverse forms of resistance and its capacity for representation through varied discursive platforms that bridge social intersections (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016; Svampa, 2010). However, much of the literature on digital activisms tends to fragment these dynamics, focusing on isolated cases and/or specific media platforms (e.g. Twitter, as Olmedo Neri, 2019; 2022; Harlow & Harp 2011; Valenzuela et al., 2012). For example, Meneses (2014) and Rovira Sancho (2016)

examine digital activism related to the Ayotzinapa case, emphasising the roles of Facebook, Twitter, and email in these efforts. Although these studies reference the influence of specific activist movements such as #YoSoy132, they do not sufficiently draw connections between these practices and the historical roots of rural, Indigenous, or other movements within the region.

Similarly, Olmedo Neri (2019; 2022) and López Robles (2022) highlight specific digital platforms, such as Twitter, as sites for the co-production of meanings and discourses that reclaim the content shared through hashtags within movements such as LGBTQ+ activism and the decriminalisation of abortion in Colombia. Their analyses emphasise the communicative functions of these platforms but do not engage with the socio-political factors that shape these practices or the voices that are excluded in these spaces. Laudano (2017), through a virtual ethnography, examined the role of Facebook and Twitter within mobilisations under the slogan *#VivasNosQueremos* (We Want to Stay Alive), highlighting social media's role in simultaneously manifesting 400,000 participants in over 240 locations across Argentina, focusing on digital activism as tool for mobilisation.

Although these studies provide valuable insights into how social media functions as a communicative strategy for organising and mobilising activists, several critical questions remain unanswered. Whose voices dominate these platforms, and whose are excluded? How do these tools shape activist practices and identities, both online and in face-to-face environments? What discourses are being emphasised or marginalised, and for what reasons? Lastly, how do socio-political contexts influence processes of mobilisation and engagement?

While scholars such as Schumann and Klein (2015) and Greijdanus et al. (2020) have analysed the effects of digital activism, they have also highlighted its potential to lead to "slacktivism", a form of low-cost, low-risk activism with possible demobilising effects. Similarly, Rovira Sancho (2017) and Cru (2024) emphasise that digital platforms are global private corporations, driven by individual and specific interests rather than collective goals.

These gaps underscore the need for a more comprehensive approach to examining the complexity and hybridity of the broader media ecology within which activists operate. This includes integrating digital and traditional forms of activism while considering the interplay between socio-political contexts and activist strategies (see, for instance, Harlow, 2016; 2021; Treré & Barranquero, 2018).

By addressing these issues, this study aims to contribute to a richer understanding of "sustainable development activism" in Latin America, with particular attention to what I call online learning networks (see Chapter 2). It moves beyond isolated platform studies to a holistic analysis of activism within its socio-historical and media-ecological contexts, placing particular emphasis on how activists navigate these spaces and the diverse Discourses and identities within it. While scholars such as Debo Armenta (2021) and Debo Armenta and Rivera González (2024) have examined "digital Indigenous activism" through a broader media ecology, considering the intersection of online and offline spaces and the integration of traditional media used within Indigenous communities, they have primarily highlighted how these spaces influence each other. This work underscores the importance of understanding the interplay between digital and face-to-face activism, a central theme of digital activism and a key aspect of my research, which employs ethnography in both virtual and in-person spaces (see Chapter 4). However, their work pays limited attention to the power dynamics that emerge from merging Discourses and identities within movements and their practices, an area my study seeks to explore in depth.

My research explores these dynamics within "sustainable development activism", focusing on how the diverse Discourses around activism *for, within, or beyond* sustainable development, as discussed in the previous section, are reshaping activists' practices and the role of online learning networks in these processes, placing digital spaces in context, exploring beyond content alone to look at the functions these platforms play in the lives of activists.

The next section examines the education and learning component within activism, with a focus on adult education literature, exploring the gaps surrounding the learning processes embedded in "sustainable development activism" within digital and face-to-face spaces and their intersections.

1.4 Adult Education and Learning in Activisms

Thus far, I have explored how literature on "sustainable development activism" has developed around activism *for, within, or beyond* sustainable development, as well as how digital spaces have shaped various dimensions of activism, including mobilisation and communication for political action. This section turns to the relationship between education and "sustainable development activism", examining existing studies and discussing how this

thesis contributes to the study of adult education, particularly the learning dynamics within "sustainable development activism".

A significant body of research emphasises formal education, particularly the contributions of higher education institutions to education for sustainable development (ESD). These studies examine specific projects, academic programmes, subject curricula, and the challenges involved in "achieving" sustainable development (e.g. Chacón et al., 2009; de la Rosa Ruiz et al., 2019; González-Campo et al., 2022; Rendón López et al., 2018; Caram León et al., 2023).

When considering the intersection of activism and education more closely, the literature increasingly highlights the influence of specific pedagogies, such as popular education, feminist pedagogies, critical pedagogies, and decolonial approaches, in fostering activism and social movements (Fuijino et al., 2018; Walsh, 2015; Tarlau, 2023; Mejía Jimenez, 2020). For instance, state-led education initiatives like the Cuban Literacy Campaign are recognised as significant contributors to activism and the promotion of social movements (Tarlau, 2023). Similarly, other scholars have focused on the feminist organisations and environmental groups spaces for non-formal education (e.g. workshops, short courses) and informal, everyday learning, often facilitated by digital media and technologies (Irving & English, 2011).

Likewise, scholars such as Enguix (2016) highlight how activist organisations, networks, and social movements use webpages and other online platforms not only to protest or disseminate information but also to educate and support others by offering training, resources, and counselling. These online platforms provide tools to help activists learn about creating virtual petitions, lobbying decision-makers on issues of concern (George & Leidner, 2008; Van Laer & Van Aelst, 2010) and engaging in hacking practices. Such hacking, through coding and programming, aims to subvert authoritarian and undemocratic technological designs, transforming virtual environments to promote the public good (Rueda, 2004).

While these studies offer critical insights into how diverse pedagogies and educational initiatives foster activism, they predominantly focus on the initiatives themselves, their impacts and outcomes. My research moves beyond these perspectives by exploring how educational initiatives, particularly online learning networks, actively shape activism. As Dyer (2020) notes, "technology cannot be removed from the political and social contexts in which it is deeply embedded" (p. 162). Central to this study are not only the effects of these networks

or their associated activism projects but also the intersections and learning processes of activists within these networks, their communities, and the broader, complex socio-political context of "sustainable development".

This research emphasises the activists themselves, how they navigate these spaces, engage with their communities, and interact with diverse Discourses while adapting to and shaping the socio-political landscape of sustainable development. Just as activism, whether occurring in face-to-face environments or mediated by digital technologies, is inherently educational, education cannot be reduced to a mere dimension of resistance and social activism. Aguilar Forero and Cifuentes Álvarez (2019), echoing Freire (2014), argue that "besides an act of knowledge, education is also and always a political act" (p. 34).

Aguilar Forero and Cifuentes Álvarez (2019), in their systematic review of education, activism, and digital technologies, stress the need to move beyond rigid distinctions such as formal, non-formal, and informal education or online/offline learning. They call for a practical turn in the study of the relationships between activism and education, one that transcends these dualisms and challenges taken-for-granted distinctions.

Building on these insights and reflecting on the existing literature on education, digital activism, and "sustainable development activism", this thesis focuses on the educational aspect of online learning networks and sustainable development activism. It places particular emphasis on the learning of activists within these networks, centring on a communities of practice framework. This theoretical approach facilitates the examination of the diverse Discourses and identities embedded within activists' learning processes, offering a lens to understand learning in its inherently social dimensions (Wenger, 2010). A more detailed exploration of this framework is presented in Chapter 3.

1.5 Conclusion: Expanding the Research Focus

Building on the literature review and my personal journey in activism presented thus far, it can be inferred that "sustainable development activism" engages with a myriad of Discourses and practices. In this chapter, I categorised these as *for, within,* and *beyond* sustainable development. These Discourses, in turn, seem to shape activism practices in various ways. For example, are these practices aligned with pre-set agendas such as the

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)? Do they prioritise environmental preservation for economic aims? Or do they focus on resisting "development" projects, practices, and Discourses? Additionally, these Discourses influence identities, raising questions such as: Who are the people engaging in these Discourses? Do they share common characteristics? What motivates their engagement with specific Discourses? Are these Discourses set, or do they change because of their activism/engagement with hegemonic Discourses?

Digital technologies have been shown to play a significant role in activism within and beyond the Latin American region. As highlighted through this research, platforms like online learning networks and various digital tools have been critical for mobilisation and communication strategies. However, understanding activism requires examining the broader media ecology, encompassing the intersection of diverse social movements, online and offline spaces, and traditional media and community practices. For example, as Coleman (2010) points out, the internet serves as both a space for transforming reality and a platform that reproduces the dominant social order. This duality often gives rise to mainstream Discourses within "sustainable development activism" while overshadowing alternative perspectives.

Similarly, the literature on education and activism has explored various forms of education, ranging from formal higher education to non-formal initiatives such as workshops and short courses. The role of digital technologies in fostering these spaces is also well-documented. Scholars underscore that activism, whether taking place in face-to-face environments or mediated by digital technologies, is inherently educational. However, education should not be reduced to a mere component of resistance and social activism. The intersections among activism, sustainable development, and online learning networks reveal how activism engages with and challenges diverse practices, including participation in online learning networks, which reflect the complex ways of engaging with "sustainable development politics".

In this context, online learning networks serve as dynamic spaces where multiple Discourses, identities, and learning processes converge, interact, and influence one another. However, this diversity is accompanied by challenges, as power dynamics often dictate the relevance and "appropriation" of these Discourses. This raises critical considerations about which perspectives are amplified, which are marginalised, and how these dynamics shape activism practices.

This thesis aims to examine how activists engage with Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism", focusing on the role online learning networks play in this engagement. Earlier in this chapter, I argued that the notion of "sustainable development activism" is often ambiguous, heavily influenced by hegemonic narratives centred on economic growth. The research seeks to provide a more nuanced understanding of these dynamics by pursuing the following aims:

In Chapter 5, the thesis analyses the various Discourses surrounding "sustainable development activism" and investigates how activists leverage them in their efforts. This includes an exploration of how these Discourses influence activists' practices and translate into tangible actions within and beyond online learning networks.

In Chapter 6, the focus shifts to identities within "sustainable development" activism. This section examines the identities attributed to activists and how these identities are utilised to shape their practices. The analysis includes the relationship between identities and the Discourses of "sustainable development" and their collective impact on activists' strategies and engagements.

In Chapter 7, the thesis investigates the roles played by online learning networks in shaping the utilisation of Discourses and identities. This includes examining how these networks facilitate, transform, or challenge the ways activists engage with "sustainable development" politics and education.

In conclusion, this research investigates how activists navigate and reshape the Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism" while examining the role of online learning networks in these processes. The analysis contributes to a deeper understanding of the intricate dynamics at play in "sustainable development activism" and how these dynamics intersect with digital technologies and education.

By addressing these objectives, the thesis aspires to enrich academic discussions on sustainable development, activism, and digital technologies, while also offering insights valuable to activism itself. This exploration positions online learning networks as vital spaces for understanding how activism engages with socio-political contexts and challenges dominant narratives, contributing both to theoretical frameworks and practical applications in the field.

Chapter Two

Context and Background

2. Introduction

In the previous chapter, I reviewed literature on "sustainable development activism", digital technologies, and adult education, identifying key gaps that this thesis seeks to address, especially around the interconnections between these three areas and socio-political dynamics. This chapter situates my research within the Latin American context, exploring the dynamics of "sustainable development activism", the online learning networks, and their members, which gives a glimpse of the profile of activists involved in this study, further developed in Chapter 4 and explored in depth in Chapter 6.

I begin by examining how "development" has been studied in Latin America, where the concept remains widely contested. Latin America's unique socio-ecological dynamics have shaped a critical Discourse on development, evident in theoretical frameworks such as dependency theories (Frank, 1969; Cardoso & Faletto, 1979; Goodman & Redclift, 1991), critiques of neoextractivism (Svampa, 2019), and the concept of *Buen Vivir* (Gudynas, 2011; Vanhulst & Beling, 2013). Even in its "sustainable" form, the notion of development has been embraced and critiqued, reflecting tensions inherent in its application.

I then consider the relationship between development and activism in Latin America, highlighting the region's rich diversity of socio-political movements. These movements often challenge mainstream notions of development by advocating for collective, autonomous, horizontal, and networked forms of organisation (Svampa, 2019; Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2019). Contextualising these efforts, I discuss how "sustainable development activism" manifests in the region, focusing on socio-ecological struggles and the alternatives proposed by these movements.

The chapter also examines the role of digital networks in "sustainable development activism". These networks do not merely function as tools for communication but act as platforms for reshaping political and social interventions. I introduce two online learning

networks central to this research, exploring how they operate within the sphere of "sustainable development" in the region and the forms of activism they foster. The chapter highlights the role of these networks, and the activists involved, providing essential context for the study.

While this chapter outlines the broader setting of the online learning networks, the rationale for their selection and the methodological process of engaging with them are detailed further in Chapter 4.

2.1 "Development" within Latin America

In this section, I examine how "development" has been studied within Latin America, emphasising how the concept of "development" in the region has been the subject of extensive scrutiny, reflecting the intricate relationship between economic, social, cultural, and ecological dynamics. Scholars such as Ortiz Monasterio (1991) succinctly capture this complexity, characterising Latin America as a paradox of "mass poverty amidst economic and ecological abundance" (p.158). Building on this perspective, Goodman and Redclift (1991) delve deeper into the inherent unsustainability of Latin American "development" trajectories, citing the neglect of future natural resource stocks, pervasive inequality, and human rights violations.

A fundamental issue in Latin American "development", according to academic scholarship, has been the inclination to emulate the development models of the so-called developed nations, resulting in what Goodman and Redclift (1991) term an "industrialised dependency framework". While this framework seeks economic growth, it often comes at significant social and environmental costs. Escobar (1995) further underscores the role of "development" as a discourse (see Chapter 3), shaping a constrained narrative that perpetuates cultural and social domination strategies.

For some authors, such as Escobar (1995; 2011), despite achieving political independence in the early 19th century, many Latin American countries remained ensnared in European economic and political influence to varying degrees. This influence intensified in the 20th century, marked by heightened intervention and ties with the United States. This phenomenon can be explained within the framework of Dependency Theory, as discussed by Frank (1969), which examines global relations of economic domination and exploitation by more economically powerful countries over the less economically powerful ones. As a result of

the unequal distribution of power and resources, some countries have developed at a faster pace than others. This dynamic has persisted into the 21st century, characterised by a period of economic expansion driven by the soaring international prices of primary commodities.

Escobar (2011) elucidates how the "development" of Latin America, as envisioned by hegemonic institutions like the World Bank and certain governments, has adopted a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approach. This perspective treats people and cultures as abstract concepts, akin to statistical figures manipulated in the graphs of "progress". Svampa (2019) further articulates that this approach has led to the emergence of contemporary neoextractivism, a development model characterised by the overexploitation of increasingly scarce, largely non-renewable natural resources, and the expansion of exploitation into previously unproductive territories, such as the Amazon rainforest, from the perspective of capital.

For instance, the World Bank Group (2024) reports an increase in Brazil's GDP growth from -4.4% in 1990 to 4.8% in 2021. According to the Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (IBGE) (2024), Brazil's GDP from agriculture grew from 6.92 billion BRL in 1998 to 35.5 billion BRL in 2024. This "growth" includes significant contributions from livestock farming and mining, both major drivers of this expansion. However, scholars such as Rivero et al. (2009) argue that by 2021, livestock farming alone accounted for 75% of deforestation in public and indigenous lands. Additionally, Amnesty International (2019) estimates that between 1988 and 2014, 63% of the deforested area in the Amazon (58.4% in Brazil) was converted into pastureland for cattle. This has led to significant biodiversity loss and reduced territory available for Amazonian indigenous tribes (see Begotti & Peres, 2020; Arellano Yanguas et al., 2022, and Global Witness, 2023).

The neoextractivist model encompasses a broad range of activities, including open-pit mega-mining, the expansion of the oil and energy frontier, the construction of hydroelectric dams, and other infrastructure projects, as well as the proliferation of monocultures and single-commodity production through the widespread adoption of the agribusiness model (Svampa, 2019). It embraces an instrumentalist and productivist approach and relies on a reimagined conceptualisation of the historical abundance of natural resources, reminiscent of the continent's "El Dorado vision" (Svampa, 2019, p.15).

In contrast, alternative visions of "development" within Latin American communities incorporate the appreciation of ancestral knowledges and the consolidation of counter-hegemonic proposals that challenge destructive, ecocide, and ethnocidal models of "development". These alternative models are grounded in diverse epistemologies (Polo Blanco & Piñeiro Aguiar, 2019). They emphasise the restoration of sustainable forms of "productivity" derived from indigenous and campesino traditions, solidarity economies, popular organisations, and cooperatives (Polo Blanco & Piñeiro Aguiar, 2019). Such models propose shifting the discursive and social centrality away from hegemonic "development" models to embrace relational ontologies that encompass a variety of alternative visions and pluriverses (Escobar, 2014).

Examples of these alternatives can be seen in the Zapatista communities in Chiapas, Mexico. Through their autonomous educational system and self-organised collective practices, the Zapatistas seek radical transformation for better living conditions based on Mayan cosmovision, the dialogue of intercultural knowledge in assemblies, and a more horizontal redistribution of power from the grassroots. They have resisted "development" projects orchestrated by the Mexican state in alliance with other governments, multilateral, and financial institutions, actively working to transform and improve their reality (Maldonado Villalpando et al., 2022).

Another example is the proposal of *Buen Vivir*, as mentioned in Chapter 1. *Buen Vivir* represents an alternative to current "development" paradigms, strongly linked with questioning notions of "development" and "progress" and leveraging alternative knowledge that emphasises a harmonious relationship with the environment (Gudynas, 2011). It seeks to integrate the economy, environment, society, and culture in new ways, advocating for social and solidarity economies and introducing themes of social and intergenerational justice within the framework of "development", positioning interculturality as a guiding principle (Escobar, 2014).

As inferred from this section, "development" within the region is complex, with approaches coming from top-down perspectives and interests, such as neoextractivism. However, these approaches have also been contested by alternatives to "development". Authors such as Escobar (2011) and Svampa (2019) express that in Latin America, the foundational myth of progressive development, or what Svampa (2019) calls the "developmentalist illusion" (p. 7), persists. This is the idea that, through economic

"opportunities", it would be possible to "close" the gap between the region and "developed" countries, thus realising the long-held but elusive goal of "development" for Latin American societies. At the same time, Latin American society has a long history of resistance, disputes, and struggles for its territory and natural resources (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016). Strong social opposition movements have arisen to counter hegemonic notions of development, aiming to eschew the "development" Discourse and redefining collective life struggles through an interconnectedness approach. As discussed in Chapter 1, within "sustainable development activism", as with "development", there are multiple Discourses emerging from those *for, within*, or *beyond,* making it highly relevant to explore the dynamics surrounding these Discourses and how they are imposed upon, challenged, and navigated by activists. The next section looks at the context of the formulation of "sustainable development" and its relationship within this study.

2.1.1 Context of the Formulation of Sustainable Development

As highlighted in section 1.2, sustainable development is a widely used and deeply contested concept, with multiple interpretations. In this section, I explore the context of the formulation of this concept, shedding light on its policy and historical roots. According to scholars in development studies, such as Esteva and Prakash (1998) and Mota Díaz and Sandoval Forero (2016), sustainable development gained formal recognition through the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) but was officially introduced in the Brundtland Report of 1987 under the motto Our Common Future. This report proposed achieving economic growth through "sustainability" policies, defining sustainable development as meeting the present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own (United Nations [UN], 1987).

Rodríguez Martínez and Sánchez Barreto (2019) analyse how the conceptualisation of sustainable development posits a series of plans, actions, guidelines, and objectives with which everyone must align, yet it does not contemplate a radical change in the very model that has created the planet's vulnerable conditions, both environmentally and socially. Scholars argue that sustainable development introduces contradictions and antagonisms between sustaining the capitalist system and achieving sustainable human development. Capitalism relies on the limitless exploitation of nature and labour to increase and accumulate capital, which is

inherently incompatible with environmental sustainability and social justice (Mota Díaz & Sandoval Forero, 2016).

The Rio Declaration in 1992 strived to reflect an increasing concern for "global environmental issues", leading to the establishment of Agenda 21[6]. However, several assumptions underpinned this concern. First, "international environmental problems" such as climate change and biodiversity loss were seen as anomalies to the existing political and scientific arrangements, and their capability to address these problems was questioned (Becker et al., 1999). Also, both the Global Minority and Global Majority[7] were assumed to have a shared interest in ensuring that future economic development did not harm the environment (Redclift, 2005). As Escobar (2011) shares, these policies tend to prioritise the sustainability of the global system, shaped by the worldview of its rulers, often neglecting the sustainability of local cultures or territories.

Ironically, "sustainable development" has become a politically flexible concept, adopted by various stakeholders due to its inherent vagueness (De Geus, 2001). This ambiguity allows it to be interpreted in many ways (as explored in Chapter 1), yet it often lacks the implementation of radical political measures (De Geus, 2001). For instance, Cortés (2001) points out that sustainable development can be interpreted as either continuous economic growth or environmental conservation. However, its predominant use denotes a localised policy that neither questions nor implies a reassessment of consumption patterns, production of goods, waste generation, social, or environmental justice.

Vega (2009) argues that "sustainable development" functions to uphold the capitalist model under a "green" guise. This approach enables the destruction of ecosystems and cultures while superficially expressing concern for their preservation, shaping a political

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[6] Agenda 21 was a framework adopted by United Nations members to guide global environmental and social policies. It addressed four key areas: social and economic dimensions, conservation and management of resources, the role of major groups, and means of implementation (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, 1992).

[7] Referring to terms that describe the demographic, social, and political positioning of different groups within the global population, Global Minority denotes those who hold dominant positions within global power structures, while Global Majority refers to the numerically larger groups that make up the majority of the world's population

landscape where debates about conflicting interests and positions are constructed and reconstructed (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016). Vega (2009) contends that "sustainable development" attempts to reconcile inherently contradictory goals, such as increasing the number of automobiles while reducing greenhouse gas emissions or destroying tropical rainforests while preserving biological diversity. This is illustrated by the Mexican case, where a dual policy approach has been used: making rhetorical commitments to "sustainable development" while supporting large, environmentally destructive projects under the guise of "green" initiatives (Toledo et al., 2014), such as the Mayan Train[8] in recent years.

The politics of global agendas, such as the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development[9] and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)[10] adopted in 2015 by all UN Member Nations, have permeated state legislations and policies, establishing new forms of exploitation and management of nature, culture, and territories under the guise of "sustainable development". For instance, Galvão (2020) shares how local impacts resulting from global dilemmas highlight not-so-evident interactions between the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. These include the almost invisible role of local and indigenous communities in the conservation of biodiversity and the mitigation of climate change, as well as the adverse effects on these populations due to global trends such as land grabbing, illegal mining, deforestation, logging, and various other predatory actions against the environment.

While the concept of "sustainability" generates political agreement, it also reveals insurmountable disagreements, deep differences, and multiple contradictions that delineate the thresholds of diverse perceptions. This indicates a potential ideological confrontation

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[8] According to the Secretaria de Turismo in Mexico (2022), the Maya Train "is a project aimed at improving the quality of life for people, protecting the environment, and promoting sustainable development". However, scholars like Barabas (2021) and several activist collectives have highlighted the socio-ecological conflicts associated with it, including deforestation, water shortages, pressure on archaeological sites, habitat loss, and other socio-ecological crises.

[9] According to the United Nations (2015), the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is a "plan of action for people, planet, and prosperity, seeking to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom". Adopted by all United Nations Member States, it encompasses 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

[10] The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are 17 objectives "designed to promote peace and prosperity for people and the planet". They 'emphasize the interconnections between environmental, social, and economic dimensions of "sustainable development" (United Nations, 2015).

process that starts from the generally accepted meaning of sustainability but also includes the subtle and immense differences inherent in a concept subject to interpretation and full of ambiguities (Rodríguez Martínez & Sánchez Barreto, 2019). These ambiguities rest on the perception of the relationship with the environment and the risks of indiscriminate exploitation of natural resources, considering economic, social, cultural, and technological alternatives to address the environmental crisis, and the role of the state, government, and citizens (Wissenburg, 2001; Rivero, 1999).

Rodríguez Martínez and Sánchez Barreto (2019) define the discourse of sustainable development as "politically correct but socially devastating" (p.145). Governments, transnational corporations, and international organisations frequently promote it without deeply addressing the significant contrasts and inequalities generated by current economic "development" models such as capitalism and neo-extractivism, which sustainable development does not intend to substantively modify.

These sections have explored how "development" has been researched with relationship to Latin America, how diverse scholars and communities have approached, and gives an overview of the "development" dynamics within the region, also, I have shedding light into the context of the formulation of sustainable development, highlighting its links to international top-down policies and acceptance by state members, and some of its links o socio-ecological injustices, which is crucial in understanding the complexities of the Discourses around "sustainable development".

2.2 "Development" and their Links to Activism in Latin America

In response to "development" paradigms, particularly those largely shaped by perspectives from the Global Minority, such as neoextractivism, critiques from the Global Majority have emerged. These critiques reject the systemic conditions rooted in the hegemonic approaches to development, such as the notion of underdevelopment (Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2019). Escobar (1988) traces the historical roots of these "development" paradigms to the major political realignments that occurred globally at the end of World War II. These realignments gave rise to concepts such as "underdevelopment" and the "Third World", reflecting the West's effort to redefine itself in relation to the rest of the world. This

process also involved extending industrial civilisation to non-industrialised regions, leading to the establishment of a complex network of relationships, spanning power, ideas, international and financial organisations, population and resource issues, and technology, systematised into what is now known as the "development" Discourse (see Chapter 3 for further details).

These debates surrounding "development" have not remained purely theoretical; they have also sparked practical responses from social movements. These movements propose and advocate for alternatives characterised by collective, autonomous, horizontal, and networked organisational structures. These structures are firmly rooted in community demands such as land rights, ethnic and gender equality, the defence of commons, diversity, and ecological justice (Svampa, 2019; Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2019). Notable examples of such movements include the Landless Workers Movement (MST) in Brazil (see Vallverdú, 2012), the Zapatista National Liberation Army (EZLN) in Mexico (see Pavón Cuéllar et al., 2009), and La Vía Campesina across Latin America (see Desmarais, 2007).

Relational ontologies have emerged as key in rethinking "development", allowing for the perception of territories as vital spaces for entire communities. This perspective encourages viewing the human and non-human world in terms of complementarity rather than division (see Escobar, 2011). Scholars, such as Álvarez (2017) and Soto Alarcón (2019), highlight indigenous ontologies that reject linear notions of "development" or the idea of "underdevelopment" to overcome. A prominent example of such ontologies is *Buen Vivir,* which is grounded in complex social, cultural, and political struggles and represents the confluence of various movements advocating for change, including peasants, Afro-descendants, environmentalists, women, and youth, spanning decades (Escobar, 2011). This concept has been enshrined constitutionally, reviving cosmologies, life philosophies, and practices of indigenous communities resisting the modern, colonial, Eurocentric world system (Quijano, 2010; Walsh, 2010). This resurgence is evident through the formation of multiethnic and plurinational states (Svampa, 2019). *Buen Vivir* embodies a way of life that prioritises harmony in three dimensions: with oneself, with nature, and with society (Campodónico et al., 2017), emphasising ecological criteria, human dignity, and social justice over economic objectives (Escobar, 2011).

To understand socio-environmental conflicts in Latin America, it is crucial to delve into their historical roots and the dominant forces that have shaped the continent. This

understanding also involves recognising the coexistence of diverse nature regimes prevalent across the region (Escobar, 1995; 2011). Scholars such as Leff (2003) emphasise that perceptions of "nature" have evolved into complex constructs, such as "development" and "sustainable development", which have been politicised and stripped of their intrinsic meanings. According to Leff, this is not merely a matter of interpreting various meanings assigned to nature but of acknowledging that all perceptions of nature are mediated through language and symbolic relationships, which encompass visions, sentiments, rationales, senses, and interests that are contested in the political arena. This transformation highlights the intricate relationships between humans and their environment, shaped by power dynamics and efforts to normalise ideologies, Discourses, identities, behaviours, and policies.

Activism within Latin America provides concrete examples of this dynamic. Movements such as No to the Mine (Torunczyk Schein, 2016), the Water War in Cochabamba (Crespo Flores, 2000), the Mapuche Movement in Chile (Pineda, 2014), and the "Living Rivers" movement in Colombia (Ríos Vivos, 2024) illustrate how "nature" issues are central to disputes, claims, and resistance. Despite their differences and particularities, these movements share a common denominator: they challenge the hegemonic Discourse of "development", even in its "sustainable" form (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016) and strive to construct alternatives to mainstream "development" paradigms (Escobar, 2014; 2018).

As explored in this section, activism within the region has a long history of struggles and resistance to "development", built in relational ontologies that tend to prioritise ecological criteria, human dignity, and social justice over economic objectives. As seen through Chapter 1 and through this Chapter, there are multiple Discourses around "sustainable development activism" going from engaging in activities that aim to "achieve development", such as activism for "green" economies, activism dictated by international agendas, such as the SDGs, and activism that build from relational ontologies, these diverse perspectives, history and sociopolitical context is relevant when exploring "sustainable development activism" in Latin America.

The following section explores further what this thesis identifies as "sustainable development activism" in Latin America. While recognising that the Discourse of "sustainable development" is deeply tied to the hegemonic development paradigm, I use the term strategically to explore the intersections of these Discourses within Latin American activism, as elaborated in section 3.3.

2.2.1 Sustainable Development Activism in Latin America

In Section 1.2, I highlighted the diversity of Discourses and practices within "sustainable development activism". This diversity is also evident in the various forms of activism across Latin America, where movements encompass a broad spectrum of protest and resistance (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016). These include the Zapatista movement, a community-based organisation that emerged in the 1980s and 1990s in the mountains and jungles of Chiapas, Mexico; the "No a la Mina" collective, which opposed mining activities in Argentina during the early 2000s; and the #SelvameDelTren virtual campaign in Mexico in 2022. As Svampa (2010) observes, social movements in Latin America have proliferated and enhanced their capacity for representation through diverse discursive and representational platforms.

Scholars such as Martínez Alier (2002), Svampa (2012), and Christel and Gutiérrez (2023) underscore a central and potentially unifying issue: ecological justice. This concern extends beyond environmental preservation, as access to critical resources such as land and water is essential for survival. While ecological sustainability often serves as a shared foundation for social mobilisations, these movements intertwine ecological concerns with practical issues related to livelihoods, habitat, well-being, and equality, positioning justice at the core of their struggles (Christel & Gutiérrez, 2023).

As noted in Chapter 1, the expansion of neoextractivism and hegemonic "development" models in Latin America has intensified repression against activism that challenges or opposes these paradigms. This repression often manifests in threats, stigmatization, and physical violence, with some cases culminating in the murder of activists confronting the interests of multinational corporations, the state, or exploitative groups targeting land, resources, and communities (Echart Muñoz & Villareal Villamar, 2019). In response to this hostile context, Toledo et al., (2014) identify two primary forms of socio-ecological struggle: protective resistance, aimed at preventing the implementation of harmful projects, and alternative initiatives that seek to develop and promote new models of "development".

An example of protective resistance can be found in Santander, Colombia, where in 2023, communities and social organizations mobilised to demand the revocation of an environmental license granted to a foreign mining company for an open-pit coal mining project (Parada Lugo, 2023). As Svampa (2010) points out, these movements, often beginning

with specific demands, frequently evolve to challenge broader issues such as destructive "development" models and the commodification of the commons[11] (Svampa, 2015).

Conversely, movements promoting alternative "development" models can be observed in the Masehual communities of Cuetzalan del Progreso, Puebla, Mexico. Through community-driven strategies, such as territorial defence assemblies, these communities have reclaimed collective control over essential aspects of their lives. Their efforts include nullifying mining concessions, defending local water management systems, and organising collective security measures (Linsalata, 2017). Notably, these alternative initiatives often incorporate elements of protective resistance, as the two approaches are deeply interconnected (Toledo et al., 2014).

Villareal Villamar and Echart Muñoz (2019) characterise these alternative approaches as processes of experimentation and collective learning. These initiatives involve creating life plans, developing local well-being projects, occupying and transforming land, and turning spaces threatened by extractive industries into territories fostering cooperation, such as through agroecology and community-based tourism. In this context, Svampa (2010) describes Latin American activism as "nomadic", highlighting its social crossovers, diverse affiliations, and the networks it builds across organisations and collectives. This activism often extends into innovative areas such as alternative communication, artistic intervention, and popular education, hallmark features of contemporary social movements.

As discussed in Chapter 1, "sustainable development activism" is characterised by its plurality, merging diverse interests and interpretations. Scholars such as Svampa (2010), Villareal Villamar, and Echart Muñoz (2019) provide valuable insights into the nomadic nature of these movements and their reliance on experimentation and collective learning. This background illuminates how activism in the region functions as a "laboratory" of Discourses, emphasising ecological concerns, resistance, and alternatives to dominant "development" paradigms.

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[11] Svampa (2015) describes the common goods or commons as collective frameworks that foster cooperation and shape collective identity. These shared resources, whether natural, social, or cultural, are considered communal heritage, belonging to the community, and holding value beyond monetary measures.

In this thesis, I focus on two specific online learning networks, examining how activists engage within them and the learning processes shaping their practices. This study considers both digital and offline activism, exploring the intersections between these spheres. The following section delves into the role of the digital in "sustainable development" activism in Latin America and introduces the online learning networks central to this study.

2.3 The Digital in "Sustainable Development" Activism in Latin America

As discussed in Chapter 1, digital technologies in activism have functioned both as means of communication and as platforms for initiating and expanding action (Fuentes, 2019). However, within the Latin American context, access to digital technologies reveals significant inequalities. For instance, according to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), in 2023, 97,012,089 people in Mexico had internet access, representing 81.2% of the population. This access is available in various locations, including homes, workplaces, educational institutions, public spaces, and through smartphones, covering 75% of the total population. Of these users, 82% reside in urban areas, while only 18% live in rural areas, underscoring a substantial digital divide in rural communities. Similarly, according to the Federal Telecommunications Institute (Instituto Federal de Telecomunicaciones, 2022), only 46.58% of members of some indigenous communities, such as the Cora, have access to mobile phones, and only 39% have network coverage.

Numerous authors have explored how online and digital environments (re)shape activist efforts, as discussed in Chapter 1. Castells and Catterall (2001) argue that the digital age is not merely a technological phenomenon but a transformative social process. This transformation intertwines technology with social, economic, cultural, and political issues. In Latin America, Karatzogianni (2015) and Gerbaudo (2017) identify the first wave of digital activism as emerging in the mid-1990s, characterised by anti-globalisation and cyber-autonomous movements. Lago Martínez (2015) and Fuentes (2019) trace the symbolic beginning of digital media use to the Zapatista movement in Mexico, which opposed the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas. Although the Zapatistas themselves did not use digital networks directly, their allies leveraged these platforms to garner support and counter government narratives promoted by official media channels (Somma, 2015).

Digital activism networks have evolved beyond being mere communication tools to reshaping political and social interventions. Lago Martínez (2015) identifies several characteristics of digital activism in Latin America: (1) multimodal connectivity among networks of people, (2) the presence of social networks both online and offline, with some pre-existing and others emerging during actions, (3) the intertwining of digital and physical spaces, (4) local movements with global reach, and (5) extensive use of audiovisual materials. Similarly, Somma (2015) highlights favourable conditions for digital activism in Latin America, such as the low cost of coordination and communication, the capacity to connect diverse groups across social, economic, and geographic divides, the provision of spaces for alternative voices, and relatively low levels of censorship.

Examples of these dynamics include the anti-FARC protests in Colombia in 2008, which were organised within hours across multiple cities via Facebook (Neumayer & Raffl, 2008). The Chilean student movement, advocating for free and quality public education, used street protests, performances, and audiovisual productions disseminated via YouTube to challenge the business-dominated education system and expose violent repression (Lago Martínez, 2015). Similarly, the #YoSoy123 movement during the 2012 Mexican presidential campaign used a hashtag to unify diverse groups concerned about the return of the Institutional Revolutionary Party (PRI). Initially started by university students, it quickly gained traction among broader citizen groups (Somma, 2015). In Brazil, the Landless Workers Movement (MST) used its website to disseminate perspectives countering privatisation policies promoted by government-aligned media (Somma, 2015).

While digital spaces have proven to be generative platforms for identity and Discourse creation, as well as for disseminating alternative epistemologies (Barbas Rhoden, 2016; Barbas, 2018), they are not without challenges. Rovira Sancho (2017) argues that technological advancements often parallel neoliberal expansion, transforming networks into tools of global capitalism that can permeate and reshape collective action. For example, Cru (2024) highlights that within indigenous linguistic activism, digital networks can reinforce linguistic and cultural minoritisation and digital diglossia, which can further deepen subordination and invisibilisation (Soria, 2016), effectively acting as a form of digital colonisation.

The use of the internet and digital networks has been pivotal for social movements, enabling connections within movements, with other global movements, the media, and broader society (Castells, 2015). However, the forms and practices of media in contemporary

activism remain fluid, dynamic, and often unpredictable (Howarth, 2012; Treré & Mattoni, 2016). This fluidity reflects the merging of diverse interests, the discourses they promote, and the entrenched power relations that shape their trajectories.

In recent years, online learning networks have emerged as spaces where activists collaborate towards "sustainable development". Couldry (2004) emphasised the need to move beyond functionalist approaches, advocating for the analysis of media as a practice. This involves considering not only how activists, use digital networks but also the beliefs, ideologies, discourses, and understandings that shape these practices. The next section introduces the online learning networks that activists engage with in this research project, aiming to provide context for these networks through a communities of practice approach (see Chapter 3).

2.3.1 Online Learning Networks for "Sustainable Development"

In Chapter 1, I discussed how online environments have been explored in the literature as spaces where activists engage in formal, non-formal, and informal learning. These platforms not only facilitate protest or information dissemination but also act as hubs for education and mutual support, offering training, resources, and counselling (Rueda, 2004; Enguix, 2016). Additionally, I highlighted the importance of examining the socio-political dimensions of these digital spaces.

Thus far, I have contextualised regional studies on "development" and "sustainable development activism" in Latin America, emphasising the transformative role of digital spaces in (re)shaping activism. Building on this foundation, this section introduces two online learning networks, conceptualised as digital spaces where educational processes emerge in the context of "sustainable development activism". Despite their existence since 2006, significant research gaps remain regarding these networks' nature, operations, and their engagement with activists, other groups, and "sustainable development" Discourses and identities.

These two online learning networks are central to this study, as they serve as critical sites for examining how activists utilise online platforms and the learning processes fostered within them. I selected these networks due to their distinct approaches to "sustainable development

activism", which provide a foundation for a comparative, multisite analysis (see Chapter 4 for more details).

While this section offers a general introduction to these networks, their deeper workings and dynamics are explored in the empirical chapters (5, 6, and 7). Further details about their structure and operation are also presented in Chapter 4. To ensure anonymity and confidentiality, the names of these networks have been changed.

MexiSustain

To understand MexiSustain, it is essential to first introduce the MY World 2015 online project. This global initiative aimed to "gather and channel the voices of citizens worldwide" through a survey that invited participants to identify "the six most critical issues out of 16 that affected them and their families". The issues ranged from "a good education" and "protection against crime and violence" to "action taken on climate change". The results of this initiative were intended to inform the post-2015 development process and contribute to shaping the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (UN SDG Action Campaign, 2024).

It was in this context that MexiSustain emerged. Initially, it was a group of university students from a public higher education institution in Guadalajara, Jalisco, Mexico. In 2014, these students decided to implement the MY World survey by visiting small towns near Guadalajara and physically administering the survey, particularly in communities without internet access. This initiative was carried out in collaboration with a Mexican NGO. Their efforts garnered significant recognition in 2015, earning them the "Voices of the People" award. Building on this success, the students launched MexiSustain as a national-level initiative later that year, incorporating an ambassador and member organisation programme.

By 2023, MexiSustain had transformed into a social enterprise, offering paid services and memberships to NGOs, private sector entities, academia, and government organisations to support their Sustainable Development Goals strategies. According to their website, their mission was to "involve people and institutions from different sectors in education and activism processes towards a world where people thrive in balance, equity, and justice, respecting planetary limits". The 2030 Agenda and the SDGs served as reference frameworks for their "sustainable actions".

The online learning network was heavily reliant on volunteerism and was composed of three main groups: executive management, the core team, and the operational team. Their activities were primarily conducted online, with occasional face-to-face events in various locations across the country.

MexiSustain operated five educational programmes designed to engage participants in learning processes: Campaigns, Accelerators, MexiSustain Kids, Lab SDGs, and the Action XSDG Mentorship Programme. Each programme targeted specific audiences, with Campaigns, Accelerators, and the Action XSDG Mentorship Programme being the most closely aligned with adult education and activism. The programmes utilised various online platforms and tools, such as Facebook, Instagram, Claned[12], and Trello, to interact with organisation members and the public. Activities included webinars, dialogues, consultations, blog entries, participation in political processes, and mentorship programmes.

MexiSustain Members.

As previously mentioned, MexiSustain was composed of three main groups: the executive management, the core team, and the operational team. The executive management consisted of a select group of individuals, including the founding members, whose backgrounds ranged from international relations to geography and gender studies. All members held higher education degrees and came from central Mexico. They were in their mid-to-late thirties and, in addition to their roles within the organisation, were actively involved in both international and national NGOs.

The core team was made up of volunteers who oversaw the organisation's various programmes, including areas such as human resources and communications. These volunteers, aged between their late twenties and early forties, came from diverse fields such as education, international relations, engineering, and architecture. They joined the organisation through different avenues: some were recommended by existing core team members, others reached out independently to express their interest (like me) and underwent an interview process, while some responded to calls on the UN Volunteers platform and were

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[12] Claned is a digital learning platform (Claned Online Learning Platform | Claned) where learners can follow self-paced and schedule educational programmes that include several learning resources like videos, conceptual notes, quizzes, etc.

interviewed by both the core and executive teams. All core team members were either current higher education students or graduates[13], representing regions across the country.

Lastly, according to MexiSustain website, the operational team comprised "ambassadors" and member organisations. As of 2020, there were 71 ambassadors and 39 affiliated organisations from all over the country, primarily from central and southern Mexico. These regions had varying economic profiles, with central Mexico experiencing significant economic growth, while southern Mexico has lower levels of economic development (Ocegueda Hernández et al., 2014). Ambassadors and member organisations joined the network through a call issued by MexiSustain and had to meet specific criteria. These included at least three years of volunteering experience or participation in a social project; access to time and technological resources to engage with the organisation; absence of an executive or decision-making role in another sustainable development network; a commitment to twelve months of voluntary online work requiring a minimum of five hours per week without remuneration; proficiency in both Spanish and English[14], and successfully passing technical tests and interviews.

The Climate Action Coalition

The Climate Action Coalition was established in 2006 when its founder, a prominent political figure from the Global Minority, began training individuals in the United States on "how to lead in the fight against the climate crisis". Although the organisation had not yet achieved formal recognition as an NGO at the time, the founder considered this event the starting point of its establishment.

According to its website, the organisation's mission was to "catalyse a global solution to the climate crisis by making urgent action a necessity across every sector of society, recruiting, training, and mobilising people from all walks of life to work for climate solutions that accelerate the energy transition worldwide and open the door to a better tomorrow".

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[13] According to the National Institute of Statistics and Geography (INEGI), in 2020, only 16,777,488 Mexicans had higher education, representing just 13% of the national population.

[14] According to a study conducted by Cely and Stanton (2023), only 5% of Mexicans can speak English. Additionally, according to INEGI (2020), only 93.4% of the total population of Mexico speaks Spanish.

The Coalition had a presence in over 168 countries and a global network of more than 42,000 climate champions. These were organised into branches and local chapters across 12 regions: Africa, Australia and the Pacific, Brazil, Canada, Europe, India and South Asia, Indonesia, Japan, Latin America, the Philippines, and the United States.

For this research project, I focused on the Latin American branch, which comprised approximately 5,600 climate champions. The branch's structure included a board of directors, led by the founder and other prominent political, academic, and advocacy figures from the United States, branch managers, general staff based in the United States, and the championship corps. While the branch managers and staff were salaried employees, the climate champions work were volunteers.

The organisation's core activities revolved around its Climate Championship Corps training, which serves as the entry point to becoming a "climate champion". This multiday training, offered both in person and online via the organisation's educational platform, is conducted in major metropolitan cities such as Mexico City and Atlanta. According to the network's website, the training aimed to "provide a deeper understanding of the climate crisis and the solutions within our reach". Participants were educated through seminars and lectures delivered by the founder alongside scientists and other "world-renowned experts" on the climate crisis and actionable solutions.

In addition to its education programmes, the Coalition co-led various initiatives in partnership with governments, academia, and other organisations. These included the "COP Operation", which trained young people to engage with COP (Conference of the Parties) processes, and projects such as the "Pathway to Carbon Neutrality" initiative in Colombia, implemented in collaboration with an international organisation.

Climate Action Coalition Latin American Branch Members.

As previously highlighted, the Climate Action Coalition's Latin American branch focused on expanding its network across all Latin American countries, excluding Brazil, which operated its own independent branch. This Latin American branch was led by a regional director with a background in international relations from a prestigious private higher education institution in Mexico. The leadership team also included directors for three key sections: engagement, diplomacy, and communication. These roles were held by individuals with postgraduate qualifications from both national and international public universities,

including institutions in the United Kingdom. Additionally, the team featured a communications coordinator who held a higher education degree from a private university in Mexico. All members of the leadership team were Mexican, working full-time in their roles, with ages ranging from their early thirties to early forties.

The Latin American branch comprised over 5,600 members, referred to as "climate champions". These individuals became part of the online learning network by completing the organisation's climate training. While the training did not impose strict prerequisites, participants shared several common characteristics. For those attending in person, they were responsible for covering their own transportation and expenses. For online training, participants needed reliable internet access and digital literacy skills. Additionally, fluency in both English and Spanish was essential, as the training sessions were conducted in these languages.

The climate champions represented a diverse range of backgrounds and regions within Latin America. They included university professors, educators, NGO members, students, engineers, and members of indigenous communities, among others.

2.4 Conclusion

In this chapter, I have explored how "development" has been studied in Latin America and examined some of the alternatives to development present within the region. Additionally, I contextualised the formulation of "sustainable development", highlighting the international agreements surrounding it and the role of the environment in shaping these discussions. As discussed, the region's "development" has been heavily influenced by hegemonic paradigms, as explained through theories such as dependency theory, neoextractivism, and the developmentalist illusion. At the same time, Latin America has cultivated diverse alternatives to "development", such as *Buen Vivir,* which is rooted in relational ontologies and cultural diversity. These tensions have given rise to a long history of resistance, disputes, and struggles for socioecological justice, leading to activism that directly challenges hegemonic notions of "development".

Furthermore, I have noted how activism in Latin America has been characterised by processes of experimentation and collective learning, as described by authors such as Villareal

Villamar and Echart Muñoz (2019) and Svampa (2010). This perspective is particularly relevant to my research, as outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, since activism that challenges hegemonic "development" is often subject to significant threats, including criminalisation and even the assassination of activists within the region. This raises critical questions about the strategies activists develop and the learning processes they engage in to persist and (re)shape their activism amid the repression they face. Activism in Latin America has evolved from confronting criminalisation and repression by various actors to leveraging online learning networks that redefine the concept of who is considered an "activist".

As this thesis progresses, I argue that activism is characterised by *strategic flexibility*, a process of continual (re)shaping of Discourses, identities and activism practices, as explored further in Chapter 8. Digital platforms have played a crucial role in activism, serving as tools for communication, mobilisation, and learning, as highlighted in Chapter 1. However, as explored in this chapter, the digital is not merely a technological phenomenon but also a social process. In Mexico, for instance, the digital realm underscores the exclusion faced by highly marginalised rural and Indigenous communities. Within these digital networks, online learning networks have emerged as spaces where activists engage in diverse learning processes, shaping specific Discourses and identities.

This contextual chapter underscores the complexities of "sustainable development activism" in Latin America and the plurality of its approaches, providing critical background for discussions in the findings chapters. Key concepts integral to this study include development as a Discourse (explored further in the next chapter), the "nomadic" nature of activism in Latin America, as highlighted by Svampa (2010), and the digital as a matter of social transformation. Castells and Catterall (2001) argue that the digital is not purely technological but deeply intertwined with social change, while Rovira Sancho (2017) highlights how neoliberal expansion has reshaped both individual and collective action.

The next chapter builds the conceptual framework used to explore these dynamics within "sustainable development activism" and the online learning networks at the heart of this study.

Chapter Three

Conceptual Framework

3. Introduction

This chapter presents the conceptual foundations of this thesis. As outlined in Chapter 1, the overarching research question, *how do activists engage with Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism", and what role do online learning networks play in this engagement?* aims to move beyond viewing "sustainable development activism" as unaffected by the power dynamics embedded within the Discourses and identities of "sustainable development". This thesis challenges the common perception of such activism as detached from broader dynamics within the "sustainable development" frameworks. Central to my conceptual approach is the framing of "development" as a Discourse, which posits that "development", and by extension "sustainable development", Discourses identify, appropriate, and legitimise ways of practising, discussing, and thinking (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997). These Discourses, in turn, define who and what counts as "sustainable development activism", as well as the conditions under which such activism is accepted or excluded.

This perspective broadens our understanding of "sustainable development activism". I also employ the concept of communities of practice as a framework to explore online learning networks and activist communities as spaces where diverse Discourses and identities merge in dynamic learning processes that (re)shape activism. The chapter introduces the conceptual frameworks that guided my analysis of the research data and is divided into three main sections. First, I introduce the concept of "development" as a Discourse, examining its connections to knowledge, power, and identity, and discussing how this perspective enhances our understanding of "sustainable development activism". Second, I adopt a social view of learning, drawing on Lave and Wenger's concept of "communities of practice", and explore the role of power and boundaries within these communities.

3.1 Discourse, Power, and Knowledge

In this section, I examine the conceptualisation of Discourse(s) and its intersections with power and knowledge, before continuing with its connections to identities (section 3.2), which are crucial to the analysis of this study.

Discourse has been conceptualised in various ways, including as language in action (Hanks, 1989), language in use (Brown & Yule, 1983), and as a regulated set of statements that combine with others in predictable ways (Mills, 2003). For McHoul and Grace (1995), Discourse can be understood as collections of knowledge and mechanisms of social control. Gee (2014a) differentiates between "discourse" (language in use) and "Discourse" (capitalised), defining Discourse, as the interaction of individuals (whos) doing specific activities (whats) in socially recognised ways (Fairclough, 1992; Gee, 2014). Gee (2014a) emphasises that the essence of Discourse is recognition as it entails the use of "language, action, interaction, values, feelings, other people, objects, tools, technologies, places, and times to be recognised as a distinctive 'who' doing a distinctive 'what'" (p. 52).

For authors such as Foucault (1980) and Mills (2003), Discourses are deeply intertwined with power and knowledge, with statements and ideas legitimised by institutions that shape societal thought processes. Foucault (1991) uses the term "Discourse" to refer to the structured patterns of statements, concepts, and perspectives, often linked to institutions or sites of power, which influence individuals' thoughts and actions. To analyse the relationship between power, Discourse, and identities in my research, Foucault's work is particularly useful, especially his focus on the micro-processes and micro-expressions of power and their links to the concept of subjectification (see section 3.2).

For Foucault, power is not an entity that one possesses but an activity that is exercised. Nealon (2008) argues that there is "no place untouched by power; conversely, there is no place of liberation or absolute freedom from power" (p.24). Rather than emanating solely from hierarchical authorities (e.g., international agencies), power is an underlying force within relational dynamics that, due to inherent inequalities, continuously creates localised and unstable power states (Foucault, 1976). This perspective underscores that power is not fixed but dispersed and contextual. This view informs my analysis, moving the focus beyond evidently "powerful" Discourses and identities in "sustainable development" to include

everyday practices and relationships through which power operates. This approach offers a nuanced understanding of power's fluid and ever-changing nature.

Foucault refers to this focus on small-scale practices and relationships as the microphysics of power (Foucault,1976). He argues that rather than searching for the centre of power or identifying its ruling individuals, institutions, or classes, one should focus on the "peripheries": families, workplaces, everyday practices, and "marginal" institutions. This approach suggests that power relations should be studied from the bottom up, exploring the multiple ways power operates within diverse yet interconnected "capillary" networks (Foucault,1976; Oksala, 2015). Alvarez (in Crush, 1995) shares that knowledge is power, but power also dictates what is recognised as knowledge and what is not. Consequently, knowledge reinforces claims to power by legitimising the institutions and individuals that define what is considered "appropriate" knowledge. Thus, knowledge, power, and Discourse are inextricably linked.

For this study, I conceptualise discourse(s) not merely as abstract collections of statements, but as Discourses that exist due to a complex set of practices embedded in power-knowledge dynamics, which sustain their circulation (Fairclough, 1992; Mills, 2003). These Discourses consist of socially contextualised utterances. For instance, the Discourses of "sustainable development" are enacted within activism across online learning networks and by my participants. These Discourses are shaped by contexts, and, in turn, help shape it. In line with Mills (2003), I argue that Discourses are imbued with meaning, force, and effect within their sociopolitical and ecological environments.

In this study, this approach means focusing not only on the Discourses and identities within the online learning networks but also on the grassroots and everyday Discursive practices of participants. This perspective does not overlook the influence of powerful entities in shaping the Discourses within these networks. Rather, it views power as an emergent effect of many interactions, a concatenation aimed at stabilising the movement of Discourses (Foucault, 1976). This indicates that micro-powers intersect to create broader social power patterns, as "Discourses are out in the world and history as coordination of people, places, times, actions, interactions, verbal and non-verbal expressions, symbols, things, tools, and technologies that betoken certain identities and associated activities" (Gee, 2014a, p.56). Foucault (1980) stresses, individuals should not be seen as a mere passive object upon which power acts: rather, Foucault posits that individuals are shaped by power relations, that

influence their actions, speech, and desires. This creates a close connection between power relations and identities (see Section 3.2), affecting self-perception and others' perceptions (Heyes, 2011). For example, power relations determine who is recognised as a "sustainable development" activist and who is not (see Section 3.2.1).

Drawing on Foucault, Ziai (2016) describes power as relational, decentralised, ubiquitous, intentional, non-subjective, and productive. Power is conceptualised as a web of force relations inherent in context, rather than something possessed by individuals or institutions. Instead, institutions and individuals function as nodes in this web, manifesting power through social and ecological interactions, which results in varying degrees of power among them.

The way we understand and acquire knowledge, its origins, production, and contexts, is defined by Discourses. To fully comprehend these Discourses, it is essential to question whose interests they serve, how alternative perspectives can emerge or be recognised, and how accepted truths retain their privileged status. As Mills (2003) notes "not everyone is able to make statements or have their statements taken seriously by others. Some statements are more authorised than others, in that they are more associated with those in positions of power or with institutions" (p.65).

This perspective is particularly useful when identifying knowledge surrounding online learning networks and activist movements. It facilitates analysis of how these Discourses navigate various power dynamics and helps to explain why certain forms of knowledge are more powerful within the context of "sustainable development".

While it could be argued that authors like Foucault (1980) and Escobar (1995;2014) perceive Discourse, knowledge, and power as a pervasive force that controls everything we do, think, and are, others like Mills (2003) and Esteva et al. (2013) argue that Discourse can function as both oppression and resistance. Discourse can act as both a tool and effect of power, but also as an obstacle, a point of resistance, and a springboard for opposition. It can transmit and produce power, reinforce it, and yet also challenge and expose it (Mills, 2003). For instance, there have been Discourses that challenge the Discourse of "development", such as "ethnodevelopment" proposed by Stavenhagen (1986), a Mexican human rights activist, who argued that development must "look within" and seek for one's own culture instead of

adopting foreign views. Similarly, Fals Borda (1991) advocated for "participatory development", such is conscious of the exclusions made in the name of development.

Discourses are strongly linked to knowledge and power. However, these "are not representations of an objective reality, but the bricks with which we built social reality" (Ziai, 2016, p.13). Within the Discourses of "sustainable development", this concept encourages examination of whose knowledge and power distinctions define developers, the developed, and resistors of "sustainable development", positioning Discourse as a site of struggle (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997). Feminist critics like Fraser (1989) and Oksala (2015) argue that Foucault's theory of power falls short in accounting for resistance, either because it lacks a normative framework or a strong theory of the subject. Fraser (1989) suggests that if all social relations are power relations, it becomes difficult to envision progress in reducing oppression, as Foucault does not differentiate between domination-based and non-domination-based forms of power. Oksala (2015) also contends that if power fully constitutes the subject, then agency and resistance may seem limited, reducing resistance to mere acceptance of normalisation. However, for this study, I acknowledge the agency of participants (see Section 3.2), recognising how they engage with and resist various Discourses around "sustainable development" in activism. Although Rangel Cruz (2009) argues that while Foucault's concept of power suggests a political programme for action, the scholar acknowledges it lacks a formal proposal for social change. Instead, small revolutions within power relationships can occur, with resistance re-directing power to create new effects rather than eliminating it completely. Resistance, in this view, does not primarily function to eliminate power but seeks to utilise power differently to produce new effects.

There is a growing body of literature exploring the relationship between activism and Discourses. For example, Liminga and Lindgren (2024) build on Laclau and Mouffe's (1985) concept of discursive articulation, which is defined as "any practice that establishes a relation between elements in such a way that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice" (1985, p. 105). According to Liminga and Lindgren (2024), data activism reveals two articulatory patterns: one involving grassroots actors who challenge power structures and advocate for social change, and the other comprising academics, capitalists, and policymakers who already occupy positions of power and influence.

In the digital realm, Shaw (2012; 2016) demonstrates how participants in feminist online networks and platforms engage in discursive activism by negotiating counter-

hegemonic Discourses and generating feminist claims. These studies have been instrumental in mapping the discursive landscape of diverse activist practices. However, this research project aims to move beyond studying activism and Discourses in isolation to examine the effects that Discourses have on activism and extend this beyond the digital realm to place it in the context of everyday activism. For instance, by viewing Discourse as deeply intertwined with power, knowledge, and identity, this study explores questions such as: Who and what defines what counts as "sustainable development activism", and why? Furthermore, it investigates the discursive dynamics that activists navigate within their movements across both face-to-face and online spaces, as detailed in Chapter 5.

The next section will explore development as a Discourse, focusing on how it functions not only as a strategy for social and economic change but also as a powerful framework that defines authority. This includes examining who holds the power to shape identities within Discourses, disseminate knowledge, and influence transformative processes.

3.1.1 Development as a Discourse

The concept of "Development" is central to academic, grassroots, and political discussions about socio-ecological change in Latin America, as shared in Chapter 2. Scholars like Escobar (1995), Cuestas-Caza (2019) and Esteva (2023) trace the origins of the development Discourse to 1949, when U.S. President Harry S. Truman coined the term "underdevelopment", initiating a global campaign to "develop" other nations. Notions of "development" were rooted in the colonialism, the so-called "discovery" of the "widespread poverty" in Asia, Africa, and Latin America (Escobar, 1995) served to justify a mission to "civilise" indigenous peoples, often labelled as "savages", and to bring "progress" (Hill & Staats, 2002). According to Esteva (2023), "development" has consistently signified one primary thing: the ability to escape a vaguely defined, undignified state referred to as "underdevelopment".

As discussed in section 3.1, "Discourse identifies, appropriates, and legitimises ways of practicing, talking about, and thinking about concepts such as "development" (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997, p.12). Development Discourse dictates who and what needs "developing", reinforcing a naturalised hierarchy between the "developed" and the "underdeveloped". Escobar (1995) argues that the emergence and consolidation of the "development" Discourse in the early post-

World War II period resulted from the problematisation of "poverty" during those years. This Discourse was embedded in the ethnocentric and destructive colonial and postcolonial Discourses that aimed to maintain rather than challenge, existing hierarchies. Underdevelopment was defined as primitive, backward condition presumed not to exist within developed societies (Marchand & Parpart, 1995).

For example, Escobar (1995; 2014) describes how "economic missions" organised by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development visited Colombia to formulate a "general development programme" for the country. These missions, led by "professional experts", demanded "improvements" across significant sectors of Colombia's economy, introducing new representation of the country's social and economic reality and prescribing detailed goals, investment needs, and methodologies. This approach promoted a form of "development" aligned with Western expectations, ultimately seeking to exert control over the country and its resources.

Similarly, the maquiladora programme in Mexico, established in the 1960s in response to the displacement of agricultural workers caused by the end of the Bracero Programme[15], was framed as a "solution" to unemployment and migration. The programme promised to stimulate Mexican industry through "development" and technology (Jenner et al., 1991). However, scholars such as Méndez (2005), Solís (2011), and Martínez Cuero (2018) have questioned the supposed benefits of the maquiladora industry's expansion, noting the significant social and environmental costs of transnational maquiladora corporations' activities in northern Mexican cities.

The emerging "order of capitalism and modernity relied on the politics of poverty, which aimed not only to create consumers but also to transform society by turning the "poor" into objects of knowledge and management" (Naz, 2006, p.68). Development organisations and institutions like the United Nations Development Programme and the World Bank continuously update and refine their approaches to achieving "development". These organisations act as conduits, disseminating development policies and strategies from

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[15] The *Bracero Programme* (1942–1964) was a U.S.-Mexico agreement allowing Mexican workers to fill labour shortages in U.S. agriculture during and after WWII. Although intended to ensure fair treatment, many braceros faced exploitation, poor conditions, and discrimination. The program marked a significant period of Mexican migration to the U.S. (González Camacho, 2008)

"expert" offices to local settings in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Knowledge about the "underdeveloped" thus becomes an active force, articulated in policy statements, implemented as reforms, and operationalised as growth strategies, gradually reshaping the social reality of "underdevelopment" (Naz, 2006).

Development as Discourse is therefore a "construct rather than an objective condition" (Gardner & Lewis, 1996, p.1). This Discourse enables the creation of a vast institutional apparatus through which it is deployed, becoming a social force that transforms ecological, social, cultural and political realities. For Escobar (1995), development is not merely the result of factors such as poverty, technology, biodiversity, or resources, nor is it solely the product of new (i.e. scientific) knowledge or the influence of international organisations like the United Nations. Instead, it is the outcome of establishing relationships between these elements, institutions, and practices, and systematising these relationships into a whole (Crush, 1995). For instance, this systematic formation determines who is considered "marginalised" and what strategies are prescribed to "address" their circumstances, as exemplified by my engagement in adult literacy programmes shared in Chapter 1.

Development as Discourse comprises not only the multiplicity of potential "objects" within its domain but also by the systematic organisation of these "objects", grouping and arranging them in specific ways within an overarching a framework. To understand "development" as Discourse, one must examine not just the individual elements but also how it systematically forms "objects", concepts, and strategies that delineate what can be thought and spoken about. These relationships, formed among institutions, socio-economic processes, knowledge systems, technological factors, and more, define the conditions under which "objects", concepts, theories, and strategies can be included in the Discourse, and how the Discourse of "development" constructs the object of "development" itself (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997).

Discourses like "development" overdetermine a hegemonic social reality, shaping how different practices led to varied outcomes (Castro Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007). For example, in Chapter 1, I discussed how activism within "sustainable development" is often framed as occurring within NGOs and formal education institutions, as well as the ongoing repression of activism that challenges existing "development" models. This tension is reflected in the questions raised within online learning networks: Who is recognised as an activist? What Discourse(s) are they permitted to engage in? How do these differ from those used in

grassroots movements? Which forms of activism receive funding from national and international bodies, and which gain visibility in global development dialogues, such as those at the United Nations? This thesis investigates how individuals within online learning networks navigate, understand, and negotiate "sustainable development" as a Discourse that acts upon and through them in multifaceted ways.

The next section examines "sustainable development" as a Discourse, considering its relationship with activism in Latin America. Understanding "sustainable development" as a Discourse allows to analyse power and domination by focusing on the conditions and effects that accompany this Discourse (Escobar, 1995). This approach provides a framework for exploring both the theoretical and practical contexts associated with it (Foucault, 1985), within online learning networks and grassroots activism movements, as well as the connection between Discourse and identity and how it produces and regulates identities, such as those of activists or other social roles (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997; Blommaert, 2005; Woolard, 1998).

3.1.2 The Discourse(s) of "Sustainable Development"

Understanding "sustainable development" as a Discourse, as outlined in Section 3.1, provides a lens for examining its origins, institutionalisation, and evolution within the broader context of "development" Discourse. In Chapter 2, I explored various conceptualisations of "sustainable development" alongside other socio-ecological perspectives in Latin America, such as *Buen Vivir*. This section examines "sustainable development" as a Discourse and how it applies to this research.

Sustainable development has become central within "development" Discourse, encompassing a range of definitions and interpretations (Mensah, 2019). These interpretations span from notions of indefinitely sustainable "development" (Dernbach, 1998; 2003; Stoddart, 2011) to the integration of economic growth with environmental and social well-being (Ukaga et al., 2010). Often, "sustainable" refers exclusively to green, ecological, or environmentally friendly matters (Mensah, 2019). This diversity prompts critical questions: if discourse identifies, appropriates, and legitimises ways of practicing, discussing, and conceptualising ideas like "sustainable development", dictating who and what needs "developing", then how and why does "sustainable development" allow, or appear to allow, for such varied meanings and interpretations?

Despite its broad definitions, "sustainable development" has profoundly influenced policies and practices in global and local contexts, as shared in Chapter 2, mainstream interpretations of sustainable development have been conceived as strategies for sustaining "development", rather than fostering the flourishing of diverse natural and social life (Esteva & Escobar, 2020). This contrasts with interpretations by authors like Curiel (2023), who frame "sustainable development" to enhance *patrimonio vivo*, meaning cultural practices, knowledge, and traditions passed through generations, thus promoting social well-being, environmental resilience, and economic stability. While these interpretations offer opportunities to challenge the development paradigm and articulate critiques of its negative impacts, international policies and "expert" opinions continue to reshape "sustainable development".

For Escobar (1995), the Discourse of sustainable development portrays the earth as fragile, urging humanity to protect it while entrusting "professionals" with determining the necessary steps. This stance excludes alternative visions from indigenous communities and grassroots movements. The sustainable development Discourse remains closely aligned with traditional "development" narratives, centred on economic growth and resource exploitation, which have failed to substantially alter the conditions of poverty and environmental degradation affecting the majority (Esteva & Prakash, 1998). The dominant version of sustainable development, rooted in international policies, privileges economic growth and market logic while promoting the unsustainable exploitation of natural resources (Salazar et al., 2023; Mota-Diaz & Sandoval Forrero, 2016). However, as highlighted in Chapter 1 and 2, there are other Discourses within Latin America that have merged within the "sustainable development" Discourse, such as that of *Buen Vivir*.

In this research, I use "sustainable development" in quotation marks to signify a Discourse that is employed by both online learning networks and activists within my study. This term can signify either sustaining traditional development models or pursuing socio-ecological justice through diverse interpretations of "sustainable development". As Harvey (2018) suggests, the inherent diversity and generality of socio-ecological arguments make them susceptible to varied uses, some of which activists may oppose. This rhetoric is mobilised for a range of purposes, underscoring the multivalent and contested nature of "sustainable development" Discourses.

The following section looks at the conceptual framework of identities within this research project, and what I refer to when talking about "sustainable development activists", recognising the influence of diverse Discourses in shaping these identities.

3.2 Discourse and Identity

As discussed in section 3.1, Discourses are deeply connected to identity, as "Discourses are ways of recognised and being recognised as distinctive kinds of people doing distinctive kinds of things" (Gee, 2014, p.184). Gee (2014) emphasises that "to mean anything to someone else and even to ourselves, we have to communicate who we are, in the sense of the socially situated identity we adopt, and what we are doing, in terms of the socially situated activity we seek to carry out" (p.183). Identity itself is complex and dynamic, shaped by intersecting social factors such as race, gender, and class (Steadman Gantous, 2022; Bourdieu, 1991). It draws upon historical, geographical, biological, institutional, and cultural materials, elements such as collective memory, power structures, and religious beliefs, while also being processed and adapted by individuals and groups according to their social conditions and cultural projects. (Busso et al.,2013).

Escobar (2008) suggests that identity is not only influenced by Discourses and practices but is actively shaped through them. These Discourses are deeply historical and embedded within power, which suggests that identities are not fixed or innate, rather, they are continually constructed and reconstructed through interactions within specific Discursive frameworks, such as those surrounding "sustainable development" activism.

Rose (1999) explored the relationship between the self and power structures, showing how societal Discourses position individuals in ways that align with dominant interests. This process, termed subjectification by Foucault (1979), transforms the self into a political instrument of social control. Through subjectification, people are shaped by Discourses that define what is considered as "normal", acceptable, or desirable within a society. "To enact identities" Gee (2014a) notes, "people must talk the "right" talk, walk the "right" walk, behave as if they value the "right" things, and wear the "right" things at the "right" time and the "right" place (p.24). These Discourses, often perpetuated by institutions of power, play a central role in shaping identities that reinforce the status quo.

However, as noted in section 3.1, while Discourses can act as tools of control, they also offer avenues for resistance (Fraser, 1989; Oksala, 2015). Thus, identities are not only shaped by dominant Discourses but also be sites of resistance and empowerment (Restrepo, 2007; Butler, 1999; McKinlay, 2010). Identities convers who we are to others but are also dynamic constructs reflecting past experiences and evolving visions for the future (Tatum, 1997).

Identity construction occurs at multiple levels, from labels found in policy documents to everyday practices. Labels, for instance, are central to identity formation, they emerge from perceived identification or similarity with specific groups and contrast with perceived differences from those outside the group (Burke, 2020). Rooted in the interplay of motives, expectations, knowledge, and social realities, labels contribute to identify and serve as social tools that regulate social performance (Camp & Flores, 2024).

Escobar (2008) argues that identity construction involves active engagement with the world, characterised by a constant interplay between identity, local contentious practices, and historical struggles. This dynamic is especially evident in activists' strategies (see for example Escobar, 2008), as identities are not merely imposed by institutions through Discourses, like those in United Nations policies or online learning networks but are actively negotiated and constructed by individuals through their everyday practices.

To recognise the potential for human agency that emerges from this process, it is essential to shift focus from viewing identity as a static entity to investigating identity through the lens of tactical behaviours (Bleiker, 2003). Escobar (2008) emphasises that identities are dialogic and relational; they emerge from, but cannot be reduced to, the articulation of difference through encounters with others. This process, according to Escobar, "involves drawing boundaries and selectively identifying some aspects while concomitantly excluding or marginalising others" (p.203). Hall, (1996) similarly notes that we can think of identities as points of suture between Discourses and practices that attempt to interpellate us, to speak to us or position us as social subjects within Discourses, and on the other hand, the subjectivities that are produced, constructing us as subjects capable of "speaking".

For instance, labels such as "ambassadors" and "climate champions" are not passively accepted, they are actively negotiated or even resisted by those whom online learning networks seek to label. Thus, analysing how labels, self-portrayals, and identities operate as mechanisms of power within specific institutional contexts, such as online learning networks, is crucial.

This includes examining processes of individuation and imposed labelling. Understanding these dynamics reveals how specific definitions shape subjects and influence practices, activities, discussions, and acceptable forms of thought within societal frameworks (Escobar, 1995: Butler, 1995). Moreover, it unveils the interests these constructions and how they are contested by others. A key point is to analyse how, from where, by whom, and for what purpose identities are constructed (Castells, 1997).

This section has explored identity within the context of Discourse(s), underscoring its importance as a conceptual framework for this research project. By examining the intersections of identity, Discourse, knowledge, and power dynamics, it lays a foundation for understanding how identities are shaped, negotiated, and contested. Building on this groundwork, the following section will delve specifically into the identities that emerge within "sustainable development" activism as they manifest in this study.

3.2.1 Identities in "Sustainable Development Activism"

In Chapter 1 and 2, I outlined the landscape of "sustainable development activism" within Latin America, emphasising its manifestation through various forms of practices, such as protest, resistance, community initiatives, and networked strategies. In this section, I define what is meant by the identities of activists engaged within online learning networks, which, for the purpose of this research, are categorised as "sustainable development activists".

As previously discussed in section 3.2, scholars like Gee (2014a) and Escobar (2014) argue that identities emerge from Discourses and practices shaped by ecologies of power, resulting in a dynamic negotiation between identity, local resistance practices, and broader social struggles. This dynamic prompt an inquiry into the necessity and role of "identity" within "sustainable development" activism: who needs it, why multiple identities arise, and how online learning networks contribute to the formation of such identities.

Fontana (2023) frames identity as both a strategic tool and a social construct. Identities while relational, cannot be reduced simply to interactions, they involve boundary-drawing and selective identification that, in turn, marginalise other aspects (Escobar, 2008). In this study, I explore whether activists leverage identities as strategic tools and investigate the role online learning networks play in this process. This analysis examinates not only the origins and power

Discourses that shape these identities but also the elements and boundaries that sustain them, acknowledging that these identities are underpinned by power dynamics of power and interest.

Grossberg (2003) conceptualises identity as a "terrain of struggle", grounded in logics of difference, individuality, and temporality. When identity is framed as difference, it often positions the subordinate as essential for defining the dominant, frequently overlooking the knowledge and traditions of subaltern groups. Within "sustainable development activists", identities like "climate champion" and "ambassador", introduced by the online learning networks, carry specific powers and frameworks within their Discourses, influencing who is acknowledged as a "sustainable development activist" and under what conditions. This impacts not only identity, but also which knowledge and practices are validated in these spaces.

Polletta and Jasper (2001), differentiate between collective identities (e.g., those forged in movements or online networks) and personal identities, noting that collective identity can form part of personal identity. Melucci (1999) highlights that forming and maintaining a collective identity involves acknowledging an actor's complexity and relationship to the environment. This includes connections with other actors, opportunities, and constraints. Melucci's view of collective identity as a continuous investment allows exploration into how activists navigate their individual and collective identities within online learning networks, reflecting on the "benefits" and negotiations tied to their "sustainable development activism", as detailed in Chapter 6.

Contemporary social movements and activism are characterised by fragmented, pluralistic collective identities that intersect with transnational, transregional, and global identities, and their hybridity[16] (Fontana, 2023). Treré (2018) describes how activists merge the physical and the digital, the human and the non-human, the old and the new, the internal and the external, and the corporate and the alternative. Recognising that identities are shaped by Discourses and practices embedded within economies of power, it is important to examine which aspects of identities within "sustainable development activism" are emphasised, as well

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[16] Heaney and Rojas (2014) define hybrid identities as those that span the boundaries of two or more social movements, issues, or identities, playing a crucial role in mobilising diverse communities.

as the reasons and mechanisms behind these choices. This includes exploring the visibility and invisibility of diverse elements within these identities.

For example, Gómez and Trentini's (2021) work with Mapuche activists in Argentina illustrates how activists adopt identities, such as "indigenous women", to gain legitimacy and enhance engagement with dominant sectors. However, this process also imposes constraints, influencing perceptions of what constitutes "authentic" identity within dominant frameworks. Clifford (1988) warns that failing to consider the constructed and contextually embedded nature of identities may inadvertently perpetuate inequality.

Activists, therefore, adopt identities not only as rational choices but as actors navigating contexts where certain identities are emphasised while others are obscured. This study analyses how participants engage with identities like "climate champion" and "ambassador", ascribed by online learning networks, and how their other identities are utilised or sidelined in this context. It seeks to understand how activists navigate and assign meaning to these labels and identities, recognising that identities are influenced by Discourses, practices, and power relationships.

Furthermore, recognising that identities are significant outcomes of participation in communities of practice (Escobar, 2008), the next section focuses on learning within these communities.

3.3 Learning in Communities of Practice

As discussed in Chapter 1, understanding the learning dimension of activism necessitates a conceptual framework that prioritises the complex environments in which learning processes are embedded, rather than focusing solely on outcomes, though these outcomes remain significant. The concept of Communities of Practice (CoP) is particularly valuable for conceptualising the learning processes involved in "sustainable development activism", both within and outside online learning networks. A CoP can be defined as any group of individuals engaged in a similar activity who share knowledge to enhance expertise and solve problems (Groff, 2023).

The foundational idea of a CoP is that people come together in groups to carry out activities in everyday life (Barton & Tusting, 2005). These interactions are not only about creating shared meanings related to the world but also about constructing identities (Land & Jonassen, 2012). This perspective enables an understanding of learning processes in relation to power dynamics within diverse communities, such as online learning networks and the activist communities participants are associated with.

Within this conceptual framework, "sustainable development activism" is embedded within Discourses and identities, which are framed by power relationships, from which CoPs, such as online learning networks and the movements participants are part of, emerge. The CoP framework facilitates the examination of diverse Discourses and identities embedded within activists' learning processes, offering a lens to understand "thinking and learning in its social dimensions" (Wenger, 2010, p.179).

In CoPs, knowledge, identity, and social learning, often through informal interactions, enable members to engage in knowledge production, exchange, and transformation. This engagement occurs through participation in shared ways of being in the world, with a collective identity and membership (Wenger, 2010), and through processes of negotiating meaning (Maida & Beck, 2018). CoPs provide a rich context to understand learning processes, particularly in relation to power dynamics. For instance, they help to reveal which ways of being in the world are more valorised than others, how a collective identity is developed and appropriated by its members, and why these dynamics occur.

Communities of practice are characterised by three key aspects: mutual engagement, where members interact in various ways; a common endeavour, referred to as joint enterprise; and the development of a shared repertoire of resources, including language, styles, and routines, through which members express their identities (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Wenger, 1998). A central focus of CoPs is "learning as social participation", where participation is understood as a "more encompassing process of being active participants in the practices of social communities and constructing identities in relation to these communities" (Wenger, 1998, p.4).

This theory of knowledge acknowledges informal networks and practices, which differ from formal structures (Barton & Tusting, 2005). In this context, Rogers' (2014) conceptualisation of informal, non-formal and informal learning is particularly useful. Rogers

describes a continuum "ranging from accidental/incidental learning, through task-conscious learning, through self-directed learning (all types of informal learning) to non-formal and formal learning (which are both planned, structured learning)" (p.21). Communities of practice can be seen as largely voluntary and focus on both learning and capacity building through collaborative relationships, breaking down communication barriers, and facilitating continuous knowledge exchange in a more open and informal manner (Maida & Beck, 2018).

Rogers (2014) emphasises that learning activities and spaces can vary in their degrees of formality and informality. For instance, in a CoP, one may learn to become a member through non-formal training programmes but also through informal learning by engaging with everyday activities (Millora, 2020). Viewed this way, learning becomes a process influenced by various spaces of participation, such as online learning networks and diverse activists' communities. Within online learning networks, activists join to be part of a community and gain access to specific knowledge and identities in "sustainable development activism". Moreover, participants are also members of other CoPs, such as their local movements, where they encounter diverse learning processes that shape their "sustainable development activism". This approach, combined with the frameworks of Discourse, power, knowledge, and identities discussed earlier, allows for an exploration of the learning processes and power dynamics involved within these communities, as detailed in Chapter 7.

I will now turn to the concept of learning as a social practice, exploring the negotiation of meaning and identity- key concepts within CoPs that are central to my research project. Finally, I discuss how CoPs relate to power dynamics and the boundaries of communities of practice conceptualisation.

3.3.1 Learning as a Social Practice

Rather than viewing learning as merely the acquisition of specific types of knowledge, such as, understanding the SDGs or the various policy documents related to "sustainable development", CoP approach emphasises its foundation in social relationships and participation contexts (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In other words, instead of focusing on the cognitive processes and conceptual structures involved, a CoP's approach investigates the social engagements that create the context for learning (Hanks, 1991). Learning involves engaging with frameworks and communities where structured participation occurs, extending

beyond mere involvement in certain activities. It encompasses being active members of social communities and forming identities and meanings in connection with these communities (Wenger, 1999).

Participation, in this context, refers to an ongoing, social, and interactional process where individuals collaborate, negotiate meanings, and learn from each other (Wenger, 1998; 1999). Wenger (1998) asserts that "learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (p.96). He explains that learning in practice involves several processes for the communities involved. These processes include evolving forms of mutual engagement, where participants discover how to engage, what helps and what hinders, how to develop mutual relationships, and how to define identities, establishing who is who, who is skilled at what, who possesses knowledge. It also requires understanding and aligning their engagement with the community's enterprise, as well as refining and reconciling conflict interpretations of what the enterprise entails. Furthermore, learning in practice involves developing a shared repertoire of Discourses, renegotiating the meanings of various elements, and producing or adopting tools, artifacts, and representations.

However, the CoP framework does not trivialise the concept of learning as an ongoing process. Instead, it emphasises significant learning that affects these dimensions of practice, understanding why individuals engage in it and the resources they have at their disposal (Wenger, 1998). This approach is particularly useful when exploring why activists engage with online learning networks. For instance, do they join because they find these online learning networks beneficial in a practical sense, something that could be applied to their activism practices? Or is it a strategic move to challenge power structures surrounding "sustainable development activism"? Additionally, the learning that occurs through these practices and those of their grassroots communities may differ. Understanding these differences, why they occur and in what ways, allows for connections to the conceptual frameworks previously discussed, such as those of Discourses and power. Does the engagement with these diverse practices reflect the same Discourses, identities, and power dynamics, or does it alter them? Exploring the reasons behind these variations is crucial. The next section will examine the negotiation of meaning and identity within CoPs.

3.3.1.1 Negotiation of Meaning and Identity

According to Wenger (1998) "practice is about meaning as an experience of everyday life" (p.52). Meaning, however, is not static, it is situated within the process of negotiation, which occurs through participation and reification. Participation involves being part of social communities and actively engaging in social activities, while reification is the process of giving shape to the experiences derived from participation (Wenger, 1998;1999). These two processes, participation and reification, are complementary in the negotiation of meaning. Although reification shapes experiences, it does not fix the meaning attributed to a person, object, or concept at any given moment. Instead, this interpretation remains open to negotiation within the practice (Farnsworth et al., 2016).

This continuous cycle of participation and reification suggests that practices within communities of practice are dynamic, evolving, and not predefined or strictly regulated (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Practices are an ongoing process where members interact, engage in activities together, and negotiate new meanings, learning from each other (Wenger, 1998). For example, participants in online learning networks engage in various activities such as trainings sessions, campaigns, and informal discussions. Through their continuous involvement, they negotiate and shape the meaning of their practices, which in turn influences their identities.

The negotiation of meaning is closely intertwined with the process of identity formation within social contexts (Farnsworth et al., 2016). Becoming a member of a CoP involves learning to embody a particular identity, where claims to competence contribute to one's evolving identity (Wenger, 1998). Therefore, learning is not just an individual process but a social one of becoming (Wenger, 2010). Identity formation within a CoP occurs on multiple levels: it involves negotiating how one's identity is perceived within the community of practice, expressing competence within that context, how others recognise one's membership, and how participation in that community contributes to shaping one's broader social identity. For instance, activists may undergo specific training to become "climate champions" or "ambassadors". This approach helps to understand the dynamics of learning and identity within and beyond these communities of practice, as well as how activists utilise these and other identities in their practices. As previously discussed in the conceptualisation of identities within "sustainable development activism", collective identities reflect not only individual complexities but also the relationship between individuals and their context, including their

actions, opportunities, and constraints within their practices. This interplay leads to the dynamic navigation of learning and identity dynamics in their activism.

Identification, however, is not merely about being labelled as something or someone (e.g. sustainability expert or climate champion), it also involves identifying with others or entities (e.g. online learning networks) (Wenger, 1998). This process of identification is coupled with what Wenger (1998) calls negotiability, where identity formation and meaning making consider power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge and meanings. The recognition of whose practices and competencies are deemed "knowledge" involves complex, historical, and political processes that address power dynamics within CoP.

While CoPs theorists acknowledge the significance of power in their learning theory (Lave & Wenger 1991; Wenger 1998; Farnsworth et al., 2016), some scholars critique the under- theorisation of power within CoP (Barton et al., 2000; Barton & Tusting 2005: Contu & Willmott; 2003; Fuller & Unwin, 2004; Roberts, 2006). The next section explored power dynamics and boundaries within CoP.

3.3.2 Power and Boundaries in Communities of Practice

The theory of Communities of Practice establishes boundaries between individuals who have participated in a particular learning history and those who have not. For example, it differentiates between those involved in shaping policies related to "sustainable development" and those who have been excluded from such processes, or between those who are considered "developed" versus "underdeveloped". These distinctions refine what is recognised as competence, determining who is acknowledged as a "sustainable development professional" or an "sustainable development activist". Consequently, a regime of competence emerges, which grants power to those who possess legitimacy to enforce or challenge these categorisations. As discussed in section 3.2, while knowledge is power, power also defines what counts as knowledge, legitimising institutions and individuals that shape what is considered appropriate knowledges. This dynamic creates intersections where power boundaries overlap (Farnsworth et al., 2016).

For Wenger (1998), CoPs are neither inherently positive nor negative in their effects, but they are a significant force capable of influencing outcomes for better or worse. As centres of

engagement in action, interpersonal relationships, shared knowledge, and negotiation of goals, these communities play a critical role in driving transformation that impacts people's lives. Although other forces, such as institutional control or individual authority, remains important, these are understood as being mediated by the communities where their meanings are negotiated in practice.

However, scholars such as Barton et al., (2000) and Millora (2020), through the lens of literacy studies, argue that Wenger overemphasises the local activities of specific sites and neglects broader structures that affect a community. They critique the CoP theory for not providing analytical tools to investigate how one CoP might shape the power dynamics of another, a position I adopt within this study. Similarly, scholars such as Gherardi and Nicolini (2000), Contu and Willmott (2003), and Roberts (2006) have criticised Lave and Wenger's characterisation of communities of practice as harmonious, coherent, and consensual.

Power relations are inherent in political and cultural institutions, including CoPs such as online learning networks, and they inevitably shape our social relations and interactions (Ball, 2012). Since CoP theory posits that learning is understood in relation to social engagement and participation, issues of power are integral to any account of learning. The negotiation of meaning and identity, as discussed earlier, might be misinterpreted as a consensual process when such negotiations can be fraught with misunderstanding and disagreement (Roberts, 2006). These negotiations are often shaped by existing power structures, such as those in the Discourse of development, as previously explored (see section 3.2.1).

Thus, understanding the boundaries and power dynamics within CoPs is crucial for a comprehensive analysis of the learning processes in "sustainable development activism". It is important to recognise that while CoPs can foster collective learning and identity formation, they can also reinforce power hierarchies and exclusionary practices. This awareness allows for a more nuanced exploration of how activists navigate these power dynamics within and across various communities of practice.

For instance, Adler and Bernstein (2004) and Sondarjee (2024) highlight that contestation in practice is inevitably shaped by epistemic power relations, where recognised authorities validate, confirm, or reformulate new knowledge. Sondarjee (2024) describes this as "practice contestation", a dynamic in which tensions within a community of practice arise

as activists challenge and negotiate the Discourses imposed by the networks. She emphasises that practice contestation involves reworking established frameworks, not only at the level of Discourse but also through tangible actions. This conceptualisation of practice contestation proves useful in understanding how participants engage with and resist power dynamics within their communities of practice, such as online learning networks.

3.4 Conclusion

My overall aim of understanding the Discourses and identities surrounding "sustainable development activism", as well as the role of online learning networks in shaping these, led me to scholars and conceptual frameworks that emphasise the interrelationships between Discourse, power, knowledge, and identity. These frameworks also highlight the role of communities of practice, where learning is constructed through social interactions. This approach provides an alternative conceptual starting point to the dominant view of "sustainable development activism", which centres on activism *for, within*, or *beyond* "sustainable development". It also contrasts with the prevailing focus in literature on ahistorical approaches, the fragmentation of digital technologies, and the perception of activist education primarily through formal education or specific programmes (see Chapter 1). This alternative framework situates activism, sustainable development, and online learning networks within a broader socioecological context, shaped by power dynamics.

Central to this framework is the concept of Discourse and its intersections with power and knowledge, as highlighted by Mills (2003), Alvarez (in Crush, 1995), and Foucault (1976; 1980; 1991). These scholars have demonstrated how Discourses not only shape identities but also create systems of power that influence and regulate social practices. Escobar (2008) builds on this, arguing that identities are constructed through these Discourses and practices. Drawing on Escobar (1995), I explored Development as a Discourse, where development Discourses identify, appropriate, and legitimise certain ways of thinking, speaking, and acting concerning concepts like "development" (Grillo & Stirrat, 1997), and consequently "sustainable development".

These Discourses have facilitated the creation of a vast institutional apparatus, including online learning networks, which function as social forces transforming ecological, social,

cultural, and political realities (Escobar, 1995). The transformation arises from the relationships between these Discursive elements, institutions, and practices, systematising these relationships into a coherent whole (Crush, 1995). However, as Mills (2003) and Esteva et al. (2013) note, Discourse can function both as a mechanism of oppression and as a tool for resistance. In this way, Discourses dictate what counts as "sustainable development activism" and determine who qualifies as an activist within these frameworks. This process of Discursive construction raises critical questions: How and why does "sustainable development" accommodate diverse definitions, meanings, and interpretations? Who is recognised as an activist within these dominant Discourses? And, crucially, how are these Discourses challenged and resisted?

The communities of practice (CoP) framework offered a valuable perspective for examining the diverse Discourses and identities embedded within activists' learning processes. It provides insights into "thinking and learning in its social dimensions" (Wenger, 2010, p. 179), especially through the processes of negotiating meaning (Maida & Beck, 2018). Recognising that power relations are inherent in political and cultural institutions, including CoPs such as online learning networks, this framework helps to illuminate how these power dynamics shape social interactions and learning (Ball, 2012). Consequently, online learning networks are not neutral spaces; they are embedded within the same power structures that influence wider political and social institutions, shaping how activists engage with sustainable development and how their identities are constructed in the process.

Chapter Four

Methodology

4. Introduction

In the previous chapters, I have explored the context of "sustainable development activism", particularly within Latin America, and examined key conceptual frameworks such as Discourse, identity, power, knowledge, learning, and communities of practice. I have situated this research project within these frameworks, providing a theoretical foundation for my inquiry. This chapter details my engagement with these concepts through an ethnographic research approach.

To address the research gaps identified in Chapter 1, I sought to move beyond the dominant methodological frameworks typically employed by scholars researching activism, particularly ethnographies rooted in colonial approaches. This commitment has shaped both the conceptual foundations of this thesis (as detailed in Chapter 3) and its methodological orientation.

I begin by explaining my decision to adopt an activist ethnographic approach to investigate "sustainable development activism" and the online learning networks central to this study. I then describe my ethnographic journey, detailing my interest in and interactions with these two online learning networks, including the process of gaining access to both the networks and my participants.

Subsequently, I outline the research methods I employed to construct data and generate knowledge, and I discuss my analysis and writing-up process. I also highlight the challenges I encountered and the strategies I employed to address them. The chapter then focuses on the tensions I navigated in my activist ethnographic research, particularly regarding my positionality and reflexivity. This included the ethics of reciprocity when engaging with communities of practice, considering my fluid and ever-changing positionality in a time and space that became both familiar and strange, and my efforts to give back to my participants, exploring how, in what form, and to what extent this was possible.

Finally, I provide essential information about my participants to facilitate a deeper understanding of the empirical findings presented in the subsequent chapters.

4.1 My Research Orientation and Adopting an Activist Ethnographic Approach

As mentioned in Chapter 1, the overarching research question driving my study is: *How do activist engage with Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism", and what role do online learning networks play in this engagement?* To address this central question, I delineated three sub-research questions:

1. What are the Discourses surrounding "sustainable development activism", and how do activists navigate them in their practices?
2. What identities are present within "sustainable development activism", and how do activists navigate them in their practices?
3. What roles do online learning networks play in shaping the utilisation of Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism"?

My research questions are rooted in a constructivist paradigm, which posits that reality is not an inherent truth but is shaped through social interactions and the use of persuasive and representational resources, as suggested by Berger and Luckman (1991). Within this framework, social phenomena and their interpretations are constantly moulded by social actors, including myself as researcher and an activist (Bryman, 2016). It is acknowledged within this paradigm that "sustainable development activism" is significantly influenced by the dynamics of meaning-making processes, which are subject to ongoing negotiation. From this perspective, reality is perceived as constructed from diverse viewpoints, and knowledge is socially built by participants in the research process, including myself, as an integral contributor to the co-construction of this knowledge (Hernández et al., 2010).

To investigate my research questions, I have chosen to employ an activist ethnography. Adopting an ethnographic perspective enabled me to explore the contexts and experiences of "sustainable development activism" both within and outside online learning networks, examining what is happening, how it is occurring, and how participants perceive it (Gregory,

2005). Central to my research is the exploration of "sustainable development activism", including its Discourses, identities, powers, and the interconnectedness embedded in the everyday lives of activists. As noted by Hammersley and Atkinson (2007), ethnography involves an in-depth study of people's actions and accounts in everyday contexts, interpreting meanings, human and institutional practices, and their implications in both local and wider contexts.

I incorporated an activist ethnographic approach (Hale, 2006; Hussey, 2012). This approach emphasises collaboration with participants rather than mere observation, positioning me as both an activist and researcher (Reedy & King, 2019). Section 4.2 explains how I integrate my activist stance into this research, while section 4.5 examines how my positionalities influenced the study and discusses the ethics of reciprocity that underpinned my activist ethnography. This approach centres on building relationships and engaging directly with participants, rather than simply producing knowledge about them. It challenges dominant external perspectives on the "sustainable development" movement and the internal views within the movement itself, navigating the liminal space between activism and academia (Deschner & Dorion, 2020).

4.1.2 Ethnography as a Methodology

Ethnography, as a methodology, is often defined as an "ongoing attempt to contextualise specific encounters, events, and understandings within a broader and more meaningful context" (Tedlock, 2000, p.455). Velásquez-Prestán et al., (2018) emphasise the importance of ethnography in understanding communities and diverse ways of life. However, these authors, along with scholars like Scharenberg (2023), critique traditional ethnography for creating a disconnect between "knowledge producers" and the communities under study, thereby reducing the latter to mere objects of research. Scholars like Velásquez-Prestán et al., (2018) further note that researchers who deviate from this stance of knowledge production are often labelled as militant or activists, which tends to lead to questions about their academic rigour.

In response to such critiques, a range of ethnographic methodologies has emerged, aiming to bridge the gap between researchers, the communities they study, and the political commitments embedded in those relationships. These approaches include feminist

ethnography (Dorion, 2021), sentipensante ethnography[17] (Fals Borda, 2009), reflexive ethnography (Dietz, 2011; Mateos Cortés & Dietz, 2022), militant ethnography (Juris, 2007; López Rivas, 2005), activist ethnography (Hale, 2001; 2006; Hussey, 2012; Reedy & King, 2019), and collaborative ethnography (Lassiter, 2005; Rappaport, 2008). Collectively, these methodologies not only promote a deeper understanding of social practices within communities but also advocate for direct engagement in efforts toward social transformation.

Activist ethnography emphasises that researchers should see themselves as participants within the worlds they study, actively contributing to the political aims of the movement or organisation involved (Dorion, 2021). However, diverging from Dorion's position, I argue that activist ethnography can also be a valid and ethical approach when researching movements whose values the researcher does not fully share. In such cases, the researcher engages from an activist orientation, striving to produce knowledge that is both academically robust and relevant to the needs of the activist community. This dual commitment ensures that the work resonates with both scholarly audiences and the communities involved (Reedy & King, 2017).

This expanding methodological orientation has gained notable traction in recent years, particularly within media studies. Authors such as Moultrie and Joseph (2024), Mustafa (2024), Perez (2023), Canella (2022), and Bradford (2024) have explored diverse social movements through their own positionalities and activist inquiries, offering rich contributions to the development of activist ethnography. Moultrie and Joseph (2024), for instance, centre Blackness as a foundational standpoint from which Black media studies scholars study, create, teach, and influence media production. Mustafa (2024) examines the intersection of online ethnography and feminist activism, highlighting the crucial role of long-term immersion in digital spaces as both an activist and researcher. Perez (2023) draws on lived experience to explore the impact of community, social programmes, and personal resilience in escaping life on the streets, while also critiquing the criminal justice system and advocating for prison education and humanisation of incarcerated individuals. Canella (2022) focuses on media activism through an autoethnography of his experiences co-producing media with a labour

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[17] Referring to conducting engaged research, going beyond field observation, engaging in open and sincere dialogue with various contexts and recognising the knowledge of local communities. It requires constant reflection and explicit consent for the use of collected information, thereby reducing the gap between researcher and subject (Flas-Borda, 2009)

union and a local Black Lives Matter chapter, exploring how grassroots media intersects with participatory politics and social justice. Bradford (2024) investigates the tensions between institutional academia and community-based knowledge in LGBTQ+ activism, advocating for more inclusive and reflexive academic practices.

When I decided to pursue a PhD focusing on "sustainable development activism" and online learning networks, one of my primary motivations was to gain a deeper understanding of my own political engagement, as well as that of those around me. From my early days in activism to my participation in online learning networks, I became acutely aware of the multitude of Discourses and identities at play. Like the scholars mentioned above, I felt compelled to explore these dynamics more comprehensively seeking not only to understand my own practices, but also those of others, as well as the power relations, political dynamics, learning processes, and educational spaces within activism. As Dorion (2021) notes, activist ethnography encourages us to question and deepen our understanding of our political subjectivity, which in turn shapes our standpoint.

Following an activist ethnography methodology allows me to inhabit the liminal space between research and practice (Juris, 2007). This approach enables me to contribute academic knowledge that is politically relevant and committed to working with and for, rather than about, social movements (Scharenberg, 2023; Juris & Khasbanish, 2013). Within this framework, every decision, from choosing a methodology to drafting my questions and conceptual framework to writing my ethnography, has been inherently political (Segato, 2015). The following sections delve into these decisions and the methodological process of this study.

4.2 Charting out my Activist Ethnography

I embarked on ethnographic research within two online learning networks focused on what I termed "sustainable development activism" in Latin America. This decision was deeply influenced by my dual role as both an activist and my personal and professional connections to the region, particularly in Mexico. As discussed in Chapter 2, Latin America, known for its rich history of resistance and environmental activism, often challenges dominant notions of development (Svampa, 2010; Trentini & Sorroche, 2016; Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz,

2018). In this section, I elaborate on my engagement with these online learning networks, explaining my rationale for selecting them for my research and addressing the challenges I encountered during my activist ethnographic inquiry.

My fieldwork spanned 10 months. Initially, I dedicated a month to scoping the research and securing informed consent from the online learning networks. Following this, I reached out to potential participants and selected sites for multi-sited participant observation. Over the next eight months, I conducted intensive field visits, immersing myself in various places and activist communities across Mexico. In the final months, I conducted semi-structured interviews with members of the online learning networks and related activists to complement the data I had gathered.

While "sustainable development activism" is a dynamic field with numerous movements across Mexico and other Latin America countries that I could have explored, logistical and financial limitations required me to adhere to institutional regulations to complete my PhD within four years (three years with funding).

4.2.1 Engaging with Two Online Learning Networks

My decision to focus on these two networks was driven by achieving a comparative, multi-sided analysis of "sustainable development activism" in Latin America. This approach enables the exploration of diverse spaces where activism unfolds both online and face-to-face, offering insights into how these settings are shaped by various interests, structures, and pedagogies. Comparative, multi-sited analysis offers "analytical possibilities that are challenging or impossible in traditional single-case studies, such as enriching insights through contrast, aiding in causal inference, illustrating how different educational contexts influence ostensibly similar phenomena, and revealing similarities across seemingly different entities" (Abramson & Gong, 2020, p.3).

Additionally, my membership in these networks, along with my diverse positionalities, as member of their focal group, activist, and researcher (detailed further in section 4.6.1) allowed me to integrate research findings into my own practice, generating insights valuable to activist communities.

These networks particularly attracted me because of their approaches to "sustainable development activism", as they engaged with diverse Discourses and featured different organisational structures. For instance, one network emerged from a group of university students and focused on sustainable development within international agendas, while the other was founded by a prominent figure from the Global Minority, adopting a scientific and technological approach. Despite their unique characteristics, such as their funding sources and the contexts in which they were established, they were also similar in several aspects. Both used specific Discourses and identity markers to define membership and encompassed various forms of activisms, with some of my participants being members of both networks.

Both online learning networks can be viewed as bounded entities, situated in the same geographical region, addressing similar issues, and engaging overlapping communities of activists. As Santos-Fraile and Masso Guijarro (2017) note, multi-sided ethnographies leverage interconnected spaces for participant observation. In this study, I explore these online learning networks within the broader system of "sustainable development activism", focusing on how participants' grassroots movements emerged, developed, and interacted across both digital and physical spaces. This approach highlights how activism is not confined to isolated initiatives but is instead shaped by a broader context of interconnected, sometimes competing, spaces.

While I provided a general context of these networks in Chapter 2, here I delve into specific aspects of their "sustainable development activism", including power distribution, funding sources, sustainable development Discourses and identities, as well as educational programmes and learning components.

Aspect	MexiSustain	Climate Action Coalition
Year Established	2014	2006
Founding	Started by a group of students as a volunteer-base group.	Founded by a political figure from the Global Minority.

Scope	National (Mexico).	Global, with regional branches (including Latin America).
Structure	Hierarchical, with a directive team and operational team, "ambassadors," working at grassroots levels.	Hierarchical with founder-led leadership and regional directors; the Latin American branch (formed by full time employees) had partial autonomy but remains dependent on international oversight.
Membership Process	Selective criteria for membership; voluntary but with a formal selection process.	Entry requires mandatory training and a formalised process for roles, particularly for "climate champions".
Primary Discourse	Aligned closely with international sustainable development frameworks, such as the 2030 Agenda and SDGs. Integrates concepts like planetary boundaries and the doughnut economy into programming, materials, and communications.	Centred on the climate crisis and global solutions, focusing on citizen participation to mitigate climate change effects. Discourse reflects climate emergency and a solutions-based approach throughout communications and educational content.
Activists Identities	Provides distinct roles (e.g., ambassadors) and activities that foster identities as sustainable development advocates through education,	Establishes "climate champions" as key identities for activists, shaping their roles through climate-focused training, public presentations,

	advocacy, and community involvement.	and engagement in international climate initiatives.
Channels	Uses learning platform, WhatsApp, Instagram, Facebook, Twitter, and website.	Operates through its own learning platform, WhatsApp, Instagram, Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube.
Main Programmes	Four core programmes: Ambassadors, Campaigns, Mentorship, and LabSDGs. Each focus on distinct aspects of sustainable development, including advocacy, non-formal education through mentorship, and project development.	Climate training, Project Thursdays, and partnerships with international events (e.g., COP collaborations). Monthly seminars spotlight projects by climate champions.
Learning Components	Mandatory mentorship programme with four modules aligned with the 2030 Agenda, covering resource mobilisation, campaign design, and public policy. Utilises a blend of asynchronous and synchronous learning, including guides, prerecorded seminars, readings, and discussions.	Climate training is central, with modules on climate science, international agreements (e.g., COP), and tech-based solutions for climate issues. Includes asynchronous resources (videos, slides) and synchronous seminars connecting Latin American activists.

Table 1: Comparative Overview of MexiSustain and Climate Action Coalition Networks in "Sustainable Development Activism".

As shown in Table 1, both online learning networks operated within Latin America and shared some participants, such as Gloria, Esmeralda, and Natalia (see section 4.8). Despite this overlap, they exhibited distinctive structural configurations. MexiSustain, for example, relied on volunteers and received grants from national and international institutions, whereas the Climate Action Coalition depended on contributions from anonymous private donors, and its core team consisted of full-time employees.

Furthermore, while both networks embraced specific Discourses and provided their members with distinctive identities, these Discourses and identities were shaped by different power dynamics, for instance, the influence of international sustainable development policies and private donor agendas.

These differences, however, were primarily structural. At a deeper level, both networks revealed notable similarities on how they navigated power, identity and Discourse. As will be explored in Chapter 7, the two networks, though seemingly distinct, shared overlapping membership, comparable power hierarchies, and similar uses of Discourses and identity constructions.

By highlighting these similarities and differences, this research sheds light on the complex interplay between online learning networks, "sustainable development activism", and associated power dynamics, thereby deepening our understanding of the Discourses and identities that shape this form of activism.

4.2.2 Gaining Access to both the Networks and Participants

Securing institutional access from the online learning networks involved obtaining formal written approval from the organisations' leaders, who acted as gatekeepers. I provided a customised consent form in Spanish, tailored, and approved by the UEA Ethics committee, for the online learning networks. Additionally, I engaged in virtual meetings with the leaders, outlining my research activities and clarifying expectations. These meetings also addressed any questions they had, particularly concerning anonymisation procedures.

The process with MexiSustain proceeded smoothly, in part due to my existing strong ties with the organisation. Having previously been part of their core team and maintaining a positive relationship with its leaders, they expressed enthusiasm for my research projects, which had included my master's dissertation[18]. However, gaining access to the Climate Action Coalition presented challenges. Securing the leaders' email addresses and obtaining institutional consent proved to be a hectic process. For example, the email addresses I could access were not accepting messages from outside their organisation. After several unsuccessful attempts, I reached out to these leaders through the Latin American branch space on the network's platform, where I am a member. However, this approach also proved unfruitful, illustrating how the organisation made communication between its members difficult and how inaccessible its upper echelons were. After a couple of weeks without replies, I sent a message to their Instagram page. Fortunately, they responded kindly and arranged a meeting with the team. After a few more email exchanges, I successfully obtained the signed consent form from one of its branch directors, who became my main point of contact. This process underscored the importance of my positionality and ongoing negotiations in obtaining consent, prompting me to reflect on these aspects (as detailed in section 4.7) and the various power dynamics involved. As Kara et al., (2023) highlight, positionalities as "insiders" or "outsiders" significantly influence negotiations regarding access and trust-building. While I aimed to transcend the binary of insider vs outsider and view these positionalities as fluid, considering myself as a researcher embedded within these networks, they still played a pivotal role in the pursuit of institutional consent.

After securing institutional consent from MexiSustain and Climate Action Coalition, I obtained permission to reach out to potential participants within their digital communities. MexiSustain provided a dataset with contact email addresses, while Climate Action Coalition allowed communication through our shared platform space. Using purposive sampling (Gill, 2020), I intentionally contacted individuals who exhibited specific characteristics, such as an active involvement in the online learning network, engagement with learning processes, and participation in grassroots movements. This approach was aimed at gaining an in-depth

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[18] My master's dissertation was a case study of MexiSustain, examining the impact of sustainable development educational programmes on sustainable living practices of adult Mexicans.

understanding of "sustainable development activism" in both online and offline spaces, as discussed throughout this thesis.

Upon initiating contact via email or messages, I provided potential participants with an information sheet outlining the research project and scheduled brief calls using the Teams platform to offer further clarification and address any queries or concerns. Additionally, some interactions were conducted face-to-face during in-person participant observations. Despite these efforts, some individuals expressed hesitance about participating in the study. Reasons for reluctance varied; some cited not identifying as "activists", a topic discussed in Chapter 6, while others voiced concerns about potential exposure of their identity and doubted whether the findings would truly benefit the movement. Although I prepared various documents, including information sheets, and participant consent forms in Spanish, our mother thong, with essential details, addressing these concerns proved challenging, as well as their right to choose to leave the study before data analysis. As noted by Miller and Bell (2012) it is inherent to the research process that as researchers, we cannot anticipate every aspect or outcome in advance, including participants' specific concerns or reservations and the findings of the study.

The study comprised 19 participants, including 9 engaged with MexiSustain, 7 from the Climate Action Coalition, and 3, who were involved with both online learning networks. Once participants agreed to be part of the research, obtaining consent for my involvement in grassroots activism movements through participant observation became another crucial step. Although my research focused on the activists themselves, and they granted me consent to observe them in their communities of practice, it was essential for these communities to be aware of my researcher identity. This process demanded careful negotiation during fieldwork, as each community had its own unique requirements and conditions.

For example, Natalia facilitated my integration into her women's community in Zapotitlan Salinas by discussing my participation with the entire group beforehand and arranging a meeting with the team to discuss the research project. On the other hand, Valentina invited me to participate in her activities as a "volunteer", revealing my role as a researcher when starting participant observation. In cases like working with Valentina, I encountered situations where some community members expressed suspicion about my intentions. While I remained truthful about my identities and purpose, this perception prompted me to reflect on the ongoing negotiation and ethical considerations inherent in

seeking consent and gaining access to diverse communities. As Kennedy-Macfoy (2013) and Kara et al. (2023) emphasise, consent cannot be reduced to a mere checkbox or signature on a document. Rather, it must be continually negotiated and re-evaluated throughout the research process.

4.3 Research Methods

In this section, I discuss the methods I employed to create data during my fieldwork and offer reflections on my experiences with them. I choose a methodological approach consisting of participant observation and semi-structured interviews, as these methods complement each other (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). For instance, certain interviews were conducted alongside specific participant observations, while others were used to refine and expand upon insights gained from participant observation.

4.3.1 Participant Observation

My primary method of data collection was participant observation, conducted both online and offline across multi-sited environments (Candea, 2009). According to DeWalt and DeWalt (2011), participant observation "involves a researcher immersing themselves in the daily activities, rituals, interactions, and events of a group to learn about both the explicit and tacit aspects of their routines and culture" (p. 1). However, my positionality within these communities deviated from the traditional outsider perspective. Having established connections within some of these communities prior to the research, I approached participant observation from an active and engaged standpoint. As Tubacki (2022) suggests, being a researcher-activist requires more than passive observation; it involves assuming multiple roles within the research context, including those of a "climate champion" and a core team member of MexiSustain.

Recognising that activism transcends both online and offline worlds, and extends beyond specific online learning network platforms, I adopted a multi-sited perspective (Marcus, 2012; Candea, 2009). This approach involved starting from a particular vantage point, namely, the online learning networks, while also attending to the circulation of

identities, Discourses, and meanings across various contexts and times. By incorporating these aspects into my analysis, I aimed to capture a more interconnected and holistic understanding of activisms (Santos-Fraile & Massó Guijarro, 2017).

I examined the content of the online learning networks across various platforms and social media spaces, focusing on their Discourses and practices related to "sustainable development activism". I viewed these networks as "places that have a sense of worldliness" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 7), offering a rich environment where participants interact and traverse (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). Over six months, I dedicated one week each month to examining their digital content. Utilising methods such as collecting screenshots, notes, and reflective observations, I meticulously documented the network's digital content. Rather than treating audio-visual materials as standalone data, I employed a reflexive approach (Hine, 2000), examining how participants used the internet to develop an enriched understanding of the practices leading to the production of these contents. I explored how participants interacted with the online learning networks and their textual and audio-visual resources, aiming to identify and analyse social and power dynamics, as well as learning processes.

To achieve this, I actively participated in synchronous events such as webinars and workshops, while also gathering data from everyday network resources and asynchronous activities. This data took various forms, including comments on learning activities, likes, shares, highlights on learning materials, and oral participations within webinars and workshops. Data collection involved daily involvement for one week per month over the six-month period, along with participation in relevant events outside of this timeframe as they occurred during data collection. Notably, data collection was paused in December due to minimal activity in the online learning networks.

Initially, I anticipated that the virtual nature of these interactions would allow for seamless participant observation without disrupting the dynamics of the online learning networks and their participants. However, it soon became clear that my dual role as both a network member and a researcher (explored further in section 4.6.1) introduced complexities. At times, I was simultaneously acting as an activist within the online learning networks while conducting participant observation, which created challenges in deciding whether to engage synchronously or asynchronously. For instance, some of my data notes were practical insights from my activist role rather than research-focused observations.

Following Roberts' (2001) suggestion that a researcher's social positioning affects what is observable and the nature of the observations, I opted to participate synchronously in some events in my activist role while reflecting on my involvement and engaging asynchronously as a researcher. This strategy enabled me to analyse and reflect on the data more effectively. For instance, participating as an activist in various events meant being actively engaged in decision-making or, at times, thinking about how I could apply the insights gained from webinars to my activist practices. This shifted my focus from research to a more activist-oriented perspective.

Through my research, I engaged in face-to-face participant observation within various activism movements across diverse activist communities. This immersive involvement underscored the understanding that activists extend their activities beyond singular locations or online learning networks, aligning with Marcus's (2012) multi-sited ethnographic approach. I embraced this approach by initiating my involvement without predetermined activism communities for participant observation. Instead, I seized opportunities to join movements as they arose and obtained participants' consent for my involvement.

Drawing from Marcus's concept of "following", I adopted a flexible and adaptive approach, actively accompanying participants in their activism practices. This involved moving from one site to another as activities unfolded, allowing me to capture the dynamic and interconnected nature of activism across different contexts. My journey began at an Action Festival organised by the MexiSustain in Guadalajara, Jalisco. This three-day event, filled with a myriad of activities, served as a pivotal starting point for my fieldwork.

At the Action Festival, amidst panel discussions, workshops, and lectures, I had my first face-to-face encounters with colleagues and participants. This event served as a crucial moment in my research, allowing me to recruit participants like Gloria from Tlaxcala, Mexico. Gloria, who led several activism projects in diverse Tlaxcaltecan communities, invited me to join her movement. Over the course of one week, I fully immersed myself in Gloria's activism, which included organising and delivering an art contest at the Tlaxcala Fun Fair during Day of the Dead celebrations, participating in an itinerant campaign in a semi-rural Tlaxcala town alongside colleagues from various movements and institutions, and delivering a "climate talk" at a public high school in Tlaxcala City.

To effectively "follow" my participants, I navigated and negotiated access to different "fields", constantly re-evaluating my multiple positionalities, as further explored in section 4.6.1 (Van Duijn, 2020). For instance, I accompanied Natalia to Zapotitlan Salinas, Mexico, where she was actively engaged with a women's collective. Over two distinct intervals in November and January, each lasting approximately 1.5 weeks, I fully immersed myself in the collective's initiatives focused on advancing women's equity and socioecological justice. Natalia facilitated a dialogue with the community, seeking their collective consent for my participation prior my involvement.

Continuing onward, I joined Luisa in Naucalpan, Estado de Mexico, were we engaged in reforestation efforts at a water dam over multiple Sundays throughout March and April. Luisa and I discussed my role as a researcher during these sessions, which also allowed me to interact with other participants, such as Sonia, who was also a member of the Climate Action Coalition.

Finally, I accompanied Valentina, who spearheaded a "walk for the environment" alongside her radio community in Ciudad Juarez, Chihuahua. Besides my identity as researcher, the community placed particular emphasis on my connection to the radio community, as my grandmother, myself, and other family members had actively listened to it. Subsequently, I joined a "climate talk" led by Valentina at a public higher education institution in Ciudad Juarez, Mexico, where I was introduced as researcher but also as Juarense, highlighting my local connection with the community.

By conducting participant observation across a variety of activities, contexts, and learning spaces, I was able to explore my research questions in depth, focusing on the Discourses and identities central to "sustainable development activism" both within online networks and grassroots movements. Engaging with these diverse settings and communities provided a comprehensive view of how activists navigate their work across different platforms and spaces. This multifaceted approach was crucial in developing a nuanced understanding of the interconnected dynamics shaping "sustainable development activism".

Throughout my participant observation experiences, I maintained systematic and comprehensive notes, documenting everything from the physical layout of the spaces to the activities and conversations with my participants and within the online learning networks. While face-to-face environments limited real-time notetaking, online spaces offered flexibility

with both synchronous and asynchronous moments. During the day, I would jot down "scratch notes", which I later expanded into extended field notes (Sanjek, 1990).

As a researcher-activist, my positionalities were fluid, intersectional, and deeply situational, as highlighted by Reedy and King (2019). There were instances, especially when activists required assistance, where notetaking understandably took a backseat, and I relied on memory to recollect events for later reflection and notetaking. Occasionally, I resorted to voice recordings during quiet moments or at night to document observations in more detail. These preliminary accounts served as valuable background, laying the foundation for further observation, as described by Burgess (1984). As I organised and analysed my fieldnotes in the months following my initial observations, I transitioned from a primarily descriptive approach to a more focused analytical one.

Being a participant observer in an activist ethnography research project means that I do not merely describe a pre-existing social reality; rather, I become an integral part of it, assuming various roles within it (Tubacki, 2022). Throughout my fieldwork, I maintained my activist involvement with the networks, balancing my roles by assisting MexiSustain with their mentorship programme and participating in events and activities as a "climate champion" with Climate Action Coalition, where I had established connections a few months before commencing my research. At times, this required me to strategically navigate my dual roles, such as during the Action Festival, where I conducted participant observation while also providing support to my colleagues by moderating seminars in the absence of designated moderators or assisting with technical issues such as registration.

When immersing myself in my participants' activist communities, I naturally took on multiple roles, serving not only as an activist but also as an educator and a friend (see section 4.6.1). I assisted with technical matters, such as placing posters in central squares to attract more participants to their activities. Additionally, I addressed inquiries and directed them to my participants whenever possible. I also provided logistical support by supplying tools and materials for their activities, and by offering financial assistance. However, my role expanded beyond practical assistance; I was also there to offer emotional support whenever needed, whether celebrating birthdays, joining for a drink to discuss and reflect on activism practices, or simply being a listening ear. Moreover, some participants sought my advice regarding their educational approaches and learning activities, issues explored in greater depth in section 4.6.2.

4.3.2 Ethnographic Conversations

To complement and expand upon the data from participant observation in my research project, I approached interviews as purposeful conversations, drawing on Burgess's (1984) concept of interviews as "conversations with purpose". This perspective emphasises the importance of conversational sensibilities and roles, highlighting interviews as mutual engagements between researchers and participants (Coffey, 2018). Unlike casual conversations, my interviews were semi-structured; I arrived with a concise list of topics to guide the conversation (Ruslin et al., 2022). While these were focused and purposive, they were also dynamic and flexible (Coffey, 2018).

These interviews involved a diverse array of individuals engaged in activism processes. This included leaders and core team members of online learning networks, activists identified within these networks as "climate champions" or "ambassadors", as well as activists who had previously been part of these networks but had stepped away from them.

I began conducting interviews after initiating participant observation, which allowed me to follow up on observations and explore aspects that might have eluded my attention during fieldwork. As Harrison (2020) notes, ethnographers do not presume to possess full understanding of what is most crucial within the field. Despite my prior involvement in some of the researched activists' communities, each experience is unique. Consequently, I employed a purposive sampling strategy (Robinson, 2023) in selecting interview participants.

The interviews were conducted through a combination of online and face-to-face interactions, determined by participant availability and logistical considerations, lasting between 40 and 90 minutes. This duration facilitated engaging dialogues where we constructed memory, meaning, and experience together (Madison, 2020). I crafted a semi-structured interview guide (Mason, 2004), formulating questions based on participant observation and topics I wanted to ensure we covered during the interview. However, the ethnographic approach allowed for flexibility, enabling the conversation to naturally evolve and address emergent themes that were not initially part of the guide but were relevant to the research. Additionally, informal discussions occurred during participant observation, often in settings such as bus rides, coffee breaks, or shared meals. These spontaneous discussions provided valuable insights into participants' practices and perspectives, aligning with the

approach outlined by Coffey (2018) to gather firsthand experiences and understandings of the social context.

However, these informal interactions also presented ethical dilemmas regarding my diverse positionalities. As Robinson-Pant (2016) suggests, microlevel relationships, shaped by ever-shifting insider-outsider roles, are not merely about the researcher and participants "getting to know each other" but also about the dialectic construction of knowledge. I remained reflective about how these roles and their inherent tensions influenced the knowledge produced, including decisions about what could be considered as data (Millora, 2020). For instance, during informal conversations at Gloria's house with her family, she shared relevant information that could potentially be used as data. However, this information was shared with me in the context of friendship, rather than as a researcher. This prompted me to reflect in the ethical tensions involved in using such information and ultimately decide whether to exclude it from my analysis.

Most of these interviews were recorded using voice recording software on my computer or cell phone, especially during face-to-face sessions. Occasionally, I took brief notes during the interviews, but I aimed to keep this to a minimum to avoid distracting or causing nervousness among participants. Following the completion of online interviews or upon returning to my workspace, I regularly made notes capturing key insights from the discussions. These notes provided invaluable during the transcription and translation phases. I transcribed all interviews in Spanish, the native language shared by both myself and my participants and conducted the data analysis in Spanish as well. I then translated only the sections deemed essential for the thesis writing process.

4.3.3 Reflecting on my Experiences

In line with my activist ethnography methodology, I integrated analytic reflections to frame my research through my roles as an activist, an active member of the online learning networks, and a researcher. This approach involved leveraging personal reflective insights to facilitate sense-making, analytic reflexivity, and theoretical analysis, as outlined by Anderson (2006) and Atkinson et al., (1999).

The aim of analytic reflection was not merely to document personal experiences but to use these insights to explore and understand broader social phenomena (Anderson, 2006). While I acknowledged the value of my position as an active member of the research context, I remained mindful that my study sought to understand a complex phenomenon of which I am only one part (Atkinson et al., 1999). In this section, I introduce my positionality within the research and reflect on its significance for the study.

My Positionality within "Sustainable Development Activism"

My journey as activist has been dynamic and evolving. Within the context of this research project, my activism took shape through my involvement in online learning networks. Initially, I began volunteering as a programmes' assistant for MexiSustain in early 2019, contributing to various initiatives. My particular interest laid in the mentorship programme, and after a few months, I assumed the role of co-coordinator for this programme. While I some had authority over the structure and learning modalities, my involvement in content creation was comparatively limited. Furthermore, my focus on one programme constrained my engagement with other initiatives within the network.

The virtual nature of my interactions with MexiSustain members posed challenges in forming meaningful connections beyond the confines of a screen. Nevertheless, despite this virtual distance, I fostered a strong attachment to the network. Engaging in this research project prompted profound introspection, leading me to question my role and impact as an activist within the organisation. Despite these reflections, I continued my involvement as an "international liaison" offering support in specific areas such as processes related to adult education.

My engagement with Climate Action Coalition began in 2021 during the conceptualisation phase of this research project. I chose to join this network to take on a more peripheral role as activist rather than as part of the management team, aiming to embrace unfamiliar perspectives and challenge my preconceptions of "sustainable development activism" through the process of "making the unfamiliar familiar and the familiar strange" (Rogers & Street, 2012, p.19). While residing in the UK at the time, I underwent training and joined the network's UK branch. However, I became more actively involved with the Latin American branch during my fieldwork. This shift, however, often positioned me more as a researcher than an activist within the community and in the eyes of some participants.

My role within the studied communities provided advantages, such as access to spaces and familiarity with dynamics. However, it also demanded a high degree of reflexivity to navigate the interplay between my role as an ethnographer and the setting and participants of my research (Anderson, 2006). For example, I became aware that my insider perspective could obscure certain practices within MexiSustain that an outsider might more easily identify. This included recognising the power dynamics participants attributed me due to my long-standing involvement and connections with key leaders, as well as my limited ability to grant agency to participants in the programme I was coordinating. Additionally, I noticed an overreliance on Discourses I had previously taken for granted without questioning them.

The analytical reflection of myself and my communities led to shifts in my beliefs, actions, and sense of self as discussed in section 8.3.3. By engaging in reflective analysis of my role, identity, and Discourses as a "sustainable development activist" both within and beyond the online learning networks, as well as my role as a postgraduate researcher, I positioned myself as both a participant in and a product of the representational processes (Anderson, 2006).

To document these reflections, I maintained a research diary. This diary was not merely a repository of thoughts or descriptions of my actions but aligned with Snow et al.'s (2003) analytic conception. My aim was to employ a range of data-transcending practices to advance theoretical development, refinement, and extension, while also making visible my positionality as an integral part of the phenomenon under investigation (see further Section 4.6.1).

4.4 Analysis and Writing-Up

The analysis of my research project was an ongoing process, spanning from the formulation of research questions to the writing phase (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2007). Early analysis occurred during online participant observation and while I was in the field. I meticulously gathered my observations in fieldnotes, incorporating pictures, texts, and reflective notes to make sense of the data, generate ideas, and prepare for future data collection to explore and develop these ideas (Coffey, 2018).

As the volume of information increased and new, intriguing aspects emerged, I realised the need to identify missing links and explore additional dimensions. In consultation with my supervisors, I initiated the development of a monthly report, which served as a preliminary analysis tool. These reports allowed for regular reflection and refinement of my approach (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019).

Given the diverse contexts and situations of my participant observation within "sustainable development activism", my fieldnotes varied significantly for each encounter. Nonetheless, I consistently included contextual, descriptive, and factual accounts, as well as impressions, analyses, and methodological notes, following Hughes' (1994) ON (observational notes), TN (theoretical notes), and MN (methodological notes) strategy. This process aimed to integrate individual pieces of data into a broader framework, facilitating a comprehensive understanding of the research landscape (Fetterman, 2020).

During data creation through participant observation and interviews, I went beyond solely relying on my perceptions. I sought to understand how participants made sense of situations, interacted, and discussed their practices, as emphasised by Fontana and Prokos (2007) and White and Drew (2011). For example, while gathering visual and textual materials from online learning network resources, I explored their significance for participants and how these resources were utilised in their activism practices. Ethnographic conversations were essential in creating data, allowing me to obtain details of situations that I did not witness or fully grasp (Burgess, 1984).

Before concluding interviews and participant observation, I began coding the data. This involved carefully reading my fieldnotes, transcriptions, and documents repeatedly during fieldwork, aiming to make sense of them through what Hammersley and Atkinson (2007) refer to as "abduction". This process involved examining concepts and theories that helped me interpret the data. I followed a colour-coded system for my observation notes, in my fieldwork notebooks, and word documents for virtual observation, as I did not want to separate data at this stage. By the time I returned to the UK, I had already identified some significant codes in both observation notes and ethnographic conversations.

Upon resuming my analysis in the UK, I initially attempted to use NVivo for coding my data. However, I found this approach somewhat limiting because it did not allow me to view the entirety of my data while searching for codes. Consequently, I opted to implement the

initial colour-coded system for all my transcriptions and fieldnotes, organising codes manually. This approach enabled me to revisit my data multiple times, leading to the emergence of new codes, themes, and analyses.

Throughout the writing process, particularly when crafting the empirical chapters and revisiting the literature, this analysis remained ongoing and dynamic. As Fetterman (2020) suggests, ethnographic analysis is iterative, with ideas evolving and building upon each other throughout the study. This iterative process of analysis was integral to the development of my research findings.

4.5 Writing Ethnography

As mentioned in the previous section, writing is intricately intertwined with analysis, involving the reconstruction of a social phenomenon through interpretative lenses (Hammersley & Atkinson, 2019). The process of writing my activist ethnographic project presented numerous challenges and required careful decision-making.

One significant consideration was the need to protect the anonymity of both the online learning networks and my participants, who were part of tight-knit communities. To address this concern, I employed pseudonyms and used vague terms when describing certain positions, such as referring to individuals as members of the core team rather than using their official titles. Additionally, I remained aware of my ethical responsibilities in managing and safeguarding the data created during my research. I took measures to ensure the security of the data, including pictures, voice recordings, transcriptions, typed-up notes, and screenshots, by converting them into electronic forms and storing them in an online folder. This folder is protected by a password and housed within the secure IT infrastructure of the University of East Anglia. Furthermore, my fieldwork notebooks, containing handwritten observations and reflections, are kept securely in my home office, further safeguarding the confidentiality and integrity of the data.

In addition to the technical aspects of writing my ethnographic study, several other considerations emerged. Striving to separate myself from my own biases and emotional connections within the realms of "sustainable development activism", the networks, and my participants to achieve a "more objective" portrayal was challenging. While belonging to the

communities I studied offered insight, it did not guarantee a complete understanding or connection to the stories and lives of my participants. However, it did provide me with the perspective needed to recognise when and how to question my positionality within the research (Nuñez & García Mateus, 2022). For example, I become aware that attending online seminars and workshops within the networks as a researcher created tensions, as my positionality made participants feel observed, prompting some to turn off their cameras. In contrast, when I joined these sessions as an activist, the dynamic shifted, participants felt more at ease and engaged collaboratively with me. This realisation led me to participate as an activist while later reviewing the recordings as a researcher, as previously mentioned.

Acknowledging my limitations in understanding the social phenomena of which I am a part, I took steps to involve my participants in the research process. During fieldwork, I shared interview transcriptions and early analyses with them, providing an opportunity for them to confirm or challenge interpretations. For example, one participant detected bias in my reflective comments within her interview transcription regarding her relationships with fellow activists who supported her initiatives. This prompted an informal discussion to clarify and complement the information gathered through both interviews and participant observations.

However, I am mindful that the decisions regarding what to include in this thesis, as well as how to represent and write about them, ultimately rested with me. These decisions were influenced by my experiences, relationships, and the evolving understanding developed throughout the project. Furthermore, developing a political understanding of my own standpoint and learning to articulate it was a process I underwent while writing this research project. It required an active and ongoing process of politicising the social worlds, as advocated by activist ethnography, which encouraged me to continuously question and deepen my understanding of my political subjectivity (Deschner & Dorion, 2020).

4.6 Reflecting on my Activist Ethnographic Research Process

Conducting an activist ethnography was both challenging and fulfilling. It involved exploring my own communities and political practices while reshaping them through theoretical engagement and participation with my participants. In this section, I elaborate on two specific challenges encountered during my activist ethnography research: positionality

and reflexivity in researching my communities, and the ethics of reciprocity. I aim to highlight these tensions and complementarities, as they had implications for various components of my research, including the selection of online learning networks and participants, decision-making processes, and writing up findings.

4.6.1 Identities, Positionality, and Reflexivity in Researching "My Communities"

Throughout this thesis, I have acknowledged my dual identity as both an activist and a researcher. However, it is crucial to recognise that these identities bring a complex intersectional array of positionalities that have influenced the design, execution, and composition of this research endeavour.

Originally from Ciudad Juárez, Chihuahua, Mexico, I identify as a Latin American woman from a working-class background. Despite challenges, I have been fortunate to receive numerous grants, enabling me to pursue education both in Mexico and abroad. These experiences have allowed me to engage in research while continuously navigating and reflecting on the privileges and practices that have positioned me as a researcher.

In section 4.3.3 I detailed my positionality within the research project, describing how I positioned myself as an "insider" within the online learning networks. However, as Deschner and Dorion (2020) note, activist organisations are characterised by multiple "insides", shaped by ongoing negotiations of everyone's political standpoints, including my own. These layers of insider status influenced my study in several ways. For instance, while I had access to the online learning networks and required consent from participants who were members of these networks, gaining informal "approval" from their activism communities presented a new challenge, with some of them positioning me as researcher and others as an activist. Navigating these dynamics required me to contend with multiple intersecting identities and positionalities, including being a young activist woman, researcher student at a UK institution, a Juarense, and an outsider within their communities.

"Choosing" a positionality within participant observation posed a challenge because participants perceived me through certain identities and positionalities that did not always align with that of a researcher. This created dilemmas where I had to reflect on my identities,

positionalities, and their role within my project. For instance, I had to consider the extent to which it was "acceptable" to assist with technical issues without "compromising" my researcher position.

> …when we were about to start Rosa's seminar, there were barely any people present in the room. Rosa looked quite disheartened, and I felt so bad for her, and the activists invited to speak. knowing all the effort she put into organising this event, I was at a loss for what to do. Should I stay here and simply observe what was happening, or should I go outside and inform people that the seminar is about to start? Perhaps they hadn't received notice and would be interested in joining… After pondering for a few minutes, I decided to step outside and start inviting people. I was not sure if it was the "correct" thing to do as a researcher, but I knew I was following my instincts as an activist.

> -Reflective notes, September 21, 2022.

Reflecting on this moment in my notes, I recognise that I struggled within my positionality. I had been viewing positionalities as binaries rather than standpoints inviting interrogation and analysis. As Scharenberg (2023) and Deschner and Dorion (2020) suggest, instead of striving for political neutrality, objectivity and academic rigour may be attained through engaging with contradictions and testing the knowledge produced. Therefore, I embraced the idea that positionalities are not static but fluid and deeply situational (Reedy & King, 2019). Furthermore, aside from positioning myself as an activist and researcher, I also held other positionalities as a friend and educator. This brought about ethical dilemmas, such as the reciprocity I could establish within participant communities and movements.

> …Natalia asked me if I could assist her with the learning activities, as she "did not know much about it as much as I do". This caught me off guard. I hesitated to decline because of the openness she has shown in welcoming me into her activism circles; helping her could have been a way to reciprocate her kindness. However, I also grappled with the concern of potentially influencing or shaping her practices, which I wanted to avoid. In the end, I proposed assisting her after completing my participant observation. This approach could afford me a deeper understanding of her context, enabling me to provide more informed assistance without unduly imposing my perspectives on her activities.

> -Reflective notes, December 3, 2022.

In my interactions with Natalia and other participants, I came to realise the significance of various positionalities within my research. I was not solely perceived as a researcher or an activist; there were numerous other identities I needed to consider and analyse, reflecting on how these affected the research project. As Reyes (2020) suggests, researchers' social identities and positionalities evolve across spaces and interactions, requiring reflection on how researchers actively draw on their characteristics and resources.

Although I did not initially consider myself as a "friend" of my participants, our relationship grew during fieldwork, reshaping our roles and the tensions not only in our relationship but also in the knowledge produced during the process. This involved redefining what constituted data, as some participants shared valuable information in casual and intimate settings, such as grabbing drinks or during late-night conversations. To verify whether I could use this information as data, I took notes and sought consent from my participants during our interview or other encounters.

The next section explores the ethics of reciprocity and how my identities, positionalities, and reflexivity played a relevant role in defining it.

4.6.2 The Ethics of Reciprocity

In previous sections, I discussed some of the ethical procedures underpinning this research, such as the use of consent forms and ethical tick boxes. When I embarked on designing this research project, I recognised the personal benefits it could bring, such as earning a PhD to advance my career and deepening my understanding of the cause I advocated for. However, I also grappled with questions regarding the reciprocal benefits for both the online learning networks and the participants involved. I was keenly mindful of avoiding replicating colonialist research dynamics and refraining from exploiting my fellow activists by subjecting them to the scrutiny of the academic gaze, as highlighted by Deschner and Dorion (2020).

Throughout the process, I remained cognisant that while I organised, analysed, and synthesised the data, the experiences that form the foundation of this thesis were not solely my own. They were the result of a collective effort, an amalgamation of shared information. I gained access to these insights because people allowed me into their private spaces and

communities, entrusting me with their lives, thoughts, and experiences. I found Swartz's (2011) reflections on the ethics of reciprocity particularly useful, which advocate for giving back ownership of knowledge and material benefits to those participating in research. During fieldwork, my attempt to return "ownership of knowledge" involved sharing my early analysis with participants, especially through informal conversations.

Navigating the offering of material support presented challenges, as it varied for each of my participants and their respective networks. For MexiSustain, I had been offering material support as a volunteer for years. During my fieldwork and afterwards, I continued to assist them, albeit in a different capacity. Instead of coordinating the mentorship programme as I had before, I renegotiated my role to act as a volunteer consultant and collaborator.

In contrast, offering material support to participants directly presented its own set of challenges. I aimed to avoid creating a transactional exchange and instead wanted to assist in addressing their immediate needs. I adopted what Nama and Swartz (2002, p. 295) refer to as the "local ethics of immediate need".

For Gloria, this meant covering commuting expenses and providing stationery for activities like poster-making. For Luisa, it involved providing food after strenuous activities at the water dam, and Valentina needed plastic bags for an environmental walk.

While providing this assistance, I did not view it solely as an act of reciprocation for research participation. Instead, I saw myself as actively contributing to their cause rather than merely observing (Reedy & King, 2017). Tubacki (2022) asserts that when we step into the role of researcher-activist, our involvement extends beyond merely participating in the lives of our research participants and learning from them; we also take on other roles.

After concluding my participant observation, I continued to maintain relationships with my participants. I joined Natalia's women's community and have been involved in their movement, offering assistance with administrative and planning tasks, including grant applications. Additionally, I remain in touch with participants like Luisa and Gloria, assisting them with advice on grants and various projects.

Navigating reciprocity in this research also extends beyond the specific online learning networks and activists involved. By producing original activist scholarship, this project aimed to engage in a broader, less tangible form of reciprocity, contributing critical insights to the

understanding of "sustainable development activism". In this way this research aspired to deepen academic and practical knowledge in the field, creating a foundation for further exploration and advocacy in "sustainable development activism".

Navigating the ethics of reciprocity, as well as the complexities of positionality and reflexivity, was integral to my activist ethnographic research. Balancing personal benefits with meaningful contributions to the communities I studied required continuous reflection and adaptability. By prioritising the collective nature of the research and striving to offer both material and intellectual support, I aimed to foster genuine collaboration and avoid exploitative dynamics. Maintaining ongoing relationships with participants and actively contributing to their causes underscored my commitment to ethical research practices and highlighted the dynamic interplay between researcher and activist roles. This approach not only enriched the research process but also reinforced the principles of reciprocity and respect that lie at the core of activist ethnography. It also embodied a contextual and situational approach to ethics, one that moved beyond ticking boxes towards cultivating a grounded, context-sensitive ethical awareness.

4.7 Insights into Research Challenges

Conducting ethnographic research presents various challenges inherent to analysing social phenomenon. These tensions range from ethnographers navigating the dichotomy between understanding individuals' perspectives from an insider's viewpoint and analysing their behaviours and contexts from a more detached, potentially alienating stance (Hammersley, 2006) to "assumptions underlying advocacy of qualitative method: that the nature of the social world must be discovered" (Hammersley, 1992, p.12). While I have previously discussed some of the challenges inherent in the methodology of this study, I will now provide a more nuanced analysis of the specific research challenges encountered throughout this thesis.

One notable challenge was the underrepresentation of research respondents in positions of power within the online learning networks, such as founders and directors of institutions. Engaging with these stakeholders proved somewhat complicated, resulting in limited outreach success. Although their first hand, verbal insights could have added valuable context, the absence of their perspectives does not necessarily undermine the core findings of the study.

The research still captures a range of their voices, represented within the online learning network's documents, formats and contents, albeit without interviews of those in influential roles.

Additionally, although financial and time constraints limited the number of "sustainable development activism" movements examined within the online learning networks, I aimed to capture their voices within the ethnographic conversations and through their representations in public formats and documents, for instance, Instagram accounts. This resulted in a focused, small scale, in-dept account of the selected movements. The brief observation periods, constrained by similar limitations (time and financial resources), allowed for in-dept exploration of diverse movements within activism learning networks, that offer valuable snapshots of activism in the context of "sustainable development activism", providing meaningful insights that can guide future research directions (see Section 8.4).

4.8 Conclusion

This chapter has aimed to share not only my methodological strategies but also to clarify why I chose activist ethnography as my approach and how it aligns with my research aims, questions, and the contextual and theoretical standpoints discussed in Chapters 2 and 3. Activist ethnography was chosen for its rigorous demands on building knowledge that matches academic standards but more importantly, it is relevant to activism and relevant organisations (Reedy & King, 2017; Dorion, 2021) and its ability to challenge and build upon my personal assumptions and practices.

In developing this thesis, I sought to establish a voice and identity that both represented my perspective and honoured the experiences of my participants, ensuring they were situated within the complex landscape of "sustainable development activism". I critically examined my biases and experiences, analysing their origins and implications for the research, and challenged them through theoretical and practical analysis and reflection.

Throughout the project, I faced challenges related to positionality and ethics, which extended beyond interactions with participants to involve institutions such as the online learning networks and the university. These challenges offered valuable insights into the

multifaceted nature of the phenomenon under study, particularly the dynamics of "sustainable development activism".

Conducting activist ethnography has proven to be an ongoing process that extends beyond the boundaries of this PhD project. It has provided actionable insights into "sustainable development activism" while demonstrating that activism and academia are compatible pursuits. Rather than viewing the research as a finite endeavour, I now see it as a continuous engagement with evolving realities, both my own and those of others, aimed at fostering deeper understanding and reflexivity about what activism means. This extends not only to those directly "involved" in activism but also to broader socio-ecological structures.

4.9 Reading the Empirical Chapters: Introducing the Participants

The following chapters present the main findings and discussion of my research. Given the diversity within sustainable development activism and the varied backgrounds of my participants, I have chosen to introduce them in this section using pseudonyms and by altering some details to preserve their anonymity. This approach aims to enhance the readability of the subsequent chapters and highlight the breadth of activist experiences represented in the study.

Rosa was a member of MexiSustain. In her mid-20s, she was studying International Relations at a public university in Guadalajara, Mexico. She joined the organisation during the COVID-19 pandemic after responding to a call to action shared by one of her professors. Initially taking on the role of "ambassador", she engaged in activism related to democracy and civic engagement, both within her university and through online platforms. Over time, she advanced to the position of assistant and eventually became the Coordinator of Alliances and Strategic Advocacy.

Laura was a member of MexiSustain from 2020 to 2022. In her early 30s, she was a psychologist based in Guadalajara, Mexico. Her involvement with the organisation began through an internet search, building on her longstanding engagement in community volunteer work. After connecting with one of the network's leaders at a volunteerism event, she joined as an ambassador. She later transitioned to the "Human Talent" division, where she worked closely with ambassadors and the core team to coordinate follow-up activities.

Lorena was a core team member of the Climate Action Coalition for two years, resigning after the completion of my fieldwork. In her late 20s, she had been involved in feminist, environmental, and peace movements in Colombia, primarily as an adult educator. Originally from Bogotá, she came from a family deeply engaged in activism. She began as an Engagement Coordinator and later became the Coordinator of Special Projects for the network's Latin American branch.

Valentina was a member of the Climate Action Coalition. In her mid-30s, she was an electrical engineer with a master's degree in energy, having studied at both public and private institutions in northern Mexico. She was consistently involved in electricity-related topics and participated in activism focused on human and environmental health within her religious and neighbourhood communities. Valentina joined the network as a "climate champion" during the COVID-19 pandemic, completing their climate training to enhance her professional profile.

Esmeralda was a member of both online learning networks. In her early 40s, she was a professor from Tijuana, Mexico, specialising in ecotoxicology at a higher education institution in San Diego, California. She was deeply engaged in movements promoting the participation and representation of women in STEM. Esmeralda joined the networks during the pandemic, serving as both a climate champion and an ambassador.

Juan Carlos was a member of the Climate Action Coalition. In his early 40s and a parent, he was the leader of a youth NGO promoting environmental education in Querétaro, Mexico. He participated in several regional social movements focused on social and environmental justice. Though he trained as a climate champion in the Philippines six years earlier, he became involved with the network's Latin American branch upon returning to his hometown.

Julio was a member of MexiSustain. In his late 30s and a parent, he was an architect and director of construction at a prominent firm in Guadalajara, Mexico. He also worked as a consultant for various governmental and non-governmental organisations, specialising in citizen participation, and supported social movements including arts collectives and independent political parties. He joined the network as an ambassador in 2020.

Pablo had been involved with MexiSustain since 2016. In his early 30s, he was a graduate student in human geography at a public university in northern Mexico. Active in

environmental volunteerism since 2011, he began his involvement with MexiSustain as a volunteer and now serves as one of its key leaders and legal representatives.

Miguel was part of the MexiSustain core team from 2017 to 2023. In his early 30s, he was a biochemical engineer educated at a public university in Guanajuato, Mexico. He began as a volunteer, organising and analysing the network's data. He later became the Management Coordinator, overseeing engagement with ambassadors and organisations, before eventually leading the Human Talent division.

Jorge was a member of MexiSustain. In his late 20s, he came from a small Indigenous community in Oaxaca, Mexico. He studied International Relations at a public university located several hours from his hometown and briefly lived in Mexico City before the COVID-19 pandemic. Despite this, his activism remained primarily rooted in his local community. Jorge formally joined the network as an ambassador from 2020 to early 2023, although he had been informally involved since 2017. He stepped away from the network during the writing stage of this research.

Natalia was a member of both online learning networks. In her late 20s, she was a biologist from Mexico City. She described her activism as "participatory development", with a focus on grassroots and collaborative networks, particularly through a women's learning community in rural Puebla. She was also part of a core group of biologists working on women's issues across Latin America. Natalia joined both networks in 2020, serving as an ambassador and a climate champion.

Verónica had been a member of MexiSustain since 2016. In her early 30s, she was a PhD candidate at a university in Costa Rica and lived in Sweden. Her research focused on peace and sustainable development. She began as a volunteer and became the Mentorship Programme Coordinator in 2017. Verónica was also active in feminist and peace-based activism.

Sonia had been a member of the Climate Action Coalition since 2019. In her early 30s, she was a mother and an educator at a private elementary school. Her activism focused on feminism, sustainability, and urban allotments. Sonia was active in digital activism, producing content to promote allotments and occasionally participating in local campaigns, such as those led by Luisa. She joined the network as a climate champion.

Juliana was a member of the Climate Action Coalition from 2021 to late 2023. In her late 20s, she began her activism around the Colombian peace agreement and later expanded into digital engagement, citizen participation, gender equity, and climate change. She led communications for one of the network's decarbonisation side projects.

Angélica was a member of MexiSustain since 2019. In her early 30s, she studied sustainable management of coastal areas in Yucatán, Mexico, and worked in Mexico City focusing on the country's natural reserves. Her activism centred on ecosystem preservation. Having previously volunteered, she later dedicated herself to this cause professionally and joined the network as an ambassador.

Gloria had been a member of both online learning networks since 2018 and 2020, respectively. In her early 30s, she was a biologist based in a semi-rural area of Tlaxcala, Mexico. She had previously worked in Guadalajara for a company that repurposed cigarette butts into paper and other products. Gloria led a hybrid environmental education project in Tlaxcala, with her activism grounded in waste management and biodiversity conservation. She joined the networks as an ambassador and climate champion.

Melissa was an influencer in her late 20s who collaborated occasionally with the Climate Action Coalition. From El Cauca, Colombia, she was a lawyer with a master's degree in environmental rights. Her activism focused on content creation addressing social and environmental injustices.

Luisa was a member of the Climate Action Coalition. In her late 20s, she studied architecture at a private university in the State of Mexico. Active in socio-environmental activism since 2015, her work included waste management, composting, reforestation, and water conservation, particularly regarding a local dam. She was also engaged in digital activism and was sponsored as an influencer by an international shoe company. She joined the network as a climate champion in 2020.

Chapter Five

Unravelling "Sustainable Development" Discourses within Activism Practices

5. Introduction

As outlined through this research project, "sustainable development activism" encompasses a broad spectrum of Discourses, identities, and practices that are rooted in complex power systems in which participants are embedded. This chapter examines the multifaceted Discourses shaping "sustainable development activism" within the context of this study, focusing on the online learning networks and the diverse communities of practice to which my participants belong. By investigating these varied Discourses and their inherent complexities, I demonstrate how they continuously (re)shape activism practices.

Central to this analysis are the intricate power dynamics that influence participants' engagement with diverse stakeholders, institutions, and communities involved in "sustainable development activism". These power systems are not neutral; they structure who has access to resources, whose knowledge is legitimised, and whose identities are recognised as competent or legitimate within these networks. By emphasising the strategic flexibility with which activists utilise these Discourses, I illustrate how they are not static entities but instead evolve as activists navigate challenges and interact with various communities and institutions.

As presented in Chapters 1 and 2, existing literature centres on Discourses for, within, and beyond "sustainable development activism". However, I argue that these are deeply intertwined, shaping and being shaped by the socio-political, cultural, and economic contexts in which activism takes place. I begin by exploring the Discourses adopted by online learning networks within the research project. These range from international frameworks, such as the Agenda 2030 for Sustainable Development, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to scientific and technological Discourses surrounding the "climate crises". I then analyse the Discourses employed by my participants as they strive for change, with a focus on what they and I identified as their "primary" Discourse of activism engagement. Through this analysis, I

provide insights into the nuanced and strategic ways activists tailor their discursive approaches to engage with distinct communities and spheres of influence.

This exploration also addresses the tensions and disjunctions present within these Discourses, offering reflections on how these disconnects impact individuals and communities navigating the complex space between them. Such tensions, often arising from the diverse and sometimes conflicting priorities within "sustainable development", highlight the challenges faced by activists as they attempt to reconcile and navigate power relationships embedded within "sustainable development" Discourses. By recognising and interrogating these challenges, this chapter contributes to a deeper understanding of how Discourses not only shape but are shaped by the lived realities of those engaged in "sustainable development activism".

5.1 Whose Worlds? Whose Agendas? Online Learning Networks and Discourses of "Sustainable Development"

As discussed in Chapter 2, online learning networks have emerged as significant spaces for "sustainable development activism". Within the scope of my research project, these networks play a pivotal role in the activism of my participants, who have engaged, either currently or in the past, with initiatives like MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition. The sections of this chapter focus on exploring the specific Discourses surrounding "sustainable development" that these online learning networks cultivate, shedding light on how these institutional Discourses are linked to particular worldviews, power structures, and vested interests (Mayr, 2008).

Following Harvey (2018), I view these Discourses as ideologies deeply embedded in material practices and social relations within institutionalised frameworks, functioning as mechanisms of political, social, and economic power. Rather than simply analysing Discourses as coherent statements circulated within online learning networks, I adopted a more nuanced perspective, understanding them as products of a complex interplay of practices and power dynamics (See Chapter 3). These practices and dynamics not only sustain the circulation of specific Discourses but also seek to define boundaries, thereby including some while excluding others. Drawing on insights from Foucault (1980) and Mills (2003), I argue that the

Discourses embedded within the online learning networks are deeply intertwined with power and knowledge, with certain ideas and statements legitimised by institutions that influence and structure societal ways of thinking.

Moreover, this exploration investigates how these Discourses both enable and sideline forms of activism, revealing their role in shaping the possibilities and limitations of activism within these digital communities of practice.

5.1.1 Sustainable Development: Who's Controlling Discourses?

As mentioned in Chapter 2, MexiSustain emerged as a response to a global initiative spearheaded by the United Nations, specifically the Action Campaign for Sustainable Development Goals. Since my involvement with the network in 2018, I have observed that the organisation's focus has continually evolved, incorporating a variety of Discourses, ranging from the SDGs to planetary boundaries[19] and the circular economy[20], reflecting what I describe as their *strategic flexibility* (see section 5.3 and 8.1.1). However, during participant observation, it became evident that the online learning network primarily emphasised a Discourse based on the SDGs and sustainable development as an international Agenda to be implemented in local contexts. For example, their website outlined their background based on the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (see Figure 1), focusing on the adoption of the Agenda by internation bodies, the MY World 2030 Survey, and the Action Campaign for the SDGs, rather than highlighting its origins as an initiative led by volunteer students striving to engage groups who were being left out of these processes, as discussed in Chapter 2. Similarly, within its mentorship programme and campaign content, as depicted in Figure 2 and 3, the activities and materials centred around various SDGs, reflecting a top-down perspective rooted in international agreements and policies. For instance, Figure 2 highlights the Agenda for the MexiSustain Action Campaign, which featured actions aligned with different SDGs,

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[19] The planetary boundaries, based on Earth system science, identify nine critical processes for maintaining the stability and resilience of the Earth system (Richardson et al., 2023).

[20] Circular economy is a system designed with the intention of maximising the use of resources while minimising waste generation for disposal (Velenturf & Purnell, 2021).

organised by specific days. Meanwhile, the mentorship programme's Module 1 agenda (shown in Figure 3) included topics based on the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, incorporating concepts such as "going glocal", transitioning from global to local.

Figure 2. MexiSustain Action Campaign Guide Agenda, retrieved in October 2022.
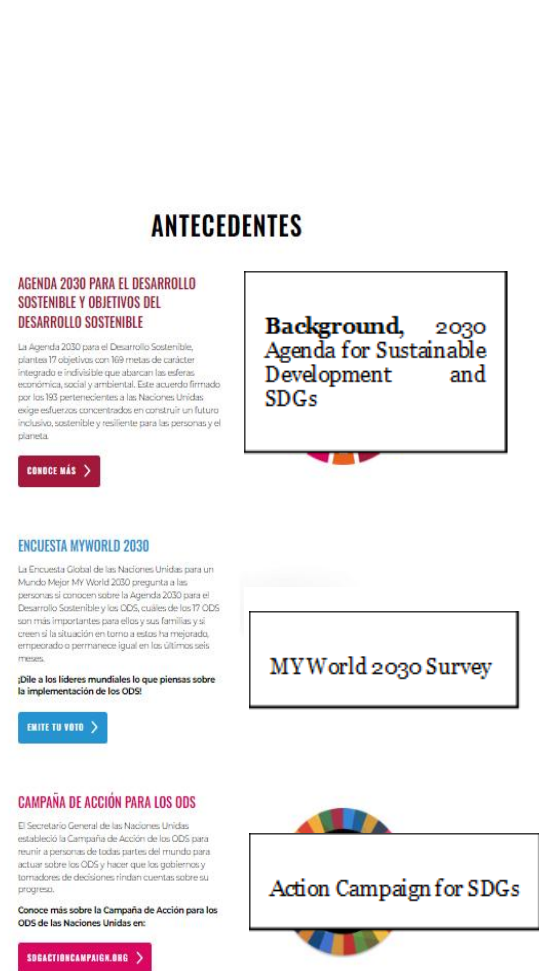
Figure 1. MexiSustain Website (Background), retrieved in January 2023.

Figure 3. MexiSustain Mentorship Programme Module 1 Agenda, retrieved in May 2023.

However, this approach to "sustainable development" has faced significant criticism (see Section 1.3). Scholars, such as Salazar et al., (2023) argue that the dominant perspective on "sustainable development" essentially reconfigures the concepts of time and space to define what the "good" place should be and how it should be achieved. In this framework,

paradoxically, problems such as predatory capitalism, consumerism, and systemic inequities are often presented as part of the solution to the socio-ecological crisis. These scholars contend that this perspective has neglected a deeper examination of the root causes of the issue, with "sustainable development" frequently perceived as an idealistic concept that remains unattainable in practice.

Additionally, González-Gaudiano (2005) critiques sustainable development by characterising it as an "empty signifier"[21], a term that takes on multiple interpretations through a chain of equivalences. Campbell and Robottom (2008) further this critique by labelling sustainable development as little more than a policy slogan. This characterisation suggests that sustainable development is often used as a superficial catchphrase without substantial backing in practical policies or actions, as discussed in Chapters 1 and 2.

Within MexiSustain, references to international agendas were prevalent, yet a clear, detailed explanation of "sustainable development" within the network was noticeably absent. Instead, MexiSustain presented itself on its website as a "hybrid initiative that combines social mobility, activisms, and advocacy with an innovative circular business model based on sustainable development. Collaborating with individuals and organisations from all sectors and backgrounds to ensure the realisation of a world where people thrive in balance, equality, and justice, respecting the planetary boundaries", as shown in Figure 4.

While this approach was intriguing, the emphasis on balance, equality, and justice stood in contrast to the strong emphasis on a "business model based on sustainable development". This tension was particularly significant when viewed through the lens of González-Gaudiano's (2005) critique, which argues that pursuing "sustainable development" through an economically driven approach has perpetuated global inequities and exacerbated the ecological crisis.

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[21] For an analysis of the link between Laclau's empty signifier and Lacanian theory, see Y. Stavrakakis' "Laclau with Lacan" in *The Journal of Culture and the Unconscious*, vol. 1, pp. 134–153.

Figure 4. MexiSustain Website (Who we are), retrieved in February 2023.

From participant observation and conversations with some participants, it became evident that there was a lack of clarity regarding who was actively involved in crafting and implementing the "sustainable development" Discourse within the online learning network community. During an interview, Pablo, a member of the core team and legal representative of the MexiSustain, shared that they adopted the Discourse of "sustainable development" based on international frameworks such as the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, while combining a social enterprise approach with a business model. This shift was driven by the demands of other institutions seeking support for their "sustainable development" strategies, as well as livelihood pressures experienced by its members, such as financial pressures (further explored in section 5.3.2).

Prior to this transition, while MexiSustain had incorporated elements of the "sustainable development" Discourse promoted by international agencies such as the United Nations, the organisation primarily focused on working towards "the world we want". At that time, they operated with volunteers and engaged with organisations holding diverse perspectives on how to instigate change. This shift in Discourse arose from the need to provide services with financial returns to these institutions and align with their expectations.

"When we were transitioning from being a network to becoming a social enterprise and evolving the online learning model, between 2020 and 2021, we noticed a significant shift. It's important to highlight that during this period, demand from various

organisations, including municipal and state governments, international organisations, and companies across all sectors, was growing. These organisations were specifically requesting support from MexiSustain for training. There was also consideration of changing our approach to offer paid services".

-Interview excerpts July 13, 2022.

Pablo's statements shed light on how MexiSustain adapted its Discourse and approach in response to external influences from various institutions. This shift, driven in part by the network's precarious funding situation, appeared to offer an opportunity not only to broaden its engagement with a wider audience and institutions but also to ensure the financial sustainability of its operations. However, as Foucault (1979) and Mills (2003) argue, and as highlighted in Chapter 3, Discourse is intricately linked to power relations where certain statements and ideas are sanctioned and authorised by institutions, exerting influence over individuals' thoughts and beliefs. While the change in Discourse within MexiSustain was seen as an opportunity to engage with more institutions and potentially secure funding through service provision, the lack of clarity in this process and Discourse led some members to alter their activism approaches and, in some cases, leave the organisation.

Laura, a member of MexiSustain for two years who worked with LGBTQ+ movements and communications, left the organisation prior to our interview. During our conversation, she shared her experience, highlighting the challenges that arose from the organisation's ambiguity. Despite her prolonged involvement, Laura found both the organisation's objectives and the discourse it employed to be unclear. This lack of clarity contributed to a pervasive sense of directionlessness, prompting her and others to pursue varied paths and question why control over the organisation's discourse was largely in the hands of a few selected individuals. According to Laura, these members, to varying degrees, took on the responsibility of defining the organisation's scope, further deepening the ambiguity surrounding the network's purpose and objectives.

"I feel like everyone is heading in a different direction, yes, Camila's (the director) discourse was very nice, I loved it, like when she explained about the circle of, I don't know what, about the economy, we are all one, yes, but the project hasn't fully landed for me. It landed for me that she read a book of I do not know what in two days. If it is something that is helping her, that's great, I learned a lot, I won't deny it, but it hasn't

fully grounded me in MexiSustain. Maybe Luisa, maybe you, maybe Pablo. Yes, they understand her, Camila, because of so many years of being together. But they also don't give me that information".

-Interview excerpts February 1, 2023.

Despite the organisation's Discourse being shaped in response to external pressures, as noted by Pablo, particularly through a focus on international agenda frameworks to satisfy external pressures, stakeholders, and institutions, the network's discourse appeared to be concentrated in the hands of a few individuals who had longstanding collaborations with the primary leader and were perceived as influential within the network's community. Conducting the interview with Laura and engaging in discussions with other members brought to light my own positionality within the network as one of those influencing its discourse. While I recognised my influence, particularly within the mentorship programme, I realised, during the analysis stage of this project, that I had adhered to a specific Discourse around "sustainable development", rooted in international frameworks like the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, without sufficient critical examination. As Pablo highlighted, these Discourse was appealing and presented an opportunity to engage with national and international organisations. I personally viewed this to enhance not only the network but also my professional career. Unintentionally, I found myself contributing to a framework that not only promoted hegemonic "development" but also prioritised economic development over considerations of social and ecological justice. Furthermore, this adherence to such a Discourse also seemed to alienate members of the online learning network, underscoring how inconsistencies between the organisation's stated discourse and actual Discourse created challenges within the team and its positionality.

Within MexiSustain, a discernible power dynamic emerged, wherein certain individuals and institutions wielded varying degrees of influence in shaping the D(d)iscourse surrounding "sustainable development". Notably, figures like Pablo and I were acknowledged by network participants as influential in shaping the online learning network' discourse. However, Pablo underscored the impact of the network's diverse partnerships and their potential to "offer them a service", (as appreciated in Figure 5) framing its Discourse as both an instrument and an effect of power. Its production was portrayed as a process that is controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed (Foucault, 1979) not only by the online learning network but also by entities beyond it.

Figure 5. MexiSustain Website (Services), retrieved in November 2022.

While the organisation promoted a discourse to which some members, such as Laura, expressed unfamiliarity and ambiguity, its Discourse was shaped by various powers within and beyond the network, including international and governmental frameworks. As discussions about the network's strategies unfolded, it became evident to me that the SDGs and international frameworks appeared to serve as a Discourse facilitating engagement with a broader range of stakeholders and fostering opportunities for funding and collaboration. However, upon reflection, it became clear to me, and perhaps to others, whether consciously or unconsciously, that we were endorsing a Discourse of "sustainable development" that might not align with the transformative aspirations of us as activists and other members of the online learning networks (See Chapter 7).

5.1.2 Navigating the Climate Crisis: A Scientific and Technological Discourse

Climate Action Coalition maintained a focused approach to addressing the "climate crisis", placing significant emphasis on mitigation strategies (see Figure 6). This included efforts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and supported international climate agreements,

such as the Paris Agreement[22]. Harvey (2018) characterises this approach as the "managerial management of the company and the state" (p. 251), highlighting the tendency to frame complex issues like the climate crisis through a technical and bureaucratic lens.

NUESTRA MISIÓN

Catalizar soluciones globales a la crisis climática, haciendo que las acciones urgentes sean una necesidad en todos los niveles de la sociedad, a través de la participación ciudadana en acciones concretas que contribuyan a mitigar los efectos negativos del cambio climático.

We need to take urgent action: to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and accelerate the global shift towards renewable energy, to half the radical fossil fuel agenda, and to ensure that world leaders strengthen and fulfil their commitments under the Paris Agreement.

Our mission is to catalyse global solutions to the climate crisis, making urgent actions a necessity at all levels of society through citizen participation in concrete actions that contribute to mitigating the negative effects of climate change.

We aspire to drive a global turning point on climate. We know that climate change threatens the health and happiness of people around the world, but we also know that we can stop it with the solutions and technologies we have at our disposal.

Para reducir las emisiones de gases de efecto invernadero y acelerar el cambio global hacia las energías renovables.

Para detener la agenda radical de combustibles fósiles.

Para hacer que los líderes mundiales fortalezcan y cumplan sus compromisos del "Acuerdo de París".

Figure 6. The Climate Action Coalition Website (Mission)retrieved in January 2023.

To promote the citizen participation central to their mission, the organisation explicitly outlined its foundation on three core pillars: education, dissemination, and activism (see Figure 7 and further details in Chapter 8). Its mission revolved around creating spaces and developing educational content intended to disseminate and "enhance" society's understanding of climate change through a technical and scientific lens. From a Discourse that approached the climate crisis as a subject demanding a scientific and technological response.

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[22] The Paris Agreement is an international climate treaty adopted by 196 parties at COP21 in Paris on 12 December 2015. It entered into force on 4 November 2016, aiming to limit global temperature rise to below 2°C above pre-industrial levels, with efforts to cap it at 1.5°C. (UNFCCC, 2024)

Figure 7. Climate Action Coalition Website (How we do it) retrieved in February 2023.

However, this Discourse often overlooked the fact that climate change is not merely an environmental or scientific-technological issue, but also a profound crisis where multiple forms of oppression intersect and interact (Mikulewicz et al., 2023). A critical examination reveals limitations in this Discourse. By adopting a scientific-technological framework, as shown in Figure 6 and 7 and in later examples in the empirical chapters (e.g., Chapter 7), the network risks marginalising alternative perspectives and ways of understanding the "climate crisis" in Latin America, such as Southern epistemologies or non-Western cosmovisions, as highlighted by De Sousa Santos (2010) along with their ontological dimensions (Escobar, 2018). For example, Andean indigenous communities' reverence for "la Pachamama", the defence of territories against extractive processes like gold mining in Colombia or copper extraction in Chile, and the Zapatista community's struggles to maintain the pluriverse offer valuable insights. These perspectives are rooted in diverse historical, cultural, indigenous, and local knowledge systems that may hold critical strategies for addressing the climate crisis. Yet, by focusing solely on the scientific-technological dimension, the network risked overlooking or sidelining these invaluable contributions.

Lorena, who was part of the core team of the online learning network at the time of the interview but left the organisation at the end of data collection, shared how her background in environmental engineering and her alignment with the technical and scientific Discourse of the climate crisis enabled her to connect with the network, leading to a full-time position with the institution.

"I studied Environmental Engineering, which is a field very focused on designing solutions related to issues like water quality, air quality… I've always been interested in the topic of training, and that's why I joined the Climate Action Coalition".

-Interview excerpts, April 19, 2023.

Lorena highlighted the significant influence of a technical and scientific Discourse on climate change within the Climate Action Coalition. Led by a prominent political and business figure from the Global Minority, the network appeared to promote and enforce a Discourse of "sustainable development activism" dictated by specific sources of authority. This Discourse frequently focused on "training" that prioritised actions for "the environment" following a scientific and technological Discourse (see Chapter 7). It promoted "solutions" that often-bypassed systemic injustices and the role of power entities.

As Harvey (2018) notes, the concept of "sustainable development" is often shaped by scientific and technological paradigms driven by vested interests, particularly those who stand to profit from providing technical expertise and technology for the global management of the planet's "well-being". This observation underscores the broader systemic forces that shape Discourses and agendas around "sustainable development". For example, the Climate Action Coalition had formed partnerships, particularly financial ones, with corporate giants like Amazon and others. However, it is worth noting that for companies like Amazon, economic growth is positioned as the solution to a socio-ecological crisis, crisis that are paradoxically outcomes of expanding economic activity (Caraway, 2020).

For instance, the Climate Action Coalition website, as shown in Figure 8, placed a strong emphasis on its founder and CEO, his apparent concern about the climate crisis, and how throughout his career as a businessman and politician, he has "recognised" that science and technology could be powerful allies in the "fight against climate change". However, various sources such as activist websites, international organisations, economic blogs, and traditional media have highlighted his investments in green technologies and sustainable businesses, including links with petroleum companies and technology companies such as Apple, with some referring to him as a "carbon billionaire".

TODO COMENZÓ...

En 2006, cuando [_____] y ex
vicepresidente de Estados Unidos [_____] logró que el mundo
abriera los ojos ante el cambio climático con la película ganadora de
premios de la Academia, [_____]
[_____]

Viendo la respuesta social tan positiva ante el documental, el mismo
año fundó [_____] como un esfuerzo para
continuar con la conversación sobre el cambio climático y convertir la
conciencia en acción.

Este fue el inicio de una revolución que lograría reunir a miles de
personas con un mismo objetivo: combatir la crisis climática.

Everything began...

In 2006, when the former president succeeded in opening the world's eyes to climate change with the Award-winning film.

Seeing the overwhelmingly positive social response to the documentary, that same year he founded the Climate Action Coalition as an effort to continue the conversation on climate change and transform awareness into action.

This was the start of a revolution that would bring together thousands of people with a common goal: to fight the climate crisis.

Figure 8. Climate Action Coalition Website (Background) retrieved in February 2023.

Moreover, the Climate Action Coalition's diverse educational resources and communication materials focus on decarbonisation and achieving net zero emissions, as shown in Figures 9 and 10. However, scholars and activists such as Schendler (2022) and Bachram (2004) criticise carbon neutrality strategies for emphasising emissions offsetting rather than direct action, often masking the need for fundamental changes and highlighting the risks of false solutions within environmental and economic systems.

Aquí encontrarás artículos de temas más avanzados sobre cambio climático, por
si ya estás familiarizado con las bases y quieres saber más.

Here you will find articles on more advanced topics related to climate change, in case you are already familiar with the basics and want to learn more.

-Too many companies rely on carbon capture to achieve net-zero emissions.

-COVID-19: Climate action for a fair and sustainable economic recovery.

-Carbon budgets to limit global temperature rise.

Figure 9. Educational resources provided by the Climate Action Coalition retrieved in January 2023.
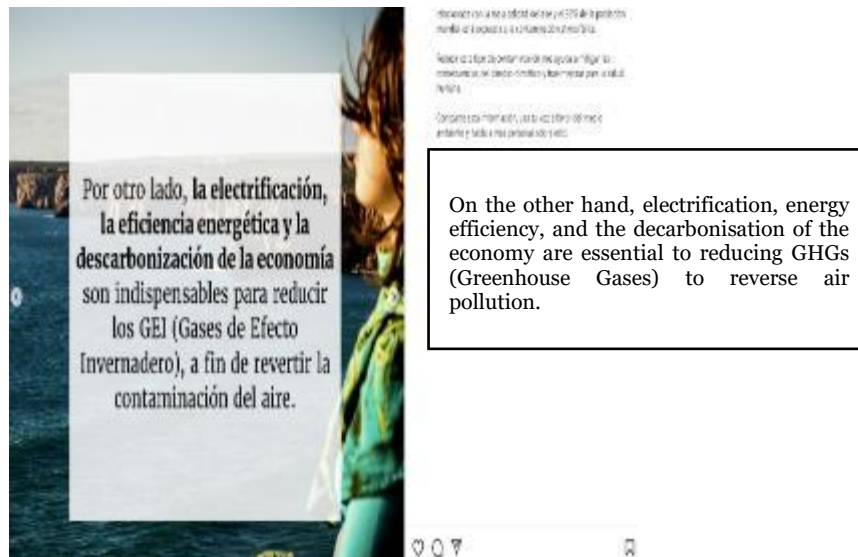
Figure 10. Instagram post by the Climate Action Coalition retrieved in March 2023.

In contrast to MexiSustain, the Climate Action Coalition seemed to be responding to the interest and forces driven by its main leader and founder, who had shaped a Discourse based on scientific-technological "solutions" for the climate crisis, solutions from which he had been receiving monetary benefits, particularly from the decarbonisation market.

As discussed in this section, within online learning networks, "sustainable development" Discourses were shaped by a range of factors, including diverse partnerships, the involvement of specific network members, influential positionalities, political figures, and alignment with international agendas, all of which reflected underlying power structures. Examining these Discourses provided an opportunity to explore how they (re)shaped the perspectives of individuals and communities striving for change.

As Leff (1998) warns, it is essential to approach "sustainable development" Discourses with caution, particularly when they become entrenched as paradigms without addressing fundamental questions related to the "development" Discourse -how, with whom, and for what purpose? Similarly, questions about sustainability- how and for whom- deserve scrutiny.

5.2 Striving for Change: Participants' Discourses on the Pursuit of Transformation

In the previous section, I explored the Discourses of "sustainable development" within the online learning networks. Now, I turn to the Discourses engaged by participants in "sustainable development activism", examining how these relate to the Discourses promoted by the online learning networks and other influential entities. Participants' involvement in activism was driven by a myriad of motivations and factors, leading to the promotion of varied Discourses. Their reasons for engagement ranged from concerns about biodiversity to aspirations for community improvement and pressures from job markets. These motivations helped shape and nurture a broad spectrum of Discourses within their activism efforts. This section focuses on three prominent Discourses that emerged during participants' involvement in activism endeavours.

5.2.1 "Taking Care of the Environment" Discourse

One prevalent Discourse driving participation in "sustainable development activism" among my participants was their concern for biodiversity and environmental issues, often framed as "taking care of the environment", as described by Luisa. For instance, Valentina, an electrical engineer and part of the Climate Action Coalition, shared how her expertise in renewable energies initially sparked her activism. During my participant observation, I noted that Valentina actively embraced the Discourse of "caring for the environment". She engaged in tangible actions, such as organising an informal "walk for the environment", cleaning up litter from the streets, and hosting a "climate talk" in a higher education institution, where she encouraged people to use tablet electrolytes instead of plastic bottles and promoted other concrete measures to reduce plastic waste.

Figure 11. "Walk for the environment" organised by Valentina. Chihuahua, Mexico. April 2023.

Authors such as Grosfoguel (2016) critique the concept of nature or the environment as problematic, arguing that it is both occidental-centric and anthropocentric. This perspective implies a division between the subject (human) and the object (nature), treating everything other than the human as mere inert objects. For example, Valentina, during an informal conversation, shared how she started organising walks for the environment in her neighbourhood after becoming aware of the waste in the streets she walked every day and how this negatively impacted the image of the area. She then researched places where she could take the waste for recycling. Later, in an interview, she explained how this anthropocentric perspective influenced her activism. She began promoting the "benefits" of clean energy, an area where she worked full-time for a private U.S. company, particularly during a period of political change when the national government withdrew its support for foreign investment in "green energies". Valentina described this shift as a "war against renewable energy", which motivated her to advocate for the "advantages" of clean energy in her country.

> "And I remember, right, this part of me trying to inform on social media with some posts on Facebook, with some posts in LinkedIn. Well, I had a lot of this part, right, of putting infographics or things like that so that people could see the benefits of wind farms, solar energy, things like that. But, no, it was an attack from people like "the PRI[23] stole more" and you say, what does this have to do with what I am telling you, right? I am just saying that the president lies, and well, no, I mean, grab a book, look, go to school and well, do not let them fool you".

> -Interview excerpts May 5, 2023.

Valentina's views on her "sustainable development activism" were intriguing and closely aligned with the Climate Action Coalition Discourse. Her approach appeared to separate "the environment" from its sociopolitical and historical contexts, overlooking the connection

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[23] According to an analysis by Bacquerie (2021), the phrase "the PRI (Institutional Revolutionary Party) stole more" emerged as a satirical expression to suggest that previous administrations mismanaged public resources. This phrase became popular in a meme involving Mexican President Andrés Manuel López Obrador (2018-2024), although there is no evidence that he ever actually said it.

between resistance to "green energies" and the broader sociopolitical climate in Mexico[24]. Additionally, she seemed to dismiss the perspectives of individuals who challenged her social media posts, prioritising formal education and framing those with access to it as more knowledgeable. This perspective reflected a top-down educational lens, which in turn suggested a Discourse centred on anthropocentrism, a characteristic that united the Discourses of the online learning networks and her own, with a technocratic vision of change. According to Chua and Fair (2019), this type of Discourse often treats the consequences of the climate crisis as predetermined rather than recognising them as outcomes of specific historical developments and choices.

Furthermore, Valentina shared her perception of an "awakening Discourse", where environmental inaction was viewed as stemming from ignorance rather than as part of an ideological battle over how humans engage with the non-human world (Steffen et al., 2011; Chua & Fair, 2019). Similarly, Gloria, a member of both online learning networks since 2018, in her early 30s and a biologist based in a semi-rural region in Tlaxcala, Mexico, employed this Discourse while giving talks at a public high school in Tlaxcala about the pollution caused by cigarette butts. Throughout her presentation, Gloria provided facts, statistics, and information on the environmental damage inflicted on water and crops due to the improper disposal of these waste products. Using visual images and charts, she adopted a top-down educational approach to explain to students the toxic substances present in cigarettes. Gloria encouraged students to share the information they had learned and to ensure proper disposal of cigarette butts.

Figure 12. "Environmental talk" organised by Gloria in a public High-School. Tlaxcala, Mexico. October 2022.

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[24] In 2018, there was a shift in energy policy led by the first left-party president in power. This change, characterised green energies as part of neoliberal policies and proposed counter-privatization in the energy sector. The reform aimed to recover and expand the country's electric power generation capacity, even if this meant including fossil energy sources (Flores Paredes & Ortíz Wadgymar, 2024).

Figure 13. Visual materials used in the "Environmental talk" by Gloria in a public High-School. Tlaxcala, Mexico. October 2022.
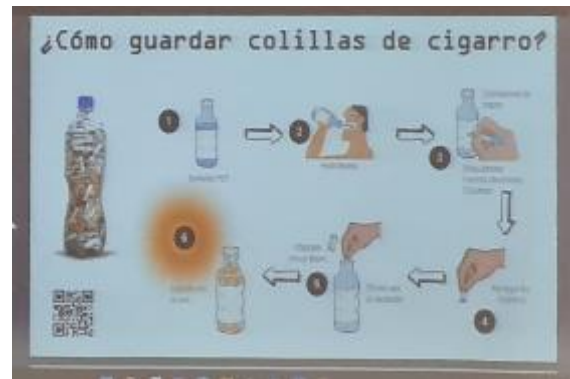
Like Valentina, Gloria presented environmental issues during her engagement with a formal education institution as stemming from a fundamental lack of information or awareness regarding humanity's role in affecting nature through individual and, ultimately, collective actions. However, during informal conversations, such as commutes and evening chats, she shared insights into the complex factors driving socioecological issues in Tlaxcala, including the arrival of multinationals, neoextractivism, real estate developments, and capitalist dynamics. This suggested that Gloria adapted her Discourse according to the context in which she conducted her activism.

Similarly, during an interview Gloria highlighted that one of the "key pillars" of her activism initiative was education, as she believed that much of the harm inflicted on the planet resulted from a lack of knowledge and understanding of our actions.

> "Well, four pillars, which are to educate and inform, no, because we have to, I believe primarily that many of the actions we take are out of ignorance… but well, I think, I don´t know the percentage, but I am sure, from my experience, that when you give information and say, hey, if you are doing that, you are poisoning yourself, people do it, well, people are free, it's like you think about it, it's like, the other day I listened to a podcast about sausages, right?, from a doctor who mentioned that it has been shown that constant consumption of sausages due to chemicals, colourings, reduces your life expectancy by 7%. I said, I won't eat sausages again. And, I haven't eaten sausages for months, right? so I believe it does work".

-Interview excerpts February 3, 2023.

Gloria underscored another crucial aspect of the anthropocentric perspective on the environment, drawing a connection between the harm inflicted by humans and its direct

impact on our own well-being. Smith (2008) articulates this Discourse by describing the notion of nature "reaping its revenge" due to human domination of "external nature", which coincides with a parallel increase in the dominance of "internal nature", referring to people themselves, and a heightened fragility of human existence. This anthropocentric Discourse often frames the environment as an external entity that demands human stewardship, primarily to safeguard ourselves from adverse impacts. Examples include caring for wells because they supply (our) water or picking up cigarette butts to prevent (our) water contamination.

For instance, Gloria mentioned in the interview excerpt that she avoided eating sausages because of the perceived negative impact on her life expectancy. Her concern was not rooted in the fact that sausages are often made from processed meats derived from animals typically raised in industrial livestock systems, a major contributor to deforestation, soil degradation, excessive water consumption, and high greenhouse gas emissions, though she might have been aware of these issues. Instead, Gloria's focus was primarily on the immediate and personal health consequences.

Similarly, both Valentina and Gloria appeared to adopt a "taking care of the environment" Discourse rooted in anthropocentrism when engaging with specific contexts and actors, such as formal education institutions. However, they employed alternative Discourses when interacting with other communities, as discussed in section 5.3. Participants like Valentina and Gloria demonstrated *strategic flexibility* to navigate and adopt diverse Discourses, included the anthropocentric "taking care for the environment" Discourse, tailoring it to what was meaningful or "appropriate" in different contexts. Participants did not necessarily strive for ideological coherence but instead assembled various Discourses in ways that resonated with their audiences, as reflected in the empirical chapters.

It is crucial to unpick the Discourses they engaged with, as these bring with them inherent power and knowledge relationships that shape socio-ecological transformation. For instance, as Malm and Hornborg (2014) highlight, the anthropocentric Discourse often depoliticises the origins of socio-ecological problems, thereby limiting political responses to addressing them. This Discourse shares similarities with those of MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition, both of which frequently framed the socio-ecological crisis as an issue that could be "fixed" within the same systems that perpetuate it. Such perspectives often obscured the root causes of these crises, narrowing the scope for transformative action.

5.2.2 Joining the Dots: Ecological Injustices and Social Justice Discourse

During data collection, another significant Discourse emerged, underscoring the interconnectedness between ecological injustices and social justice, and vice versa. Within this Discourse, participants expressed an understanding of how environmental conflicts are intertwined with social issues. One example is Lorena, who shared her experiences in an interview. Lorena recounted her early involvement in environmental activism, which began during her youth. However, it was through her work in Guaviare, Colombia, that she came to a realisation: the social conflicts she once viewed as isolated were, in fact, deeply intertwined with environmental challenges. This awareness led her to shift her approach, compelling her to address environmental and social issues together in her activism.

> "The first time I got involved in the peace process was by traveling to the Guaviare department. I went to work there, very close to the area of significant armed conflict, but also an area of very important environmental conflicts. So that marked me a lot, making me want to get involved again, more strongly in environmental issues, and especially from a social perspective".

> -Interview excerpt April 19, 2023.

Lorena, along with others, maintained a distinction between what was considered environmental and what was deemed as social. While acknowledging some interconnections between the two realms, she perceived them as separate entities cohabiting within the same space but subject to distinct conditions. Similarly, Sonia, a member of the Climate Action Coalition and an educator at a private primary school, also drew a line between "the environment" and social concerns. However, she introduced a perspective that distinguished between viewing the environment through a scientific-technological lens and adopting what she refers to as a "sustainability" Discourse.

> "I am a climate activist, and I am very interested in human rights, citizenship, sexual and reproductive rights, and, of course, climate change and education for sustainability... When it came to joining the Climate Action Coalition, I had my reservations and doubts. To me, it seemed very, well, very hegemonic, still driven largely by a Global North perspective, and I wondered, well, what about Latin America? Is everything centred only

on this issue of energy transition? Where human rights and the struggles of people in the territories[25] fit into this?".

-Interview excerpt April 5, 2023.

Sonia emphasised her view that the scientific-technological Discourse within the Climate Action Coalition primarily originated from the "Global North", neglecting the specific challenges faced in Latin America, particularly the resistance struggles in local territories. This perception contributed to her hesitation in joining the network.

Although she expressed an interest in "education for sustainability", she remained unclear about what this concept entailed and how the "sustainability" Discourse differed from or intersected with her other areas of activism, such as climate change and sexual and reproductive rights. She questioned how the Climate Action Coalition's Discourse applied to her geographical context and whether the realities of her territories were even included. This uncertainty echoed the Discourse within MexiSustain, where members discussed "sustainability" without clearly defining its meaning or identifying who was shaping its interpretation, as highlighted by Laura in Section 5.1. Despite these doubts, she engaged with the online learning network education environments, driven by external pressures (as discussed in Chapter 7).

Jickling and Wals (2008) note that the concepts of "sustainable development" and "sustainability" often blur critical distinctions necessary for thoughtful evaluation. They argue that inconsistencies and value conflicts arise when comparing the sustainability of ecological processes with the sustainability of the "development" model. Despite these complexities, many individuals, including Sonia and myself were conditioned to view "sustainable development" and "sustainability" as inherently positive, potentially leading us to endorse conflicting aspects simultaneously, even unintentionally.

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[25] Territories, as a distinct Latin American concept, illuminate power relationships in space, shaped by the confrontation between global forces on one hand and local, place-based, or "territorially anchored" groups on the other (López Sandoval et al., 2017).

5.2.3 Striving to "Live Well" Discourse

Another prevalent Discourse that participants engaged with in activism was the desire to support their local communities. This drive often arose when individuals became aware of specific issues they perceived as unjust and in spaces of informal education, whether these issues directly affected them or others, and recognised the interconnectedness of systemic problems such as inequalities, sexism, and colonisation. For instance, Veronica, a member of MexiSustain, shared in an interview that her activism began with her realisation of the injustices she faced, how these injustices impacted those around her, and how she felt she could build some spaces to allow the others to become aware of these systemic injustices.

"Ah, I began to get involved when I was 18 years old and had my first experience with gender-based violence, which help me to understand what it truly was. So, from there, I developed a strong interest in these issues... my family has always been very conservative about such topics, right? so I started exploring peace-related topics, and it was like, okay, this is violence, that's cultural violence, that's gender-based violence, and that's when it clicked, and I said, ah, okay, I'm experiencing this too. I wondered how I could help others who might be in similar situations ... how to prevent it, or at least how to openly discuss these issues?".

-Interview excerpts May 26, 2023.

During conversations and interviews, participants such as Veronica, Julio (a member of MexiSustain, a parent in his late 30s, and a consultant for various governmental and non-governmental organisations specialising in citizen participation), and Juliana (a member of the Climate Action Coalition from 2021 until late 2023. In her late 20s, she began her activism journey with the peace agreement and later expanded her focus to include digital spaces, citizen participation, gender equity, and, ultimately, climate change) shared their awareness of being denied the right to *Vivir Bien* (live well). This concept, also known as *Buen Vivir,* is a Latin American multicultural approach that emphasises the recognition of intrinsic values and views nature as a subject (as discussed in Chapter 2). Its core principles include unity, equality, dignity, freedom, solidarity, reciprocity, social and gender equity, social justice, and responsibility (Gudynas, 2011). Veronica, along with others, realised that people were being denied the opportunity to live well. Reflecting on her situation, Veronica, through non-formal and informal learning, recognised the oppressions she faced, including those from her partner,

and observed that her family was "very conservative on these issues". She felt a responsibility to act to enhance well-being for herself and others, growing increasingly aware of the social and cultural context surrounding her.

Similarly, Julio shared in an interview how his learning experiences in the construction sector revealed the invisibility of local resources, such as adobe, and the imposition of foreign techniques and materials. These foreign methods not only proved to be more costly, had negative impacts on the ecological environment, but also neglected traditional construction knowledge. This imposition, he noted, restricted the local artisan community's potential to thrive in the construction sector.

"In construction and interior design, things are often brought in from Italy, France, other external sources, right? So, several friends and I discussed whether it's possible to build a completely local house, with floors from the area, local art, and furniture from the region. In other words, everything locally sourced. We began to develop a project, a showroom where the house would have local floors, local art, and locally sourced furniture. We were progressing well with suppliers for floors, paint, and everything else. When we reached the art aspect, though, we noticed there was a variety but also a lot of invisibility".

-Interview excerpts April 4, 2023.

In a different context, Julio reflected on how his work in construction and interior design exposed the invisibility of local art, materials, and traditional construction knowledge, and contrasted with the imposition of foreign, primarily European techniques and materials. The oversight was particularly striking given Mexico's rich history of architecture and construction systems. Julio found that this discrepancy challenged his previous conceptions and methods of working. Authors like Ramírez Gallegos (2012) emphasise that views of *Buen Vivir* are not solely about material possession but also involve reflecting on and transforming our ways of being, doing, and feeling to achieve a good life.

The Discourses of Julio, Veronica, and others, including myself, reveal a common theme among participants: an awareness of injustices and the lack of a *buena vida* often served as a catalyst for activism. This awareness drove us to rethink how we engaged with our communities and fuelled a desire to make a difference. For example, Juliana shared how her reflection on her context and diverse realities misaligned with her vision of living well led her

to become an activist. She realised that *Buen Vivir* extended beyond material aspects to encompass feelings and emotions, including rebellion and compassion (Gudynas, 2011). Juliana expressed how she did not know what path she should follow, but she shared how she was determined to do something for her community and reality.

"while I was at SENA[26], I realised that I was studying alongside classmates who were victims of the armed conflict, studying with classmates who walked from very far away to attend classes, like two hours, and had to leave their homes around 4:00 in the morning to be able to arrive by around 7:30. I noticed in the area that there were many abandoned animals, so being at SENA made me face a reality that, well, I was also living. And I said, well, what if we do something about it. I think that this experience opened my eyes in many different levels, like you get closer to different problems of racism, sexism, well, to everything in one institution, and I think that made me realise, well, at that moment I did not have so clear that I wanted to become a communicator, but I did want to start being an activist".

-Interview excerpts April 5, 2023.

As other participants such as Veronica, Juliana expressed how realising that her life did not align with what her perception of *buena vida*, pushed her to take steps to address the issues she and others faced, whether it was gender violence, racism, classism, or colonisation. Participants, including Juliana, rejected, at some stance, domination and control, aiming not to become a mere means to an end, a crucial aspect of the *Buena Vida* paradigm (Gudynas, 2011).

A significant aspect of *Buen Vivir* involves redefining the relationship between humans and nature, as well as among humans themselves (Haidar, 2019). While not explicitly stated, participants who embraced this Discourse challenged power dynamics within their communities. They addressed issues such as the imposition of foreign techniques, the invisibility of local knowledges and construction materials, and gender violence. However, there was limited discussion about the relationship with ecosystems. To me, this seemed to

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[26] National Training Service (SENA), a Colombian public institution aimed to develop vocational programmes.

reflect an aspect of the anthropocentric Discourse, where participants perceive nature as divided into an internal and an external realm, as explained in section 5.2.1. For instance, Juliana recognised that "abandoned animals" affected her and other' quality of life but did not question why these animals were present, perhaps overlooking the possibility that they had been displaced from their habitats.

The examination of Discourses within "sustainable development activism" revealed a wide diversity of approaches. Predominant themes included anthropocentric views on "taking care of the environment" and the connections between social and environmental injustices, as exemplified by Lorena and Sonia. Participants engaged with activism Discourses that highlight these interconnections. Additionally, striving to live well emerged as a Discourse, where participants, reflecting on their own experiences and the oppressions faced by themselves and others, chose to act and pursue a "better life".

Understanding the prevalent Discourses that participants engaged with in "sustainable development activism" was essential for exploring the diverse motivations, forces, and power dynamics that shaped their adoption of specific Discourses (see Section 7.1 for more detail). For example, Gloria adopted an anthropocentric Discourse when engaging with a higher education institution, using a top-down educational approach to discuss "the environment". However, during informal conversations, she shifted to a Discourse centred on living well, emphasising how issues such as neo-extractivism had impacted her and her family's quality of life. Similarly, Sonia revealed that she engaged with the scientific-technological Discourse despite holding reservations about it.

This exploration provided deeper insights into the broader Discourses surrounding "sustainable development activism" and highlighted how socio-ecological factors influenced and shaped these Discourses. The educational formats associated with these Discourses also varied. For instance, the anthropocentric Discourse was typically linked with top-down educational approaches, whereas the living well Discourse was more closely aligned with informal education. Participants often described engaging with the latter through personal experiences and interactions with others.

As Ziai (2016) observes, "Discourses are not representations of an objective reality, but the bricks with which we build social reality" (p.13). The upcoming sections explore how

activists engaged with Discourses of "sustainable development" across different contexts, including online learning networks, and analyse how participants navigated these Discourses.

5.3 Discourses of Engagement in "Sustainable Development Activism"

Activism, characterised by its pursuit of change, took various forms, as defined by Reyes-Rodríguez and Colás-Cos (2017). It involved advocating for projects, confronting realities, and addressing situations within specific ideological frameworks. As illustrated earlier, my participants were actively involved in diverse activism practices, each intertwined with distinctive Discourses. These Discourses and practices were not static; they evolved as participants navigated their journey, interacting with various communities and institutions.

This section delves into the dynamic and (re)shaping of activism Discourses related to engaging diverse stakeholders, institutions, and communities. It highlights examples of Discourses directed towards diverse communities and funding organisations, analysing their role in shaping the Discourses of "sustainable development". By exploring these examples, we glean insights into the nuanced ways that activists tailored their Discourse approaches to engage with distinctive spheres of influence and power.

5.3.1 Changing Discourses in the Navigation of Diverse Communities

Navigating diverse communities was a fundamental aspect of my participants' practices. Whether seeking collaborators or identifying spaces for their endeavours, building and maintaining relationships required complex engagements with various Discourses and their strategic utilisation. Through participant observation and conversations with participants, it became evident that these Discourses were dynamic and subject to change based on the individuals involved, the politics and Discourses of the communities and institutions, and the participants' own positionalities within these contexts.
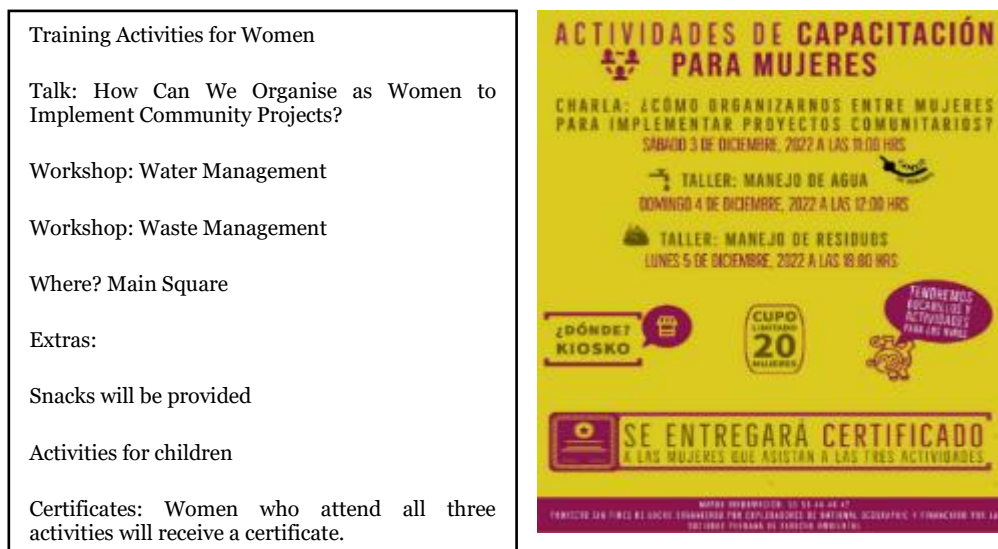
Natalia, a member of both online learning networks, is in her late 20s and a biologist focused on women's issues in Latin America. She actively incorporated a range of Discourses into her activism, demonstrating adaptability and nuanced approaches in different contexts.

One example was her participation in the Climate Action Coalition, where she presented a "climate crisis" Discourse during a monthly talk. This session served as platform for interaction with fellow members, all identified as "climate champions", who shared a mutual understanding of the "climate crisis" Discourse with a scientific-technological focus (see Figure 14). During this talk, Natalia, adhered to this Discourse, presenting data and employing technologies as part of the "solution", while also integrating elements of community organisation Discourse. For instance, she shared the use of participatory diagnosis through mapping activities with communities, which prompted questions and stimulated dialogue with "climate champions" on "building community projects in the face of the climate crises".

However, in her collaboration with the women of Zapotitlan on a women's community project, Natalia strategically shifted her emphasis. In this context, she portrayed herself as an "explorer" and prioritised community organisation Discourse to address socioenvironmental inequalities (see Figure 15). Unlike her approach with the Climate Action Coalition, Natalia focused more on community building, viewing it as the primary means to navigate and address the complexities of the climate crisis.

Figure 14. Natalia's monthly talk promotional event with the Climate Action Coalition, August 2, 2022.

| Training Activities for Women |
| Talk: How Can We Organise as Women to Implement Community Projects? |
| Workshop: Water Management |
| Workshop: Waste Management |
| Where? Main Square |
| Extras: |
| Snacks will be provided |
| Activities for children |
| Certificates: Women who attend all three activities will receive a certificate. |

Figure 15. Natalia's promotional poster for Zapotitlan community project, December 2022.

Natalia demonstrated what I refer to as *strategic flexibility* (see section 8.1.1), where activists like her and Gloria not only adjusted their Discourses but also moulded practices, identities, and self-portrayals to resonate with diverse communities and practices and further their activism (see Chapter 6 and 7). For example, when engaging with individuals in political spaces, Gloria proudly identified as an activist advocating for a *Buena Vida*, aiming to improve her life and the lives of her community. Her Discourse included critique and challenges against injustices, particularly targeting hegemonic practices such as the environmental impact of foreign industries on her community's biodiversity.

Interestingly, when seeking access to public spaces and support in Tlaxcala municipalities, Gloria presented herself as the founder of her environmental education initiative and adopted a Discourse aligned with the SDGs. During my participant observation at the "Turn Off the Pollution and Turn On the Art" contest, sponsored by an international organisation, she integrated the SDGs Discourse while negotiating with the municipality the bureaucracies for space at the local fair. In line with this Discourse, Gloria decorated the designated spaces with illustrative images representing the SDGs (see Figure 16).

However, Gloria did not explicitly delve into the SDGs Discourse or international agendas and policies with her collaborators or the participants during the activity. Instead, she underscored community enhancement through an environmental perspective when interacting with her team. For instance, she started the activity with a talk on the impact of cigarette butts on water bodies, health, and biodiversity, explaining the importance of having disposal systems in public spaces, such as the local fair.

Figure 16. "Turn off the pollution, turn on the art" activity with SDGs visual resources and participants making their art. Tlaxcala, Mexico. October 29, 2022.

In conversations with Gloria's volunteers, who came from diverse background, especially young people involved with the red cross and Gloria's friends, they shared that their motivation to participate stemmed from a desire to "do something" for their community, a sentiment echoed by some of my participants. Some volunteers expressed a sense of moral responsibility, driven by a belief in "giving back" to the community that had previously supported them through various activities.

However, rather than engaging with the volunteers' Discourse of living well, Gloria adopted a Discourse centred on "nature". This was evident in her focus on discussing the effects of certain actions, such as smoking and discarding cigarette butts in the water and soil. It seemed to me that Gloria was less strategically flexible when engaging with her volunteers, who viewed her as holding a powerful position as the founder of her environmental education initiative.

Similarly, Gloria employed an "environmental" Discourse when engaging with high school institutions and students in Tlaxcala. This was exemplified by her organisation of "climate talks" as a "climate champion" in collaboration with local formal education institutions. For me, this approach demonstrated how Gloria aligned her Discourses with diverse institutions, depending on their dynamics and degrees to transcend the Discourses present within the institutions. While she viewed political spaces, such as dialogues with governors, as opportunities to present herself as an activist and challenge dynamics that restricted her vision of living well, she used an "environmental" Discourse when interacting with institutions like high schools, local municipalities, and funding organisations. This was evidenced by her use of SDGs images and comments during her talks about their classes and extra activities within the spaces students within the education institutions could influence.

Figure 17. Gloria and "Turn off the pollution, turn on the art" participants in a 'nature' focused conversation. Tlaxcala, Mexico. October 22, 2022.

Much like Gloria and Natalia, participants utilised a range of Discourses, identities (see Chapter 6), and learning approaches (see Chapter 7) to interact with diverse communities. While they tended to strategically employ these Discourses, navigating various power structures and institutional contexts, they placed varying emphasis on "their" Discourses, such as Gloria with a "nature" Discourse and Natalia with a "living well" Discourse. Through participant observation and conversations with participants, they engage with diverse communities, Discourses, and educational practices of "sustainable development", exploring how cultural Discourses defined what was considered normal and what was included or excluded from the dominant culture (Nish, 2022). While experimenting with "sustainable development" Discourse could often be seen as strategic approach, there were instances where it could potentially lead to alignment with prevailing and hegemonic perspectives on "sustainable development activism", especially when engaging with funding institutions as seen in the next section that promoted and required specific Discourses within communities.

5.3.2 The Dilemma of Financial Needs: Discourses with Funding Organisations

The involvement with various Discourses to secure funding for activism projects played a crucial role in shaping activists' engagement with specific Discourses, particularly those related to sustainable development outlined in the international agendas, such as the SDGs. This involvement also contributed to fostering an understanding of the climate crisis through a scientific and technological approaches. Whether obtaining grants for projects, as exemplified by Natalia's women's community project, financing specific activities like Gloria's

art contest, supporting research endeavours such as Esmeralda's project in the Antarctica[27], or funding online learning networks, activists demonstrated the use of specific Discourses for securing funding. Recognising these Discourses was essential for understanding the underlying dynamics and power structures influencing activism funding and the Discourses employed.

The online learning networks received funding from various entities. The Climate Action Coalition, founded and directed by a prominent political and business figure in the international arena, embraced a managerial approach that blended businesses and state interests. For example, Figures 18, 19, and 20 highlight the network's leader and the role of international state agreements in the "fight" for the climate crisis within the network.

Leaders like the one spearheading the Climate Action Coalition advocated for transformation through the application of scientific and technical rationality within an administratively powerful state. This state was envisioned as being equipped with "robust regulatory and bureaucratic powers, collaborating with "big" science and large corporate capital", as highlighted by Harvey (2018, p.231). This collaboration extended to fostering activism practices aligned to specific Discourses and funding programmes, such as decarbonisation initiatives, as well as "COP operations", where the network trained activists to engage with these specific Discourses and practices within the international event. Additionally, it provided opportunities for a selected few, such as the participation of "climate champions", who promote the Discourse the network follows in national and international advocacy spaces like the COP[28].

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[27] A project led by two international organisations with a focus on SDGs, where more than 100 women with backgrounds in STEM take a one-year intensive course and undertake an expedition to Antarctica.

[28] The Conference of the Parties (COP) brings together all States that are Parties to the Convention, where they review the implementation of the Convention, and any related legal instruments adopted by the COP. The COP also makes decisions necessary to promote the effective implementation of the Convention, including institutional and administrative arrangements (UNFCCC, 2024a).

Figure 18. Climate Action Coalition's "Who we are" section with a strong focus on its leader figure, May 2023.

COP Operation 2023. Youth Ambassadors for the Climate

Go to calls for applications.
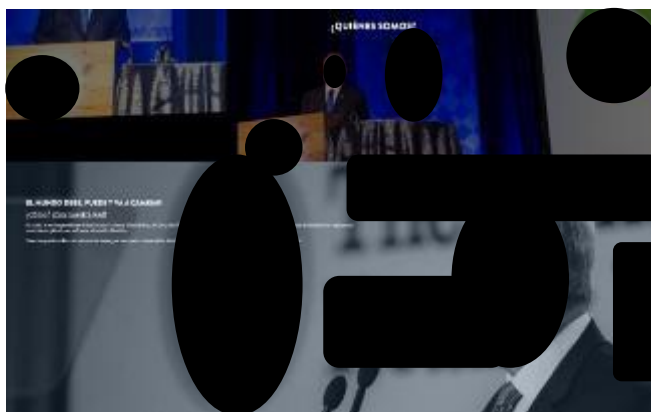
Figure 19. Post from the online learning network's website about the "COP operation" programme, where activists engaged in non-formal education based on the network's Discourse, May 2023.

Road to COP 27 Key Agreements

Figure 20. Instagram Post on State Agreements at COP27 under the #OjosEnLaCOP (eyes in the COP) Campaign, May 2023.

On the other hand, MexiSustain consistently faced challenges in securing the financial resources necessary to sustain its operations. Since its inception, the organisation struggled with the ongoing task of acquiring funding. Notably, according to its founding members, the organisation adopted a Discourse centred around the SDGs to align with the growing popularity of these goals during the network was established. As a participant and core member in the network, I observed that our actions and programmes, initially aimed at fostering collaborative engagements with local governments, academia, and the private sector, were shaped to meet the "demands" on "sustainable development" imposed by other institutions, such as the international organisation that provided us with some grants.

Mayr (2008) highlights that institutions are shaped by Discourse and, in turn, possess the capacity to create and impose Discourses, thus controlling how we perceive aspects of the world and society. These Discourses are often promoted by specific groups and individuals within society to both confirm and extend their power. This insight prompted a reflective

examination of the Discourses embraced by MexiSustain, raising questions about its origin, implications, and potential impact on the organisation's mission, objectives, and operation.

An illustrative case of activists adapting their practices to align with the Discourses favoured by funding institutions can be seen in Natalia's experience. During my participant observation, Natalia and her team revealed the delicate balance they maintained in orchestrating activities and using Discourses within the women's community to meet the criteria set by their financial backers and those from whom they sought additional support. For instance, after conducting a participatory diagnosis, the women from Zapotitlan expressed interest in capacity building in areas such as waste and water management, traditional medicine, and gastronomy. However, due to the specific Discourses tied to what the funding institutions classified as "climate action" or "sustainable development", which excluded some other Discourses, such as those of the women's community, Natalia and she felt compelled to incorporate and emphasise certain activities that were not necessarily essential or of interest to the women in the community.

These activities included organising a seminar on the climate crisis from a scientific and technological perspective, creating video letters[29] where community members shared their experiences of the climate crisis with someone in the city, and documenting native plants in a popular app. In this way, Natalia and her team tailored their initiatives to meet the expectations of funding institutions.

Another illustrative case of adapting Discourses, identities, and practices to align with funding sources was demonstrated by Luisa. Her activism focused on addressing water issues at Presa el Madin, a reservoir relied upon by her community. To advance her cause, Luisa collaborated with various institutions.

On one front, Luisa volunteered with an NGO, collaborating with other volunteers from the community, private sector, and an indigenous community. Together, they engaged in spiritual and ecological interventions, reshaping their Discourse towards one of holistic well-

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[29] The video letters were recordings showcasing the experiences of women dealing with the climate crisis in their communities. For instance, a mother and daughter shared their experiences with a river that has dried up and how this has altered their way of life. These videos were aimed at reaching people in different contexts.

being. This approached encouraged people to explore spiritual Discourses as means to connect with the water reservoir, promoting principles such as reciprocity and respect in their work.

On another front, Luisa secured funding from a prominent international shoe and clothing company for her reforestation efforts. To comply with the company's requirements, she shifted away from the NGO's approach and adopted a "climate crisis" Discourse that aligned with the Climate Action Coalition. Embracing her role as "climate champion", for reforestation activities. As part of her agreement with the company, Luisa featured their shoes in digital content that showcased the reforestation work being undertaken by her and her team.

Figure 21. Luisa's content for funding institution, Estado de Mexico, Mexico. April 2023.

Following a reforestation activity in which I participated as part of my participant observation, I joined Luisa and another volunteer for a meal and drinks. During our conversation, I inquired about Luisa's involvement with the shoe company. She candidly acknowledged her awareness of the compromises involved in working with funding institutions and promoting Discourses that sometimes conflicted with her ideals, for instance, consumerism. However, she shared that the shoe company was one of the few organisations willing to sponsor some of her activism expenses, including transportation and tools. Given her limited financial resources, Luisa viewed this sponsorship as a necessary opportunity to continue her activism efforts.

Examples like those involving the online learning networks, Natalia, and Luisa underscore the delicate balancing act that activists often undertake. In seeking financial support, they navigate complex choices and power dynamics, balancing the expectations of

funding institutions while remaining attuned to genuine needs and interests of their activism communities.

5.4 Conclusion

Unravelling the intricacies of the Discourses within the realm of "sustainable development activism" among my participants and the researched online learning networks is essential for understanding what I have termed "sustainable development activism" and its broader implications. As explored in this chapter, the Discourses surrounding these online learning networks were intertwined with various power dynamics. For instance, MexiSustain aligned with international agendas such as the SDGs, tailoring its focus to meet the demands of external institutions such as the private sector and financial organisations. In contrast, the Climate Action Coalition followed a predominantly scientific and technological approach, shaped largely by its prominent figure, a political and business leader from the Global Minority.

While participants were affiliated with these networks, they did not exclusively adhere to the dominant Discourses presented by them. Their motivations for activism, as well as the Discourses they expressed and engaged in, were diverse. These ranged from advocating for environmental stewardship to embracing a "living well" Discourse through their activities. These Discourses, however, were shaped by a variety of factors, including power dynamics and learning processes, such as Valentina's background as an electrical engineer, to informal education experiences of recognising socioecological injustices, as in Juliana's case, or non-formal education, such as Veronica's realisation that she was a victim of gender violence. These Discourses were not static; participants demonstrated *strategic flexibility* in their interactions with diverse communities, funding institutions, and online learning networks (as discussed further in Chapter 7). In these spaces and communities, where power dynamics varied, activists often adapted or challenged their discourses to fit the context or confront prevailing power structures.

Through their Discourses, online learning networks appeared to set boundaries on what is considered to be "sustainable development activism", creating tensions between the Discourses that brough participants to activism, such as living well, and the top-down

Discourses deemed "appropriate" within the online learning networks' communities, such as the SDGs and a scientific-technological approach to the climate crisis. For instance, Natalia adopted a "climate crisis" Discourse within the Climate Action Coalition community and a community-building Discourse with the Zapotitlan Women's community, even thought she was referring to the same grassroots activism project. Similarly, Luisa, when dealing with her funding institution, focused on highlighting efforts towards "the environment" using a Discourse aligned with the online learning networks, while within the NGO and among volunteers, she employed a Discourse marked by challenging our connection with the world.

In Chapter 2, I highlighted how Latin American activism manifest through a plurality of protest and resistance movements (Trentini & Sorroche, 2016), expanding and enhancing its capacity for representation through various discursive and representative platforms (Svampa, 2010). For instance, this included the use of digital networks and engagement with intersectional activists' movements. However, within the online learning networks, Latin American activism seems constrained by a very specific Discourse shaped by a top-down perspective, or activist *within* sustainable development, as shared in Chapter 1. Instead of acknowledging the plurality of activisms, these networks appear to steer them towards adopting a Discourse that risks alienating their grassroots activism practices and knowledges.

Earlier in this thesis, in Chapter 2, I discussed how Toledo et al., (2014) identify two primary forms of socio-ecological activism: protective resistance, which seeks to prevent the implementation of harmful projects, and initiatives aimed at developing alternative models to the dominant "development" paradigm. However, in Chapter 1, I highlighted the sociopolitical context of Latin America, marked by the expansion of neoextractivism and hegemonic "development" models, as well as the growing repression against activism that challenges the current "development" paradigms, which included threats and even murder. In the light of this context, I would add other form of activism to those of the authors: one that engages with *strategic flexibility* in activism Discourses as a strategy to sustain their practices, as shown by Luisa and Natalia so far.

However, this form of activism brings with it diverse challenges, such as adoption of top-down Discourses that sideline alternative visions of "development" within Latin America. These visions, in turn, sideline the appreciation of local, ancestral knowledges and the consolidation of counter-hegemonic proposals that challenge colonial, destructive, ecocide, and ethnocidal models of "development". The model of online learning networks, as shown in

this chapter and expanded in Chapter 8, seemed to be based in top-down education models, where the Discourses, knowledges, and what and how is deemed for activists to learn are set by powerful figures, whether they are the founder, international agencies and interests, or a few individuals in their core team, leaving the alternative models grounded in the understanding of diverse epistemologies behind.

Exploring these Discourses is valuable for understanding how knowledge is acquired, where it originates, how it is produced, and under what circumstances. I encouraged reflection on whose interests are being served in the process of activism and how it is possible to think differently. This could enable us to trace how certain information, accepted as truth, maintains its privileged position (Mills, 2003). The forthcoming chapter will delve into the myriad identities that activists embrace, how these identities are shaped by multiple Discourses, and how activists, in turn, reshape those Discourses themselves.

Chapter Six

Am I an Activist? Identities and Self-Portrayals in "Sustainable Development Activism"

6. Introduction

In the previous Chapter, I explored the Discourses around "sustainable development activism", shedding light and how these serve specific interests and set education and learning approaches (further developed in Chapter 8), shaping what is deemed as "sustainable development activism" and what is not. In this chapter, I examine the identities and self-portrayals of "sustainable development activists". As highlighted by Gee (2014) in Chapter 3, Discourses are deeply connected to identity, as they represent ways in which individuals are recognised and come to recognise themselves as distinctive types of people engaged in particular kinds of actions" (p.184). My focus is on understanding how my participants navigated these identities and portrayals as they engaged with diverse communities in their activism practices. I also explore the essence of what is means to be an activist, alongside other related identities such as that of a "climate champion".

Delving deeper, I investigate how identities, much like the Discourses previously discussed in Chapter 5, shape activists' education practices and influence the strategic choices and dilemmas they encounter in their engagement with "sustainable development". These decisions are affected by the appreciation and abandonment of certain aspects of being and knowing, while simultaneously embracing identities linked to specific powers and interests. The identities of activists, as well as those of the people they collaborate with, significantly influence their Discourses and practices. In turn, their Discourses and practices also shape their identities.

As Taft (2010) argues, the interplay between identity and strategy is both complex and reciprocal. Identity claims influence over strategic choices, while the ways individuals and communities' approach political engagement also shape their identities and the Discourses they construct. This dynamic process involves identity Discourses guiding and supporting specific strategic choices, which in turn reinforce various facets of those identities.

My exploration begins by investigating the meaning of activism within online learning networks. From there, I capture the varied voices of my participants to shed light on what being an activist means to them. Next, I examine the diverse identities among my participants and the significant role digital networks, such as the online learning networks played in the adoption and portrayal of these identities. Finally, I explore the complex negotiation of identities and self-portrayals as activists engage with diverse communities, further illuminating the intricate dynamics involved in the pursuit of "their cause".

6.1 Being an Activist within the Online Learning Networks

Both researched online learning networks promoted specific identities to which their members were expected to align. Similar to how these networks shaped Discourses, as discussed in Chapter 5, the identities they endorsed were also influenced by power dynamics and aligned with certain institutional interests. As Sindic et al., (2015) suggest, networks often define people in particular ways to ensure alignment with dominant interests. These online learning networks employed distinctive methods to shape identities, such as inviting individuals to become "ambassadors" or offering training courses that certified them as "climate champions". This section explores how these diverse identities were constructed.

MexiSustain described itself on its website as "a hybrid initiative that combines social mobilisation, activisms, and advocacy with an innovative circular model based on sustainable development". The use of the term "activisms" was particularly intriguing, as it suggested an acknowledgement of the various forms and approaches to activism within the network. By employing the term in its plural form, MexiSustain seemed to recognise the diverse perspectives, strategies, and actions taken by individuals participating in its activities. Moreover, the network's linkage of "activisms" with social mobilisation and advocacy suggested an intrinsic connection among these elements. To me, this implied that these varied forms of activism serve as tools to mobilise people in activities primarily aimed at advancing "sustainable development activism". As Pablo, who was involved in crafting the organisation's description and serves as one of its key leaders and legal representatives, put it:

> "I was really interested in having "activisms" there, so that´s because I intervened, because I think it was not there. Activism with "the activism" and I change it to

"activisms" to recognise that it exists in different ways, like many activist movements, and that in Mexico, many active individuals converge from many different places, and I think there is a convergence, but on a personal level, I think we all need to come together more, like in a more common cause, because sometimes I feel very disconnected, right? But that's another thing, so some of it was from there".

-Interview excerpts, July 13, 2023.

By emphasising "activisms", Pablo suggested that diverse identities could converge within the organisation. However, to engage with the network and be accepted as a member, whether collectively or individually, individuals needed to meet a series of requirements that shaped specific identities within the network (see Figure 23). For example, to join as an ambassador, individuals were required to be fluent in both Spanish and English, possess three years of volunteer experience, have access to a computer and the internet, provided recommendation letters, and demonstrate a commitment to and understanding of "sustainable development" as an international political Agenda, particularly by following the SDGs as a framework.

However, as mentioned in Chapter 2, in a country like Mexico, where 19.4% of the population identifies as part of an Indigenous community and approximately 4% of them do not speak Spanish[30] (INEGI, 2022), and where some indigenous communities such as the Cora community just 46.58% of their population has access to a mobile phone without guaranteed internet access (IFT,2022), these requirements for participation within the online learning network excluded a significant portion of Mexican society and its social movements. As Toledo et al., (2014) argue, the challenge lies in creating movements that no longer mimic dominant worldviews and ways of conceptualising nature, but instead reclaim the history, culture, and collective memory of the people, essential aspects of identity. While Pablo suggested that the use of the word "activisms" was intended to embrace multiple forms and identities of activism, the research revealed, as highlighted in interviews with Laura and Julio, that MexiSustain' s activism was ultimately "targeted to privileged and elitist identities".

[30] Being Spanish the official language in Mexico.

Figure 22. Requirements for becoming an ambassador at the MexiSustain. Retrieved from their ambassadors' call, November 2022.

Figure 22 illustrates the extensive list of requirements that MexiSustain set for individuals seeking to join the network as "ambassadors" in 2022. It highlighted both mandatory and essential prerequisites for initiating the application process. Among the 37 listed requirements, over 20 prominently featured the word "MUST" in capital letters, underscoring a corporate tone with phrases such as "working under pressure and meeting established deadlines", "conducting technical tests", and "demonstrable experience in project management". Additionally, the criteria heavily emphasised the 2030 Agenda and SDGs, requiring applicants to have prior experience in projects aligned with this Discourse. This in turn, sidelined forms of activisms that did not fit within these established frameworks.

In contrast to MexiSustain, the Climate Action Coalition claimed it did not impose formal "requirements" for joining. However, participation in a climate training programme was considered essential for becoming part of the community. This training was designed to provide individuals with a scientific and technological perspective on climate change, encouraging them to adopt specific activism practices aligned with this Discourse. As Lorena noted, the climate training held "significant importance" for community members. According to Castell (2004), identities may emerge from dominant institutions but only become meaningful when social actors internalise them and build their significance around them. By undertaking the network's training course, members engaged with and constructed a shared

Discourse based on a scientific and technological view of the climate crisis, eventually developing a collective identity as "climate champions".

The Climate Action Coalition presented a broad depiction of "who we are", placing significant emphasis on the organisation's activities, founding journey, historical context, and global reach, as shared in section 5.3. Activism was featured as one of their key pathways for advocacy.
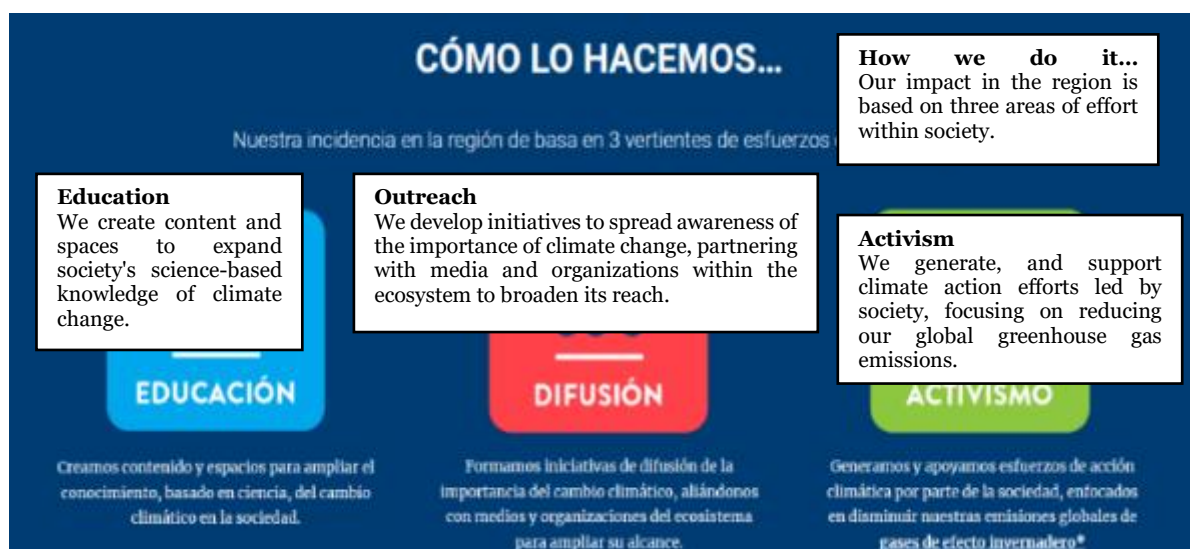
Figure 7. Climate Action Coalition Website (How we do it) retrieved in February 2023.

Figure 7 indicates that the organisation undertook initiatives to stimulate global responses to the climate crisis across three societal domains: education, communication, and activism. Within the realm of activism, the organisation initiated and supported efforts focusing on climate action, with particular emphasis on reducing greenhouse gas emissions. Furthermore, the Climate Action Coalition's website featured a "get involved" section, suggesting that active participation equated to adopting the role of a "climate activist" (see Figure 23).
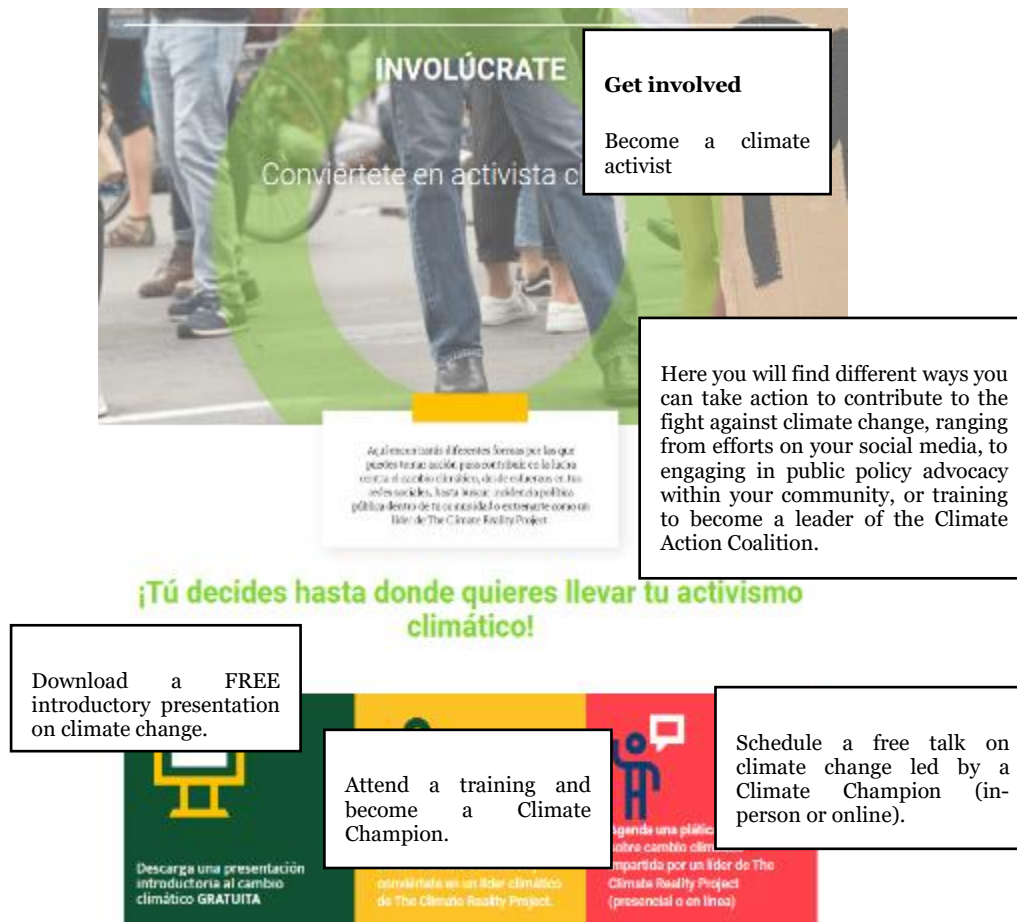
Figure 23. The Climate Action Coalition Website (Get involved) October 2022.

In the call to action "get involved, become a climate activist", the network outlined various ways to participate in the "fight" against climate change. These options ranged from engaging on social media to influencing local politicians and participating in the network's climate training. Activism was portrayed as an evolving journey, reflecting a dynamic and fluid interpretation of the concept. By presenting activism as a diverse and multifaceted endeavour, the network framed climate education as a process through which individuals "reconstruct their identities within a Discourse that remains open, incomplete, and contingent" (González-Gaudiano, 2005, p.123). This perspective apparently recognised the agency of individuals in choosing their preferred paths of action, emphasising that activism can encompass a variety of approaches rather than being confined to a single method.

However, while the network's approach acknowledged individuals' autonomy in aligning their activism with personal beliefs and inclinations, it could also be argued that the

organisation subtly seemed to shape specific identities through Discourse, such as the imperative to become a "climate champion" by undergoing training grounded in a scientific and technological framework.

The online learning networks adopted a structured approach to engaging individuals and communities in activism efforts. This often involved a series of steps for individuals to become "climate champions" or "ambassadors", aligning them with specific identities rooted in a specific "sustainable development" Discourse. However, this process risks overlooking the pre-existing involvement of community members and the Discourses and identities they bring with them. Instead, these individuals may be pushed into an institutionalised strategy. This echoes Bullard's (2004) critique, which highlights the drawbacks of mainstream environmental organisations adopting a corporate model in their structure, activities, and outlook. Such an approach has contributed to the alienation of grassroots leaders and community organisers from the broader movements. The following section delves into the essence of what it means to be an activist for the participants.

6.2 What does it Mean to be an Activist?

In designing my research proposal and conducting fieldwork, I faced a significant challenge in determining the criteria for identifying participants and defining what constitutes an activist in the realm of "sustainable development". Initially, I assumed that activists were primarily those visibly engaged in street protest or actively advocating for political action. However, as I began reaching out to potential participants, I encountered a diverse spectrum of identities and self-portrayals among those working toward "sustainable development". This led me to question: what defines an activist in this context?

During my interactions with participants, I observed a notable hesitation and ambiguity surrounding the term "activist". Many participants were reluctant to embrace the "activist" label within certain communities. Instead, they preferred identities such as students, community members, climate volunteers, or sustainability ambassadors, roles that reflected their involvement in diverse communities and aligned with accepted Discourses within these circles. As Escobar (2008) suggests, the political and cultural practices of social movements in the region play a crucial role in shaping identities.

This section explores what it means to be an activist among my participants, drawing on Tilly's (2014) conceptualisation of the term as individuals or groups who use action to effect social or political change. Identity, as elucidated by Escobar (2008), emerges from Discourses and practices deeply entrenched in historical contexts and power dynamics. In Latin America, amid uncertain times marked by declining faith in democracy, political stagnation, and the rise of right-wing extremism (Gatehouse, 2019), the landscape of activism, especially for land and environmental activists, has become perilous. Global Witness (2023) highlights the dangers faced by activists in Latin America, with Mexico and Colombia among the most hazardous countries for such endeavours. Given the circumstances, participants in my study might have hesitated to adopt the label of "activist". They questioned why they were selected for the study, who I was, what I intended to do with the research, and how their contributions might be used, as if they were assessing the safety of identifying themselves as activists.

Additionally, some participants may have hesitated to label themselves as activists due to media and mainstream Discourses, as discussed in Chapter 1, which often portray activism as reactive. For instance, Julio noted that the term "activism" frequently evoked negative emotions and associations, creating barriers to open dialogue and collaboration.

"Nowadays citizenship participation is taken as a reactionary condition, as an anger circumstance...everything always has to be done as a reaction of pain, a reaction of anger. So, when we talk about activism, other people tend to be like no bro, no bro, no, take it easy, take it easy".

-Interview excerpts, April 4, 2023.

Julio's perception of activism as a reactionary response, often associated with pain, extremism, and anger, resonated with others in the study. This negative depiction of activism is not unique to the Mexican context. Research by Cabezas Pinta et al., (2021), Castañeda (n.d), and Hervé Huamaní (2023) investigate the criminalisation of activism in Ecuador, Colombia, and Peru. Similarly, studies by Monin et al., (2008), as well as Bashir et al., (2013), conducted in the United States and Canada, have documented similar tendencies to view activists through negative stereotypes, which hindered engagement and identification with them.

On the other hand, participants like Laura expressed reluctance to identify as activists due to the perceived level of commitment activism implied, preferring instead to contribute to society in their "own capacity".

"I don't consider myself an activist because I think it's like too much commitment, but I do consider myself committed to myself, to my society, and well, I try to contribute as much or as little as I can from where I am".

-Interview excerpts, February 1, 2023.

For some participants, activism seemed to extend beyond their everyday lives, perceived as something external to their personal experiences. Others, who had previously identified as activists, shifted their engagement strategies, adopting multiple identities such as "climate champion" to navigate the threats and violence directed at them and their families by powerful political figures and groups. For instance, Juan Carlos, a member of the Climate Action Coalition and leader of a youth NGO dedicated to fostering environmental education in Querétaro, faced life-threatening situations for both him and his family while organising a major protest aimed at protecting one of the region's key rivers. This protest coincided with a significant commemoration attended by the President of Mexico.

"With all these threats, well, the truth is that, you know, I will tell you something, there are heroes to heroes, and there are those who decide to give their lives for their ideals. Which is very respectable, but I am more of the mindset that as long as you're alive, the battle continues".

-Interview excerpts, April 28, 2023.

Juan Carlos' experience highlighted the ethical commitments inherent in activism, as described by Escobar (2008). Amid political turmoil, activists often navigate complex power dynamics and ethical dilemmas, including the risk of endangering their families and communities. They engage in skilful disclosure to create spaces where new forms of identity, knowledge, and action emerge. Juan Carlos's decision to adapt his activism practice and identity reflected a response to oppressive forces, emphasising the ongoing nature of the struggle for socioecological justice.

The perceived hesitation of participants to fully embrace an activist identity was driven not only by personal concerns but also by broader socio-political realities, where activism entails significant risks. It is noteworthy how online learning networks readily employ this identity and as discussed in section 6.1, attributed specific characteristics to it based on embracing particular Discourses tied to various powers and hegemonic knowledges. To me,

this can be seen as a strategy to both delegitimise certain activism practices, such as the protests Juan Carlos organised, or those that did not conform to "championship acts" or adhere to campaign guidelines, as will be explored in Chapter 7. Moreover, this served to reinforce activism as practices that align with dominant sustainable development Discourses.

This phenomenon, where certain powers and institutions define who qualifies as an activist and what are the characteristics this identity encompasses, underscores the intricate interplay between identity, power dynamics, Discourses, and socio-political contexts. These factors shaped how participants engaged with and navigated "sustainable development activism". For instance, MexiSustain imposed an extensive list of requirements, some of which privilege specific groups, such as fluency in English, a language not accessible to many Mexicans, or competition of training heavily focused on a scientific-technological Discourse of "the climate crisis". Such criteria sideline other forms of activism, such as Juan Carlos' protests, in favour of practices aligned within institutional Discourses, such as "climate talks", "championship acts" or specific campaigns.

In the next section, I examine the diverse identities that participants adopted, or, as Butler (1995) might suggest, performed through their practices and explore the implications of these identities within "sustainable development activism".

6.2.1 Identities of "Sustainable Development Activists"

As previously discussed, the identity of an "activist" was met with reluctance among participants and communities, shaped by socio-political and historical contexts. Nonetheless, participants often engaged with multiple identities across different spaces, at times including that of an activist. This section explores the varied identities and self-portrayals of "sustainable development activists" within the study. Understanding these identities is essential, as they not only influence the actions of activists but also shape how we perceive and respond to their practices. Identity is deeply embedded in practices, particularly in the practices and Discourses of power (Sindic et al., 2015).

For example, Gloria performed several identities during participant observation. She represented herself as a MexiSustain ambassador in activities related to the network, such as webinars and meetings with other ambassadors, aligning with an SDGs Discourse (as

discussed in Chapter 5). At other times, she adopted the role of a "climate champion", echoing the Discourse of the Climate Action Coalition through her involvement in "climate championship acts". Additionally, she identified as a Tlaxcaltecan when engaging with different communities in her own collective activities, such as an itinerant campaign. Gloria described how these identities emerged from a battle between external powers, her causes, and a continual process of "construction and reconstruction".

> "I am in that stage where I have to define myself, where I want to go, who I want to be with, and above all, what my role is both individually and collectively. In that sense, I am also in this process of construction and deconstruction, you know, because many times when we are asked who we are? Well, we go to the titles, to our achievements, etc., but that's something external, the result of the effort you have made, but there is also this part of your essence, so to speak. Right? So, I think... well, Gloria is a passionate woman committed to socio-environmental causes".

> -Interview excerpts, February 2, 2023.

Like Gloria, several participants shared that their identities have been in constant flux and construction, influenced by their interactions with people and institutions. However, they highlight one common trend: following a cause, which I argue also is (re)shaped by diverse Discourses and communities (as discussed in Chapter 5). This echoes Agius and Keep's (2018) statement that identity is not simply about classification, but rather engaging in a complex series of meanings, intersections, and possibilities of meaning.

For instance, Natalia embodied diverse identities during participant observation, including those of a member of a women's collective, a feminist, a member of MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition, a friend, a biologist, and a Latin American woman, among others, many of which overlapped. In an interview, she reflected on how her identity as an activist had evolved over time, alongside her understanding of and engagement with the Discourses surrounding the causes she supported.

> "I think Natalia is something overly complex and in process...yes, I define myself as an activist, under my own definition of activist, right? I think that sometimes, the perception I had was very, when I started my work in conservation, the definition I had of activists was like these people who go out to the streets and fight and protest, like that was my definition. But I said, no, well, it goes beyond that, right? And the fact that I

define it like that, work for that cause, for biodiversity, for participatory development through education in networks, well, that makes me an activist".

-Interview excerpt, May 26, 2023.

Natalia shared that her understanding of activism within the "conservation" Discourse was very specific, characterised by actions such as "going out to the streets, fighting, and protesting". However, she also described how engaging with a new Discourse, "participatory development", led her to distance herself from what she referred to as the "conservationism Discourse". Instead, she began to define her activist identity through this new Discourse, focusing on the pursuit of change, particularly in the preservation of biodiversity. This shift underscores how the activist identity is deeply intertwined with various Discourses, as demonstrated by Natalia and other participants, and how the activist's identity itself is continuously shaped by these evolving Discourses.

Similarly, Monica, a member of MexiSustain, was in her late 20s and worked as a marine biologist and educator at a secondary school in northern Mexico. She shared that she did not readily embrace the activist identity because she perceived it as rooted in certain practices and Discourses promoted by diverse institutions. Instead, she believed that activism could be manifested through "small" actions aligned with her diverse positionalities, such as her role as an educator. Monica adopted an identity and Discourse that were accepted by her workplace, a high school, reflecting how her activism engagement was shaped by her professional context.

"Well, yeah, I hadn't called myself an activist either, you know, ha-ha. But just, maybe yes, I think we are partly activists because I believe we do carry out actions, right? I mean, activism isn't just about saying "I am an activist" and that's it, but it's about acting, right? And maybe these actions, one might think of activism, like going to tie yourself to a tree, right? But no, they are small things, I mean, from your workplace, giving a class for example. Being a teacher, well, that is activism".

-Interview excerpt, April 13, 2023.

Monica highlighted how her understanding of activist identity was shaped by a particular Discourse, one that frames activists as people who "tie themselves to trees", a perspective that aligns with the current Mexican government's portrayal of activists opposing neoextractivism projects across various regions. Although Monica did not fully identify with

the "activist" label as defined by the reactive Discourse portrayed by some media and government narratives[31], she and other participants acknowledged that they embodied certain "aspects" of activism. These aspects were fluid, influenced by multiple identities in constant flux due to several factors such as their interactions with different individuals, affiliations with various institutions, encountered opportunities, life experiences, and broader power dynamics shaping their legitimacy.

These factors not only led to shifts in their identities but also reshaped the Discourses surrounding "their cause", as noted by Natalia and others. For some, identifying as an activist within certain Discourses created complexities and challenges, including perceived limitations on engagement and potential risks to their safety, as shared by Julio and Juan Carlos in section 6.2.

For instance, Julio shared how being identified as an "activist", despite activism being a matter of citizenship participation, was often associated with a "reactionary condition". He disagreed with this dominant perspective, stating, "there are times when you do not have any other option" but to be disruptive, acknowledging that this approach was successful in certain instances, such as feminist movements in Mexico. This suggests that, even though he did not accept the dominant Discourse that portrayed activists as problematic, he shaped his strategies to engage with specific communities, such as those in architecture and art, where he was involved.

On the other hand, Valentina and Monica referred to activism as "tying yourself to a tree", following a dominant Discourse within the country. Although they apparently did not view this form of activism as inherently bad and acknowledged that people "were free to engage in such acts", they portrayed these actions as "negative activism" during the interviews. They position themselves in favour of "small actions" and disqualified more radical forms of activism. This stance has political implications, advocating for incremental activism that barely questions dominant Discourses and practices risks reinforcing existing power structures.

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[31] See for example, Noticaribe (2022), and Mora (2022).

As Escobar (2014) observes, identity is continually negotiated between local practices of resistance and historical contextual struggles, imbuing identity formation with a dynamic, evolving nature. Activists may sideline this identity when they buy into dominant Discourses that portray activism as "radical" or "reactionary". This processual quality is particularly evident in activists' political strategies, as seen in the approaches of Julio, Juan Carlos, Gloria (who describes herself as an activist within Senate spaces and Tlaxcaltecan in local fairs), and Natalia, who identifies as "climate champion" within the Climate Action Coalition, but as "explorer" within the women's community.

Participants, however, expressed how digital spaces offered a platform where they could more freely embody their activist identity and varied Discourses. The following section explores how digital environments, especially personal social media platforms, are seen as spaces that allow participants to express their activist identities and Discourses in ways that may not be permitted in other settings.

6.2.2 Digital World in the Identities of Activism

Digital spaces, particularly social media platforms, emerged as environments where my participants appeared to feel more at ease identifying as "activists", in contrast to their experiences in face-to-face interactions observed during fieldwork. Scholars such as Flores Marques (2016) and Kerfa and Tortajada (2022) have highlighted that digital activism enables individuals to assert their identities while challenging dominant Discourses and mainstream narratives. However, digital spaces also tend to portray activism as a desirable pursuit, emphasising its great potential without acknowledging that "power is not something people get back with technology, as power is not something activists get, but something they build" (Kleis Nielsen, 2010, p.185).

This phenomenon was reflected in participants' online expressions, such as openly declaring their activist roles in Instagram bios and actively participating in online trainings, groups, and communities centred around activism. The digital sphere appeared to provide participants with a sense of safety and empowerment, allowing them to express their activist identities "more freely and authentically". However, at the same time, online platforms, including online learning networks, seemed to promote activism as a desirable pursuit while often remaining largely conformist. These platforms tended to bolster existing power

structures and Discourses, distancing people from and disqualifying more radical forms of activism.

Juliana, for instance, explicitly noted that online platforms had offered her the opportunity to embrace and pursue her activist identity "more fully".

"In the pursuit of being an activist, I thought, well, I don't have much time to go to the main square every day and stand there with a sign. I'm busy with my studies and work. But what if I try from the digital world? Maybe with a tweet, I can reach more people than I would physically at Plaza Bolívar, and they wouldn't think I'm crazy".

-Interview excerpts, April 21, 2023.

Juliana's perspective on online spaces was particularly insightful. She noted that these platforms not seemed to only allow her to incorporate activism into her schedule more easily but also gave her a chance to "challenge" other's perception of her activism. By engaging in digital activism, Juliana felt she could avoid being labelled as "crazy", distancing herself from a label often promoted by the dominant Discourse around activism in the region. This perception of potential judgement or stigmatisation, rooted in prevailing Discourses around activism, had previously discouraged several participants from actively engaging or openly identifying as activist.

In contrast, Melissa, an environmental influencer with a background in law and environmental rights, openly embraced the activist label. She concentrated on creating digital content that addressed issues such as consumerism and the broader societal impacts of the climate crisis. In her Instagram bio, Melissa identified herself as a digital creator dedicated to "sharing relevant environmental news, educating about the deeper aspects of consumption to encourage mindful consumer behaviour, and actively participating in climate activism".

Digital creator
🌱 Noticias ambientales importantes
• Te enseño que hay detrás de lo que consumes para
🔥 🌐 Activismo por el clima
ⓕ Facebook profile + 1 link

Important environmental news
I teach you what lies behind what you consume so you can be a conscious consumer
Climate activism

Figure 24. Image from Melisa's Instagram Profile retrieved in January 2023.

As shown in Figure 24, Melissa disclosed that her activism began and continued to be rooted in content creation, with a strong identification with an activist identity within the digital sphere. During an interview, she offered a compelling insight into how the digital space seemed to offer her a space for her activism. However, this space and her engagement with digital content creation were driven not just by her, but also by external actors with whom she could engage, such as brands that could collaborate with her as an influencer.

"There was a moment when I suddenly started creating more political content because we were in a complex social situation in the country, we were in the middle of a strike, during the pandemic. The national strike was a complex event here in Colombia, and I made content about it. After a very very interesting introspection, I realised that this wasn't something brands would like either, and that if I wanted to be an influencer, I had to define a niche. I am not going to say it was about pleasing brands but rather being strategic".

-Interview excerpt February 7, 2023

Melissa shared how engaging in "political issues" that challenged hegemonic Discourses, such as the National Strike in Colombia, where millions of people mobilised across the country against the tax reform, pension reform, and labour reform, what some sectors, including activists, called "the neoliberal package" (Aguilar Forero, 2020). Melissa shared how, as an influencer and activists, engaging in these "political issues", as she referred to them, was not strategic. This brings into question: who is considered an activist within digital environments? Are these people conforming the hegemonic Discourses and distancing themselves from political action? As highlighted by Castells and Catterall (2001), the digital is as a process of social transformation in which technology is inseparable from social, economic, cultural, and political issues. Conversely, Gloria, although she readily acknowledged her role as an activist in everyday conversations, did not explicitly label herself as such in her Instagram profile (see Figure 25). Instead, she presented herself as an "environmental disseminator, scientist, volunteer, and entrepreneur". Nevertheless, her commitment to activism was seamlessly embedded in her daily activities, as evidenced by her featured Instagram stories. These stories highlighted a wide array of engagements, including trips, museum visits, conference participation, events hosted by various organisations, and other roles she occupied, such as "ambassador".

Figure 25. Image from Gloria's Instagram Profile retrieved in November 2022.

Gloria's activist identity found a place among the multiple identities and Discourses she maintained within her Instagram stories. While she did explicitly define herself as an activist in her social media bio, she nonetheless created a space to emphasise this role, distinct from her other identities and activities, such as her role as an ambassador. By doing so, Gloria differentiated her activist identity from her other pursuits, highlighting the diverse practices within her activism. This reflects an understanding of activism in relation to other spaces of communication, such as the streets and traditional media (Flores Marques, 2016), demonstrating that identities are in constant negotiation and construction across various Discourses, times, and contexts (MCentee-Atalianis, 2021). For instance, Gloria featured images of activities aligned with a particular Discourse as part of her "ambassador" identity for an important international institution, while also showcasing independent actions undertaken under a different Discourse at various times, framed within her activist identity.

Another example of how activism was portrayed in public profiles, shaped by diverse Discourses and external influences, was illustrated by Luisa. As a member of the Climate Action Coalition and an architecture student during the data collection phase, Luisa actively engaged with multiple organisations in digital and community activism related to the climate crisis. In selected Instagram reels and posts, Luisa openly identified as an activist, even including this identity in her Instagram bio at one point, referring to herself as an "imperfect activist". However, Luisa's identity underwent a shift over time; after receiving her degree, she evolved from identifying as an "imperfect activist" to an "imperfect architect and socio-environmentalist", reflecting the dynamic and evolving nature of identity in response to her personal and professional changes.

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🌱Imperfect Architect & SocioEnvironmentalist
👤@tecdemonterrey 🎓ARQ'23
⭐@converseallstars ᴍx
😎@climatelatino
🌈@nacelarcoiris1320
🏆@zeromarket.mx
🔗 www.motusdao.org/detalles-y-registro/nemi-quest-2 + 1
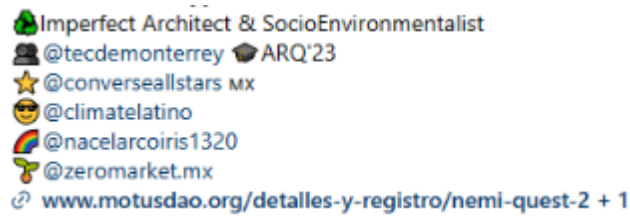
Figure 26. Image from Luisa's Instagram Profile retrieved in July 2023.

This transformation highlighted Luisa's interaction with, and identities connected to a range of institutions. Her adoption of the "imperfect activist" identity was particularly thought-provoking. When asked about the meaning behind being "imperfect", Luisa explained that, like many others, she felt short of the ideal expectations dictated by Discourses. For instance, she shared, "until now, I have not been able to eliminate my carbon footprint… my diet is not entirely vegetarian, I still use a car, plastics, and lack top-tier eco-technologies in my home".

Luisa's insights pointed to an implicit set of criteria, characteristics, and behaviours that delineate what it means to be an activist or an architect, shaped by the Discourses of various institutions and communities, such as her involvement in vegetarian and zero-waste communities, or with a higher education institution that certifies her as an architect. This perspective implied the existence of certain prerequisites or standards that one must meet to legitimately embrace the identity of an activist. By calling herself an "imperfect activist", Luisa acknowledged that unless certain parameters within these Discourses are met, one's activism might be perceived as incomplete or not fully aligned with prevailing expectations. This reveals a more nuanced understanding of activism, where individuals may feel pressure to conform to certain ideals or standards established by different Discourses, such as the one Luisa invoked, that individualise responsibility, and power structures, whether institutional or communal, to claim the activist identity.

Although some participants noted that online spaces seemed to allow them to identity as activists, there were instances where they found themselves shifting between different identities and Discourses depending on the circumstances and those, they were likely to engage with. For example, Melissa moved from being an activist creating content around "political issues" to becoming an activist and influencer collaborating with diverse brands. As Gee (2014) highlights, to mean anything to someone, we communicate who we are and what

we are doing. It seemed that social media platforms; while offering virtual spaces for communication and possible political action, can both facilitate dialogue for activists and create barriers to their activism practices (Kerfa & Tortajada, 2022).

For instance, the need to shift Discourses when engaging with "brands" as an activist influencer, as shared by Melissa, or considering oneself an "imperfect activist" within an individualised responsibility Discourse, as shared by Luisa. As Joyce (2010) observes economic, social, and political factors determine whether and how people engage with digital activism. This mirrors how, both in face-to-face and online environments, activists navigate the identity of an "activist" through diverse Discourses. Is an activist someone who does not challenge current hegemonic Discourses and instead accommodates to them? For example, someone who is zero waste but not demand that large neoextractivist companies regulate waste and production? Is it a "bad" activist who engages in "political issues"? as Escobar (2008) suggests, identity is not only shaped by Discourses and practices but also emerges and evolved through engagement with them.

Throughout my engagement with the diverse online and offline activities of participants, a clear pattern emerged: when participants embraced the activist identity, or those shaped by online learning networks, it was often a strategic choice, made with careful consideration of the political and tactical benefits it might offer. The following section examines the fluidity of these identities and their strategic deployment across different contexts.

6.3 Negotiating Labels; Fluid Identities for Engaging in Activism

When participants engaged with diverse communities and stakeholders across various sectors, a multitude of identity-related terms emerged through both online and in-person interactions, as well as in dialogues with participants and respondents. These diverse identities appeared to serve as strategic tools, enabling participants to create platforms for cooperation and build connections with others. As Escobar (2008) suggests, the production of identities in people's interactions involves the construction of cultural worlds, shaped by recursive improvisations within a sedimented historical background. This process encompasses various forms of mediations, including symbolic, discursive, and other "tools of

agency", such as identities. As demonstrated in the previous sections, certain identities tend to be more "accepted" or legitimised by specific institutions and communities, allowing participants to navigate these spaces.

Take Natalia, for instance. In her numerous activist roles, she held multiple identities, biologist, educator, explorer, climate champion, ambassador, friend, collaborator, and an activist. However, she did not employ all of these identities at once. Instead, Natalia strategically selected and presented certain identities depending on the individuals and communities with whom she was interacting, drawing on specific Discourses to frame her interactions.

For example, when interacting with members of the Climate Action Coalition, Natalia referred to herself as an explorer and "climate champion", aligning with a scientific and technological Discourse, as detailed in Chapter 5. In contrast, when engaging with other networks or seeking funding for a community project she co-led with other women, she identified as a collaborator, emphasising her "sustainable development" Discourses. In these contexts, she highlighted biodiversity conservation when identifying as a "climate champion" or "ambassador". However, when developing a funding proposal for an international organisation that supports climate crisis initiatives, she shifted focus, emphasising climate change mitigation in alignment with the objectives of the organisation.

In her role as collaborator with a women's community in Zapotitlan Salinas, Natalia and her team deliberately chose to present themselves as "Explorers" to build rapport with the community. They leveraged a shared network familiar to many of the women, intentionally distancing themselves from an association with Don Raul, a local figure who was not "well-liked" due to his history of violence against women. This negative reputation had created distrust within the community.

When promoting their activities and collaborative project, Natalia and her team consistently included a statement emphasising the complete separation of their activities from any political affiliation or private interests, despite being funded by two international organisations (see Figure 27). These sponsors were mentioned on promotional materials to attract participants, yet Natalia and her team aimed to create an identity that distanced them from perceived hierarchies to better connect with the women's community. However, initial efforts to engage participants outside their circle of friends met with resistance.

Capacity Building Activities for Women

Sunday, January 8
12:00 - Departure from the kiosk
Convivial Gathering

Monday, January 9
17:00 - Pulqueria
Workshop: Let's Make Compost

Tuesday, January 10
18:00 - House
Workshop: Climate Crisis

Participation certificates will be awarded

Snacks and activities for children will be provided

Free activities with no affiliation to any political party or private interest

Organised by Explorers

Figure 27. Capacity-building sessions call by Natalia and her team, January 2023. Portraying Natalia and her team" identities as Explorers and stating their sponsorship by an international institution.

Figure 28. Women from Zapotitlan participating in a native medicinal plants workshop. Puebla, Mexico. January 2023.

The challenges faced by the team in expanding participation could largely be attributed to the community's distrust of external entities, particularly the affiliations and sponsors highlighted in the promotional posters. Doña Rosa, a member of the *Masehual Siuamej*

Monsenyolchicauani[32] community, explained during capacity-building sessions that external entities often impose their own goals on communities, limiting genuine engagement and failing to address the community's actual needs.

Similarly, during informal conversations, several women shared their past experiences with various projects. They noted that many of these initiatives were implemented more as performative gestures rather than genuine efforts to address the community's needs. Instead of fostering meaningful collaboration, these projects often imposed external goals, leaving the women feeling disconnected from the process and receiving little to no tangible benefit from their involvement.

Despite these initial setbacks, Natalia and her team eventually expanded participation, often through word-of-mouth recommendations and by strengthening their relationships with the women involved. As they became closer to the community, their identity evolved from that of outsiders, "explorers" or associates of Don Raul, to individuals more integrated with the community. An illustrative moment occurred when a waitress from a local restaurant, where the team frequently dined, eventually joined their activities. When asked about her decision to get involved, she explained that her curiosity grew after observing the team's consistent presence and conversing with them over time. She began to feel more comfortable with their motivations for working in Zapotitlan and saw them as part of the community.

As this dynamic unfolded, even my own identity shifted from that of an external "researcher" to being perceived as part of "the team" by the women. Our identities, professor, biologist, friend, filmmaker, researcher, explorer, gradually merged into a single cohesive identity centred on the project: "the team", united by a common Discourse of women's empowerment for socio-environmental transformation. This process reflected the development of a Community of Practice (CoP), where interactions extended beyond the creations of meanings around the world to include the ongoing construction of identities (Land & Jonassen, 2012). As Butler (1995) asserts, even deeply rooted identities are always provisional and subject to change. Our experience reflected this fluidity, demonstrating how identities can transform through deepening relationships and a shared Discourse.

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[32] Women who support each other

During my field visits to Zapotitlan Salinas, Natalia did not present herself as an activist. Instead, she adopted the role of an explorer, and later, simply "Natalia", a member of "the team". However, when seeking publicity and financial support for the project, she strategically portrayed herself as an activist, tailoring her identity to fit the expectations of various institutions and communities involved in the project. This flexible self-portrayal allowed her to navigate between different Discourses and audiences, shaping both her personal identity and the overarching Discourse of the project.

For instance, to secure funding, Natalia adopted the identity of an activist and member of a prominent climate change institution. She embraced an anthropocentric "climate crisis" Discourse, promising the institution the development of climate crisis video letters, a significant shift from the women's original work. Natalia explained that this navigation through diverse Discourses and identities was necessary to sustain the project. Yet, it was a delicate balancing act: while the team secured funding, a large portion of their time and effort had to be redirected towards producing these video letters, a task that was misaligned with the women's interests and the initial goals of the project, as they were interested in engaging with capacity building for their territory's transformation rather than sharing how affected they are as a consequence of the climate crisis with people in the city.

This scenario illustrates the complexities of identity as a strategic resource, particularly in the context of securing external support. McKinlay (2010), drawing on Butler, emphasises that identity has the potential for insubordination, resistance, and liberation. Although Natalia had to adopt an external identity that diverged from her core values and the project's Discourse, her strategic use of identity enabled the team and the women's collective to access financial resources and continue their work, thereby maintaining their original goals despite external pressures.

A similar example of this *strategic flexibility* of identities and Discourses can be seen in Valentina's approach. As a member of the Climate Action Coalition, Valentina introduced herself as an electrical engineer from Ciudad Juarez, specialising in energy engineering. She organised an "Orbital activity" focused on collecting recyclable waste from specific streets in Ciudad Juarez. Valentina leveraged her connection to a local radio station, Orbita, where she was a dedicated listener.

As part of her "championship acts" within the Climate Action Coalition, she coordinated the activity under the banner of "orbital activity", promoting it through the station's communication channels, including radio broadcasts and WhatsApp groups. However, Valentina's identity and the Discourse surrounding this activity were not limited to her role as an electrical engineer or "climate champion", though these aspects were certainly present. She carried out this activity as the "green girl", her identity within the Orbita community.

The promotion and execution of the activity were framed by this Orbital identity, aligning with an anthropocentric and solidarity-oriented Discourse. The slogan "let's walk together for the environment" echoed the values and messaging commonly expressed by attendees and members of the Orbita community, reinforcing the shared ethos of solidarity and "environmental responsibility" (refer to Figure 29 and 30).

Orbital Activity
Let's Walk Together for the Environment

Items to Collect
- Plastic bottles
- Aluminium cans
- Cardboard

Figure 29. Orbital activity call by Valentina, April 2023.

Figure 30. Participants of the Orbital activity, some of them wearing Orbita merchandise. Chihuahua, Mexico. April 2023.

Similarly, Valentina led a "climate talk" at the university where she had completed her undergraduate studies. While she mentioned her involvement with the Climate Action Coalition, presenting herself as a "climate champion", she strategically emphasised her status as an alumnus of the institution, identifying herself as "ex Liebre[33]". According to Valentina, this deliberate choice was intended to foster a connection with the participants, leveraging her alumni status to capture their attention and build rapport. Like Natalia, Valentina, and other participants often fostered a collective identity within the communities they engaged with, viewing this shared identity as a source of social power, alignment, and mutual support (Reicher & Haslam, 2015).

Moreover, during a meeting with the organisers before the event, one of them introduced Valentina not only as a former student of the university but also as a "climate champion". This dual portrayal underscored Valentina's credibility in the eyes of the event organisers, highlighting her multifaceted identity and the strategic positioning of her roles to maximise her impact and influence with different actors, contexts, and institutions.

The works of Grossberg (1996) and Escobar (2008) illustrate how identities are shaped through relational differences and power dynamics, emphasising the role of otherness. Valentina's and Natalia's approaches, however, demonstrated an effort to construct a collective identity that challenged and reshaped cultural understandings of "sustainable development". By navigating and leveraging accepted identities and Discourses within their communities, they sought to enable participants to question and redefine prevailing Discourses.

In Valentina's case, her identities underwent a notable shift in Discourses. Initially, she adopted a solidarity-oriented approach, identifying as the "green girl" from Orbita. This identity was rooted in a community-focused Discourse, and informal learning practices. Over time, however, Valentina transitioned her focus towards the scientific dimensions of the climate crisis, engaging with technologies and engineering topics. This shift in Discourse aligned more closely with the perspectives promoted by both the higher education institution and the Climate Action Coalition (see Figures 31 and 32).

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[33] Identity given to graduates of the higher education institution.

Driving Solutions in the Fight Against Climate Change

Figure 31. Promotional poster for Valentina's Climate Talk at a local University. Chihuahua, Mexico. April 2023.

Figure 32. Valentina and some participants of the Climate Talk activity. Chihuahua, Mexico. April 2023.

Both the higher education institution and the Orbita radio community were acutely aware of Valentina's extensive involvement in "sustainable development" activities across various communities and institutions. The university closely monitored her contributions to environmental initiatives, particularly in clean energy. Within the radio community, Valentina was recognised as the "green girl", a title given to her by peers in recognition of her dedication to "the environment".

Despite this broad recognition, Valentina was strategic in tailoring her approaches to activism depending on the communities she was engaging with. Recognising the power dynamics at play, she deliberately adopted different identities and self-portrayals, and learning practices fitting the specific dynamics and expectations of each context. By sharing her experiences, Valentina highlighted the significance of adapting self-portrayals and the impact this had on her ability to collaborate effectively in different spaces.

For instance, Valentina often identified herself as a "climate volunteer", a label chosen to appeal to a wide range of audiences. However, she also emphasised the need for contextually sensitive identities, acknowledging that certain terms or portrayals could inadvertently hinder collaborations.

"I am not at odds with the word "activist" I do not think that it is just to tie yourself to the bridge or things like that. It is something more political. But as I have been describing myself as "climate volunteer", because this part of arriving at a place and saying that I am a "climate champion" I do not know, I don't feel it, I don't buy it, I feel that what I do is not something enormous and, also, I do not want to scare people to open me a space or interact with me, I am more comfortable with introducing myself as a "climate volunteer".

-Interview excerpts, May 5, 2023.

Valentina expressed a sense of detachment from both the "activist" identity and the "climate champion" identity attributed by the Climate Action Coalition. She argued that activism was often misrepresented by media portrayals, such as the imagery of individuals tying themselves to trees during protests to the Mayan train in the Riviera Maya. Valentina's scepticism towards the "activist" label stemmed from concerns that such portrayals could alienate potential allies and limit engagement with her efforts. Consequently, she preferred alternative terms that she believed were more inclusive and conducive to broader participation in her activism.

Moreover, Valentina resisted the "climate champion" identity imposed by the network, describing it as something she "did not buy into". Despite her personal reservations, she strategically employed this identity during interactions with higher education institutions and other organisations, recognising the practical benefits of aligning with this role in certain contexts.

This practice of adopting flexible identities and self-presentations was also evident in my own experience during participant observation. I navigated multiple roles, trying to balance my dual identities as an activist and a researcher (as discussed in section 4.6.1). However, this dual role sometimes created difficulties, especially when introducing a new identity to a context where I was already known by another. For instance, at the start of my participant observation, I attended an action festival organised by MexiSustain. Although I

was a co-coordinator for one of their programmes, I chose to attend as a researcher. I attempted to maintain this identity throughout the festival but faced challenges such as a lack of credibility and trust from others or being perceived as arrogant.

During a workshop at the festival, one of the moderators asked me to assist with a technical issue involving a microphone. Initially, I was unsure if she was referring to me, as I was seated at the back of the hall taking notes. After assisting with the microphone and other tasks, the moderator later mentioned in an interview that she had initially questioned my credibility due to my perceived detachment from the event's core activities.

> "My first impression when I arrived at the event, here in Guadalajara. Right now, I feel you are very free, but that day you seemed to be in another role, you were, I don't know how to explain it, a position like, I understand the vibe and I relate to these people and this crowd".

> -Interview excerpts, February 1, 2024.

Identifying as a postgraduate researcher from a Global North institution while conducting research in the global south presented a set of challenges that I had not fully anticipated. Although being Mexican and involved in some of the movements I observed might have seemed like sufficient credentials, identifying as a researcher introduced complexities. This role sometimes led to perceptions of arrogance and could hinder my ability to engage with communities that have a long history of being subjected to extractive practices, particularly by individuals associated with Global North institutions.

Throughout my data collection, I maintained my identity as a researcher but also embraced my role as an activist. This dual identity allowed me to participate in activities not merely as a researcher but as someone actively involved in advocacy and activism.

As Escobar (2008) emphasises, identities are formed through interactions at multiple levels. This dynamic nature of identity construction was particularly evident in the identity strategies employed by activists, as discussed in this section. Participants often navigated multiple identities, adapting them to fit the expectations and norms of different spaces and Discourses. However, this adaptability did not equate to mere conformity. Instead, activists strategically employed various identities and approaches to further their causes, balancing between aligning with accepted Discourses and challenging them.

6.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored the complexity and diversity of identity dynamics surrounding "sustainable development activism". It examined how online learning networks have shaped the perception of activism through their Discourses and membership requirements, defining what constitutes an "sustainable development activist" in these spaces. This has led to activism being perceived as a practice accessible only to those with specific privileged characteristics, such as fluency in English or digital literacies. At the same time, participants often exhibited reluctance to fully embrace the label of "activist". This hesitation could have stemmed from various historical, political, and power structures, including the portrayal of activism as something "reactive" or the dangers associated with it in Latin America, as well as the high expectations that institutions, such as online learning networks, placed on this identity.

Rather than exclusively identifying as "sustainable development activists", participants adopted multifaceted identities, self-portrayals, and Discourses to engage with diverse communities and spaces. As Harvey (2018) argues, every ecological project and argument inherently carried political undertones, and vice versa. Identities were deeply intertwined with both socioecological and political contexts, as well as the Discourses of "sustainable development". Furthermore, every identity carried political implications, and participants navigated a complex web of identities and Discourses shaped by specific interests, sponsorships, and group affiliations. Analysing the interconnectedness of "sustainable development activism" identities and Discourses thus becomes crucial to understanding these dynamics.

For instance, Valentina initially adopted her "green girl" identity within her Orbital community, grounded in a solidarity-focused Discourse. However, she later shifted her identity to that of a "climate champion", embracing a scientific-technological Discourse to navigate and gain access to higher education institutions. Social identity inherently involved power, which created differences, either as a foundation or consequence. Participants were not only externally influenced by power dynamics but also recognised that their diverse identities and self-portrayals were actively shaped and constructed by these forces. Accessing higher education institutions might have been nearly impossible for Valentina had she continued to identify herself solely as the "green girl", an identity that lacked influence within

academic settings. Similarly, presenting herself as a "climate champion" within her Orbital community would not have resonated in the same way.

The strategic use of self-portrayals, through diverse identities and Discourses, served as crucial tool for participants to engage in activism. Butler (1999) emphasises that the power of identity representation cannot be strictly understood within the binary of oppression versus liberation. Instead, it is multifaceted, productive, and creative. Participants demonstrated how they creatively and strategically utilised the multitude of identities they are connected to engage with diverse communities and involve others in their varied practices. Although these identities are shaped by power, participants frequently challenged these dynamics in various ways. For example, Natalia used video letters as means to raise funds for collective activities within the women's community. As Sindic et al., (2015) argue, there is no identity without power, and the reverse could also be true. Participants harnessed this power to both challenge the authority their specific identities granted them and to subvert the Discourses tied to those identities, ultimately using this power to strengthen their movements.

Using diverse identities and Discourses did not necessarily imply that my participants fully embraced the meanings attached to these identities. Instead, they strategically employed them as channels to further their activism. As Butler (1995) suggests, identity becomes solidified when power aligns with the subject, shedding its external quality and being internalized as part of the self. However, participants like Valentina did not completely "buy into" these identities; rather, they used them as forms of self-portrayal to advance their causes. These fluid identities and Discourses enabled participants to forge connections and foster collaboration across diverse communities. At the same time, they highlighted the complex interplay between ecological and socio-political dimensions within activism.

As Escobar (2008) notes, identities and struggles are constantly evolving, shaped by external encounters, and never fully determined in isolation. The upcoming chapter explores into online learning networks as communities of practice, examining their role in shaping the identities and Discourses of participants, while also exploring how participants, in turn, influence and shape these networks.

Chapter Seven

Learning to Be(come) a "Sustainable Development Activist"

7. Introduction

In previous chapters, I explored how participants navigated the complex landscape of Discourses and identities associated with "sustainable development". This navigation was shaped by external pressures, including expectations from job markets and funding institutions. Although participants such as Valentina, Natalia, and Gloria did not fully align with hegemonic Discourses and identities and often expressed scepticism or a sense of "not buying into" them, they strategically engaged with these frameworks to advance their activist agendas. This *strategic flexibility* enabled them to negotiate existing power structures while pursuing their causes.

This chapter investigates how participants engaged in learning processes within the educational frameworks of online learning networks, using a CoPs approach. As outlined in Chapter 3, CoP refer to groups of individuals engaged in shared activities, where ongoing knowledge exchange enhances expertise and problem-solving (Groff, 2023). Participants interacted with multiple communities and practices in both online and in-person settings, particularly through the Climate Action Coalition and MexiSustain. These networks offered informal and non-formal learning opportunities that were embedded in Discourses and identities tied to "sustainable development activism".

As discussed in Chapter 4, although structural differences existed between the two online learning networks, they revealed deeper similarities in how they navigated knowledge, power, identity, and Discourse in the context of "sustainable development activism". Participation in these networks often involved working towards certifications, distinctions, and roles, such as "climate champion" or "ambassador", that were legitimised within the overarching framework of sustainable development Discourses. These labels helped shape understandings of who qualifies as a "sustainable development activist" and what such activism entails.

In CoPs, individuals engage in social learning by negotiating meaning and performing shared practices and ways of being in the world. While participants often did not fully identify with the Discourses and identities of "sustainable development activism" promoted by these networks, they viewed participation as a strategic step in their broader journey of social transformation. This chapter begins by exploring the motivations behind participants' engagement with the online learning networks. Did they view these spaces as practically or intellectually beneficial, or as strategic tools to challenge existing power structures?

The chapter then examines the perceived benefits of participating in these communities, including access to funding opportunities and professional development. Next, I analyse the learning processes tied to the non-formal educational initiatives of these online learning networks, which often served as prerequisite for membership. Through these processes, participants engaged in meaning-making and developed practices that sometimes aligned uneasily with the dominant Discourses promoted by the networks.

Following this, I explore how participants engaged with the core educational initiatives, including their interactions with online communities and outreach to offline audiences. These interactions illustrate how learning, meaning-making, and contestation of practices occurred within and across these spaces. In doing so, this chapter highlights the dual role of online learning networks: as relevant contributors to the broader hegemonic structures shaping "sustainable development activism" and as platforms where participants navigated, negotiated, and resisted those structures.

As discussed in Chapter 3, "sustainable development activism" is deeply embedded within Discourses and identities that are shaped by power dynamics. Online learning networks and the broader activists' movements participants are part of, are no exception. Drawing on Bonini and Treré (2024), I emphasise how activists have repurposed digital technologies, such as online learning networks, in ways that diverge from their creators' original intentions. Participants adapted these tools to suit their needs, pursue political objectives, and participate in ongoing processes of meaning-making and practice contestation.

This chapter therefore explores the complex interplay between structure, agency, and technology in shaping the identities and practices of "sustainable development activists".

7.1 Looking for a Community of Practice

As discussed in previous chapters, "sustainable development activism" involves a complex interplay of multiple identities and Discourses, each carrying its own power dynamics and knowledge systems. While participants, as shared by Laura and Sonia, often expressed a lack of full alignment with the online learning networks, most continued to engage with them. From the perspective of CoP, this situation is problematic, as a CoP typically involves a group of individuals engaged in similar activities, sharing knowledge and expertise to solve every day, seemingly common problems (Groff, 2023; Barton & Tusting, 2005).

However, as highlighted in previous chapters, online learning networks often operate with fixed Discourses and identities that permeate their activities. These frameworks are typically imposed from a top-down perspective, such as when training sessions are presented as essential requirements for participation within the community. Other learning activities, further explored in this chapter, also reflect this structure. This section explores the motivations that led participants to join and remain active in these networks, despite the challenges of alignment.

According to the participants, several factors contributed to their engagement with online learning networks. Given that they came from diverse online and offline communities, each participant was drawn to these networks for different reasons. Two primary motivations emerged as key drivers: the apparent desire to "join forces" with others who were perceived as already taking action, and the external pressure or aspiration to enhance their competitiveness in professional and academic pursuits by becoming part of a community.

Interestingly, the non-formal learning provided by the online learning networks did not seem to be the primary motivation for participants; instead, it became an intrinsic aspect of their membership and engagement within these communities (see section 7.2). According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a community of practice involves participation in an activity system where participants share a mutual understanding of what they are doing and its significance in their lives and communities. However, some scholars argue that CoP are often assumed to be inherently harmonious (Gherardi & Nicolini, 2000; Reynolds, 2000). In contrast, the online learning networks explored in this study (the Climate Action Coalition and MexiSustain) promoted Discourses and identities that do not always fully align with those of their members. These networks often reinforced the perspectives of a selected group, creating

tensions within the learning dynamics and broader activism efforts. The following sections explore the pathways through which individuals engaged with activism in these networks, shedding light on their reasons for joining and underlying dynamics at play.

7.1.1 Looking for Someone to "Join Forces" With?

A theme that emerged from interviews and participant observation was the desire to "join forces" with others. However, this desire seemed to be driven more by external motivations than by intrinsic ones. In this context, the online learning networks appeared to align with Wenger et al.'s (2002) concept of communities of practice, groups of people who share a common concern, set of problems, or passion. This inclination to connect with a community that resonated with their diverse concerns was frequently highlighted during interviews and casual conversations. For instance, Sonia, a member of the Climate Action Coalition who actively supported Luisa's reforestation efforts, shared the challenges she initially faced in finding a community focused on climate crisis issues. She reflected on how the seemingly absence of such communities during her secondary school years hinder her early engagement with activism and acted as a "barrier" to her involvement in activism practices.

> "As I reflect on that time, when I watched the documentary (climate crisis documentary), I realised that very few people around me were aware of or interested in the topic. It made me feel anxious and concerned. However, since I couldn't find anyone around me discussing or caring, I thought maybe it wasn't as urgent. Perhaps it was enough that organisations like United Nations were acting, right?"
>
> - Interview excerpts, April 5, 2023.

Sonia shared several insights about her journey toward activism. Initially, she acknowledged that she viewed the climate crisis Discourse, particularly from a documentary led and produced by the leader of the Climate Action Coalition, as a relevant but distant, a matter that seemed "not that urgent" and beyond her reach. She also associated this Discourse with international institutions like the UN, which she believed were the ones actively addressing the issue, further distancing her from it. Sonia expressed feeling isolated within this Discourse, as she struggled to find others with whom she could discuss the climate crisis,

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since it was not a prevalent topic in her local community. However, as she mentioned in section 5.2.2, even after joining the network, she felt that it was something rooted in the "Global North", referencing her disconnection from the network's Discourse and the power dynamics it carried. Additionally, despite her involvement in various community initiatives, such as feminist movements, she did not perceive them as "relevant" as the climate crisis Discourse.

In an interview, Sonia explained that her decision to join the Climate Action Coalition was not driven by a desire to engage in activism practices, like those she was involved in with Luisa's community efforts, but by a need to be part of a community from which she felt isolated. As an educator at a private institution, she saw value in obtaining the "climate champion" identity offered by the network. She recognised that the training and "professional development" opportunities provided by the coalition would be beneficial for her career. As noted in section 7.1.2, she shared:

> "I knew about the Climate Action Coalition because my work involved sending a group of students to Brazil for its training. One of my tasks was to follow up with the young people who attended. Later, I helped other girls with trips to places like Miami, then Mexico City, and so on. That was part of my involvement, but I decided to attend the training myself because I felt like something was missing, you know? I mean, I supported the organisation through my job, I knew the organisation, but I wasn't really part of it".

> -Interview excerpt March 29, 2023.

Unlike her students, who came from privileged backgrounds and attended a private bilingual institution in Mexico while participating in international activities like the Climate Action Coalition training, Sonia initially faced rejection when she applied to attend the training in Mexico City. This setback sheds light on the activism profile of the network, as Discussed in Chapter 6. Despite this challenge, she eventually participated in the training a year later in Atlanta, United States, funding the trip herself. Although she had reservations about the course's relevance, finding it somewhat hegemonic and heavily rooted in a Discourse centred in the Global North, as highlighted in section 5.2.2, she still saw it as valuable for her "professional development", and recognised its significance for "sustainability issues".

Sonia's reflections offer an interesting insight into her engagement with the online learning network: her interest seemed less focused on the learning processes themselves and

more on acquiring knowledge about the network's Discourse and securing a recognised, powerful identity to navigate her professional environment, rather than enhancing her activism. As discussed in Chapter 3, while knowledge is power, power also dictates what is recognised as knowledge in various spaces (Alvarez, in Crush, 1995). For Sonia, accessing this knowledge and the associated power was crucial, as it helped her to be perceived as "more prepared" in her workplace and in practices related to "sustainability issues". This shift in focus emphasised the network's Discourse over her own, diminishing her activist perspectives and highlighting the top-down nature of the network's structure.

On the other hand, participants such as Angelica (a member of MexiSustain since 2019, in her early 30s, who studied sustainable management of coastal areas, and worked in Mexico City focusing on the natural reserves) and Esmeralda revealed that a significant motivator behind their involvement with the online learning networks was their desire to take what they viewed as "tangible action", stemmed from a sense of "incompleteness", or in Luisa described in Chapter 6, "imperfectness". Both Angelica and Esmeralda were aware of and understood the needs and injustices in their respective communities and were already taking action to address them. However, they expressed a sense of apparent stagnation in their efforts. Despite being engaged in diverse communities, including academic and local ones, they felt that their engagement was "not enough".

Esmeralda, an academic at a higher education institution, reflected on how she saw joining MexiSustain as an opportunity to make a "meaningful" impact within her community and address the issues she was most passionate about:

> "I wanted to do something different and truly have my science impact the community. So, that was my main motivation for seeking out MexiSustain, I saw that they were doing something that was impacting the population, they had socially impactful work, and I thought, "That's what I want".

> -Interview excerpt April 24, 2023.

Esmeralda's insight highlights several key issues. Despite her long-standing involvement in activism since her teenage years, including building new knowledge and educating people at university, she saw the online learning network's activities as those that made a "meaningful" impact. This perspective underscored the power dynamics within these networks, which shape what is considered "meaningful action" in "sustainable development

activism". Esmeralda viewed MexiSustain as a platform for engaging in "socially impactful work", a perception likely influenced by the international Discourses it promoted, particularly those related to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as a means of "achieving sustainable development".

As discussed in Chapter 5 and 6, the Discourses of online learning networks influenced what was regarded as "sustainable development activism". This included shaping the traits and characteristics of an "activist", as explored in Chapter 6, as well as defining the knowledges and practices deemed to be "activism". In this context, these networks functioned as nodes within a web of power, legitimising their Discourses and identities through their connections with influential political figures and institutions (Mills, 2003). For example, their authority was bolstered by associations with powerful entities, such as the political and business leader of the Climate Action Coalition, and international organisations like the UN, which endorsed the SDGs.

Angelica, for instance, emphasised the benefits she perceived in joining the network, particularly the opportunity to deepen her understanding of its Discourse and gain insights into "how things were done".

"I wanted to find something that would keep me updated, meet people, understand how things were done, what movements were happening, and learn new things".

-Interview excerpts April 23, 2023.

While Esmeralda joined the network to align her activities with what she perceived as "meaningful" under the network's Discourse, Angelica was drawn by the idea to learn about the network's framework and understand "how things were done". Through her involvement, Angelica gained familiarity with the accepted norms, practices, and expectations surrounding "sustainable development activism". In this way, the network's Discourse indirectly (re)shaped activists' perceptions of "activism" and "sustainable development", as well as influenced some of their practices (Leff, 1999).

For participants like Angelica, this alignment was "beneficial", serving as a guide to navigate the "accepted" dynamics in various contexts. However, for others like Laura, the experience resulted in disillusionment. Initially viewing MexiSustain as a potential community for action, Laura eventually chose to leave due to disagreements with the

network's purpose and Discourse. For her, the idea of adhering to a specific Discourse, such as the SDGs, to steer her activities and projects appeared incongruent with her vision of activism.

> "I was never in agreement with those questionnaires, with them asking me what the SDG was or whatever... I never identified with that a hundred percent, because it was like, well, adopt an SDG and see what you can come up with, and no, I want to contribute, I like contributing, not starting something on my own".
>
> -Interview excerpts February 1, 2023.

Laura highlighted a significant tension in her engagement with MexiSustain. She expressed discomfort with the network's emphasis on aligning with predefined Discourses, such as the SDGs. She questioned the practicality of implementing "new" activities within her activism community, noting that established learning processes were already in place. For Laura, meaningful activism centred on contributing to collective efforts rather than initiating projects dictated by external standards.

While seeking strategies to enhance her activism, which was rooted in a "living well" Discourse, Laura faced constant pressure to adopt activities grounded in the SDG framework. This expectation clashed with the needs of her local community and her approach to activism. She described feeling like a "bad ambassador" for failing to align her practices with MexiSustain's Discourse, revealing a broader disconnect from the network's identity and Discourse. Ultimately, this disconnection led her to leave the community.

Laura's experience illustrates how online learning networks, through a CoP lens, often set the parameters for "being in the world", shaping collective identity and membership as described by Wenger (2010). These networks dictated the terms of participation, leaving little room for participants to engage in knowledge production, exchange, or transformation, as explored in the following sections of this Chapter. Instead, participants like Laura were expected to reshape their activities to align with the network's prescribed activism framework.

Scholars such as Gherardi and Nicolini (2000) have often depicted communities of practice as harmonious and organic. However, the experiences of participants like Esmeralda, Angelica, and Laura reveal that online learning networks promote certain identities, Discourses, and practices while overshadowing others. While many participants expressed

interest in learning "how things were done" and networking to ostensibly "enhance" their activism, their involvement in these networks was not always smooth or harmonious. Rather, it often required them to navigate conflicting identities, interests, and Discourses.

Building on Mallo et al., (2020) understanding of communities of practice, which emphasise social relations centred around making, learning, and negotiating, participants found themselves engaged in a dual process of resistance and engagement with these varied elements. This suggests that online learning networks operate as spaces where top-down approaches to activism dominate, reshaping the activism ecosystem, defining who is perceived as an activist, and dictating "acceptable" practices. Activists at the same time, face increasing pressure to conform to these institutionalised frameworks of activism, often as a means of coping with external demands.

The next section examines how external pressures, such as market demands and professional competitiveness, further influenced participants' decisions to join online learning networks. These factors added layers of complexity to their involvement, shaping the ways they negotiated their roles, identities, and the broader Discourses within these communities.

7.1.2 Joining a Community as a Requirement for Instrumental Reasons; Competitiveness in Both Job and Academic Settings

Participation in online learning networks was frequently motivated by instrumental factors such as job requirements, career advancement, market demands, and the pursuit of certifications to enhance "competitiveness" in both professional and academic contexts. Foyer and Dumoulin Kervran (2017) explored the dilemmas faced by activists involved in environmental and sustainable development in Mexico, highlighting how these individuals often grappled with a conflict between preserving their independence and pursuing job opportunities, financial benefits, and other rewards. Such pursuits risked legitimising systems established by political powers.

Participants in this study faced similar tensions. For instance, Valentina shared that her decision to join the Climate Action Coalition stemmed from a desire for professional development. She underscored the pressure to continuously seek out courses and

certifications to maintain competitiveness in her field, reflecting the persistent tension between her personal activism and the demands of career advancement.

> "So, I had always had this interest in studying, in reading, in immersing myself in environmental matters, and after the master's degree, um, I spent a lot of time looking for courses, whether they were short ones online or in person, just to keep preparing myself. So, there was a course that many people in my LinkedIn community were taking, which was the Climate Action Coalition's course... I saw it just as something to add to my curriculum, in this continuous preparation I wanted to keep having".

-Interview excerpts May 5, 2023

Valentina mentioned that her decision to join the Climate Action Coalition was influenced by observing other members of her professional network participating in its training programmes. She considered this participation, a valuable addition to her CV. Similarly, Sonia saw the network's training as relevant to her involvement in "sustainability issues", as discussed in Section 7.1.1. These considerations led both Valentina and Sonia to become members of the Climate Action Coalition and engage with new Discourses and identities within their activism.

As previously mentioned, participants joined online learning networks for diverse reasons, ranging from enhancing their CVs to seeking networking opportunities or responding to the demands of professional networks and other institutions like the job and academic markets. Drawing on Naz (2006) and viewing development as a Discourse, it can be argued that sustainable development, as a Discourse, has established a set of relationships among various elements, institutions, forms of knowledge, and practices that define how participants can be integrated into the Discourse. In the case of the online learning networks, this integration facilitated by participating in the network's training, becoming an "ambassador", or being recognised as a "climate champion".

In Chapter 3, I discussed that a CoP is characterised by three key aspects: mutual engagement, a common endeavour, and the development of a shared repertoire of resources through which members express their identities (Barton & Tusting, 2005; Wenger, 1998, 1999). However, as seen in the case of the online learning networks, both the motivations for engagement and the engagement itself were driven by a mix of intrinsic and instrumental motives. Furthermore, participants engaged unequally, with the networks controlling the

repertoire of resources based on specific Discourses, as seen in Chapter 5. This, in turn, shaped an identity that was not fully shared by all members, as explored in Chapter 6.

Participant revealed their seemingly "inner" motivations for joining the networks, often driven by a desire to "do more" for their communities and understand "how things are done". As discussed earlier, external factors also played a significant role, such as the need to enhance their professional competitiveness. Personally, I viewed MexiSustain as a space where I could engage in seemingly social change activities in my country while studying abroad. It also represented an opportunity to undertake my master's dissertation with the organisation, allowing me to gain relevant skills and experience for the future. Moreover, MexiSustain represented a chance to connect with diverse communities beyond my usual circles and potentially effect change in areas where activists are often excluded from the conversation.

At the same time, participants' motivations for joining the online learning networks align with Escobar's (2008) argument that activists often join movements with specific Discourses as a tactic to engage with more persuasive public arguments in pursuit of their objectives, as discussed in Chapter 5. For some participants, these networks offered perceived "advantages" to their careers or activism, such as access to funding opportunities, as highlighted in the next section. These advantages were often linked to the Discourses and identities promoted by the networks.

However, as previously discussed, participants often experienced unequal engagement within the networks. Their identities and Discourses were afforded limited space for meaningful learning processes. Instead, the online learning networks appeared to dictate what counts as "sustainable development activism". As highlighted in Chapter 2, and supported by the empirical data, this version of activism was aligned with the interests of a selected few. This sheds light on the forces shaping contemporary activism.

The next section further examines the perceived "benefits" participants attributed to their membership in these networks and considers their implications for activism.

7.1.3 Perceived Benefits by Becoming Part of the Online Learning Networks

Being part of online learning networks appeared to offer several "benefits" to their members. These advantages included acquiring influential identities, such as "climate champion" or "ambassador", and gaining recognition as a "sustainability professional". Such designations enabled individuals to access spaces often inaccessible to grassroots activists. Membership also seemed to provide opportunities for learning and networking on both national and international scales. Participants frequently highlighted the "prestige" associated with these organisations, which facilitated connections with diverse institutions and communities.

Several participants, including Ale and myself, noted the advantages of learning about the "sustainable development", particularly in relation to international agendas like the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. While Foucault (1976) posits that individuals are shaped by power, influencing their actions, speech, and desires, participants demonstrated how understanding these Discourses and identities could be used strategically. This knowledge allowed them to navigate and access advocacy spaces often reserved for individuals with specific characteristics and privileges, such as familiarity with institutional frameworks.

For example, Rosa, a member of the MexiSustain focus group, was in her mid-20s and studying International Relations at a public university in Guadalajara. She recounted her struggles to participate in international political processes related to "sustainable development" prior to her involvement with MexiSustain. The organisation provided her with critical tools and support, empowering her to represent civil society within UN political processes. This support included guidance on navigating prevalent Discourses, assistance with nominations, and financial aid.

"so, it was precisely here (in the MexiSustain) where I was invited to be nominated as representative of civil society within the official Mexican delegation, not just as a regular civil society member, but as part of the delegation which also bring other benefits with it... and the truth is that the MexiSustain supported me through thus nomination process, providing me with all this knowledge to be able to go as representative of civil society in sustainable development because not just anyone can go, I mean, you really need knowledge about the subject to be able to have this approach and these new

perspectives within the delegation... on the other hand, monetarily I received 5000 MXN (£220) from them, which was like support for the airplane tickets".

-Interview excerpt November 17, 2022.

Rosa's insights further illuminated critical dynamics within online learning networks and advocacy spaces, particularly around the construction of identities and power dynamics. Her experience underscored the selective nature of these spaces, where certain identities, such as "climate champion" or "ambassador", are valued and legitimised, enabling access to international advocacy platforms. These identities seem to be linked to characteristics and Discourses that align with the priorities and frameworks of dominant institutions, often those in the Global North. This suggests that access to these spaces is not only shaped by the desire to contribute to change but also by the ability to conform to pre-established, institutionally recognised roles.

Rosa also pointed out to the knowledge imbalance inherent in these networks. While she gained knowledge that enabled her to participate in advocacy spaces, she did not mention how her own insights or contributions were valued or integrated into the network's broader efforts. This highlights a critical issue, the networks left little room for participants to shape or challenge the existing frameworks. As a result, while participants like Rosa could access these spaces, their own knowledges were sidelined, reinforcing existing power dynamics.

Similarly, in my role with MexiSustain, I found engaging with its Discourse "advantageous" for accessing influential spaces, particularly within UNESCO and universities, where I believed I could advocate for diverse causes such as gender equality. Although membership in the network provided me certain privileges, such as access to funding that would have been difficult to secure otherwise, it came at a cost. I had to adopt Discourses that I did not fully align with and navigating the power dynamics they entailed. Knowledge and practices outside the network's framework were not perceived as "relevant" compared to those associated with the online learning networks. This highlighting how hegemonic "sustainable development" Discourses shape perceptions of activists, framing them as individuals who embody specific Discourses (Heyes, 2011).

It became evident that online learning networks navigated institutional environments across multiple movements to connect with interorganisational networks and participants. Through their engagement with the online learning networks, participants discovered

opportunities to traverse diverse advocacy movements and spaces, leveraging their multiple identities and Discourses. However, while online learning networks promoted specific identities and Discourses, participants like Rosa had to sideline aspects of their activism to adopt these prescribed identities and frameworks, which left little room for challenging or sharing their own perspectives.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Grillo and Stirrat (1997) emphasise how "development" as a Discourse defines relationships formed among knowledge systems and institutions. In this case, the hegemonic Discourse of "sustainable development" shaped the benefits participants like Rosa could access. By aligning with Discourses set by international agendas, such as the SDGs linked with MexiSustain, participants gained certain advantages. However, MexiSustain, as a hybrid network where multiple Discourses converge, also shaped activism practices by promoting specific Discourses and identities.

Participants also highlighted resistance practices within these networks, sharing how the learning processes were driven by specific knowledge dynamics dictated by the "sustainable development" Discourse. They navigated through these dynamics strategically to uphold their own activism causes. The subsequent section explores how participants actively engaged with the activities of online learning networks while simultaneously advancing their advocacy causes, demonstrating *strategic flexibility* in employing various identities and Discourses to sustain their efforts.

7.2 From Learning to Strategically Adapting: Navigating the Joint Enterprise of the Online Learning Networks

As previously discussed, the online learning networks and the participants appeared to have differing reasons and motivations for engaging in a common endeavour or participating in the learning processes facilitated by these institutions. seemed to have different reasons and motivations to engage in the learning processes these institutions were carrying out. The CoP framework conceptualises learning as a social practice, where participation is an ongoing, social, and interactional process in which people collaborate, negotiate meanings, and learn from each other (Wenger, 1998) as outlined in Chapter 3.

However, the empirical data in this section explores how the processes of communities of practice differ between online settings (online learning networks) and offline contexts, such as participants' local communities. For instance, as previously mentioned, the Climate Training and Mentorship Programmes were essential prerequisites for becoming part of the online learning network's "communities of practice". As discussed in Chapter 3, a community of practice involves participating in an activity system where participants share an understanding of their actions, thus becoming "knowledge practitioners" (Fuller, 2007). These programmes appeared to be designed by the online learning networks to provide participants with a foundation for engaging with the network's communities and those beyond.

MexiSustain, for example, offered a mentorship programme aimed at "fostering intensive capacity-building and establishing a reference framework for action" (MexiSustain, 2022). According to the network, this programme sought to connect experts and professionals in "sustainable development" with individuals and organisations in Mexico and globally. This brief description highlights a relevant issue, rather than recognising all members as individuals with valuable knowledge and experiences, the programme placed greater emphasis on connecting them with "experts" and "professionals" in "sustainable development", prioritising these identities as knowledge practitioners.

The programme also aimed to "enhance knowledge and promote engagement" with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs through mentorship. It focused on advocacy across various dimensions, including implementation, monitoring, financing, follow-up, socialisation, and evaluation of these frameworks, thereby defining the types of activities considered relevant within the online learning network.

Members engaged with "sustainable development experts and professionals", such as a Mexican Ambassador, representatives from national and international organisations, the network's founder, its core group, and other recognised "sustainability experts". Pablo, a member of the core team, embraced this identity upon joining the network and engaging with its Discourse and the knowledge it promoted. This reflects Foucault's (1979) concept of subjectification, wherein individuals are shaped by Discourses that define what is considered "normal". In this case, those identified as "sustainability experts" were individuals already well-versed in the "sustainable development" Discourse, through frameworks like the SDGs, as exemplified by the Mexican Ambassador, or those who acquired this knowledge via the network's mentorship programme. These experts followed specific practices, primarily

engaging in a top-down approach focused on implementing and evaluating initiatives within the SDGs framework.

Figure 33 illustrates the structure of the mentorship programme. The online learning platform, designed by a small team of "sustainable development professionals", including myself, consisted of four modules. Participants had access to diverse learning materials, such as conceptual notes, interview recordings, and exercises, all aligned with the network's "sustainable development" Discourse. For instance, in Module 3: Designing Campaigns for Sustainable Development, the materials highlighted examples of "good" practices for designing "sustainable development" campaigns.

Despite the diverse backgrounds of participants, many of whom were actively working with various communities and carrying out grassroots activism, the examples provided in this module were predominantly from large, established institutions. These included international organisations such as UNICEF and UNESCO, governmental bodies like the Ministro de Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo Social (Minister of the Environment and Social Development), and private corporations such as Coca-Cola.
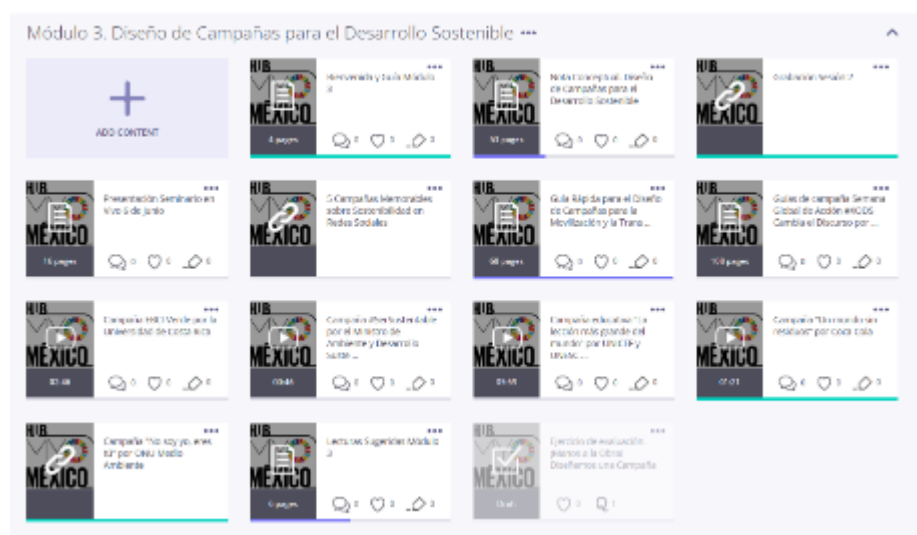
Figure 33. Structure of MexiSustain's mentorship programme retrieved in March 2023.

As highlighted in Chapters 3 and 5, "development" as a Discourse dictates what is considered valid knowledge, with particular statements and ideas legitimised by institutions

(Foucault, 1980; Mills, 2003). Within this mentorship programme, "sustainable development" was framed as a policy and a top-down agenda that participants were expected to integrate into their practices. Similarly, the learning practices followed this format, where participants had little opportunity to share their own knowledge, with the SDGs dictating their activities rather than the other way around. This dynamic was evident in their evaluations, which required participants to create a campaign aligned with specific SDGs and their goals, as illustrated in Figure 34.
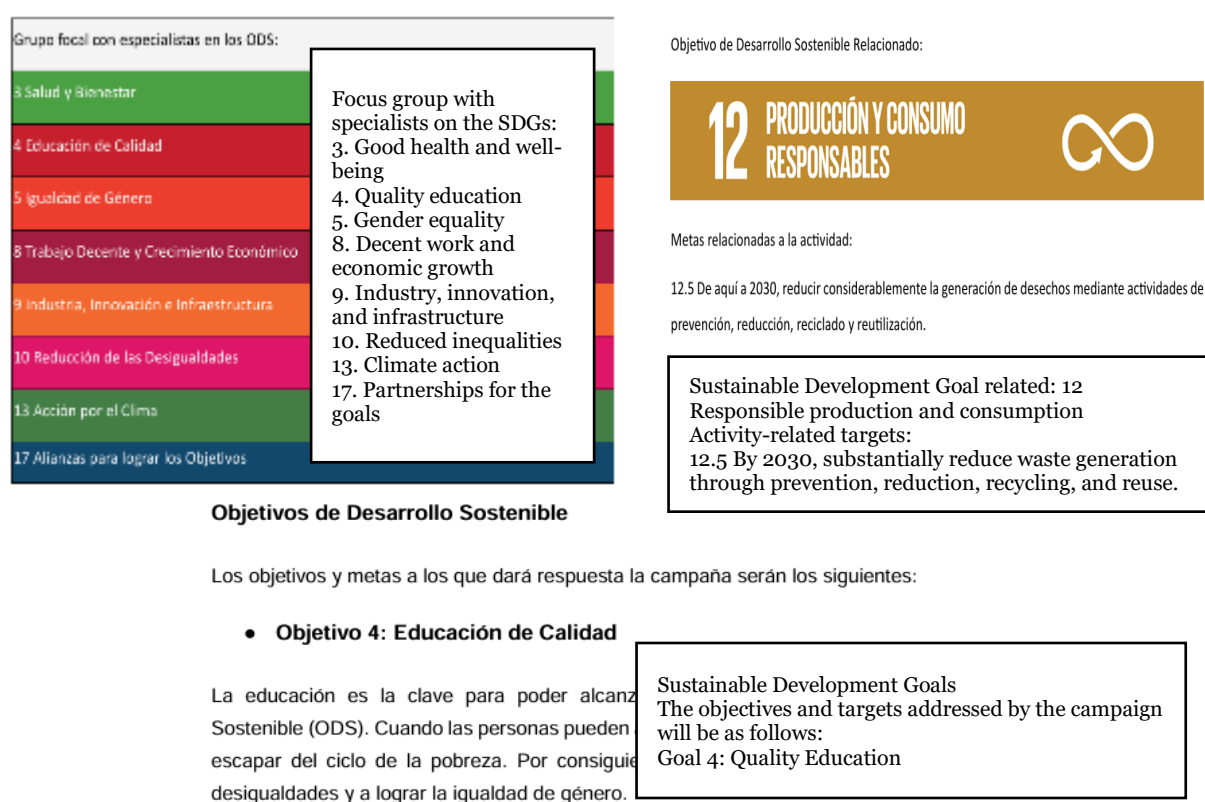
Figure 34. MexiSustain Mentorship Programme participants' campaigns align with specific SDGs retrieved in April 2023.

During an interview, Gloria expressed her surprise at the consistent emphasis on the SDGs throughout all the training sessions she attended. While she questioned this approach, she also acknowledged that it served as a pathway to engage with activism practices and connect with communities beyond her own.

"I didn't know about this process, that it was so much about training and that they had mentorship. I remember at the beginning it was like, oh, you've just joined us, so you have to go through this mentorship. What are the SDGs, what are the SDGs, and they had each month, if I can recall correctly, like a specific SDG, and they had a webinar or a campaign focused on that, in mentorship, because they said, "well, everyone in their regions, in their States, are doing something, right?" and you could do it from your own project, organisation, but promoting it, right? So, I remember that at the beginning with (her movement), it kind of forced me, you know, like, oh, we have the SDG of, I don't know, equality… so that pushed me to do more campaigns or being more active, right?".

-Interview excerpts February 3, 2023.

Gloria articulated how the network's Discourse had been instrumental in shaping her activism practices within the mentorship programme and beyond. During the interview, she elaborated on how, despite needing to reshape her activism practices to align with specific aspects of MexiSustain's Discourse, such as the SDGs, this alignment facilitated her access to funding opportunities and garnered support from various stakeholders, including local governments and academia. Within CoP and "development" as a Discourse, institutions like those linked to the SDGs, such as the UN and, in this case, MexiSustain, were actively defining what counts as "sustainable development activism" practices. These included activities aligned with the SDGs, as illustrated in Figure 33 and 34 and in Gloria's experience.

Wenger (1998;1999) explains how learning affects practice, highlighting that participants discover what facilitates and what hinders their engagement. This phenomenon reflects what Foucault (1976) describes as the microphysics of power, where small-scale practices and relationships perpetuate broader power structures. In this case, Gloria recognised that to engage with the online learning network, as well as with institutions like local governments and funding bodies, adopting this approach was necessary and beneficial. However, as discussed in section 7.2.1, this approach was not without resistance.

Veronica and I were responsible for developing the programme's content. While we had some flexibility in designing and refining the learning materials, our work was constrained by guidelines set by the organisation and the participants, including stakeholders from the private sector and local governments. As discussed in Chapters 2 and 4, due to financial struggles, the mentorship programme became one of the main practices through which the

online learning network could generate revenue. This financial dependency further influenced the content and direction of the programme, aligning it with the priorities of these stakeholders rather than providing room for a broader or more diverse range of perspectives.

This top-down influence underscored broader power dynamics within the network. While participants like Gloria gained valuable tools and access to influential spaces, their activism practices were often reshaped to fit the frameworks prescribed by powerful stakeholders. This dynamic left limited room for participants to challenge or expand upon the dominant narratives, underscoring the complexities of engaging in "sustainable development" Discourses within such structured networks.

Similarly, the Climate Action Coalition required its members to undergo Climate Training, which was developed internationally rather than by the Latin American branch team. The training focused on the science of climate change and underscored the role of individual "climate champions" in addressing the climate crisis through "championship acts" and "climate talks". In addition, the training provided resources such as pre-designed presentation slides and public speaking materials.

Participants had access to these materials as well as both synchronous and asynchronous seminars. Most of the asynchronous seminars were led by the coalition's founder, see Figure 35. However, there were also sessions covering topics such as indigenous knowledge, refugees and migration during the climate crisis, and social media engagement, among others. While these topics might have appeared to encompass diverse perspectives, they were still tailored to align with the organisation's Discourse. The emphasis was on promoting specific practices and narratives that were consistent with the coalition's objectives, thereby framing the climate crisis and activism within a particular set of values and goals.

Figure 35. Pre-recorded seminar of the Climate Action Coalition's training programme, January 2023.

In the Climate Action Coalition's climate training, for instance, there was a segment titled "Indigenous Cosmovision: Inspiration to Protect the Earth", which followed a seminar format with a moderator and a guest. Participants had a few minutes at the end to ask questions. This session was co-led by a white man from the Global Minority, who had lived in Mexico for several years, alongside a member of an indigenous community from El Salvador. The segment included videos that conveyed the concept of Mother Earth and the idea of our interconnectedness with it, while also drawing on Discourses around Pachamama (Mother Earth). However, the session gave limited attention to the destructive impact of capitalism and the systemic challenges it creates for indigenous communities.

During the Q&A, participants raised concerns about issues such as extractive mining in the regions, its consequences for social movements, and broader systemic problems, including corruption and land defence. However, these questions were predominantly addressed by the facilitator from the Global Minority, whose responses tended to focus on individual actions, encouraging participants to "listen" or "read" more about these topics or to "connect" with nature on a personal level. This tendency reflected what Grosfogel (2016) characterises as epistemic extractivism, wherein knowledge from indigenous communities or other resistance groups is extracted from its original context, depoliticised, and re-signified within Western-centric frameworks.

The learning as a social practice framework suggests that participation is an ongoing, social, and interactional process where individuals interact, collaborate, negotiate meanings, and learn from each other (Wenger, 1998). However, as seen from this example, within the online learning networks, there were individuals with specific Discourses, such as those that reduce complex, systemic struggles to more simplistic and individualised forms of engagement. Discourses that questioned systemic injustices, such as those of a few participants who challenged the seminar, were less authorised or taken less seriously by others (Mills, 2003). This makes learning within the networks a process where only a specific Discourse is considered valid and authorised.

Figure 36. Indigenous Cosmovision. Inspiration to Protect the Earth session organised by the Climate Action Coalition, November 2022.

The online learning networks actively promoted training programmes as a gateway for activists to join their communities and engage with specific "sustainable development" Discourses and identities, serving as a prerequisite for becoming part of these communities of practice. However, these programmes were predominantly centred on institutionalised Discourses and identities (as discussed in Chapter 5 and 6), with a top-down learning approach, where participants had little to no agency in shaping the learning processes. This approach had the potential to overshadow participants' unique perspectives and knowledges. Participants, such as Gloria, seemed to appreciate the opportunity to gain insights into the network's Discourses, understanding "how things were done".

Wenger (1998;1999) identifies "joint enterprise" as a key characteristic of a community of practice, signifying the "shared purpose" that unites its members, one that is defined and negotiated by the members themselves. However, the online learning networks exhibited relatively rigid learning processes, guided by specific Discourses and identities, and showed limited openness to incorporating participants' diverse perspectives. Instead of passively accepting these norms, participants engaged in active negotiation and meaning making within the networks' initial learning programmes, reshaping the Discourses and identities to suit their own needs and activism goals. They also integrated different learning processes within their communities, as briefly shared in Chapter 5 and 6. This suggests that within communities of practice, power dynamics also exist and dictate specific learning processes.

The following section explores how participants challenged the contents, Discourses, and identities presented in the climate training and mentorship programmes. Participants adapted these elements to better align with their own objectives, resisting the prescribed framework and making room for their activism approaches. This section also emphasises that while these online networks may appear to impose set Discourses, they may function as dynamic communities of practice outside online spheres where meanings are continually negotiated, and purposes evolve in response to the needs of the participants.

7.2.1 Meaning Making: Negotiations about Online Learning Networks' Contents

Participants engaged with the Discourses and identities promoted by online learning networks that, while different from those they employed in their own activism practices (as

discussed throughout this thesis), still offered perceived "benefits". As outlined in section 7.1.3, these perceived advantages motivated their decision to join and participate in these networks. However, this engagement did not imply a full acceptance or uncritical adoption of the networks' Discourses and identities. Instead, participants engaged in a process of negotiation and meaning making with the content and practices encountered within the online learning networks.

Participation in these networks provided an opportunity for participants to be perceived as "knowledgeable practitioners" by influential institutions, thanks to the specific Discourses and identities they were exposed to. These platforms often allowed participants to access spaces of authority and "credibility" that might otherwise be closed to them. Yet, these networks were not without their challenges. While they facilitated recognition and legitimacy within certain spheres, they also created conditions that could inhibit the development of alternative meanings and learning outcomes, as Fuller (2007) suggests.

For instance, Natalia participated in a monthly talk within the Climate Action Coalition, where "climate champions" were given a space to share their "solution" practices, as seen in Chapter 5. Natalia used diverse Discourses to refer to the same "activism project". However, the Discourse and identity were not the only aspects that changed, so did the learning processes and the meanings associated with them. With her participation in the Climate Action Coalition monthly talk, she followed a lecture-style intervention, where she shared specific methods on how to address a challenge, portraying socioecological problems as something with a set structure to follow, as shown in Figure 37. On the other hand, with the women's community, she framed challenges as opportunities for collaborative reflection, where there was no single "solution", but rather an approach that enabled women participants to organise and make changes, as seen in Figure 38.

In this example, Sara was making meaning of her activism processes quite differently in each situation. This suggests that while these networks could be seen as enablers, providing participants with "influential" Discourses, they also imposed constraints by fostering kinds of knowledge and practices while potentially limiting others. However, outside the online spaces, participants' practices were quite different, allowing for alternative learning processes to emerge.
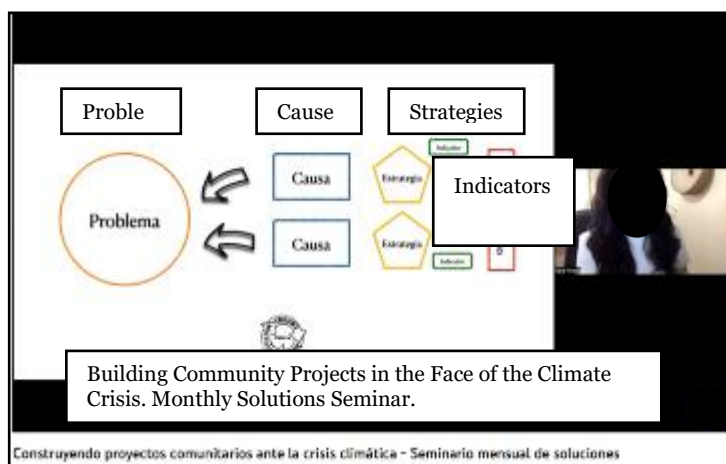
Figure 37. Natalia delivering a lecture-style talk at the monthly Solutions Initiative hosted by the Climate Action Coalition, retrieved in March 2023.

Figure 38. Women from Zapotitlán participating in a mapping activity focused on identifying water challenges in their community, an initiative organised by Natalia. Puebla Mexico. January 2023.

I previously mentioned my involvement in the mentorship programme at MexiSustain. While we were required to adhere to specific organisational guidelines, we also had the opportunity to develop some of the learning materials. During this time, my team and I engaged in a process of meaning-making, actively working to modify and expand the network's Discourse to promote alternative Discourses to "sustainable development". For instance, when inviting "sustainability experts" to contribute to the programme and speak on diverse topics, we deliberately included individuals who did not traditionally identify or were identified as "sustainability experts". These individuals, however, possessed knowledge and experiences that fostered reflections on "sustainable development" beyond the conventional Discourse of the SDGs. By incorporating these voices, we sought to challenge the online learning network's Discourse and introduce broader, more inclusive perspectives.

One example of our efforts to challenge the scope of MexiSustain's Discourse occurred during a section introducing the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which included

a segment titled "Intersectionality 2030". While the content was initially focused on examining the intersection of the SDGs, we decided as a team to expand its focus. To achieve this, we invited two speakers: one, who fitted the traditional "sustainability expert" identity as a member of our core team and a worker with a feminist NGO, and the other, an academic actively engaged in social justice activism.

Although we encouraged both speakers to mention the SDGs as required by the programme's guidelines, we also ensured they had the space to explore intersectionality beyond these frameworks. The speakers shared their personal experiences with intersectionality, presenting it both as a theory and a practice, and allowed time for participants to share their own experiences. They drew from diverse projects, such as a research initiative with migrant women in the border city of Ciudad Juarez, where systemic inequalities and cross-border migration intersected with environmental challenges.

In addition to sharing their insights, our guests fostered a space for dialogue among participants. For example, Natalia, one of the participants, discussed her ongoing work with the Holbox community and sought advice on integrating intersectional approaches into her socioecological efforts. This sparked an engaging discussion on community dynamics and how socioecological change could be advanced through intersectionality. Although the guests still operated within the confines of the networks' Discourses, they made efforts to accommodate alternative perspectives and identities, thus enriching the discussion and enabling a more nuanced understanding of intersectionality within "sustainable development" practices.

While participants appreciated the insights that the networks' Discourses could offer them, they also recognised the importance of critically engaging with the programme's content. In interviews and casual conversations, many expressed that although they strategically employed the networks' Discourses, they were aware of its limitations, including the inherent power dynamics and political structures at play. They also discussed the programme's epistemic limitations, recognising that certain forms of knowledge, such as local or indigenous perspectives, were often marginalised within the framework. For instance, Jorge, a member of MexiSustain in his late 20s from a small indigenous community in Oaxaca, shared how he strategically integrated MexiSustain's Discourse into his activism, tailoring it to align with his rural and indigenous identity.

"Because I have also tried to ground the 2030 Agenda at the local level, here in the community, within a rural and indigenous context, I believe it is the common thread in all the work I have done… how do you implement a programme or plan adopted in the most cosmopolitan city in the world, New York, into a context where perhaps a women feels uncomfortable with solid ground because it is easier for her to do her crafts on the earth, right?… we also have so much to contribute to development… also, to rethink some concepts, right? From an indigenous, from a rural perspective. For example, there are many elements of poverty, but I was thinking what is poverty? Right?… It's precisely rethinking the term poverty… I mean just the example I mentioned earlier, that is, poverty, perhaps access to decent housing, but what is a decent housing? I mean, in a city is seen as solid ground, with a concrete roof, perhaps in a community, I mean, for people it is easier on earth or a roof of adobe".

-Interview excerpts November 11, 2022.

While Jorge acknowledged the power dynamics shaping the dominant Discourse of MexiSustain, his approach demonstrated how participants could navigate and reframe institutionalised frameworks to align with their own identities and objectives. Jorge highlighted how integrating his rural and indigenous perspectives with the training sessions provided by online learning networks facilitated the creation of convergent spaces. In these spaces, various Discourses and mobilisation strategies were negotiated, even though there was a strong emphasis on adopting the Discourses of the online learning networks.

Juliana, on the other hand, expressed that some of these Discourses felt "pretty scary" to her. Engaging with unfamiliar concepts such as "gases", "decarbonisation", and "regeneration" posed both challenges and opportunities. For Juliana, this encounter with hegemonic Discourses in "sustainable development activism" was a chance to expand her understanding and critically engage with these dominant frameworks, despite initially finding them daunting.

According to Lave and Wenger (1991), a community of practice involves participating in an activity system where members share understandings about their roles and the significance of their actions within their lives and communities. In the context of the online learning networks, while the focus was on specific content aligned with particular Discourses and identities, participants actively engaged in negotiating these activity systems. They shaped

their own understandings and engaged in meaning-making around the networks' Discourses, as shared by Jorge. In some cases, such as with MexiSustain, there were also space for difference that could enhance and strengthen the network's community. For example, indigenous voices were welcomed and supported, rather than asked to homogenise, as previously seen within the Climate Action Coalition.

For instance, Angelica mentioned that she does not view the SDGs as a "panacea", but rather as a "guide". This perspective illustrates how participants often saw the networks' training not as an ultimate solution but as a tool to inform their strategic decisions. Similarly, other participants indicated that the training served as a guide to help them navigate various aspects of their activism, such as applying for funding or interacting with institutions that share similar Discourses, as shared through this Chapter. This strategic use of the networks' Discourses highlights how participants adapted and negotiated their engagement to align with their own objectives and contexts.

This underscored how communities of practice may not always pursue a common endeavour or joint enterprise, as Wenger (1998) suggests. Instead, they develop a shared repertoire of resources where power dynamics intersect with diverse Discourses, defining "who is doing what" within these spaces (Gee,2014a). However, participants' meaning-making processes demonstrate that "sustainable development activism" is not confined to fixed Discourses or identities. Rather, it engages with a multitude of these, as described by Rangel Cruz (2009) in Chapter 3, who refers to such engagements as "small revolutions" within power relationships. Here, resistance redirects power to create new effects rather than eliminating it entirely.

The next section examines how participants negotiated the identities and Discourses provided by the online learning networks in both their online and face-to-face activism practices, emphasising their *strategic flexibility*.

7.3 From Online Learning Networks Objectives to Members" *Strategic Flexibility*: Practice Contestation and Transformation in "Sustainable Development Activism"

The learning processes in which participants engaged with the online learning networks extended beyond the climate training and mentorship programmes required to become an "ambassador" or a "climate champion", as participants needed to demonstrate commitment both during and after the initial learning phase. For instance, participants were tasked with projects such as developing an action plan in MexiSustain, which required them to integrate the network's Discourse into their activism efforts. Additionally, members of the Climate Action Coalition were expected to perform "championship acts" and participate in various campaigns organised by the institutions. Valentina shared her experience of feeling compelled to engage in activities that aligned with and perpetuated the Climate Action Coalition's Discourse as part of her commitment to the network.

> "It was completely different from what I thought it could be... because when you start the course, I don't remember if you sign something or click an okay button, you commit to doing an activity, well, 10 activities per year, which you could say is like one per month of championship acts. So, for me, it was like, I mean, it's not just taking the course, putting it on LinkedIn to show that you're continuously improving, but it's a commitment that what you learn, you're going to bring it to the community".

> -Interview excerpt May 5, 2023.

As Valentina, Jorge, and other participants noted, joining the online learning networks involved more than meeting formal requirement, such as demonstrating the characteristics outlined in their calls, completing the mentorship programme or undergoing climate training to attain titles like "climate champion" or "ambassador". It also required incorporating the specific Discourses and practices promoted by these networks into their activism. This was not solely an individual learning experience but a collective and social process of becoming, wherein participants engaged in structured participation, such as in campaigns and "championship acts". Through these engagements, they formed new identities and constructing meaning within these communities (Wenger, 1999), which, in turn, reshaped their activism.

However, during participant observation, it became evident that participants were constructing meanings that did not always fully align with the networks' Discourses. While they engaged with the identities and discourses promoted by the networks, they also used these frameworks as tools to reshape their practices, engage with diverse communities, and strategically navigate the networks' Discourses and identities. Participants appeared to identify and leverage the micro-powers intersecting within these to address broader social power patterns.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Discourses operate as coordination of people, places, times, actions, and symbols that signify specific identities and their associated practices (Gee, 2014a). By engaging with the Discourses promoted by the online learning networks, participants actively negotiated power dynamics within the broader context of "sustainable development activism".

The following section explores how participants interacted with and, at times, contested the activities and resources associated with the "championship acts" and "campaigns" promoted by the online learning networks.

7.3.1 *"Championship Acts" and Campaigns*

As previously shared, Valentina highlighted that members of the Climate Action Coalition were committed to developing 10 "championship acts" annually. These acts could take various forms, such as organising "climate talks", as illustrated by Valentina's involvement with a higher education institution, or participating in environmental walks, as explored in Chapter 5 and 6. Similarly, "ambassadors" affiliated with MexiSustain were encouraged to participate in campaigns endorsed by the network, aimed at mobilising and engaging diverse activist communities. While these activities adhered to specific Discourses and identities, such as those tied to the SDGs and the climate crisis, participants exhibited *strategic flexibility* in how they approached their roles as "ambassadors" and "climate champions".

Participants navigated these Discourses and identities not only to meet the expectations set by the online learning networks and access associated benefits and opportunities (as discussed in section 7.1.3), but also to assert their own identities and Discourses. For instance,

Valentina adopted the identity of the "green girl" within her Orbital community, aligning with a local community Discourse, while Natalia identified herself as a member of "the team" within the women's collective, following a *Buen Vivir* Discourse.

This dynamic resonates with what Sondarjee (2024) refers to as "practice contestation", a dynamic where ongoing tensions within a community of practice arise as activists challenge and negotiate the Discourses imposed by the networks. Such contestations illustrate the interplay between compliance and resistance, as participants strategically balance fulfilling their commitments to the networks while embedding their unique values and practices into their activism.

The Climate Action Coalition, for instance, provided its "climate champions" with an online resource library that primarily featured PowerPoint presentations for delivering "climate talks" as part of their "championship acts". This repository also included top-down resources designed by the international staff to "help" members establish their identities as "climate champions", such as templates for requesting speaking engagements and personalised presentation cards. Figure 39 shows the platform style where participants could access these resources, highlighting its top-down approach. The platform prominently featured its primary member, their knowledge, and their Discourse, leaving no room for participants to share their own resources within the platform.
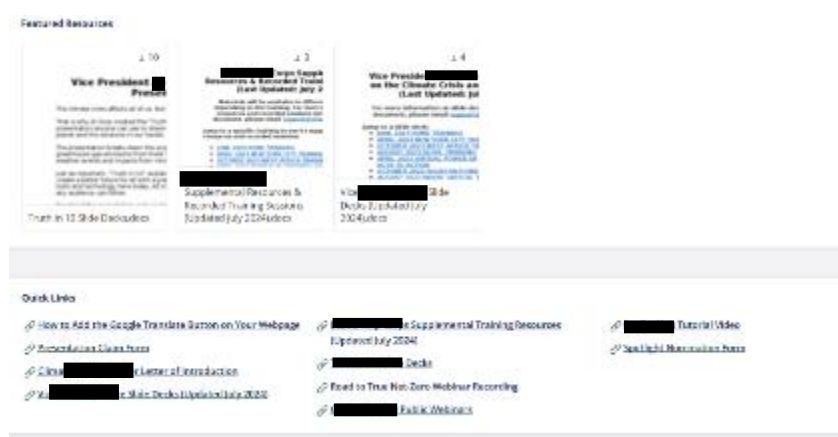
Figure 39. Climate Action Coalition resources platform retrieved in March 2023.

An example of the resources available to participants included slide decks for these "championship acts", which were built around a climate crisis Discourse. These presentations

incorporated visuals, examples of "natural disasters", scientific "hard data", graphs, and three central questions: identifying the problem, proposing solutions, and exploring the role of citizens in addressing the issue.

Figure 40. Set PowerPoint slides for "climate talks" by the Climate Action Coalition, February 2023.

Despite the structured format of the presentations and the stipulation that they should not be modified, participants like Valentina and Gloria adapted their slides for their "climate talks" at educational institutions. For instance, Gloria tailored her presentation to address cigarette butt waste management, aligning it with her activism and linking it to previous events supported by other institutions, such as the "Turn on the Art, Turn off the Pollution" contest. While she adhered to three questions proposed by the network, she reframed them to suit her specific context.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Wenger (1999) suggests that learning involves engaging with frameworks and communities where structured participation takes place. Rather than merely focusing on prescribed activities, learning requires active membership in social communities and the creation of meaning in relation to those communities. Gloria exemplified this by constructing meaning around a "climate talk", embedding it with her CoP in Tlaxcala. Instead of uncritically adopting the PowerPoint slides provided by the network, she reframed them to resonate with her community. By leveraging identities such as that of a Tlaxcaltecan and a "climate champion", she gained access to activism spaces and strengthened her connection to both her local and global networks.

Sondarjee (2024), in the context of a study on World Bank senior managers and interactions with other communities, suggests that practice contestation does not always involve discarding old tools or introducing entirely new ones; it can also entail reorganising existing tools and practices. This concept was evident in the strategies employed by both Valentina and Gloria.

During her presentation, Gloria incorporated an interactive activity with the students in attendance. The activity involved collecting cigarette butts and placing them into plastic bottles. Gloria explained that she sold the collected butts to a company that recycles them into paper, generating funds to support her activism. To me, this demonstrated how Gloria integrated various practices, identities, and Discourses across diverse communities of practice to advance her activism. Moreover, it illustrated the dynamic learning processes in which she engaged herself and others.

Figure 41. Gloria delivering a climate talk as one of her championship acts at a high school. Tlaxcala, Mexico. October 2022.

On the other hand, Valentina retained the core questions, and a Discourse centred on the climate crisis but shifted the focus to clean energies and topics relevant to herself, her audience, engineering students, and the city where the talk was held. Identifying herself as a "climate champion" to the organisers, Valentina also positioned herself as a graduate among the attendees, as discussed in Chapter 6. During an interview, she explained how she adapted her presentation based on recommendations from another "climate champion" she had met months earlier. She noted that, in addition to participating in a community of practice with established Discourse and set identities, members engaged in informal processes of reification that shaped their experiences of participation (Wenger, 1998).

For instance, Valentina was incorporating tips from other members during informal learning processes and adapted materials provided by the online learning network for her activism practices, rather than accepting them in the exact form set by the Climate Action Coalition. While ensuring she addressed the three core questions, Valentina also integrated additional slides and information beyond the Coalition's resources. She shared personal experiences, such as participating in environmental walks in her neighbourhood and church, and invited attendees to join her in these practices.

"I say, as long as you follow the presentation's guidelines, you can remove, add, as long as you maintain the structure of responding to the three questions and in the first one make them understand that there is a problem, in the second one talk about the solutions and well, in the third one leave that doubt of well, and what are you going to do as a citizen? And so, since I took the course, I try to give talks, it is not always possible because well, not everywhere welcomes you… I have also tried to do other things separately… so I also report that as "championship act".

-Interview excerpts, May 5, 2023.

Valentina and Gloria highlighted that while the "championship acts" primarily centred around giving "climate talks", they also incorporated other activities as part of their "commitment" to the networks, even when these practices did not fully align with the network's Discourse. Valentina described this as doing "things separately". For instance, Luisa documented her work at the water dam as part of her "championship acts". Her aim extended beyond fulfilling commitments to the online learning network, she also sought to engage with individuals who followed or were members of the network's community. For example, Luisa used the online learning network's group to call for volunteers for her Sunday reforestation activities. Similarly, Hilda tagged the online learning network's community in her volunteer recruitment posts, successfully attracting participants through these efforts.

While the networks provided resources tailored to specific Discourses, identities, and practices, participants engaged in a mix of non-formal and informal learning processes. They shared how they adapted these materials to align with their diverse activist communities as well as the requirements of the online learning networks. This practice contestation was not limited to discursive or normative challenges but extended to practical, action-oriented

modifications. As Sondarjee (2024) highlights, practice contestation involves reworking established frameworks not only at the level of Discourse but also in tangible actions.

Participants contested the networks' emphasis on "climate crisis" Discourses, such as delivering "climate talks" centred on scientific data, and also the practices "allowed" by the networks. For example, rather than relying solely on the Climate Action Coalition platform to access top-down resources, Luisa used it as a space to share calls for her activism efforts, actively engaging more people in her reforestation initiatives. This adaptation demonstrates how activists redefined the tools and practices provided by the networks to suit their local contexts and priorities, as illustrated in Figure 42.

Figure 42. Luisa with fellow "climate champions" in one of her activism activities in a water dam. Estado de Mexico. April 2023.

Navigating diverse practices, Discourses, and identities within the activities of the online learning networks was a shared experience for Gloria, Valentina, Luisa, and others. While the "championship acts" required by the Climate Action Coalition adhered to a specific format and were primarily individual activities, MexiSustain adopted a different approach. Participants were encouraged to engage with communities, focusing on the SDGs, and guided by a specific Discourse rather than a prescribed format or activity.

For example, during the "Global Action Week" promoted by the United Nations SDG Action Campaign, MexiSustain developed a campaign framed around the SDGs, accompanied

by the slogan "change the discourse". According to the network, the campaign aimed to inspire people to "rewrite the story that shapes a new reality through changing the discourse, knowing that the impossible is possible if acted upon collectively". As part of this initiative, the network created materials to engage their ambassadors and encouraged participation in community activities. This shift marked a departure from their usual focus on individual actions, reflecting a more collective approach.

However, despite the call to "change the discourse", the campaign reduced this concept to promoting a more "positive" outlook. This oversimplification overlooked the complexity of Discourse as deeply embedded in power relationships within activism. The campaign failed to critically address fundamental questions such as: what systemic actions should be taken? with whom? why? and whose reality are been shaped, and for whom? This critique echoes Leff's (1998) argument questioning the concept of "sustainable development" and emphasising the need for deeper engagement with the broader power dynamics at play.

MexiSustain developed various resources to engage participants in the campaign. Volunteers from their core team, including Rosa, Veronica, and myself, were recruited to create these materials while adhering to the guidelines established by the international campaign. Members of the network, such as "ambassadors" and member organisations, were required to participate in these activities as part of their membership. Like the approach taken with the mentorship programme's learning materials, some participants, including Rosa and myself, sought to adapt these resources to incorporate alternative Discourses and identities.

However, as scholars like Adler and Bernstein (2004) and Sondarjee (2024) have noted, contestation in practice is inevitably mediated by epistemic power relations, where recognised authorities validate, confirm, or reformulate new knowledge. Although MexiSustain adhered to campaign guidelines established by powerful institutions, it was Rosa and I, due to our roles within the network and recognition within its educational programmes, who were granted the opportunity to (re)shape resources and practices. Unfortunately, this flexibility was not extended to the activists themselves; instead, it was reserved for those of us regarded as "professionals" within the network's Discourse.

For instance, MexiSustain implemented a blackboard platform where campaign participants could access a variety of SDG-focused resources. These resources included an introduction to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs, a welcome video from a prominent UN figure,

official campaign guides, virtual event schedules, promotional materials, and registration forms. Similarly to the Climate Action Coalition, these platforms and materials adopted a top-down approach. Participants engagement was difficult to track, and there was no dedicated space for fostering dialogue around the resources for participants to contribute their own materials, as illustrated in Figure 43.

Figure 43. MexiSustain #ActionXSDGs Campaign Trello board, retrieved in October 2022.

While these materials aligned with the Discourse of the SDGs and the "change the discourse" campaign, some, such as the campaign guides, were crafted by members of the core team, the "professionals" within the network, including Veronica and myself. Through practice contestation and meaning making via *strategic flexibility*, we sought to incorporate activities that embraced the diverse Discourses and identities among activists.

Rather than focusing solely on the "ambassadors" and discussions centred around the SDGs, the MexiSustain campaign sought to engage with a broader audience through its slogan: "It is time to turn apathy into action, fear into hope, and division into unity". However, as mentioned earlier, the slogan failed to critically address the root causes and systemic issues contributing to the unsustainability of our living systems. Instead, it implied that "being more positive" was the solution, subtly placing blame on people's "inaction".

For instance, the guides assigned specific SDGs to each day, and we were tasked with creating a campaign guide suggesting activities for ambassadors centred around each of these SDGs. Some activities adhered to international guidelines, such as the "Don't Choose

Extinction" campaign, which encouraged participants to showcase a video featuring a dinosaur entering the UN headquarters to discuss fossil fuel spending and how redirecting these funds could "help" alleviate poverty.

However, as part of our efforts to shape the Discourse and practices within the online learning network, we added additional activities in the "Examples for Action" section, as shown in Figure 44. These activities included organising dialogues, photovoice projects, and reflections on participants' localities and activism. Our aim was to encourage more community-oriented learning processes and challenge the campaign's dominant Discourse by incorporating alternative practices, Discourses, and identities. Through these activities, we sought to promote a more "open" learning approach that recognised and valued the diversity of experiences, knowledges, and perspectives within the activists' communities of practice.

Examples of Action XSDGs
-Organise a series of hybrid dialogues on gender equality in your community. Invite women from diverse sectors, ages, and backgrounds to share experiences related to gender equality, poverty, and hunger. Together, explore the question: What are the intersections between gender, poverty, and food security? Facilitate a reflective exercise to develop a collaborative report. Share the report with community leaders, including local authorities.
-Design a collaborative Photovoice project with women from your community. Highlight the intersections between poverty, hunger, and gender equality, showcasing both the current situation and the desired future. Include personal or collective reflections. Organise an exhibition or event to present the Photovoice project, encouraging participants to share their experiences with a broader audience. Amplify visibility through social media, press releases, and other channels.

Figure 44. MexiSustain campaign's guide retrieved in September 2022.

For instance, within the framework of the SDGs focusing on "no poverty", "zero hunger", and "gender equality", we developed activities that encouraged ambassadors to engage with their communities and address their local challenges through dialogues and reflections. Rather than merely promoting the content of these SDGs as recommended by international guidelines, Rosa and I tried to integrate an approach that prioritised local grassroots engagement. By aligning with diverse activist Discourses and leveraging our capacity to influence change through contestation, we utilised our positional power within the network

(Lave & Wenger, 1991). As previously noted, Rosa and I were known as "sustainability professionals", this allowed us to be seen as people who performed certain practices and were legitimised to shape the campaign's guides, as highlighted by Gee (2014a) in Chapter 3.

As discussed in the conceptual framework, Wenger (1998) refers to this negotiability within the CoP framework, where identity formation and meaning making consider power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge. The recognition of whose practices and competencies are deemed "knowledge" involves complex, historical, and political processes that address power dynamics within CoPs. In this case, due to our perceived alignment with the network's Discourse and long engagement with the learning processes within MexiSustain, Rosa and I were perceived as knowledgeable. Campaign's participants were required to follow our suggested activities to engage with the campaign. However, by leveraging our power positions, we aimed to challenge the power dynamics surrounding the Discourse, knowledges, and practices allowed within the online learning network.

Similarly, though from a different position of power within MexiSustain, participants like Gloria used these campaigns to access communication channels and other benefits provided by their membership within the network, promoting their own activism practices and Discourses. For example, during the 2022 Action XSDGs campaign, Gloria organised a virtual event via Facebook Live in collaboration with MexiSustain's official account. The event was widely promoted by the online learning network, amplifying her activism reach. While Gloria initially focused on the SDGs and presented herself as an "ambassador", she and her guest, a member of an NGO dedicated to sea turtle protection who followed an ecological justice Discourse, shifted the conversation to better align with their activism practices. They followed an informal talk learning approach, interacting with viewers through Facebook comments (see Figure 45). They shared experiences and critically discussed current practices such as tourism, industrial pollution of water bodies, and the oil industry.
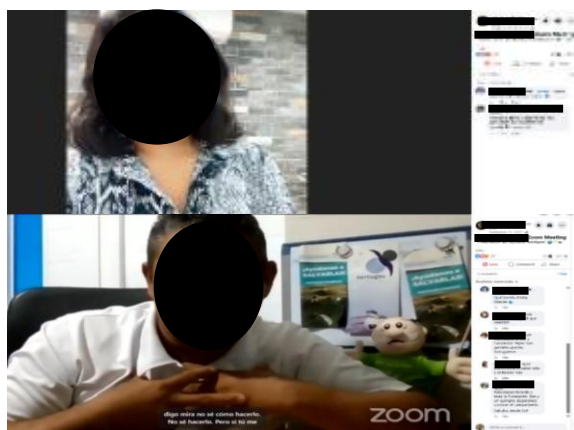
Figure 45. Informal talk organised by Gloria during the MexiSustain Action XSDGs Campaign. Retrieved in October 2022.

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In her concluding speech, Gloria reinforced the campaign's message by encouraging people to take "small" steps towards positive change, highlighting the importance of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda. As Sondarjee (2024) argues, practice contestation occurs "within the confines of intersubjective relations and interactions in domains of knowledge" (p. 2). While Gloria integrated the network's campaign Discourse into her messaging, she also allowed space for her and her guest's own activism Discourses, leaving the interpretation and further knowledge construction up to the attendees.

Similarly, Rosa, who organised the face-to-face Action Festival of MexiSustain, described how the first day was dedicated to panel discussions, following a more structured approach to learning. This provided a platform for local authorities and professors from the host university to share their perspectives and practices related to the SDGs, as "experts" on the topics. According to Rosa, the activities were deliberately designed to align with the global campaign's Discourse and to satisfy the sponsors, a UK based international NGO with a hegemonic Discourse of "sustainable development".

For example, an official from the Mexican Chancellery introduced the global campaign "change the discourse", explaining an activity called "flip the script". This activity consisted of changing negative words for positive ones, while Rosa distributed visual and textual materials to attendees to "flip the script". The materials featured words like "division", "apathy", "fear", and "problem" in dark tones. When attendees flipped the sheets, they revealed words such as "hope", "union", "empathy", and "opportunity" in vibrant colours (see Figure 46).

After the panellist finished speaking, Rosa invited attendees to take a picture while "flipping the scrip". For me, this activity was a clear reinforcement of the hegemonic Discourse promoted by the online learning network. The photos from this activity were prominently featured in MexiSustain's social media channels, yet participants did not have the opportunity to choose the words or dynamics themselves. Instead, they were simply asked to perform for the camera (see Figures 46 and 47). In this case, the Discourse surrounding the activity functioned as an effect of productive and relational power (Ziai, 2016), where activities, dictated by an international organisation, like some of those in the action guides and the action festival, left little to no room for participants to engage with their own perspectives or practices.

Figure 46. "Flip the Script" activity in the Action Festival organised by MexiSustain. Jalisco, Mexico. September 2022.

Figure 47. Negative (problem, division) and positive (opportunity, unity) words in the "Flip the Script" activity at the MexiSustain Action Festival. Jalisco, Mexico. September 2022.

During an interview, Rosa shared that while she had adhered to a "rigid" learning format, she managed to introduce some changes by involving individuals who were not typically regarded as "sustainability professionals" within the online learning network. For example, in the panel titled "Inclusion for Gender Equality", she invited the founder of a feminist online learning network for "professional women in sustainable development fields", such as engineering and biology, as well as two trans women from a grassroots NGO in Mexico City.

Rosa explained that her aim was to challenge the prevailing Discourses on gender equity within the context of "sustainable development", both within the network and in broader societal discussions.

"I felt that on that panel, we managed to change some minds. At first, I was a bit worried that they might criticise the girls from (an organisation for trans people). However, their testimonies deeply enriched the participants' perspectives. I believe it was very valuable

and exactly what we were aiming for. Additionally, a constructive dialogue was generated between the panellists and the participants. Important topics were discussed, such as the idea that not all feminists support all women, these kinds of things, that create discrimination and inequality".

-Interview excerpts November 17, 2022.

In this panel, contestation emerged not only from Rosa's decision to invite individuals who were not typically identified as "sustainable development professionals", but also from the diversity of the communities of practice represented. The invited panellists shared their experiences, and during the dialogue section, the trans women began questioning the founder of the feminist online learning network. They critically examined the network's inclusion practices, challenging the criteria of who was considered a "professional" and the Discourses shaping the digital network. Advocating for genuine inclusion, they emphasised their desire to "inhabit spaces rather than merely be present".

As an assistant at this event, I found that listening to the stories of the trans women challenged my pre-existing Discourse on gender equity. Engaging in this non-formal and informal learning processes, both during the event and in conversations outside the organised activities, allowed them to share further insights and engage in meaningful dialogue with us. Having grown up in a Catholic family, I had primarily been exposed to Catholic Discourses on trans people. These discussions offered me new perspectives and greatly broadened my understanding. As Wenger (1998; 1999) posits, meaning is not static but is negotiated through participation with social communities, shaping our experiences. Through engagement with individuals outside my usual communities, I was able to reshape the meanings I attributed to trans communities.

While differing Discourses among participants, including attendees, were evident, many, including Rosa and my own, felt that these conversations prompted deep reflection and meaning negotiation. As Hofius (2023) and Sondarjee (2024) suggest, disagreements and contestation arise not only within specific communities but also at the intersections where different communities of practice meet, often leading to clashes in understanding. However, the ongoing cycle of participation and meaning negotiation suggests that practices within communities of practice are dynamic, evolving, and not strictly predefined or regulated as highlighted by Lave & Wenger (1991) in Chapter 3.

On the second day of the festival, Rosa and the other organisers integrated various activist communities through workshops and dialogues, adopting a more flexible and participatory learning approach. Moving away from the formal university setting used on the first day, they selected an entrepreneurship centre as the venue (see Figure 48). This new space provided attendees with diverse settings that encouraged more interactive and varied sessions. Unlike the previous day's structured panel discussions confined to a single auditorium, this setting fostered a more flexible exchange of knowledges and practices. Workshops were led by "ambassadors", but the events were open to a broader audience. Participants included university students, parents of "ambassadors", friends of attendees, and even panellists from the previous day, such as the trans women from the NGO and members of the entrepreneurship centre.

Figure 48. Participants of MexiSustain Action Festival in the entrepreneurship centre. Jalisco, Mexico. September 2022.

Despite the apparent openness, the event was still shaped by the hegemonic Discourse of the SDGs. Although Rosa claimed that the negotiation of meaning and identity appeared consensual, underlying tensions persisted, particularly around the learning processes, which were marked by misunderstandings and disagreements. As Roberts (2006) notes in his critical study of communities of practice within management literature, notes regarding management academics and practitioners, such tensions are common in these settings. The workshops did provide a space for contestation, but the dominant framework of the SDGs remained difficult to challenge.

For example, Gloria began the day by co-leading a workshop with another MexiSustain member. Both identified as "ambassadors", and the room was decorated with visual elements representing the SDGs (see Figure 49). However, the discussion unexpectedly shifted away from the SDGs and instead adopted an anthropocentric focus, emphasising the importance of "caring for the environment", a theme that had recurred throughout the event and had been

explored more thoroughly in Chapter 5. While the SDGs remained present in the background, they were not the direct focus of the discussion. This shift indicated a tension between the prescribed Discourse of the SDGs and the actual practices and priorities of the participants.

Figure 49. SDGs Visuals during the Action Festival organised by MexiSustain. Jalisco, Mexico. September 2022.

Similarly, participants adopted various identities and roles while facilitating workshops, ranging from citizens and academics to transgender individuals and mothers. However, the "ambassador" identity, rooted in the SDG Discourse remained dominant, potentially overshadowing other participants' Discourses. As Hall (1996) noted in Chapter 3, identities act as points of suture between Discourses and practices, positioning individuals as social subjects within specific Discourses and constructing them as subjects capable of "speaking". While participants shared their diverse identities, the Action Festival organised by MexiSustain adhered to a specific Discourse, where the "ambassador" identity conferred a more powerful position.

This dynamic illustrated the subtle ways in which institutional power reinforces certain Discourses and identities while marginalising others. In Chapter 3, I highlighted that power operates as an underlying force within relational dynamics, continuously creating localised and unstable power states. As Foucault (1976) suggests, power is not fixed but dispersed and contextual. Despite participants seemingly moving away from the hegemonic Discourse and identities during the Action Festival, these remained predominant, particularly when individuals recognised as "powerful" within these spaces, such as academics or diplomats, came into play. In these interactions, participants often shifted away from the identities and Discourses they used during informal chats, highlighting the dynamic and contextual nature of Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism". Activists engaged in

a myriad of Discursive practices depending on their situational contextual, illustrating the fluid and ever-changing nature of activism.

Participants, much like those at the MexiSustain Action Festival, actively contested the prevailing Discourses surrounding "sustainable development activism", whether by engaging individuals not traditionally considered "sustainable development professionals" or by incorporating activism *beyond* sustainable development. However, they also utilised online learning networks' dominant Discourses in strategic ways, such as integrating its visuals into activities or referencing it at the start of their participation. This tendency was prevalent among both the attendees and members of the online learning networks, as they often engaged with Discourses and identities perceived to hold power or provide certain advantages, even if, as Valentina remarked, they did "not buy into it".

Juan Carlos, for instance, recounted his involvement with the Climate Action Coalition and emphasised how he strategically leveraged the network when he required specific resources, such as gaining attention for his initiatives. When advocating for legislation to designate a natural area within his community as a protected reserve, Juan Carlos and his fellow activists turned to the online learning network for support. They sought assistance in mobilising individuals to sign a petition, which they planned to present to local and regional governments as part of their advocacy efforts.

"I don't ask people for things out of the blue, you know? I know how to use my connections. So, if I'm really in a situation where I truly need your support, I'll ask for it… and with the Climate Action Coalition, well, I know if you ask them for help, they will give it. But we try not always to go to them for everything… you have to know when, how, and where, and this time, it was pretty urgent and demanding, so I told them, "Look, I need support for this issue" so, we started discussing and all these ideas for making it go viral came up".

-Interview excerpts April 28, 2023.

Later in the interview, Juan Carlos elaborated on how, despite the complexity of the issue and the involvement of various actors, such as the private sector, the state, and local communities, the initiative managed to gain attention and make progress. This situation encompassed not only "environmental solutions", as often portrayed within the network, but also a wide range of socio-ecological, political, and cultural factors. Candon-Mena and Treré

(2022) describe activists as "pragmatic visionaries" who combine a belief in the democratising potential of technologies with a practical approach that critically evaluates their true potential, including their risks and limitations.

Juan Carlos and other participants leveraged online learning networks to amplify their activism by engaging with the Discourses and identities these platforms enabled. However, this approach required a critical evaluation of the platforms' potential, the meanings they conveyed, and the possible benefits and consequences they entailed. While activists demonstrated *strategic flexibility* in adopting these Discourses and identities, there was a risk of inadvertently reinforcing them. Discourses are not static; they continuously shape and reshape individuals through their practices. Although Discourses are instrumental in constructing reality and shaping understanding, they do not wholly determine "sustainable development activism". Instead, they significantly influence how activism is enacted within social practices (Mayr, 2015).

Despite their *strategic flexibility*, participants grappled concerns about sustaining Discourses that might reinforce the very systems of oppression that sought to dismantle. Escobar (1995) cautions, the increasing adoption of the language of "development" or "sustainable development" by professionals and activists can inadvertently enable institutions to perpetuate the worldview of those in power.

For instance, Lorena, a core team member of the Climate Action Coalition, reflected on her journey from feminist political advocacy to her role within the Coalition. During an interview, she highlighted a significant shift in her activism Discourse, shaped by the network's policies and overarching Discourse. Lorena's transition was not solely a personal choice but was influenced by the integration and adaptation required within the Climate Action Coalition's approach.

"For example, I really like working with X (an activist community), I learned a lot about political advocacy, and I really like the world of political advocacy. But, for example, the Climate Action Coalition is not as strong, at least in Latin America, it's not as strong in terms of political advocacy. So, for example, it was quite different for me to go from being with X, where I had a bit more freedom to approach some politicians to here to try to do some things".

-Interview excerpts April 19, 2023.

Lorena's reflection revealed that her engagement with the Climate Action Coalition led to a shift in her activism practices. Like other members, she participated in a training programme that emphasised a scientific and technological understanding of the climate crisis. As Foucault (1980) underscores, educational systems act as political instruments for shaping and reshaping Discourses and the power dynamics they embody. Lorena's involvement with the network catalysed changes in her activism Discourse, particularly within the Coalition's advocacy framework.

However, Lorena's experience also illustrates that the Discourses of online learning networks are not entirely hegemonic; spaces exist for alternative ways of thinking and engaging. While her professional role within the Coalition influenced her activism practices, it did not fully encompass or direct them. Her practices remained dynamic, suggesting that the Coalition's framework shaped her approach but did not wholly define her activism.

7.4 Conclusion

This chapter explored learning within the context of "sustainable development activism", focusing on both online learning networks and face-to-face activism spaces through the lens of communities of practice (CoP). Participants expressed a range of motivations for joining MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition, viewing these spaces as sites for activist learning. Their reasons ranged from seeking collaborative communities to leveraging the perceived benefits of membership, such as enhancing employability or satisfying institutional funding requirements. These motivations were influenced by power dynamics that defined "sustainable development activism" through specific Discourses and identities, such as those linked to the SDGs and the role of "climate champions".

As outlined in Chapter 3, Groff (2023) defines a community of practice as any group of individuals engaged in a similar activity who share knowledge to enhance expertise and solve problems. However, in the online learning networks and other spaces engaged by activists, specific power dynamics shaped interactions within the "sustainable development" Discourse. Gee (2014a) conceptualises Discourse as the social interaction of "whos" engaged in specific activities in socially recognised ways. Participants highlighted how these dynamics often fostered top-down learning processes, shaping who is recognised as a "sustainable

development activist" and what language is deemed legitimate (e.g. "climate champions", "ambassadors", and the use of SDG related terminology).

For instance, Esmeralda joined MexiSustain because she perceived its practices as genuinely aligned with her understanding of "sustainable development activism", despite her extensive prior experience in activism, research, and community transformation. Similarly, Valentina's main motivation for joining the Climate Action Coalition was to enhance her CV within the "sustainability" sector, while Juliana sought to gain recognition as a "sustainable development professional".

The online learning networks offered non-formal learning programmes, offering participants pathways to integrate into their communities and gain recognition through institutionalised titles like "ambassador" or "climate champion". However, these networks diverged from Wenger (1998) and Barton and Tusting (2005) conceptualisation of CoPs, which emphasise mutual engagement, common endeavour, and a joint repertoire of resources. Instead, the online learning networks were characterised by top-down dynamics while participants often had limited agency in shaping learning experiences, as illustrated in Figures 33, 35, and 37 and reflected in participants accounts.

Despite these limitations, meaningful learning and engagement extended beyond the boundaries of the online learning networks. Participants engaged in continuous social processes, where collaboration, dialogue, and renegotiation of meaning occurred. This aligns with Wenger's (1998) view that participation happens not only in formal settings but also in broader social contexts. For example, Rosa described her participation during the action festival as meaningful because she invited individuals who were not traditionally recognised as "sustainable development professionals". Similarly, Natalia and Gloria emphasised their activism beyond these digital platforms, including Natalia's work with women's communities and Gloria's organisation of community-driven events.

As Wenger (1998) states, "learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning" (p.96). Participants displayed evolving forms of engagement, shifting from externally imposed identities such as "ambassador" or "climate champion" to more collaborative and self-defined roles like "green girl" or simply being part of "the team". These evolving identities influenced who was recognised for expertise, shaped by both institutional markers and community-based forms of recognition. Participants learned how to navigate and

align with different communities, gaining insights into what enabled or constrained their activism.

Learning in practice involves developing shared repertoires of Discourses, renegotiating meanings, and producing or adopting tools, artefacts, and representations (Wenger, 1998;1999). Within "sustainable development activism", participants engaged with overlapping Discourses embedded in systems of power, such as activism *for, within* and *beyond* sustainable development, outlined in Chapter 1. The CoP framework illustrates how learning influences practice, shaping individuals' motivations and access to activism resources (Wenger, 1998). While online learning networks operated within specific Discourses, they were also interwoven with power and knowledge relations (Foucault, 1991; Mills, 2003), thereby shaping how activism was imagined and enacted. For example, by emphasising the SDGs focused Discourse, MexiSustain centred activism *within* sustainable development, potentially overlooking other forms of activism (*beyond* sustainable development).

However, as discussed in Chapter 3, Discourse can function both as an instrument and an effect of power, but also as a site of resistance and possibility (Esteva et al., 2013). Participants engaged in complex processes of meaning-making, simultaneously challenging and strategically utilising the Discourses and identities embedded in online learning networks. These platforms provided access to funding, partnerships with institutions, and opportunities to recruit volunteers. Activists like Luisa and Natalia used MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition to navigate institutional relationships, learning how to leverage or circumvent these platforms to further their goals

This reflects Wenger's (1998) concept of "negotiability," where identity formation and meaning making are influenced by power and knowledge hierarchies. Participants critically assessed the meanings promoted by these networks and the strategic advantages they offered. Although activists sometimes risked reinforcing dominant frameworks, they also demonstrated *strategic flexibility* in how they engaged with Discourses and online learning structures. When critical, they knew how to take advantage of what these networks provided, whether for visibility, funding, capacity-building, or institutional collaboration, while continuing to define and pursue their own activist paths.

Although Chapter 4 outlined how MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition differ in their approaches to "sustainable development activism", particularly regarding Discourses,

institutional origins, funding models, and degrees of formalisation, this chapter has demonstrated that they also share important similarities. Both networks promoted dominant sustainable development Discourses, constructed institutionalised activist identities such as "climate champions" and "ambassadors", and relied on hierarchical learning structures. They conferred status and legitimacy. These roles served as gatekeeping mechanisms, determining who was recognised as a credible action within the sustainable development activism field.

Despite these structural and Discursive controls, participants were not passive recipients of imposed identities and practices. As seen throughout this chapter, they actively engaged with these frameworks in strategic and critical ways. While navigating institutional demands and expectations, participants selectively appropriated resources, certifications, roles, language, offered by the networks to advance their own activist goals. Their learning journeys were marked by negotiation, contestation, and redefinition of what it means to be a "sustainable development activist".

Thus, the comparison between these two learning networks not only revealed the influence of dominant Discourses in shaping activist learning and identities but also underscored the dynamic agency of participants. Online learning networks were not simply vehicles for reproducing hegemonic understandings of sustainability and activism, they were also spaces where activists repurpose institutional tools and recognition to pursue alternative visions of transformation.

In sum, this chapter highlights the dual nature of online learning environments within "sustainable development activism", as sites of both constraint and possibility. Activists learn within existing power structures, but they also learn against and through them, strategically leveraging these platforms to challenge, subvert, or reimagine what activism can be.

Chapter Eight

Conclusion and Implications

8. Introduction

As demonstrated in the empirical chapters (5, 6, and 7), online learning networks play a significant role in the formation and dissemination of "sustainable development activism" Discourses and identities. These networks are closely tied to diverse institutions and sites of power. As Mills (2003) highlights, Discourses have tangible effects on individuals and their thinking, shaping the way they perceive and engage with issues related to "sustainable development".

This research set out to explore the Discourses and identities around "sustainable development activism" and the role of online learning networks in (re)shaping these dynamics. By employing an activist ethnographic approach, this study uncovers the diverse ways in which "sustainable development activism" is understood and practised, particularly within online learning networks, using a communities of practice framework.

The research redirects academic attention from the predominant focus on activism *for, within, or beyond* "sustainable development", isolated media or platforms, uncritical perspectives of these tools, and the "formal" views of education in activism, all prevalent themes in academic literature, as discussed in Chapter 1. Instead, it adopts a broader, social practice perspective that highlights how "sustainable development activism" is embedded in everyday realities. The specific focus on the Discourses and identities associated with this form of activism represents an original contribution to the field, which has often overlooked the nuanced experiences of activist groups.

Key findings reveal the complex challenges surrounding "sustainable development activism" and their connections with diverse Discourses and identities within this form of activism. These challenges include external pressures from funding institutions, the criminalisation of certain activist practices and identities, and the impact of these factors on participation and engagement within and beyond online learning networks.

By employing a multi-sited activist ethnography, I gained a deep, insider perspective on the intersection of activism, "sustainable development", and online learning networks. This methodological approach provides a rich understanding of how activism is understood and practised across various contexts. As discussed in Chapter 1, activism in the context of "sustainable development" has been studied as activism *for, within, and beyond* the parameters of "sustainable development". However, there was a critical need for exploring how these perspectives intersect and why such intersections matter, particularly within the context of emerging online learning networks for activism, where diverse individuals and institutions converge to learn and "become" activists.

Furthermore, using a communities of practice lens enables a closer examination of the Discourses and identities associated with "sustainable development activism", particularly as they related to power dynamics. This approach reveals how power relationships embedded in diverse communities shape not only activist identities but also the practices and Discourses in which activists engage.

By adopting a social practice perspective, this research transcends the dominant view of online learning networks and activism as separate from the power dynamics within "sustainable development" Discourses. Instead, it demonstrates how these dynamics are deeply interconnected and mutually influential.

This chapter summarises the key findings and ideas, linking them to existing literature and theory to address the research questions posed earlier in this thesis. Following this, the chapter explores the implications of these findings for policy and practice.

The chapter begins by discussing how "sustainable development activism" has evolved as a strategy for sustaining activism, addressing the first two sub-questions of this research:

1. What are the Discourses surrounding "sustainable development activism", and how do activists navigate them in their practices?
2. What identities are present within "sustainable development activism", and how do activists navigate them in their practices?

Next, I return to the concept of *strategic flexibility* within "sustainable development activism", a central theme emerging from the research findings and participants' insights. This is followed by an exploration of the role online learning networks play in (re)shaping this form

of activism, addressing the third sub-question: 3. What roles do online learning networks play in shaping the utilisation of Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism"?

This chapter also considers the implications of these findings for activists, adult education practitioners, and funding institutions. Finally, I outline directions for future research and offer reflections on the methodological choices made in this study. These reflections address the broader implications for research in the field of activism, including a critical analysis of what this research means for activist ethnography and how it challenges traditional understandings of activism itself.

8.1 "Sustainable Development Activism" to Sustain Activism?

In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed the ongoing debate about what "sustainable development" aims to sustain. This section explores how "sustainable development activism", as conceptualised in this thesis, emerges as a contested and evolving set of Discourses that ultimately aims to sustain activism itself. One objective of this study was to analyse the Discourses underpinning "sustainable development activism" and how activists leverage them in their efforts. As outlined in Chapter 1, existing literature often frames activism as occurring *for, within or beyond* "sustainable development". However, there has been limited examination of the underlying Discourses and power dynamics shaping these forms of activism and how their perspectives intersect.

In Chapter 5, I analysed the diverse Discourses that appeared to "motivate" participants to engage in activism. These include anthropocentric views of "taking care of the environment". For example, Valentina and Gloria described nature as external to humans, requiring stewardship for humanity's benefit, as analysed by Grosfoguel (2016). Within this framework, an "awakening" narrative emerges, framing "environmental inaction" because of ignorance. However, Malm & Hornborg (2014) critique this perspective, arguing that it depoliticises the socioecological origins of environmental problems, overlooking significant inequalities and the specific social, economic, and political structures driving ecological degradation. These critiques resonate with discussions in Chapter 1, where I linked sustainable development to colonialism, modernity and capitalism (e.g., King, 1976; Dixon & Heffernan, 1991; Escobar, 1995; Ziai, 2016; Hintzen, 2005; Samson & Gigoux, 2017; Marquetti, Miebach

& Morrone, 2024) and explored development as a Discourse framework in Chapter 3 (Escobar, 1995).

Another prominent Discourse in participants' activism emphasises the interrelations of ecological and social conflicts. Lorena's experiences in Guaviare, Colombia, exemplified this perspective. While working with local communities, she observed how environmental issues were deeply entwined with broader social struggles. Similarly, Melissa underscored this connection, stating during an interview: "talking about the environment without discussing social problems is just gardening". This critique highlights a Discourse that challenges the separation of environmental issues from social justice, framing such an approach as reductive and insufficient.

A further prevalent Discourse among participants was the pursuit of "living well", aligning with the concept of *Buen Vivir*, as explored in Chapter 2. This perspective recognises the interconnectedness of systemic issues such as inequality, sexism, and colonialism, all which participants viewed as impacting their communities and themselves. The experiences of Julio, Juliana, and Veronica, as detailed in Chapter 5, illustrate how participants became increasingly aware of these injustices. Rejecting domination and control, they sought transformative ways of being, doing, and feeling to achieve a "good life". This Discourse challenges hegemonic models of development, advocating instead for a more holistic and relational approach to sustainability, as highlighted by Álvarez (2017), Gudynas (2011), and Campodónico et al. (2017).

As discussed in Chapter 5, specifically in section 5.3, activists' Discourses and identities are dynamic, evolving in response to diverse contexts and power dynamics. For instance, Gloria's engagement exemplified how activists navigated different Discourses depending on the audience. She initially positioned herself within an anthropocentric Discourse when engaging with me as a researcher and adopted a "climate crisis" Discourse within a corresponding "climate champion" identity when collaborating with higher education institutions. In contrast, informal settings, such as conversations with fellow activists and family, prompted a shift to a Discourse centred on living well and relational identities, where she highlighted the tangible impacts of neo-extractivism on her family's quality of life. This fluidity demonstrates how activism is contextually shaped by both social and political environments and Discourse.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how Discourses are intertwined with power and knowledge (see Foucault, 1989; Mills, 2003). Certain ideas and statements become legitimised by powerful institutions, shaping individual and collective thought processes and practices. As highlighted in Section 5.2, the Discourses of "sustainable development activism" within online learning networks often diverge from those of individual activists. For example, the Climate Action Coalition prioritised a scientific and technological Discourse, framing the "climate crisis" as solvable through technological solutions and training individuals as "climate champions" advocating for net-zero emissions. Similarly, MexiSustain's Discourse, shaped by international policies like the SDGs, promoted the idea that "sustainable development" could be achieved through ambassador-led campaigns and activities. These Discourses reflect complex power relationships. For instance, as discussed in Chapter 5, MexiSustain Discourse responded to funding constraints within the civil society ecosystem, while the Climate Action Coalition's Discourse aligned with the interests of its founding figure and allies.

Viewing "development" as a Discourse reveals how it enables the creation of institutional apparatuses that shape ecological, cultural, and political realities (Gardner & Lewis, 1996; Gee, 2014). In Chapter 2, I highlighted how "development" in Latin America has often been conceptualised by governments and international agencies through a top-down, ethnocentric, and technocratic approaches (Escobar, 2011). Neo-extractivism, as Svampa (2019) observes, continues to permeate the region. Meanwhile "sustainable development" has generated a diversity of Discourses, often vague and with lacking consensus on what exactly should be sustained (Gow, 1992; Qizilbash, 2001; Jabareen, 2004; 2008, Redclift, 1993; Sachs, 1999).

As with "development", hegemonic Discourses of "sustainable development", such as those used by the online learning networks, overdetermine a dominant social reality, shaping practices and influencing outcomes (Castro Gómez & Grosfoguel, 2007). In Chapter 1, I discussed how Latin American activism often adopts a "nomadic" vocation, cultivating relationships and networks across diverse sociopolitical, economic, artistic, and symbolic forms of resistance and practice (Svampa, 2010). However, activism challenging hegemonic "development" frequently faces repression, criminalisation (Villareal Villamar & Echart Muñoz, 2018) and violence, as evidenced by reports of murdered activists (Global Witness, 2023). Participants shared that one strategy to navigate these complexities, including funding constraints, criminalisation, and power dynamics, was engaging with "sustainable development activism" (in quotation marks), as defined in this thesis. This engagement reflects a contested and evolving set of Discourses rather than a fixed concept.

In Chapter 1, I observed that "sustainable development activism" is predominantly framed as *activism for, within,* and *beyond* "sustainable development", predominantly through the lens of formal education, where individuals engage with specific Discourses. However, as demonstrated in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, while participants often began their activism "motivated" by a particular Discourse, their engagement evolved over time. Depending on the context, power dynamics, and positionality, participants engaged with multiple Discourses. For example, Sonia (Chapter 5) was aware of her misalignment with hegemonic Discourses, such as those perpetuated by online learning networks but engaged with the strategically, to gain "recognised" qualifications (as noted by Sonia and Valentina in Chapter 7) or to access funding opportunities (as demonstrated by Natalia and Luisa). These global and regional power structures shape activism practices, encouraging initiatives like ambassador campaigns and championship acts while criminalising others, such as protesting against extractivism.

I argue, contributing to academic debates, that "sustainable development activism" emerges not simply as activism *for, within* or *beyond* "sustainable development", but as a framework to sustain activism itself. This activism exists within a complex ecosystem where individuals face significant dangers, including criminalisation and violence, as they protect their communities against neo-extractivism and capitalism. In response to power systems and complexities of activism, participants in this study engaged within "sustainable development activism" by navigating Discourses and identities to advance their practices and pursue transformation. Through *strategic flexibility*, activists challenge hegemonic Discourses and seek for change in an oppressive sociopolitical and ecological context.

As discussed in Chapter 3, Discourses are closely linked to identities. Escobar (2008) argues that identity is not only shaped by Discourses and practices but is also actively produced through them. My second sub-research question investigated: *What identities are present within "sustainable development" activism? How are these identities attributed to activists, and how do activists employ them in their efforts?*

Throughout this thesis, particularly in Chapter 6, I explored how online learning networks ascribe specific attributes to activism. For instance, the Climate Action Coalition equated activism with participating in its Discourse by undertaking training to become a "climate champion" or delivering "climate talks". Similarly, MexiSustain associated activism with engaging in campaigns supporting the SDGs or adopting roles like "ambassador". As Gee

(2014) explains, "Discourses are ways of recognising and being recognised as distinctive kinds of people doing distinctive kinds of things" (p.184).

In Chapters 1 and 2, I discussed the long history of activism in the region, shaped by struggles and resistance to dominant models of "development". Within this context, diverse Discourses of "sustainable development activism" have emerged. These range from activities supporting "development" (e.g., activism for "green" economies), to activism shaped by international agendas (*within* sustainable development, such as the SDGs), and activism rooted in relational ontologies (*beyond* sustainable development). These Discourses, in turn, influence who is recognised as an activist and who is excluded from this recognition. For instance, this thesis has pointed to the criminalisation of certain forms of activism, raising critical questions about access and representation in international "sustainable development activism" spaces. Who is granted legitimacy within these spaces, and why? Conversely, who is labelled as "criminal" or "problematic", and how do prevailing Discourses shape these classifications? These questions underscore the power dynamics that govern activism, highlighting how the Discourses that define "sustainable development" can marginalise grassroots voices while privileging institutional actors and mainstream Discourses.

As mentioned in Chapter 3, conveying meaning to others, and even to ourselves, require us to communicate who we are and what we are doing (Gee, 2014). This process draws upon historical, institutional, and cultural materials shaped by power structures, social conditions, and cultural projects (Busso et al., 2013). In Chapter 6, I explored how activists articulate their identities, often expressing ambivalence about adopting the activist label.

As noted in Chapter 4, some participants interrogated me about my research and background before deciding whether to identify as activist themselves. Participants described how they navigated "accepted" identities within their communities of practice, often strategically adapting their self-representation based on context. For example, Valentina shared her experience of being known as a "green girl" in her radio community. She also adopted identities such as "climate champion" or "ambassador" to access certain spaces and perceived benefits, much like Gloria did in her art contest. Similarly, Pablo identified as "sustainability expert" when employing MexiSustain's dominant Discourse.

These identities are tied to power structures that legitimise certain Discourses while marginalising or overshadowing others. The strategic adoption of such identities illustrates

the complex interplay between power, recognition, and agency within activist spaces, highlighting how participants navigate institutional and cultural dynamics to advance their causes while negotiating their sense of self.

For instance, Valentina's "green girl" identity was not recognised as "professional" within higher education institutions, and she lacked the authority to give talks that someone with a more "formal" identity might possess. Instead, she strategically adopted identities and specific Discourses, such as being a "climate champion" and an alumni of the institution, to gain recognition and credibility. As Mills (2003) argues, not everyone has equal access to making statements or having their statements taken seriously. This was evident in the cases of Valentina, who carefully selected different identities within her communities of practice, such as "green girl" within the orbital community and "climate champion" within higher education, and Juliana, who sought to avoid being perceived as "crazy" for her activism by shifting her practices to online environments, away from the main plaza. Some identities and statements are more "authorised" than others, often aligned with those in positions of power or associated with established institutions.

As previously mentioned, Escobar (2008) suggests that identity is not only influenced by Discourses and practices but is actively shaped through them. These Discourses are deeply historical and embedded within power structures, suggesting that identities are not fixed or innate. Rather, they are continuously constructed and reconstructed through interactions within specific Discursive frameworks, such as those surrounding "sustainable development activism". In Chapter 3, I discussed how Fontana (2023) frames identity as both a strategic tool and a social construct. Within the context of "sustainable development activism", identities like "climate champion" and "ambassador", introduced by online learning networks, carry specific powers within their Discourses. These Discourses influence who is acknowledged as a "sustainable development activist" and under what conditions. This, in turn, impacts not only identity but also which knowledge and practices are legitimised within these spaces (see section 8.2).

Participants strategically adopted various Discourses and identities to respond to the demands and expectations set by a dominant minority, often marginalising some of their own Discourses and identities in the process. Contemporary social movements and activism are marked by fragmented and pluralistic identities, which intersect with transnational, transregional, and global identities, reflecting their hybridity (Fontana, 2023). As such,

activists choose identities not only based on rational decisions but also as agents navigating contexts where certain identities are foregrounded while others are downplayed.

Identity formation takes place on multiple levels, ranging from labels in policy documents to everyday interactions. Labels, play a crucial role in shaping identity, emerging from a sense of connection or similarity with certain groups while differentiating from those outside the group (Burke, 2020). For example, being a "climate champion" or an "ambassador" within online learning networks and connected communities enabled participants to engage with formal education institutions and international agencies. These labels were driven by a blend of motives, such as accessing funding opportunities, expectations, like becoming a "professional" in sustainability, as Pablo shared, and knowledge, such as understanding "how things were done" (Camp & Flores, 2024).

"Sustainable development activism" is a form of activism that interacts with the complexities surrounding the "sustainable development" Discourses. Within this framework, multiple identities and Discourses intersect, with activists operating within dominant structures to sustain their activism in a global context where the "sustainable development" Discourse is both influential and restrictive. This research contributes to the existing literature by highlighting how Discourses shape activist identities, an often-overlooked aspect. In this context, activism assumes various identities, though some are more powerful than others. These identities are shaped by the "sustainable development" framework to advance specific hegemonic interests, such as the perpetuation of development. The next section explores the *strategic flexibility* activists employ as they navigate and engage with their activism in this complex environment.

8.1.1 Strategic Flexibility to Navigate "Sustainable Development Activism", a Conceptual Contribution to Research

This study has revealed how hegemonic Discourses of "sustainable development" permeate the contexts in which activists operate. From using the SDGs to secure a space at a public fair, as seen in Gloria's example, to accessing funding centred on the "climate crisis", as illustrated by Natalia, these Discourses exert significant control over both activists' actions and the identities they adopt. However, in contrast to the perspectives of scholars like Foucault (1979; 1980) and Escobar (1995; 2014), who argue that Discourse, knowledge, and power

operate as pervasive forces controlling what we do, think and become (as discussed in Chapter 3), participants in this study demonstrated what I term *strategic flexibility*. This concept describes a form of resistance where activists engage with diverse Discourses and identities to harness power in alternative ways, thereby generating new effects. Robinson-Pant (2001) highlights how understanding development as Discourse enables researchers to analyse how individuals navigate these dynamics and adopt various strategies. In this study, *strategic flexibility* emerges as a prominent strategy, allowing participants to engage with and resist dominant frameworks while fostering diverse activism practices.

In Chapter 3, I discussed how scholars such as Mills (2003) and Esteva et al. (2013) argue that Discourse functions as both a tool and effect of power but can also serve as a site of resistance. Similarly, in Chapter 2, I noted how scholars such as Svampa (2010), and Villareal Villamar and Echart Muñoz (2019) conceptualise Latin American activism as a "laboratory" of Discourses, foregrounding ecological concerns, resistance, and alternatives to dominant "development" paradigms. The participants in this study exemplified this dynamic, demonstrating how *strategic flexibility* enabled them to shift between and challenge Discourses. Chapters 5, 6, and 7 explored the diverse Discourses and identities participants navigated through their activism practices, showing how online learning networks (re)shaped these (see section 8.2), and highlighted the *strategic flexibility* involved.

For example, Natalia approached her women's community project using a "climate crisis" and solutions-oriented Discourse coupled with a "climate champion identity" aligned with the Climate Action Coalition. In contrast, she adopted a community-oriented Discourse and identity when collaborating with the women of Zapotitlán. Similarly, Luisa utilised a "taking care of the environment" Discourse and identity linked to a shoe company and the online learning network to access funding for her work at the water dam but shifted to a community-focused Discourse and identity when engaging with her neighbours. McHoul and Grace (1995) argue that while Discourse can be a mechanism of constraint, it also enables writing, speaking, and thinking within specific historical limits. This research highlights how Discourses and identities can both constrain and provide space for agency and resistance.

As discussed in Chapters 1, 2, and the empirical Chapters 5, 6, and 7, "sustainable development activism" is heavily shaped by hegemonic power structures, such as the interests of a Global Minority that seek to suppress Discourses and identities not aligned with their economic development agenda. However, as Ziai (2016), Oksala (2015), and Fraser (1989)

argue, Discourse is a site of struggle, where activists exercise agency by engaging with and resisting various "sustainable development activism" Discourses. For instance, as described in Chapter 5, Gloria shared how a "taking care of the environment" Discourse motivated her activism. However, as noted earlier, this perception may have been influenced by my positionality and association with the online learning networks that perpetuate this Discourse. In informal conversations, Gloria also expressed her awareness of the harmful effects of neoextractivism and multinational corporations in Tlaxcala on her family, revealing a deeper motivation for her activism.

Despite the powerful forces driving activists to adopt specific "sustainable development activism" Discourses, such as those promoted by online learning networks or required by international institutions and funding bodies, activists engage in what Rangel Cruz (2009) describes as "small revolutions". These involve redirecting power to create new effects rather than eliminating it entirely. For instance, Sonia acknowledged that the Climate Action Coalition's Discourse was heavily rooted in "Northern" epistemologies. Instead of passively accepting this framework, she used *strategic flexibility* to engage with it, gaining access to a valued identity and understanding within her professional community. Similarly, Jorge shared how he adapted MexiSustain's Discourse to align it with his indigenous-rural context.

Through *strategic flexibility*, activists contest power dynamics and create space for alternative perspectives. Gloria, for example, used an SDG Discourse to secure dialogue with the local government and obtain a public event space for her art contest. Although she displayed SDG-related imagery to meet the administration's requirements, once she engaged with attendees and participants, the SDG Discourse became secondary. Similarly, as detailed in Chapters 5 and 7, participants like Natalia, Valentina, and Luisa strategically navigated "sustainable development" Discourses to achieve specific goals, such as securing funding or gaining access to advocacy platforms. By adapting their Discursive practices, activists operate within constrained frameworks while subtly resisting and reframing them.

Moreover, while the studied online learning networks often perpetuated dominant Discourses, participants utilised *strategic flexibility* to redirect power and produce new effects. For instance, Veronica and I modified action campaign guides to accommodate diverse Discourses, and participants engaged in network activities while challenging and transforming Discourses in practice. Rosa, for example, invited a trans women NGO to share their

experiences and critique hegemonic gender equality Discourses during the MexiSustain Action Festival.

As discussed in Chapter 3, a growing body of literature examines the relationship between activism and Discourses. Scholars like Svampa (2010) describe activism as a "laboratory of Discourses", while Liminga and Lindgren (2024) and Laclau and Mouffe (1985) explore Discursive articulation within activism. Shaw (2012; 2016) focuses on how activists negotiate counter-hegemonic Discourses. This study contributes to these debates by highlighting how *strategic flexibility* enables activists to critically engage with multiple Discourses, challenge power structures, and redefine both Discourses and identities.

While the use of *strategic flexibility* illustrates how participants navigate the complex landscape of "sustainable development activism" in the region, it also raises questions about why such flexibility is necessary in the first place. This underscores deeper concerns about the power dynamics at play, including the criminalisation of activists who operate outside the frameworks defined by mainstream institutions. Examining these power relations highlights the broader challenges face by activists as they resist dominant Discourses and strive to prioritise sustaining life over sustaining "development".

8.2 Online Learning Networks (Re)Shaping "Sustainable Development Activism"

Online learning networks are a central focus of this research study. As discussed in Chapters 1 and 2, digital activism has significantly shaped contemporary activism practices. However, much of the existing scholarship has predominantly emphasised the fragmentation of activism, focusing on isolated platforms and often overlooking the historical roots of movements. This has contributed to uncritical perspectives on the role of digital platforms. In contrast, this study explores how online learning networks emerge in diverse contexts, navigating various power structures and processes of institutionalisation (see Chapters 2 and 4).

For instance, MexiSustain originated as a student-led initiative and evolved during the COVID-19 pandemic into a social enterprise aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It then moved to offer services to private, non-governmental, and governmental

organisations. Conversely, the Climate Action Coalition was established as a global initiative, backed and maintained by a politically and economically influential figure from the Global Minority. These contrasting origins and trajectories underscore the importance of examining the power dynamics embedded in the networks' Discourses and identities. This analysis addresses the third sub-research question: w*hat roles do online learning networks play in shaping the utilisation of Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism"?*

As noted in Chapter 2, scholars like Castells and Catterall (2001) argue that the digital age is not merely a technological phenomenon but a transformative social process, deeply intertwined with social, economic, cultural, and political dimensions. This perspective provides a critical lens for understanding the role of online learning networks in activism. For instance, the Climate Reality Project was closely linked to governmental and techno-scientific institutions, framing the "climate crisis" as a problem solvable through the deployment of advanced technologies and specialised expertise. Similarly, MexiSustain operated within the international development ecosystem, treating the SDGs as a universal framework for achieving a "better world". These Discourses, often tie to specific institutions or power structures, shape how individuals think and act within these networks (Foucault, 1991).

As explored in Chapters 5, 6, and 7, online learning networks also defined who could be considered an activist and the conditions under which this identity was recognised. For example, the Climate Action Coalition required individuals to complete its training or utilise its resources to "tackle the climate crisis" or earn the title of "climate champion". Similarly, MexiSustain established detailed criteria for joining its network and becoming an "ambassador", including adherence to specific guidelines for action campaigns aligned with its Discourse. These processes demonstrate how online learning networks shape activist identities by delineating criteria for participation and legitimisation.

Participation in these networks often involves structured learning processes integral to membership. Whether through climate training to become a "climate champion" or seminars hosted by MexiSustain, participants engaged with these networks as communities of practice. As Groff (2023) explains, communities of practice are formed when individuals engage in shared activities, exchange knowledge, and co-create meanings and identities (Land & Jonassen, 2012).

In previous sections and empirical chapters, I illustrated how participants used *strategic flexibility* to navigate the complexities of "sustainable development activism". They engaged with diverse Discourses and identities depending on their sociopolitical contexts. For some participants, such as Sonia, Valentina, and Monica, joining online learning networks was a way to learn and understand "how things were done". This engagement facilitated their development of strategies, skills, and knowledge to navigate the challenges of "sustainable development activism". Wenger's (1998) concepts of participation and reification provide a framework for analysing how activists negotiate meaning, balancing their involvement in online learning networks with their broader activism practices.

For example, Juan Carlos shared in Chapter 7 how he engaged with the Climate Action Coalition, attended their seminars, but carefully considered when and where to seek support for his own initiatives. This was because the Discourse promoted by the network and its identity were linked to specific interests, knowledges, and powers, as discussed in previous sections. Similarly, Sonia acknowledged that although the network's Discourse was rooted in the Global North, her involvement allowed her to gain professional recognition within her community. Other participants, such as Gloria, Natalia, Valentina, and Luisa, engaged critically with the learning processes within these networks, using their Discourses with *strategic flexibility* to further their activism.

Participants utilised these networks not uncritically but strategically, considering power dynamics and hierarchies of knowledge (Wenger, 1998). For instance, Rosa invited individuals who were not perceived as "sustainable development professionals" to participate in MexiSustain's Action Festival seminars. Luisa used the network's resources to recruit volunteers for her reforestation efforts, while Valentina negotiated both the network's identity and Discourses to engage with diverse communities and facilitate activities aimed at "taking care of nature". In Section 7.2.1, Jorge described how he sought to "ground" the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in his indigenous and rural context, critically engaging with concepts such as "poverty" and "decent housing".

These examples illustrate how activists negotiate meanings and identities in their social practices through both non-formal and informal learning processes. As highlighted in Chapter 3, communities of practice shape what is deemed competent within a given learning history. Online learning networks, therefore, play a role in defining who is acknowledged as a "sustainable development activist" and what that entails.

In Chapters 5, 6, and 7, I examined how participants engaged with diverse Discourses and identities that often differed from those promoted by online learning networks. However, the networks' Discourses still exerted significant influence on participants' activism. For instance, Valentina (Section 7.1) explained how she had to conduct a set number of "championship acts" to maintain her membership in the Climate Action Coalition, as well as engage in campaigns and action guides developed by MexiSustain. These activities reflect Discourses embedded in specific power dynamics and interests, as discussed in Chapter 5.

As emphasised in Chapter 3, knowledge and power are deeply interconnected: power defines what counts as knowledge and legitimises the institutions and individuals shaping this knowledge (Farnsworth et al., 2016). Within "sustainable development activism", online learning networks act as nodes of power, shaping and promoting knowledge systems such as the SDGs and techno-scientific approaches to addressing the "climate crisis".

Although Foucault (1989) did not explicitly address resistance, this study reveals how activists use online learning networks as communities of practice to challenge and resist hegemonic Discourses. These Discourses serve both as constraints and as platforms for resistance (Mills, 2003; Esteva et al., 2013). The decision to join and remain within these networks, alongside the utilisation of diverse Discourses and identities, reflect activists' motivations to adapt to pressing needs, such as job market demands, access to funding, or navigating the global repression and criminalisation of certain forms of activism.

Online learning networks function as institutions fostering specific Discourses and identities linked to established powers. At the same time, they provide spaces for activists to challenge and negotiate their engagement with these elements, responding to the demands of funding institutions, the criminalisation of activism, and political constraints.

The studied networks offered participants a community of learning where they can explore the diverse Discourses and identities within "sustainable development activism". As Millora (2020) noted, communities of practice enable learning through both non-formal training programmes and informal everyday practices. While online learning networks often reinforced hegemonic Discourses, participants strategically employed these spaces to challenge and reinterpret them, integrating diverse perspectives into their activism.

This study contributes to the literature by conceptualising online learning networks through communities of practice where Discourses, power dynamics, and knowledges

intersect within complex socio-political contexts. By highlighting how technologies and social contexts are mutually constitutive, these findings emphasise the importance of critically engaging with the power structures embedded in online learning networks. Ultimately, this research underscores their dual potential as sites for both conformity and resistance within "sustainable development activism".

8.3 Reflecting on the Academic, Policy, and Practice Implications of my Research

This section reflects on the academic, policy, and practical implications derived from my research study. The discussion is divided into three main areas. First, I examine the implications for academic debates on "sustainable development activism", providing insights into how my research findings address existing gaps in the literature. Second, I consider the implications for education policy, with a particular focus on funding and its relationship to activism. Finally, I explore the practical implications of "sustainable development activism".

8.3.1 Implications for Academic Debates on "Sustainable Development Activism"

This section explores the contributions of this research to academic debates surrounding "sustainable development activism". As argued in previous sections, this study reframes "sustainable development activism" not merely as activism *for, within,* or *beyond* "sustainable development", but as a framework that seeks to sustain activism itself within a complex and often hostile ecosystem. Within this framework, individuals contend with external pressures such as the institutionalisation of activism, including funding requirements, professionalisation, and training demands, alongside the physical and psychological threats posed by criminalisation and violence. These realities, particularly the "dirty stuff" of neoextractivism and capitalism, underscore the precarious and multifaceted nature of activism today.

Although this thesis focuses on online learning, the educational processes supporting "sustainable development activism" extend far beyond digital spaces. Activists engage in a

continuum of learning experiences, ranging from formal training sessions, such as climate-focused certifications, to informal dialogues with community members and fellow activists. These diverse interactions expose activists to a multiplicity of Discourses and identities shaped by intricate power dynamics, enabling them to navigate the socio-ecological systems entwined with their activism.

By applying theoretical frameworks of Discourse, knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980, Escobar, 1995), and communities of practice (Wenger, 1998, 2010), this research reveals the dual role of education: fostering certain Discourses and identities while constraining others. As Wenger (1998, 2010) asserts, learning is inherently social and participatory, involving negotiation of meaning and collaboration. However, as illustrated through Laura's experience in Chapter 5, online learning networks such as MexiSustain operate within contexts laden with power asymmetries. These dynamics often privilege certain individuals and Discourses, creating unequal learning opportunities.

A critical question arises: Do these educational spaces truly promote equitable participation, or do they reinforce existing hierarchies? Activists in this study frequently found themselves adapting to the expectations of those in leadership positions, rather than engaging in genuine, reciprocal learning processes. This disproportionate demand for flexibility on the part of activists underscores the limitations of current educational practices in fostering equity within these networks.

While Lave and Wenger (1991) conceptualise communities of practice (CoPs) as dynamic and inclusive spaces for participation and reification, the findings of this thesis suggest that these ideals are not always realised. Power differentials within CoPs often constrain the negotiability of knowledge and learning. For instance, dominant Discourses, such as those aligned with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) or technological framings of the climate crisis, can marginalise alternative perspectives. This perpetuates a cycle in which certain voices and knowledge systems are elevated, while grassroots or indigenous perspectives are marginalised.

This thesis underscores the critical role of Adult Learning and Education (ALE) in addressing global and local challenges. While Discourses such the SDGs could provide a valuable blueprint for global action, their reliance on universalised Discourses risks homogenising knowledge and imposing top-down approaches. By prioritising critical

reflection on these embedded Discourses, ALE has the potential to foster genuine, grassroots-driven social transformation. This requires creating spaces where diverse knowledges and perspectives are valued, and where local experiences are not subsumed by global priorities.

Wenger's (2010) concept of learning as "becoming" further emphasises the interplay between learning, identity, and social participation. However, as seen in Chapter 6, activists often feel compelled to suppress aspects of their identities to conform to dominant Discourses within CoPs. For example, cultural and ideological elements of their identities may be excluded in favour of the norms promoted by these spaces. Such exclusions undermine the transformative potential of social learning by stifling diversity and creativity.

To address these challenges, ALE must prioritise inclusivity and diversity, recognising the value of multiple identities and perspectives. By fostering environments where activists can fully integrate their unique identities into their learning processes, ALE can create more equitable and transformative educational experiences.

This study demonstrates that "sustainable development activism" is shaped by a complex interplay of Discourses within knowledge, power, and identity. The concept of *strategic flexibility*, combined with critical engagement in educational processes, offers a pathway for activists to navigate these challenges. However, for ALE to fulfil its transformative potential, it must critically reflect on its own power structures and actively support the inclusion of marginalised voices and Discourses. Only then can it contribute to a more just and equitable form of "sustainable development activism", one that genuinely empowers activists to effect change in their communities and beyond.

Reflecting on the methodology and its implications in doing research within activisms

Adopting an activist ethnographic approach for this study has proven to be highly pertinent in deepening the understanding and informing the practices of "sustainable development activism". As discussed in Chapter 1 and reiterated in Chapter 4, this methodology enabled me to transcend the hegemonic practices entrenched in knowledge production, where a stark separation between the knower and the known is often preserved due to its colonial underpinnings (Deschner and Dorion, 2020). By situating myself within the phenomenon of activism, a domain in which I am embedded, this approach fostered a more immersive and multidimensional understanding. It required not just observing or analysing

activism but fully participating in its practices and Discourses from multiple perspectives. Although I had been an activist for years prior to commencing this research, the methodological rigour and critical reflexivity required for this study revealed numerous dimensions of activism I had previously overlooked. Aspects of activism that were obscured by the immediacy of action became clearer when viewed through the lens of researcher positionality. Conversely, certain decisions and actions during this process were informed by my activist experience, necessitating the blending of these two roles. This dual positioning shaped the trajectory of this study, culminating in the insights presented in this thesis.

This methodological approach diverges significantly from that of a mere observer or even a traditional participant-observer. It demands active, critical engagement from a uniquely situated position, balancing the dual responsibilities of researcher and activist. As discussed in Chapter 4, this required numerous decisions that were not only methodological but also ethical and political, as my practices and involvement in "sustainable development activism" evolved throughout the study. One of the key challenges of this approach was grappling with the fluid and contested nature of activist identity. Throughout the research process, I frequently questioned whether I truly "qualified" as an activist or whether I was inadvertently appropriating an identity I had no right to claim within the complex and intersectional terrain of activism. Reflecting on the power dynamics surfaced by this research, I asked whether my role as an academic might unintentionally replicate the exclusionary processes of institutions, such as online learning networks, that implicitly shape who can or cannot identify as an activist.

Through the process of writing this thesis and critically reflecting on what it means to be an activist, it became clear that I was not merely producing knowledge about "them", the activists. Instead, I was engaging in a process of critical self-interrogation, examining our shared political engagements and the interrelationships between activism and academia (Deschner and Dorion, 2020). In this sense, I came to understand my work as performing a form of activism from within the academic setting, challenging the traditional boundaries of research and action. Conducting activist ethnography requires engaging with diverse types of knowledge, contextual, corporeal, contradictory, and collective. This study exemplified this multiplicity, as each emerging finding was interrogated and contested through differing perspectives and lenses. These included not only my own positionality as an activist-ethnographer but also the insights and challenges posed by participants, institutional contexts, and broader academic frameworks.

Throughout the research process, I continuously asked critical questions about the political context in which my observations unfolded. How did my embodied position influence what I perceived, what I chose to prioritise, and how I interpreted my findings? How did my own internal conflicts generate multiple and often contradictory interpretations of the same phenomena? Equally important, how did external, conflicting perspectives, whether from online learning networks, participant communities, or the higher education institution in which this research was embedded, shape the co-production and dissemination of knowledge? These reflections underscore that the process of knowledge production is inherently political. Power relations within and across the various contexts I studied influenced not only the findings themselves but also the ways in which they were produced, framed, and contested. This aligns with Foucault's (1980) assertion that power and knowledge are inseparably linked, as the act of producing knowledge is never neutral.

For instance, the online learning networks I examined often operated within entrenched power dynamics that privileged certain Discourses, identities, and forms of knowledge while marginalising others. As a researcher, I was compelled to navigate these dynamics critically, ensuring that the findings presented in this thesis reflected the diverse and often contradictory perspectives of participants while resisting the pressures to conform to institutional norms. This process revealed the necessity of acknowledging and addressing the political dimension of research, particularly in contexts where activism and academia intersect. The methodological reflections derived from this study highlight the transformative potential of activist ethnography, not only for understanding and informing "sustainable development activism" but also for challenging the power structures and normative frameworks of academia itself. By situating research within activism, this approach enables the co-production of knowledge that is not only analytically robust but also rooted in principles of equity, social justice, and transformative change.

8.3.2 Policy Implications for "Sustainable Development Activism"

This research highlights the profound influence of funding institutions, including international agencies, online learning networks, local municipalities, and educational institutions on the Discourses and identities underpinning "sustainable development activism". These institutions play a pivotal role in shaping activism by promoting specific

Discourses and practices while marginalising others. The findings raise significant policy implications for creating more inclusive, equitable, and transformative approaches to "sustainable development".

The study demonstrates that sustainable development Discourses are regulated by intricate systems of power, as outlined by Mills (2003), where certain ideas are amplified while others are excluded. This is achieved through institutional mechanisms, including funding requirements, calls for proposals, and follow-up processes. These systems often reinforce dominant Discourses, such as those tied to the SDGs, by incentivising compliance and alignment with their frameworks. For instance, participants like Natalia and Gloria had to adapt their practices and identities to fit the expectations of funding institutions, often at the expense of their grassroots priorities. Natalia's community, for example, redirected their efforts towards producing video letters to secure funding, even though the community's preferred initiatives were more locally relevant and impactful.

Drawing on Foucault's (1980) understanding of Discourse as being controlled, selected, organised, and redistributed by power structures, this study reveals how funding institutions serve as gatekeepers, determining which voices and Discourses are legitimised within "sustainable development activism". This has far-reaching implications for policy, particularly in addressing the systemic marginalisation of grassroots and community-led activism.

The findings call for funding institutions, especially international agencies, to adopt flexible and inclusive funding criteria that accommodate diverse activist practices and Discourses. Rigid criteria tied to hegemonic frameworks like the SDGs often exclude grassroots initiatives that challenge mainstream narratives but offer transformative potential. Policies should prioritise locally defined needs and approaches, allowing communities to propose their own metrics of success and strategies for action.

It is also crucial for international agencies to decolonise their funding frameworks by recognising and addressing the power imbalances embedded in global development agendas. This involves shifting from top-down approaches that prioritise universal solutions to context-specific strategies that empower local communities. Policies must ensure that funding supports projects rooted in indigenous knowledge systems, community priorities, and non-Western perspectives on "sustainable development".

To reduce the imposition of external Discourses, funding institutions should integrate genuine participatory decision-making processes that include representatives from grassroots movements and community organisations. These representatives should have an active role in shaping funding priorities, criteria, and evaluation mechanisms, ensuring that the distribution of resources aligns with the realities and aspirations of those on the ground. Policies must acknowledge the diversity of activism by valuing a plurality of Discourses and identities, rather than imposing uniform standards of "acceptable" activism. International agencies and funding bodies should expand their recognition of activism beyond roles such as "ambassadors" or "climate champions" to include informal and community-based initiatives. This would involve providing financial and logistical support for activities that challenge mainstream narratives and promote alternative visions of sustainable development.

Moreover, funding institutions must be held accountable for the Discourses they promote and the power dynamics they reinforce. This requires transparent reporting mechanisms that allow activists and communities to provide feedback on the impact of funding criteria and processes. Independent evaluations should assess whether funded initiatives genuinely support grassroots priorities and foster transformative change.

Beyond financial support, funding institutions should invest in capacity-building programmes that strengthen the autonomy and resilience of grassroots movements. These programmes should focus on developing skills in areas such as advocacy, resource mobilisation, and critical analysis of development Discourses. This would enable activists to engage with funding institutions on more equitable terms and challenge the implicit biases embedded in funding practices.

Finally, international agencies and policymakers must advocate for legal and institutional protections for activists facing criminalisation or repression. Funding institutions should condition their support on recipient governments' adherence to human rights standards, ensuring that activists are not penalised for dissent or critical engagement with development Discourses.

International agencies, as some of the most influential actors in "sustainable development", have a responsibility to lead by example in implementing these policy recommendations. They must recognise their role in perpetuating hegemonic Discourses and take deliberate steps to dismantle these dynamics. This includes revising their funding

frameworks to centre the voices of marginalised communities and grassroots movements, fostering partnerships based on mutual respect, and committing to a transformative vision of sustainable development that prioritises socioecological justice over performative compliance with global agendas.

By embracing these policy shifts, funding institutions can move beyond their role as gatekeepers of "sustainable development activism" and instead become enablers of genuine, community-driven change. This transformation is essential for ensuring that activism is not constrained by institutional expectations but is instead empowered to address the systemic inequalities at the heart of the development crisis.

8.3.3 Implications for "Sustainable Development" Activists

This research engages with the multifaceted complexities embedded within "sustainable development activism". It uncovers how this form of activism often operates within a tension between perpetuating mainstream narratives of sustainable development and navigating the harsh realities of activism's criminalisation. In some cases, as observed in certain online learning networks (e.g. climate talks or "solution-focused" monthly seminars), activism appears to be framed as an individualised responsibility. Activists are expected to generate "solutions" to sustainable development "problems" without critically addressing the systemic roots of the development crisis itself. This focus on solutions risks depoliticising activism by ignoring the structural inequalities and power imbalances that underpin global socio-ecological challenges.

Conversely, as exemplified by Juan Carlos, activism is also shaped by the urgent need to cope with the criminalisation of dissent. This highlights the precarious nature of activism in contexts where standing against powerful interests often entails significant risks, including violence and repression. Within this precarious and dynamic landscape, participants in this study demonstrated *strategic flexibility*. They navigated diverse communities of practice, adapting Discourses and identities to advance their causes. However, this adaptability raises critical questions about the epistemological foundations of activism. It is essential for activists to interrogate the origins of the knowledge they engage with, critically examine the conditions under which this knowledge is produced and reflect on whose interests it serves. Furthermore, activists must consider their own roles in either challenging, disrupting, or perpetuating

existing power structures. As Alvarez insightfully noted in Crush (1995), "knowledge is power", yet power also determines what is recognised as knowledge and what is dismissed.

Being an activist is not merely an individual identity; it is shaped and defined by the Discourses and power dynamics activists engage with. For instance, within the Climate Action Coalition, being an activist entailed adopting a specific Discourse rooted in scientific and technological "solutions" to climate change, enacted through structured practices such as climate talks. Similarly, for MexiSustain, activism was framed by adherence to the mainstream Discourse of sustainable development as embodied in the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), alongside fulfilling a demanding set of criteria. These frameworks impose implicit expectations on activists, as evidenced by Luisa's reflections on being an "imperfect activist". This illustrates how contemporary activism increasingly demands a wide range of qualities and conformity to specific standards. In response, reclaiming activist identities "on our own terms", as Natalia articulated, becomes vital. This reclamation acknowledges the diversity of communities of practice and the power dynamics they are embedded within.

Throughout this research, I have used the term "sustainable development activism" intentionally to highlight the *strategic flexibility* that activists employ in engaging with diverse contexts and Discourses. However, this should not be misinterpreted as an uncritical acceptance of hegemonic or mainstream Discourses surrounding sustainable development. Instead, this research demonstrates that while activists cannot entirely escape the influence of these dominant Discourses, they retain the agency to critically engage with and reinterpret them. Contrary to Foucault's perspective on the inescapability of pervasive power, this research underscores the capacity of activists to challenge, disrupt, and give alternative meanings to these Discourses.

Practically, this research suggests several implications for activism. First, activists and organisations should prioritise reflexivity in their practices, questioning how power dynamics influence the knowledge and Discourses they adopt. Training programmes, workshops, and online learning platforms must create spaces for critical dialogue, where activists can reflect on and challenge the normative assumptions underpinning their strategies and actions. Second, organisations should strive to decentre hegemonic frameworks like the SDGs by fostering greater inclusivity of local, community-driven knowledge systems. Supporting grassroots initiatives that challenge globalised, top-down solutions can help ensure that

diverse perspectives and lived experiences are prioritised in shaping sustainable development strategies.

Finally, this research advocates for the creation of activist spaces where diverse identities, experiences, and Discourses are not only recognised but actively valued. These spaces should enable activists to reclaim their identities and strategies on their own terms, resisting pressures to conform to external expectations or dominant Discourses. By fostering critical engagement with the structures that shape activism, these spaces can serve as platforms for genuine transformation, both within activist communities and in their broader socio-political contexts. This dual focus on critique and agency highlights the transformative potential of activism, even within systems that often seem impermeable to change.

8.3.4 Implications for Learning and Adult Education Studies

This study positions online learning networks and activism as significant, though often contested sites of adult education. These are no neutral spaces, they are embedded in broader structures of power, where learning takes place through identity negotiation, resistance, and *strategic flexibility*. Although this research focuses specifically on the educational dynamics within *sustainable development activism*, its insights carry broader implications for the field of learning and education studies.

A central insight emerging from this research is that learning is inherently political. Educational spaces, whether online, offline, formal, or informal, are shaped by power relations and Discourses that influence what is taught, how it is taught, why it is taught, and who is positioned as the "knower" versus the "learner". The often-presumed binary between online and face-to-face learning is misleading; these modes are deeply interwoven and co-constitutive, forming a continuum of educational practices. As discussed in Chapter 1 and supported by Aguilar Forero and Cifuentes Álvarez (2019), this research supports calls to move beyond rigid distinctions between formal/informal, online/offline, and institutional/grassroots education. Instead, it advocates for a more integrated and situated understanding of learning within activism.

Through the experiences of activists and online learning networks, this research demonstrates how power and Discourse influence access, recognition, and legitimacy in

education, not in a pervasive or deterministic way, but as significant forces that shape learning and education. Activists engaged in a variety of educational spaces and learning processes, many of which privileged dominant Discourses aligned with professionalisation, certification, and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), or "the science behind the climate crisis" while sidelining local knowledge systems and situated activist knowledges. For instance, Valentina's access to speak at universities as a "climate champion" was validated, whereas her work as "green girl" within her own community was not afforded the same legitimacy.

Drawing on Adler and Bernstein (2004) and Sondarjee (2024), this research highlights how epistemic power relations shape the production, validation, and circulation of knowledge. These dynamics often determine what is accepted as "real" or "legitimate" education, reinforcing hierarchies of expertise. Online learning platforms that promoted SDG-aligned campaigns as valuable learning opportunities frequently overlooked the deep, contextualised knowledge cultivated by activists through lived, community-based struggles.

Yet, education is also a site of possibility. Learning functions both as a tool for reinforcing hegemonic knowledge and to disrupt it, as shown by the strategic flexibility of the activists in this study. Despite, and sometimes in direct resistance to, dominant Discourses, activists found ways to create new meanings, negotiate identities, and adapt strategically to external demands, from funding structures and professional expectations to criminalisation and labour market pressures. Disruption can and does occur within institutionalised educational spaces, such as the online learning networks, particularly when learners are given the freedom to bring their own experiences and epistemologies into the learning process.

This points to a critical imperative within learning and education studies: to support educational approaches that not only recognise but actively valorise the knowledge individuals and local communities carry with them. It also requires acknowledging the interconnectedness of the diverse spaces in which learning occurs, whether online, offline, in local communities, regional gatherings, or formal institutions. Education must confront the deep questions about what counts as knowledge and whose perspectives are valued.

Ultimately, this research advocates for educational spaces that are open to multiple ways of knowing and being. Rather than reinforcing existing power hierarchies, education should promote critical reflection, dialogue, and epistemic, ontological, and socioecological

justice. By promoting inclusive, transformative educational practices, learning can become a catalyst for social change rather than a mechanism of conformity.

8.4 Future Avenues for Research

This research has made a significant contribution to the field of sustainable development activism and activist learning, particularly through its exploration of Discourses and identities within activist communities and online learning networks. By expanding the literature on these digital networks and their role in shaping activists' trajectories, the study offers a deeper understanding of how sustainable development activism is shaped by diverse power structures, social dynamics, and broader cultural and political processes. Nevertheless, several important areas for further investigation have emerged, presenting opportunities to deepen and refine knowledge in this field.

First, while this research provided valuable insights into online learning networks as digital communities of practice, future studies could more thoroughly examine the technological dimensions of these spaces. Although this study touches on social media, algorithms, and digital ecologies, a focused inquiry into how these technological infrastructures influence activism is needed. For example: How do algorithms and platform policies shape activist Discourses and identities? How do activists navigate challenges such as digital surveillance, data privacy concerns, and the commercialisation of online platforms? These questions are crucial for unpacking the power relations embedded in digital activism, particularly in the context of sustainable development. A closer look at the technological infrastructures underpinning these networks could reveal the ways in which digital environments simultaneously enable and constrain activist action.

Another key avenue for further research is the role of gender dynamics in sustainable development activism. This study found that many grassroots activists are women, raising questions about how gender shapes engagement, legitimacy, and leadership in activist movements. Future work should investigate how gendered identities are constructed within activist spaces and how they intersect with other forms of oppression and marginalisation, such as race and indigeneity. How do women navigate activist arenas? How do their perspectives shape Discourses of sustainability and justice? Examining these dynamics could offer critical insight into the unique challenges and contributions of women within these

movements and help ensure their experiences are better represented in both scholarship and practice.

Additionally, more research is needed to understand how race and indigeneity shape activist trajectories and learning. An intersectional approach that explores the co-construction of race, gender, and activist identities would enrich our understanding of activism's complexity, especially in transnational and postcolonial contexts.

Finally, while this study drew on theoretical frameworks grounded in Discourse, power/knowledge relations, and communities of practice, which proved useful in analysing how online learning networks are (re)shaping "sustainable development activism", I also recognise the limitations of these lenses.

These frameworks helped me engage with complex questions that emerged early in my PhD journey, shaped by my own experience as an activist participating in these online learning networks: Why do activists move between diverse communities, even when those communities do not fully align with their values or purpose? What role does the strategic navigation of different spaces and causes play in online learning networks and grassroots activism? And how do professionalisation and institutionalisation influence activist commitments?

These lenses revealed key tensions within activist learning spaces. For example, they helped illuminate how climate billionaires influence the establishing of online networks that define who qualifies as a "climate champion", what should be learned, how activists should speak, and even how they should act. They enabled an exploration of how power inequities shape practices, identity, recognition, and legitimacy in activist learning, and how dominant Discourses, such as those associated with the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), impact grassroots activism and activists themselves.

However, while these frameworks are effective in highlighting how power circulates within "sustainable development activism", they fall short in accounting for the *strategic flexibility* activists employ or the ways in which meaning and action are co-created within local contexts. For instance, Juliana shared how her time at the SENA awakened her to the injustices around her, an awareness that sparked her activist engagement. Theoretical approaches such as critical and decolonial pedagogies could offer more robust tools for analysing these transformative, situated learning processes or the development of what Freire

calls *conscientização*, a deepening awareness of both of the sociocultural reality that shapes people's lives and their capacity to transform the reality (Freire, 1970; 1994; 2005).

Throughout this work, I have emphasised the importance of educational spaces that are open to multiple ways of knowing and being. Rather than reinforcing dominant power hierarchies, such spaces should promote critical reflection, dialogue, and epistemic, ontological, and socioecological justice. Education, in this sense, should not serve as a mechanism of conformity, but rather as a catalyst for meaningful socioecological transformation.

As discussed in Chapter 1, when examining the intersection of activism and education, the literature increasingly foregrounds pedagogical approaches such as popular education, feminist pedagogies, critical pedagogy, and decolonial frameworks (Fujino et al., 2018; Walsh, 2015; Tarlau, 2023; Mejía Jiménez, 2020). These frameworks are particularly relevant for understanding how activist learning can emerge from, and be shaped by, collective struggle, resistance, and hope. Scholars including Olguín Valencia and Villa Rojas (2021), Themelis and Hsu (2021), Mejía Jiménez (2011), and Ollis (2012) have employed these approaches to interrogate how empowerment and transformation occur within activist spaces.

For example, analysing the learning processes in grassroots movements like Natalia's women's learning community through these lenses could offer critical insight into how knowledge is produced through lived experience, cultural identity, and relational practices. Such an approach could also help illuminate how activists sustain their commitments and create meaning and *strategic flexibility* amid complex and intersecting forms of oppression and marginalisation.

While this research has contributed to a deeper understanding of the intersection between online learning networks and "sustainable development activism", it also highlights important areas for further exploration. Research, including my own, has often foregrounded dominant Discourses and structural power dynamics. While this focus is valuable, it can obscure the everyday, situated, and relational dimensions of activist learning that are equally essential to understanding how activism unfolds across diverse contexts.

Future research should critically engage with the technological, gendered, racial, and Indigenous dimensions of activism within locally and community-grounded contexts. Grappling with these complexities is crucial for developing more comprehensive, inclusive,

and transformative understandings of activist learning within the broader landscape of global sustainability Discourses.

8.5 Conclusion

This thesis explores the complex web of Discourses and identities shaping "sustainable development activism", with a particular focus on how online learning networks influence these dynamics. In addressing the socio-ecological crises that define our time, this research positions activism as both a site of resistance and a domain where power operates to constrain and reconfigure alternative Discourses. The findings reveal that "sustainable development activism" is not a homogeneous field but a dynamic and contested terrain where activists strategically engage with multiple Discourses and identities to navigate the intersecting demands of "sustainable development".

As outlined in Chapters 1 and 2, the study began by questioning the dominant framings of activism as *for, within*, or *beyond* "sustainable development activism", as well as the dominant frameworks of development and digital technologies in activism, which often depoliticise critical issues and uphold hegemonic systems of neo-extractivism and global capitalism. Activism in Latin America, as this thesis demonstrates, engages with these hegemonic structures while simultaneously contesting them. Activists navigate multiple, intersecting Discourses, such as the SDGs, technocratic approaches to the climate crisis, and relational perspectives like *Buen Vivir,* to carve out spaces of resistance and transformation. The concept of *strategic flexibility*, introduced in this study, illuminates how activists tactically adapt to and reframe these Discourses to advance their causes while challenging dominant frameworks. Importantly, this concept also highlights the tension between conforming to institutional demands and maintaining grassroots integrity, which emerged as a recurring theme throughout the research.

The findings, particularly from Chapters 5 to 7, underscore how online learning networks have become key arenas for the dissemination and negotiation of "sustainable development activism". These networks, such as MexiSustain and the Climate Action Coalition, not only facilitate learning and engagement but also act as institutions that respond to specific interests, shaping activist practices and identities. While these platforms often reinforce dominant Discourses, participants demonstrated agency in strategically engaging

with and subverting these frameworks. However, the findings also highlight the risks of these networks perpetuating exclusionary practices by privileging certain identities, such as "climate champions" or "ambassadors", and marginalising grassroots or alternative approaches.

Crucially, this thesis highlights the centrality of identity in "sustainable development activism". Activist identities are not fixed; they are continually shaped and reshaped by the Discourses and power dynamics embedded within communities of practice. Participants shared how they navigated these identities, sometimes adopting roles such as "climate champions" or "ambassadors" to gain legitimacy while remaining critical of the frameworks these roles perpetuate. The findings emphasise that identities are tools for both navigating power structures and resisting them, with activists like Monica demonstrating how professional and personal roles intersect to create hybrid identities that reflect both strategic adaptation and grassroots values.

The implications of these findings are significant for academic debates, policy, and practice. Academically, this thesis extends the literature on activism by incorporating the theoretical frameworks of Discourse, power, and communities of practice to analyse the intersections of activism, learning, and identity. It critiques the tendency to polarise activism as either for or against sustainable development, instead revealing the nuanced ways in which activists navigate these intersections with strategic flexibility. Moreover, this research sheds light on the role of online learning networks as both sites of opportunity and constraint, demonstrating their dual role in empowering activists while also reinforcing hegemonic Discourses.

From a policy perspective, the findings highlight the need for funding institutions, international agencies, and educational platforms to critically engage with the power dynamics embedded in their frameworks. Policies that prioritise rigid criteria tied to global frameworks like the SDGs risk marginalising local knowledges and grassroots perspectives. Instead, these institutions should adopt more inclusive and flexible funding and learning models that centre the voices of marginalised communities and actively support alternative visions of development. With the SDGs and global sustainable development agenda concluding in 2030, the need for pathways that promote justice, inclusivity, and diverse forms of activism is more relevant than ever. For example, participatory decision-making processes and the recognition of diverse activist identities and Discourses could foster more equitable and transformative

forms of engagement. The next agendas for "sustainability" should prioritise the sustainability of life, community, and solidarity rather than serving the interests of a privileged few.

Practically, this research emphasises the need for activists and organisations to critically reflect on the Discourses they engage with and the identities they construct. Activists should continue to employ *strategic flexibility* to navigate institutional demands while creating space for alternative narratives that challenge the dominant paradigms of sustainable development. Additionally, online learning networks must strive to create more inclusive and participatory spaces that value diverse forms of knowledge and practice, ensuring that grassroots voices are not overshadowed by institutional priorities.

In reflecting on the methodological approach, the use of activist ethnography allowed for a deeply situated and reflexive engagement with the field. By positioning myself as both researcher and activist, I was able to interrogate the processes of knowledge production within activism, academia, and online learning networks. This dual positioning not only enriched the data collection process but also offered a critical lens for understanding how power operates within the intersections of these domains.

This thesis concludes by calling for a critical re-evaluation of the Discourses and practices that shape "sustainable development activism". It underscores the need for online learning networks and other institutions to critically engage with their own power dynamics, prioritise inclusivity, and support diverse and grassroots-led approaches to activism. Furthermore, the findings suggest that *strategic flexibility*, while essential for navigating the constraints of dominant systems, should not obscure the broader structural transformations required to address socioecological injustices. By amplifying marginalised voices and fostering spaces for alternative Discourses and identities, activism can become a more powerful force for transformative change.

In sum, this research contributes to the growing body of literature that seeks to understand activism as a dynamic and contested practice deeply embedded in the power structures of our globalised world. It underscores the importance of recognising activism not merely as a reaction to crises but as an active site of knowledge production, identity negotiation, and resistance. By shedding light on the role of online learning networks in (re)shaping "sustainable development activism", this thesis provides a critical foundation for further inquiry into the intersections of activism, education, and power, while offering

actionable insights for academics, policymakers, and practitioners committed to advancing socioecological justice.

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Appendix A

Information sheets were shared with leaders of online learning networks and potential participants, providing concise details about the research project in Spanish, the participants' mother tongue. The sheets outlined what their participation entailed and their rights if they chose to take part in the study. Additionally, they were offered the option to schedule an informal call or send an email to ask any questions and learn more about the project.

Abigail Martinez Renteria
Postgraduate Researcher

Faculty of Social Sciences School of Education and Lifelong Learning

University of East Anglia Norwich Research Park Norwich NR4 7TJ United Kingdom

Email: a.martinez-renteria@uea.ac.uk
Web: www.uea.ac.uk

Exploring the role of online learning networks in the learning and literacy practices of sustainable development activists in Latin America.

INFORMATION SHEET Activists

(1) What is this study about?

You are invited to take part in a research study about the role of online learning networks in the (re)shaping of learning processes and literacy practices of sustainable development activists in Latin America. You have been invited to participate in this study because you are an active member of an online learning network and an activist for sustainable development in Latin America. This Participant Information Sheet tells you about the research study. Knowing what is involved will help you decide if you want to take part in the study. Please read this sheet carefully and ask questions about anything that you don't understand or want to know more about.

Participation in this research study is voluntary. By giving consent to take part in this study you are telling us that you:

- Understand what you have read.

- Agree to take part in the research study as outlined below.

- Agree to the use of your personal information as described.

- You have received a copy of this Participant Information Sheet to keep.

(2) Who is running the study?

The study is being carried out by the following researcher: Abigail Martinez Renteria. This will take place under the supervision of Professor Anna Robinson-Pant (A.Robinson-pant@uea.ac.uk) and Dr Harry Dyer (Harry.T.Dyer@uea.ac.uk).

(3) What will the study involve for me?

You will be asked for your consent to be part of an ethnographic study, which means that I will follow your involvement, interactions, and practices with activism activities and textual and visual resources both within and outside digital learning networks for approximately six to eight months, as well as on any other relevant occasion within the data collection period.

Participant observation will take place in hybrid spaces, including various digital learning network spaces (social networks, learning platforms, among others) and in-person environments. This observation will be conducted by me, a member of the digital learning network, over a period of six months and on any other relevant occasion within the timeframe of the fieldwork. Observations will be recorded in a password-protected folder, which will include notes, relevant images, and other resources.

Some photographs will be taken.

You will have the opportunity to review the information generated about you before it is included in the publication of the doctoral thesis.

(4) How much of my time will the study take?

You will commit to participating in an ethnographic study. I will investigate your engagement, practices, and interactions within the online learning network's spaces and resources for around six months and on any relevant occasion outside this time range during the data collection process. Likewise, I might join a face-to-face event of your activist movement. To complement the data gathered, you will be asked to hold a semi-structured interview of around 30 to 90 minutes.

(5) Do I have to be in the study? Can I withdraw from the study once I have started?

Being in this study is completely voluntary and you do not have to take part.

Your decision whether to participate will not affect your current or future relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia (or Online Learning Network) now or in the future.

If you decide to take part in the study, you can withdraw your consent up to the point that your data is fully anonymised. You can do this by sending an email to a.martinez-renteria@uea.ac.uk stating your decision to withdraw from the study.

(6) What are the consequences if I withdraw from the study?

You are free to stop the interview at any time. Unless you say that you want me to keep them, any recordings will be erased and the information you have provided will not be included in the study results. You may also refuse to answer any questions that you do not wish to answer during the interview. If you decide at a later time to withdraw from the study, your information will be removed from my records and will not be included in any results, up to the point I have analysed and published the results.

(7) Are there any risks or costs associated with being in the study?

Aside from giving up your time, I do not expect that there will be any risks or costs associated with taking part in this study.

(8) Are there any benefits associated with being in the study?

As a participant in the study, you will contribute broadly to the discussion about activism for sustainable development, sharing your learning, literacy, and action practices.

It is also hoped that the participants along with me will develop a useful resource for online learning networks and the engagement of activists for sustainable development based upon reflections.

(9) What will happen to information provided by me and data collected during the study?

The research project aims to collect information about your learning processes, literacy practices and activism experiences inside and outside the online learning networks. The methods for data collection are participant observation, interviews, and participatory methods. Audio recording and material photographs will be employed during the data collection process. This information will be used for analysis and could be employed for relevant future publications. Nonetheless, participants will decide if the data collected during the participatory methods is shared with the online learning networks, their members, and fellow activists.

All the information collected during the research period will be confidential. Nevertheless, confidentiality cannot be guaranteed in case participants harm, are in danger or are involved in illegal activities.

The results will be used to obtain the PhD in Education degree from the University of East Anglia. Additionally, the results could be employed for future education interventions of the online learning networks. Likewise, the information could be used to publish future books, and articles in scientific journals and conferences.

Your personal data and information will only be used as outlined in this Participant Information Sheet, unless you consent otherwise. Data management will follow the Data Protection Act 2018 (DPA 2018) and UK General Data Protection Regulation (UK GDPR), and the University of East Anglia's Research Data Management Policy.

The information you provide will be stored securely and your identity will be kept strictly confidential, except as required by law. Study findings may be published. Although every effort will be made to protect your identity, there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

Study data may also be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. The data will be kept for at least 10 years beyond the last date the data were accessed. The deposited data will not include your name or any directly identifiable information about you, but there is a risk that you might be identifiable due to the nature of the study and/or results.

(10) What if I would like further information about the study?

When you have read this information, I will be available to discuss it with you further and answer any questions you may have. (a.martinez-renteria@uea.ac.uk)

(11) Will I be told the results of the study?

You have a right to receive feedback about the overall results of this study.

You can tell me that you wish to receive feedback by sending an email to a.martinez-renteria@uea.ac.uk

This feedback will be in the form of one-page lay summary This feedback will be at the end of the study

(12) What if I have a complaint or any concerns about the study?

If there is a problem, please let me know. You can contact me via the University of East Anglia at the following address:

Abigail Martinez Renteria

School of Education and Lifelong Learning University of East Anglia

NORWICH NR4 7TJ

a.martinez-renteria@uea.ac.uk

If you are concerned about the way this study is being conducted or you wish to make a complaint to someone independent from the study, please contact the Head of School of Education and Lifelong Learning, Professor Yann Lebeau (Y.Lebeau@uea.ac.uk)

(13) How do I know that this study has been approved to take place?

To protect your safety, rights, wellbeing and dignity, all research in the University of East Anglia is reviewed by a Research Ethics Body. This research was approved by the EDU S-REC (School of Education and Lifelong Learning Research Ethics Subcommittee).

(14) What is the general data protection information I need to be informed about?

According to data protection legislation, I am required to inform you that the legal basis for processing your data as listed in Article 6(1) of the UK GDPR is because this allows to process personal data when it is necessary to perform our public tasks as a University.

In addition to the specific information provided above about why your personal data is required and how it will be used, there is also some general information which needs to be provided for you:

- The data controller is the University of East Anglia.
- For further information, you can contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk
- You can also find out more about your data protection rights at the Information Commissioner's Office (ICO).
- If you are unhappy with how your personal data has been used, please contact the University's Data Protection Officer at dataprotection@uea.ac.uk in the first instance.

(15) OK, I want to take part – what do I do next?

You need to fill in one copy of the consent form and send it to a.martinez-renteria@uea.ac.uk. Please keep the letter, information sheet and the second copy of the consent form for your information.

(16) Further information

This information was last updated on 29 June 2022.

If there are changes to the information provided, you will be notified by email

This information sheet is for you to keep

Appendix B

Participant consent forms were provided after distributing information sheets and engaging in informal conversations. These were shared with and signed by the leaders of online learning networks and activist participants in this research study.

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM (First Copy to Researcher)

▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ is willing to participate in this research study. In giving the consent the organisation states that:

- It understands the purpose of the study, what it will be asked to do, and any risks/benefits involved.
- It has read the Participant Information Sheet, which it may keep, for its records, and has been able to discuss its involvement in the study with the researcher if it wishes to do so.
- The researcher has answered any questions that it had about the study, and it is happy with the answers.
- It understands that being in this study is completely voluntary and it does not have to take part. Its decision whether to be in the study will not affect my relationship with the researcher or anyone else at the University of East Anglia now or in the future.
- It understands that it may stop the participant observation at any time if it does not wish to continue, and that unless it indicates otherwise any recordings and photographs will then be erased and the information provided will not be included in the study results.
- It understands that the results of this study may be published, and the organisation may be identifiable in these publications due to the nature of the study or results.
- It understands that information about the organisation that is collected over the course of this project will be stored securely and will only be used for purposes that it has agreed to. It understands that information about the organisation will only be told to others with its permission, except as required by law.

It consents to: Ms. Abigail Martínez Rentería, Post-Graduate Researcher at the UEA UNESCO Chair in Adult Literacy and Learning for Social Transformation.

Participant observation   YES **X**   NO ◯

The data collected in this study may be deposited with a repository to allow it to be made available for scholarly and educational purposes. Although every effort will be made to protect the organization's identity, it may be identifiable in this due to the nature of the study or results.

It consents to:

Deposit of data in a repository   YES **X**   NO ◯

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Would it like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES **X**   NO ⭕

If you answered **YES**, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

- Postal: ███████████████████████████ **Mexico**

- Email: ████████████████ **org**

████████████
....
Signature

████████████████████████
....
PRINT name

02 August 2022.

....
Date

FORMA DE CONSENTIMIENTO DEL PARTICIPANTE Activista- *Observación Participante* **(Copia para el investigador)**

Yo, ███████████████ estoy de acuerdo en ser participar en este proyecto de investigación. Al dar mi consentimiento acepto que:

- He entendido el propósito del estudio, que es lo que mi participación conlleva y cualquier riesgo/beneficio que esta puede traer.

- He leído la hoja informativa del participante, con la oportunidad de quedarme con una copia para mi referencia, y pude discutir con la investigadora mi involucramiento si así lo deseé.

- La investigadora ha respondido las preguntas que tuve acerca del estudio y estoy conforme con las respuestas.

- Entiendo que ser parte de este estudio es totalmente voluntario y que no es obligatorio ser parte de él. Mi decisión de ser parte o no del estudio no afectara mi relación con la investigadora o cualquier otra persona en la Universidad de East Anglia (o redes digitales de aprendizaje) ahora o en el futuro.

- Entiendo que puedo detener mi participación en la observación en cualquier momento si no deseo continuar. También, entiendo que no será posible remover mi información y datos al menos que las observaciones hayan sido grabadas o que sea individualmente identificado de alguna manera.

- Entiendo que los resultados de este estudio podrán ser publicados. A pesar de que se hará todo esfuerzo para proteger mi identidad, existe la posibilidad de que sea identificado en estas publicaciones debido a la naturaleza del estudio o resultados.

- Entiendo que la información personal acerca de mi que sea colectada a través del estudio será guardada con medidas de protección y seguridad y podrá ser utilizada únicamente para los propósitos que yo he autorizado. Entiendo que la información acerca de mí solo será compartida con otros con mi permiso, a excepción de ser requerido por la ley.

Doy mi consentimiento para:

Observación   SI ●   NO ○

Fotografías   SI ●   NO ○

La información colectada en este estudio podrá ser depositada con un repositorio académico para hacerla accesible a propósitos académicos y educativos. A pesar de que todo el esfuerzo será puesto en proteger mi identidad, podría ser identificado debido a la naturaleza del estudio o resultados.

Doy mi consentimiento para:

Poner mi información en un repositorio académico   SI ●   NO ○
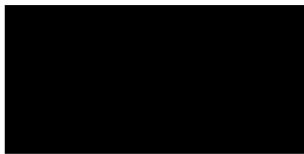
Would you like to receive feedback about the overall results of this study?

YES ●   NO ○

If you answered YES, please indicate your preferred form of feedback and address:

• Dirección Postal: _____

_____

• **Correo electrónico:** _____ ██████████ mx _____

██████████

Firma

██████████

Nombre

22 de agosto de 2022

Fecha

Appendix C

During fieldwork, I recorded my observations in traditional notebooks, including descriptive notes, analytical notes, personal reflections, and references to audio messages for myself. These notes were later transcribed into a digital document to begin coding during the fieldwork stage.
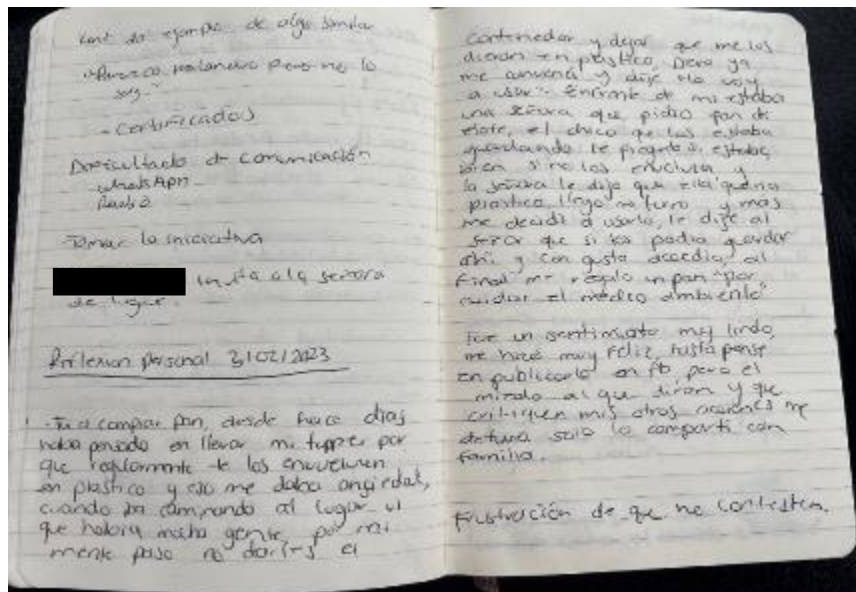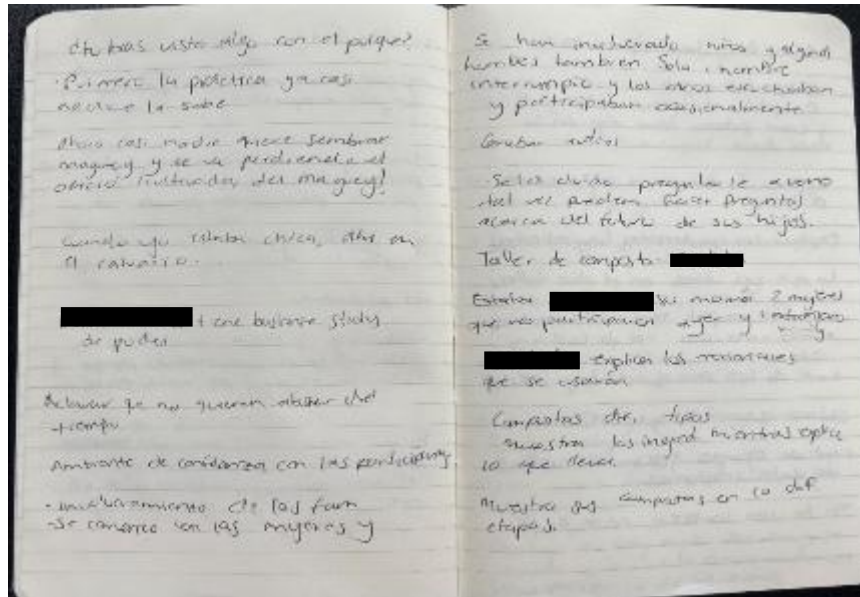
Place: Zapotitlan Salinas, Puebla. Located in one of the biggest natural reserves of horizontal cactus. The community was funded by Mixtec and Popolocas indigenous groups during prehispanic times. According to some locals, the habitants left the town during revolution and once this finished, people from close towns repopulated it. The do not speak Mixtec or Popoloca anymore.

A little about ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ is biologist. She started to get involved with educative process working in a private school and getting part of educative projects focused on climate change. She is explorer of National Geographic, and part of ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ Latin America.

A Little about ▮▮▮▮ **team:** ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ (physicist and biologist) in a congregation organised by National Geographic a few moths ago. Since then, they have been partnering to get funding for, and implement different projects. ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ contacted their team by the National Geographic Explorers Platform.

▮▮▮▮▮ She is an anthropologist from Zapotitlan Salinas (she knows the context pretty well)

▮▮: He is an oceanologist from Oaxaca, working with water management

Isma: He is a filmmaker from an indigenous community in Oaxaca, mainly working with indigenous communities and their social processes.

(Everyone met for the first time in this project)

Context: The project started as an initiative of ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ met ▮▮▮▮▮▮ during a university field trip 9 years ago. ▮▮▮▮▮▮ has worked in a stone quarry; he lives in the caves that he and his ancestors have made. ▮▮▮▮ was invited by ▮▮▮▮▮ to visit the caves and Zapotitlan, deciding to start a project there. They got funding from the Peruvian Society of Environmental Right for the first activities with women (according to ▮▮▮, they decided to focus on women because of the sexism in the community), then from National Geographic to continue the project.

Before the activities observed, ▮▮▮▮ team did a diagnosis to explore what the participants wanted to learn about the climate crisis and how this is affecting them. Some of the issues arising were water and waste management, getting to know success stories of similar communities, as there has been projects before but they do not succeed. They created a WhatsApp group (not all of them have access to a phone and/or internet) where they are in constant communication.

Participants: Women from Zapotitlan, they are 3 to 65 years old. Most of them work in town (restaurants, corner shops, cleaning, etc). At least half of them is related with ▮▮▮▮▮▮. At least half of them brought their children to the sessions.

Before the sessions: The women who attended the diagnostic activities were invited via WhatsApp. ▮▮▮▮ and her mom put some posters with the activities' information in some strategic places of Zapotitlan (the central plaza, corner shops, parks, bakeries, etc).

Day 1. Talk: How to organise ourselves between women to implement community projects?

Before the session.

We went to have breakfast to one of the towns restaurants ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ was with us (She is a member of the Masehual Women Cooperative). During breakfast we talked about how globalisation is affecting local habits and traditions, as well as intergenerational learning. ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ mentioned how the sowing of non-native crops has affected Puebla.

"The berries are getting all the water, there is research saying that if we keep this way, we will run out of water in 10 years, it is very sad"

During the session.

The talk started after 45 min from the scheduled time. Some women were in a "cajas meeting" (there are no banks in town, so the women have organised themselves and created their own financial system). They were sitting in a circle and ███ invited them to write in a post-it how were they feeling and what were they expecting from the session, some answers were: cold, curious, exited about hearing from ███████ and were expecting to hear about her collectivity story and success in the implementation of community projects.

███████ntroduced ███████: She is a Masehual indigenous woman, part of a Masehual Women Cooperative in Cuetzalan, Puebla, funded in 1995, since then, they have developed and implemented different projects (including an eco-touristic hotel run by them) to empower women in their community.

"The experience of others is wisdom"-███████ "We wanted to look for stories of extraordinary people from similar contexts"

███████ talks about her experience in her collective "Women supporting each other"

Key points:

- They used their skills and knowledge, (hand crafts, textiles mainly) as an entry point to organise their own business and get independence, with the assistance of a university student.
  "I started to learn (textiles) since I was a child, everything that we embroider, we sell it"

- ███████ mentioned that she joined different funded projects before. Nevertheless, these projects were funded by organisation with specific aims and the community wasn't getting benefited from the activities, especially women.
  "Those men wanted to manage the project, but we were not alone"
  "We saw that they wanted to manage us, so we separate from them"

- After start selling their handcrafts, the collective started looking for capacity building sessions (sometimes run by them, sometimes by external people) and the conscientisation of women in their community and close towns. Some of the workshops were on literacy (reading and writing).
  "Women did not know what a dignified life was"
  "I am not prepared, I did not attended university, but thanks to my collective I have learned a lot"
  "I started to wake up there, sometimes we are always at home"
  "Women need to recognise themselves by what they are and what they know"
  "120 women are learning, and they are teaching their children and families"

- ███████ highlighted the difficulty of organise a collective. She said that it is a difficult and painful process, where they will be exposed to criticism and not everyone will believe in them. However, the results will come in a long term "maybe you won't see it, but it will be there, for the next generations"
  "Some women started to get organised, but some still are afraid"

Appendix D

The interview guides included key themes to be explored during the semi-structured interviews. These were later adapted based on participant observations, integrating emerging themes.

Semi-structured Interview Guide (Activists)

Possible areas of questions/themes to be pursued in the semi-structured interviews

1. Activism

   - What motivates you to act towards sustainable development?

   - Tell me about your activism story. How did it start? How has it evolved? Who has played a key role?

   - What activities do you usually do? Why? How?

   - What could enhance your activism?

2. Activism and online learning networks

   - Why did you join ▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮▮ America?

   - How long have you been part of the online learning network?

   - What has been your experience with the online learning network so far?

   - Has the online learning network enhanced (or restricted) your activismactivities? How?

3. Learning processes

   - How did you learn about sustainable development? Who was involved? Where? When?

   - What kind of activities do you join to enhance your understanding of sustainable development topics/issues?

   - What activities do you do to educate the others about sustainable development? Why? How?

   - Mention one or two significant experiences in your learning/educator journey. When did it happen? Where? Who was involved? How? Why?

4. Literacy practices

- What textual/visual/audio-visual materials are involved in your activities?Why? How?

- What is the meaning of those materials? (Including the ones detected duringthe participatory observation?

*This guide may be adapted to develop specific ideas in relation to the findings of the participant observation stage

Semi-structured Interview Guide (Online Learning Networks organisers)

Possible areas of questions/themes to be pursued in the semi-structured interviews

1. Involvement with the online learning network

- How would you describe yourself? Share about your background and interests

- Why and how did you join ██████████████ ███████████████

- How long have you been part of the online learning network?

- What has been your experience with the online learning network so far?

- What is your role in the online learning network?

2. Learning processes

- How did you learn about sustainable development? Who was involved?Where? When?

- What activities do you do to educate the others about sustainabledevelopment within the online learning network? Why? How? Who is the target?

- What learning materials do you develop to enhance sustainable development learning within the online learning network? Why? How? Who are those directed to?

- Mention one or two significant teaching/ learning experiences in your journey as part of the online learning network.When did it happen? Where? Who was involved? How? Why?

3. Literacy practices

- What textual/visual/audio-visual materials are developed by the online learning network?Why? How?

- What is the meaning of those materials? (Including the ones identified/observed duringthe participatory observation)?

*This guide may be adapted to develop specific ideas in relation to the findings of the participant observation stage

Appendix E

After trying NVivo, I decided to switch to colour coding and thematic analysis within transcriptions and notes. By integrating everything into a single document, I was able to achieve a cohesive and comprehensive view of the diverse data collection notes, reflections, and analyses.