

Human Rights in Minefields

Extractive Economies,
Environmental Conflicts,
and Social Justice in the
Global South



César Rodríguez-Garavito
(Director)

HUMAN RIGHTS IN MINEFIELDS

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JUSTICE IN THE GLOBAL SOUTH

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Introduction: A New Generation of Writing on Human Rights

César Rodríguez-Garavito

Point of Departure: The Current State of Human Rights¹

These days, uncertainty seems to be the prevailing mood in human rights circles (Gearty and Douzinas 2012). A new wave of academic works is debating fundamental tenets of the human rights movement and asking whether we are now facing “the endtimes” (Hopgood 2013). Activists and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) can feel the foundations trembling beneath their feet.

This despair stems from the convergence of four structural transformations pushing the human rights field in different directions. First, the rise of new global powers (such as the BRICS countries: Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa) and the relative decline of Europe and the United States points to a multipolar global order. Together with the proliferation of “hard” and “soft” law in international governance, this tendency has yielded a wider and more fragmented legal and political space. In this new context, states and NGOs from the global North are no longer the only ones controlling the production of human rights standards, as new actors (such as transnational social movements, transnational companies, and states and NGOs from the global South) emerge as influential voices.

Second, the repertoire of actors and strategies, both legal and political, has expanded considerably. Traditional strategies, such as “naming and shaming” recalcitrant states, are complemented by new strategies of transnational activism that involve a large number of actors (both promoters and targets of activism), including social movements, online media networks, transnational

1 This section is taken in part from Rodríguez-Garavito (2014).

companies, intergovernmental organizations, universities, and online activist groups.

Third, information and communication technologies simultaneously present new challenges and opportunities for human rights. As demonstrated by the worldwide mobilizations linked to the Occupy movement, tools like social networks, documentaries, digital reports, and online and distance learning have the potential to accelerate political change, reduce informational disadvantages suffered by marginalized groups, and bring together national, regional, and global groups to directly influence human rights protection.

Fourth, extreme environmental degradation—climate change, water scarcity, the rapid extinction of species and forests, unchecked pollution—has become one of the most dangerous threats to human rights. After all, human rights are essentially meaningless if what is truly at stake is the life of this planet. Ecological problems are thus fundamental for global discussions on human rights, whether those discussions adopt a traditional conception of economic development, link environmental justice with social justice, or search for new conceptions of human rights that are compatible with the rights of nature.

The resulting uncertainty puts the human rights community—a community that, for decades, has courageously confronted dictatorships, corporate abuses, socioeconomic injustice, ethnocide, and environmental degradation—in an uncomfortable spot. Having more questions than answers is disconcerting for human rights organizations, who today are expected to offer well-defined legal solutions to complex moral and political dilemmas.

Nevertheless, I believe that we should celebrate this discomfort, as the transitions—between strategic models, between intellectual paradigms, between governance structures, between technologies—represent moments of creativity and innovation in social fields. In human rights circles, where we have erected organizational and intellectual barriers so tall that it is hard for us to be reflective and self-critical, this situation offers an unprecedented opportunity to reevaluate some of our core premises: who may consider themselves members of the movement, what types of knowledge and disciplines should be taken into account, and what strategies are most effective in a multipolar world that is

also characterized by a multiplicity of modes of communication. For the first time, important tensions and asymmetries—North vis-à-vis South, elite versus the masses, national against global—are being openly discussed with the aim of overcoming them and strengthening the movement’s collective capacity.

A New Generation of Writing and Reflection

This book, and the Dejusticia initiative that inspired it, seeks to feed such discussions. To that end, it proposes a new type of writing on human rights, one with three specific characteristics. First, the writing is *reflective*: its authors, who are the very people working in organizations on the ground, stop to think about the potential, achievements, and limits of their knowledge and their practice. In this sense, both this book and Dejusticia’s larger project, described below, seek to amplify the voices of human rights defenders in academic and practical discussions about the future of the field, which, to date, have tended to be dominated by academic studies. In the spirit of the type of action research that I describe in detail in chapter one, this type of writing combines the methodological and analytical strengths of academic research with the practical experience of the authors and the organizations and communities with whom they work. The result is a writing that is as robust as it is relevant, and which contributes to broadening the window of reflection within the human rights field that has been opened with the recent debates mentioned above.

Second, the genre of writing proposed in this book is *narrative*. Partly because of the human rights community’s excessive mastery of legal language and knowledge, its preferred mode of writing is that of technical reports and legal briefs. While this genre has enjoyed notable achievements for decades, it has hindered organizations and activists from effectively sharing and communicating the stories that they live and learn about firsthand: those of the victims, of campaigns, of moral dilemmas, of injustices, of victories. Opening the human rights field to other types of actors, knowledge, and audiences means telling these stories—and telling them well. To that end, the contributors in this volume—with the help of techniques borrowed from fields such as narrative journalism (see chapter one)—tell and are part of these stories.

Third, this new type of writing *comes from the global South*, from the countries and regions that have tended to be objects rather than subjects of the knowledge and decisions within the human rights field. In this sense, it attempts to respond to the challenges of an increasingly multipolar world and to counteract the organizational, economic, and epistemological asymmetries between the South and North that have impeded the effectiveness and legitimacy of the global human rights movement. The authors of this genre of writing are activist-researchers from Africa, Latin America, the Middle East, and South and Southeast Asia who belong to human rights organizations and write from this geographic and professional angle to enrich global dialogue on the future of the field.

The Origin and Structure of the Book

This text forms part of a long-term project undertaken by Dejusticia, which revolves around the Global Action-Research Workshop for Young Human Rights Advocates. The workshop, organized annually, seeks to foster connections among and train a new generation of action researchers.

As explained in chapter one, the workshop helps participants develop action-research tools, understood as the combination of rigorous research and practical experience in social justice causes. For ten days, Dejusticia brings approximately fifteen participants and ten expert instructors to Colombia for a series of practical and interactive sessions on research, narrative writing, multimedia, and strategic reflection on the future of human rights. The aim is to strengthen participants' capacity to produce hybrid-style texts that are at once rigorous and appealing to wide audiences. Participants are selected on the basis of a text proposal, which is then discussed during the workshop and subsequently developed with the help of a mentor (one of the instructors) until a publishable version is achieved, such as the chapters that make up this volume.

The workshop also offers participants the opportunity to take advantage of new technologies and translate the results of their research and activism into diverse formats—from blogs, videos, and multimedia to social network communications and academic

articles. Therefore, in addition to the annual volume comprising participants' texts and instructors' reflections, the workshop produces a blog in Spanish and English that features weekly entries by workshop alumni, written in the style described above. As explained in chapter one, the title of the blog—*Amphibious Accounts: Human Rights Stories from the Global South*²—owes itself to the fact that action research is “amphibious” in that its practitioners move seamlessly between different environments and worlds, from academic circles to local communities to state entities. For those who are dedicated to the promotion of human rights, this often implies navigating these worlds in the global North and South alike.

Each year, the workshop is centered on a particular current issue. In 2013, the topic was the impact of the “boom” of extractive economies that have proliferated around the world in light of the increasing demand for and price of minerals (gold, coltan, platinum, copper, etc.) and fossil fuels. In addition to providing coherence to the book and the group of participants, the selected topic determines the workshop site—for the sessions are held not in a classroom or convention center but in the middle of the field, in the very communities and places that are witnessing the issue firsthand. For example, the 2013 workshop traveled to northern Colombia, where the eruption of extractive economies (centered on coal and other minerals) has profoundly affected the rights and lives of indigenous and rural communities.³

The structure of this volume reflects that of the workshop. Following the opening chapter, which defines action research and its practice in the “minefields” of extractive economies, the core section of the book features studies on the consequences of these economies on human rights around the globe—from the rights of rural communities in countries like Brazil, India, Mexico, Peru, South Africa, and Uganda to the rights of indigenous peoples in places like Chile, Colombia, and Paraguay. Finally, the last part of the book gathers the reflections of several of the instructors who

2 See www.amphibiousaccounts.org.

3 To learn more about the workshop's journey and hear participants' testimonies, see the brief video at <http://www.amphibiousaccounts.org/#!/conoce>.

led sessions during the workshop and acted as mentors during the writing process.

Acknowledgments

A new and long-term initiative such as this one is more than a collective effort—it requires the support of an entire organization. This text and the ongoing commitment that it represents is an institutional effort of Dejusticia that involves, in one way or another, all of the organization’s members. For the unconditional support that Dejusticia’s staff have dedicated to this project, and for embodying the hybrid of research and action in their daily work, I extend enormous thanks to all of them.

I am particularly indebted to the colleagues and friends who were co-architects of the 2013 workshop and subsequent publication process. First of all, I would like to thank Meghan Morris, senior researcher at Dejusticia, for having believed in the idea of the workshop from the beginning, when it was a mere dream, and for having dedicated her unparalleled talent, generosity, and commitment to the immense task of ensuring that the workshop, this volume, and the blog became a reality. If we are able to sustain our efforts moving forward, it will be in large measure thanks to Meghan. And when we still were fortunate to have Eliana Kaimowitz here at Dejusticia, she was the ideal and indefatigable workshop co-organizer and facilitator. Her energy, intelligence, and efficiency were essential for laying the foundations of the project, to which we are sure she will continue contributing as it moves forward. Finally, any initiative of this nature requires considerable logistical support, which William Morales assumed with an admirable mixture of efficiency, solidarity, and optimism. Without his daily support and his ability to anticipate problems, put out fires, and ensure that everything functioned better than planned, this project would have surely outstripped us. Thanks to him for everything.

At the workshop, significant contributions were made by the instructors, many of whom also served as mentors to participants during the subsequent writing process. I therefore extend my deepest thanks to Michael Burawoy, Gavin Capps, Elvia Cuadro, Karl von Holdt, Adele Kirsten, Chris Michael, Diana Rodríguez

Franco, Laura Salas, Debbie Stothard, Nandini Sundar, and Rodrigo Uprimny. In his hybrid role as organizer and participant, Carlos Andrés Baquero was, as always, simply essential.

During the editing and production process, three individuals were fundamental. Morgan Stoffregen went above and beyond her duties as a professional translator and editor, becoming an unwavering ally who made continual improvements, proposed alternatives and ideas, and ensured that a polyphonic manuscript was converted into a coherent and legible whole. Elvia Sáenz, in coordinating Dejusticia's publication process, never ceased to demonstrate precision and creativity. Marta Rojas was, once again, our ideal graphic designer.

The convening of our workshop and the publication of this book—in addition to the ongoing operation of Dejusticia's international program—were made possible thanks to the generous and enduring support of the Ford Foundation. Louis Bickford and Martín Abregú were and continue to be fundamental counterparts in our efforts: beyond coordinating the foundation's financial support, they have served as partners who are at once sympathetic to and independent from our ideas and initiatives, for which we are enormously grateful.

I would like to conclude by recognizing perhaps the most essential players of all: the activist-researchers who authored the chapters in this volume. Both during and after the workshop, they enthusiastically supported Dejusticia's commitment to action research and took time from their busy lives to reflect, write, revise, and write again. If the space that we created for them is helpful in their work to contribute to a more effective, horizontal, and creative human rights movement, this effort will have been worth it.

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CHAPTER 1
Amphibious Research:
Human Rights and Action
Research in a Multimedia World

César Rodríguez-Garavito

To do action research on human rights is to lead a double life. It is to experience, in a matter of hours, the transition from the introverted world of the classroom to the extroverted world of the media and meetings with activists and public officials. The contrast can be felt on the skin: the humidity and heat of fieldwork is a far cry from the climate-controlled air of university offices, courthouses, and philanthropic foundations.

The contrast is even more marked when practicing action research in highly dangerous and unequal contexts, such as those visited by the contributors to this volume in the course of their advocacy and research on socioenvironmental conflicts. Such conflicts have exploded throughout the globe over the last fifteen years, as one country after another has turned toward natural resource exploitation to satisfy a growing global demand for minerals, oil, and energy.

Elsewhere, I have used the term “minefields” to refer to these sites and the spheres of social interaction produced within them (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011). They are minefields in both a sociological sense and an economic sense. In sociological terms, they are true social *fields* (Bourdieu 1977), characteristic of enclave economies in the extractive sector, and therefore typified by profoundly unequal power relations between mining companies and local communities, as well as a scarce state presence. They are *minefields* in that they are highly dangerous: any misstep within these fields, which are characterized by violent and distrustful social interactions, can be fatal. They are also minefields in an economic sense. On many occasions, they revolve around the exploitation of gold, silver, coltan, or other valuable minerals.

In other cases, as in several natural resource exploitation projects in Colombia that I have studied, they are minefields in a more

literal sense as well: the territories in conflict are littered with anti-personnel mines, sown by leftist guerrillas and right-wing paramilitaries as a strategy of war and territorial control.

In this chapter, I reflect on the nature of and challenges inherent to the type of action research embodied in this volume, which we at Dejusticia are nurturing through an annual workshop for young human rights activists from the global South. In line with its reflexive logic, the chapter draws explicitly on an earlier work of mine (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011), which is based on my experience of practicing action research in social minefields, particularly three socioenvironmental conflicts in indigenous territories that have received national and international attention: the dispute over the construction of the Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian Amazon, the conflict over oil drilling in the territory of the Sarayaku indigenous community in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and the struggle surrounding the construction of the Urrá dam in northern Colombia.

The chapter is divided into three sections. In the first, I characterize the practice of action research within these contexts, highlighting what I consider to be its four main scientific and political strengths. In the second, I explore the dilemmas facing action research, outlining the four challenges that represent the flip sides of the strengths mentioned in the first part. I close the chapter with a proposal to solve some of these dilemmas, through strategies that form an approach that I refer to as “amphibious research” — research that allows the action researcher to breathe simultaneously in the two very different worlds of academia and the public sphere, and to synthesize her two lives into one without drowning in the process. In making the case for amphibious research, I highlight the need to widen the types of writing and forms of diffusion of human rights work in order to take advantage of a world that is increasingly multimedia.

The Action-Research Windmill

One of the best characterizations of the practice of action research is the beautiful article by Michael Burawoy (2010) about Edward Webster, the renowned South African labor sociologist who founded the Society, Work and Development Institute (SWOP) of

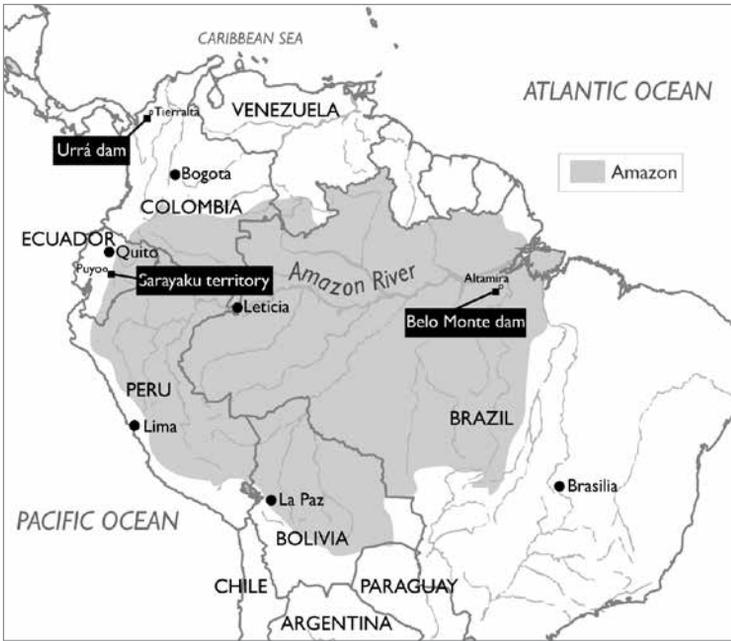
the University of the Witwatersrand. Burawoy uses the metaphor of a windmill to describe a typical day in the life of Webster. Like a windmill, Webster, a public sociologist and action researcher, is in constant movement, propelled by the many blades that constitute his professional activity: research and teaching, participation in the public sphere (the media, social movements, and so on), public policy advocacy, and the construction of institutions that embody and promote action research, such as think tanks and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). The rotation and interconnectedness of these four blades causes the sociological imagination to transform into political imagination, in the same way that the relentless turning of a windmill converts air into energy.

This South African windmill resonated thousands of miles away, in the heart of the Amazon, during my empirical work on minefields. I had been propelled there by the forces of various blades that led me from academic research and public debate on indigenous rights in Colombia to human rights advocacy in Washington and, from there, to new rounds of research and activism in Brazil and Ecuador. All of these activities formed part of the consolidation process for two institutions I helped found: the Center for the Study of Law, Justice and Society (Dejusticia, a research center and NGO) and the Global Justice and Human Rights Program at the University of Los Andes (a university-based legal clinic), both in Bogotá, Colombia.

I started the project with a study on the Urrá dam, located in northern Colombia, the birthplace of the country's blood-soaked paramilitary movement and the site of violent disputes over territorial control and drug trafficking between the paramilitaries—working in shady alliances with Colombia's armed forces and political elite—and the equally violent leftist guerrillas, particularly the Revolutionary Armed Forces of Colombia (FARC) (see figure 1). Caught in the crossfire are the indigenous Embera-Katio people, who have lost at least twenty-one leaders through assassinations by one side or another. And today—after twenty-five years of forced displacement and human and environmental loss caused by the construction of the Urrá dam—the Embera-Katio people face the very real threat of cultural and physical extinction (Rodríguez-Garavito and Orduz 2012).

FIGURE 1.1

**Indigenous peoples and socioenvironmental conflicts:
Mapping amphibious research**



SOURCE: Dejusticia

Even though I arrived in Urrá with the intention of documenting what had happened over those two decades—and in that sense, donning my professional sociologist hat—from the very beginning, the research project had a component of action. In fact, I had learned about the Urrá case during a collaborative effort with the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, when I had been donning my other professional hat (as a lawyer) to advise the organization on legal strategies for defending indigenous territories and livelihoods. Thus, on my first trip to Urrá, I was accompanied by students from the Program on Global Justice and Human Rights at the University of Los Andes with the goal of helping the Embera-Katío community explore the legal options available to defend their rights.

I still remember vividly my arrival to Urrá. Before the unusual sight of a group of professors and students in one of the most violent regions in one of the world’s most violent countries, the military personnel who jealously guarded the entrance greeted us

with distrustful questions—“Who are you?” “What are you doing here?” Once we passed the checkpoint, the reasons for the distrust became clear. As we traveled down the river that fed into the reservoir, we saw navy speedboats playing cat and mouse with the illegal boats transporting cocaine produced on the slopes of the river.

Allowing myself to go with the unpredictable flow of action research, I arrived at the second stop in the project: the Belo Monte dam in the Brazilian Amazon. The action-research project on the Urrá dam had led to my involvement in the legal defense of other indigenous communities who, like the Embera-Katío, had not been consulted prior to the construction of development projects in their territories, despite the fact that practically every Latin American country has ratified Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization, which establishes the obligation to conduct prior consultations. While at a public hearing on this topic before the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in 2010, I learned that the commission had just received a complaint regarding a case similar to Urrá. This complaint, submitted by indigenous communities and environmental organizations, accused the Brazilian government of having failed to consult Amazonian indigenous communities before authorizing the construction of Belo Monte, slated to be the third largest dam in the world. The case immediately attracted international attention given that, on the one hand, the Brazilian government had declared the dam to be of national interest as part of the country’s plans to become an economic superpower and, on the other, international celebrities (such as Sting and James Cameron) had traveled to the region to express their solidarity with the indigenous peoples. When the Brazilian government refused to obey the Inter-American Commission’s order to suspend the dam’s construction while the commission reviewed the complaint, various human rights organizations and scholars—myself among them—traveled to the region to document the situation and express our condemnation of the government’s decision.

Having been involved in the Urrá case as an academic researcher and in Belo Monte as a lawyer, my comparative-socialist intuition led me to look for a third case of legal and political mobilization that, unlike the previous two, had ended with a

favorable judicial decision for the indigenous communities. The opportunity to complete the study sample arose in mid-2012, when the Inter-American Court of Human Rights held a hearing in the territory of the Sarayaku people in the Ecuadorian Amazon, which foretold a decision in favor of the indigenous community. When I traveled to the Sarayaku territory for fieldwork, the community and their lawyers were eagerly awaiting the court's decision, which was published a day after my visit ended. In a historic decision, the Inter-American Court ordered Ecuador to provide compensation to the indigenous community for having authorized oil exploration without first consulting them, and to conduct such a consultation should Ecuador consider oil exploration within Sarayaku territory in the future.

With this case study, my journey had reflected a complete rotation of the windmill: from the research of a professional social scientist to intervention in the courts and media as a human rights lawyer, including participation in debates on indigenous rights in each of the three countries, and ending again with the professional social scientist. As tends to happen, today, several years into the project, I am certain of neither my identity nor my precise role in the story. I have been all roles at once and none in particular. Nor do I know when my involvement will end; unlike professional academics, I cannot choose to leave the project once I publish a book on it. Since my commitment is to the underlying human rights cause as well as to the people and communities who have placed their trust in my work, I cannot simply "move on" to the next book project.

Elsewhere, I offer a detailed account of the theoretical and legal framework of the study (Rodríguez-Garavito 2011). For the purposes of this chapter, I will limit myself to outlining the four strengths of action research that I believe are illustrated by the type of process I have described, which can also be seen at play in the other chapters in this book. First, the rapid changing of the action researcher's roles and identities allows one to see the same social reality from distinct angles (that of the scientist, the activist, the judge, and the public official). The result, I believe, is a greater *empirical richness and precision* than is possible in other types of research. For instance, over the course of the project's several years, I have had the opportunity to interact with a broad range

of actors who hold widely different views about economic development, indigenous peoples' rights, and the environment. In dozens of meetings, public debates, and field visits, the views of indigenous leaders, human rights defenders, high-ranking public officials and judges, journalists, business representatives, officials of the United Nations and inter-American human rights system, and academics have helped me understand both the complexity and the clear patterns that characterize the messy daily realities of socioenvironmental conflicts in Latin America and elsewhere.

Second, the design, questions, and results of the action-research project are directly informed by interactions with actors on the ground and are planned with diverse audiences in mind. As shown by the contributors to this book, the result is a greater *relevance* of the research for multiple audiences, which can translate into influence in the fate of the issues under study. I have had the opportunity to appreciate this advantage firsthand. By following the thread of events in the three cases and remaining committed to the underlying cause and to the communities and organizations involved, I and my colleagues at Dejusticia have been able to provide useful information and expertise at key junctures. In Ecuador—after the government cracked down on indigenous and environmental organizations by revoking their registration and suing their leaders for “terrorism” for having organized marches and protests—we used the information we had gathered and our previous work on authoritarian governments to produce a report documenting widespread violations of the rights to protest and freedom of expression in Ecuador (Pásara 2014). The fact that the report was widely discussed in Ecuador—including by President Rafael Correa, who lashed out against it repeatedly on television and social media—attests to the relevance that this type of work can have. Similarly, in Brazil and Colombia, our action-research team has become a go-to resource in policy and media debates on indigenous peoples' rights, as well as a frequent collaborator in training workshops for grassroots communities, judges, human rights officials, and other influential audiences.

Third, by letting the rhythm of events lead the way, the action researcher achieves *immediate and continued access* to the places and people of her studies, who see her as just another participant instead of an intruder seeking to extract information. Interventions

delivered in multiple formats (such as opinion pieces and media appearances) also lend an immediacy to research products that is absent from traditional academic production, which can take years before coming to fruition. Unlike conventional researchers—for whom social practice is a laboratory where one wears rubber gloves and dissects events with the cold analytic scalpel of the professional scientist and from which one leaves untouched, never to return—action researchers tend to keep the conversation going with the people and communities for whom these events are not a laboratory but their lives. This creates the essential interpersonal glue—trust—that not only allows the action researcher to have continuous access but, more importantly, leads social actors to actively seek her involvement, as has been the case with the social leaders and progressive judges and public officials with whom we have worked.

Fourth, action research has an emotional strength that has been largely overlooked by the growing literature devoted to it. Because it involves direct contact with events and a multitude of people (protagonists in the cases, colleagues, diverse audiences, and so on)—and because it is explicitly inspired by moral convictions (such as the defense of a social justice cause or the construction of an institution that represents these convictions)—action research is a constant source of *motivation*. The adrenaline that runs through one's veins while standing between the blades of the windmill is a powerful incentive to continue working, and is one that tends to be lacking in the solitary work of professional scholars, who are expected to check their moral commitments at the door. As Burawoy writes in connection with the sociological windmill, "When the winds are gale force it is impossible to get close [to it] without being drawn into its vortex" (2010, 5).

It is an exhilarating experience indeed—one made even more stimulating by the fact that it is always a *collaborative* enterprise, for only through the collective work of highly motivated individuals can the many commitments and activities of action research be achieved. For instance, the project on environmental conflicts and indigenous rights that I have been using as an illustration in this chapter involved no fewer than twenty people throughout the years, including outstanding young researchers, human rights advocates, filmmakers, designers, and webmasters.

Appropriately, several of the publications resulting from the project have been co-authored with young scholar-activists trained in action research (Rodríguez-Garavito and Baquero forthcoming; Rodríguez-Garavito and Orduz 2012). In the various instances when exhaustion or failures of our efforts have caused me doubt or disillusionment, these individuals' deep commitment, talent, and enthusiasm have been more than enough to move forward.

To my mind, these are the strengths of the practice of action research and the results that it generates. But each strength has its dark side, which gives rise to profound dilemmas. To them I now turn.

Don Quixote versus the Windmill: The Dilemmas of Action Research

In a famous passage of *Don Quixote*, the novel's protagonist, accompanied by his faithful squire, Sancho Panza, spars with windmills that he mistakes for dangerous giants. As in Miguel de Cervantes's story of the celebrated knight, there is much that is quixotic in action research. It is a very ambitious undertaking, and can even be dangerous in contexts such as minefields. As in the novel, there is a high risk that something will go wrong in the story of the sociological windmill.

The main risks can be viewed as the flip sides of the four aforementioned strengths. First, the shifting of roles and activities that allows for a richer and more complete version of the facts inevitably leads to *dispersion*. The action researcher leaps from task to task, from one meeting to the next, from one place to another. For example, I remember writing my opinion pieces for a Colombian newspaper as I was in the midst of conducting fieldwork in the Brazilian and Ecuadorian jungles, only to then search anxiously for an internet cafe in a small town on my way back in order to submit it before the deadline. This risk of dispersion becomes permanent, which means that the concentration needed to convert empirical richness into quality academic products becomes impossible to achieve. In other words, the speed and immediacy of public interventions wind up replacing the slower and more patient work of the social scientist. The result can be academic dilettantism.

Second, with relevance and influence comes the risk of a *loss of independence*. By interacting with multiple audiences, action

researchers can be captured by one of them—for example, a state agency or company that hires them as a consultant, or a social movement that demands unconditional loyalty. I have personally lived this dilemma: a state agency that asked me to write a concept paper about a draft bill on prior consultation in Colombia was so uncomfortable with my position of guaranteeing indigenous rights that it decided to shelve the report; I have rejected several offers from mining companies to work as an “indigenous community relations consultant”; and several times I have had to explain to the indigenous movement why I would not sign their communiqués, even though I agreed with them. The reason was the same in all of these cases: I needed to maintain my professional role as an action researcher. Or, to paraphrase Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2014), I had to remain objective despite not being neutral. But this was not always well received by the above audiences.

In violent places and countries, relevance has an additional high cost: action researchers risk not only their independence but also their physical safety and lives. Precisely because action researchers are relevant, they are a problem for powerful, violent actors—from the state’s armed forces to leftist guerrillas, right-wing paramilitary squads, local mafias, or private armies serving companies. Ever since the publication of our book on Urrá, I have been advised by trustworthy local leaders not to go back to the region for safety reasons. And after the publication of our report on the Ecuadorian government’s persecution of social movement and political opposition leaders, it has become clear to me and to the heads of other organizations sponsoring the report that traveling to Ecuador may put us at risk of arrest.

In fact, the connection between relevance and personal danger is so close that I believe it is characteristic of action research in countries with a legacy of recent political violence (such as Colombia, South Africa, and many other countries of the global South represented in this volume) or volatile contexts such as minefields. Put more clearly: those who practice action research in these contexts can do so only because other action researchers who came before us sacrificed their lives, tranquility, or personal safety for the cause.

This was the moving revelation of a conversation that I had in Johannesburg with the new generation of researchers from SWOP,

the center founded by Eddie Webster, our “sociological windmill,” who was also present. The youngest members were the ones who remembered that several of Webster’s colleagues had been murdered by state forces for their anti-apartheid academic and political work. Without such extreme commitment and persistence on the part of Webster and his surviving colleagues, SWOP might have disappeared at the hands of the apartheid regime.

The same can be said of action research—and, in fact, of social science and legal research in general—in Latin America. Indeed, some of the pioneering centers of Latin American social science (such as the Brazilian Center for Analysis and Planning, co-founded by Fernando Henrique Cardoso) served as refuges for academics being persecuted for their studies and their militant critiques of the dictatorships of the 1960s and 1970s. Therefore, from the beginning, the human rights movement and action research were intimately tied, and some philanthropic organizations (such as the Ford Foundation) that had previously tended to support only academic programs in the region inaugurated programs to finance the then-emerging human rights NGOs when it came to light that the academics who supported these NGOs were being killed, threatened, and exiled (Keck and Sikkink 1998).

In the most violent countries, such as Colombia, many action researchers have paid with their lives or with exile for having raised their voices against the various armed groups. In fact, the founder of one of the most influential strands of action research—sociologist Orlando Fals Borda, the creator of participatory action research—was arbitrarily detained in 1979 by the government of Julio César Turbay on unfounded charges of belonging to the guerrilla group M-19. Furthermore, in the 1990s, the most influential academic center for the study of violence at the time (the Institute of Political Studies and International Relations of the National University of Colombia) was persecuted so harshly and systematically that a good number of its researchers ended up in exile. Some (such as Eduardo Pizarro) were targets of the FARC, while others (such as Álvaro Camacho and Iván Orozco) were targets of paramilitary groups; many of these individuals received research grants from the University of Notre Dame and elsewhere in order to escape the violence for a few years. With the caustic humor that Colombians have developed to endure this savagery, some called

these sponsorships “Carlos Castaño Fellowships,” a reference to the name of the commander of the powerful paramilitary armies that forced many public intellectuals into exile at the end of the 1990s. Others did not manage to flee in time: in 2004, Alfredo Correa de Andreis, a well-known sociologist from the Caribbean coast, was assassinated in a plot involving paramilitaries and the intelligence agency of the Colombian state. Although those of us who practice action research in Colombia today face personal risks that we must anticipate and manage with extreme prudence—for example, by carefully coordinating fieldwork with local NGOs and communities—fortunately, we do not face the prohibitive level of risk experienced by our predecessors. To them we owe the spaces we now have in universities, civil society, the state, and the media.

Third, the drawback to immediate access to actors and events is *difficulty in achieving the analytic distance* so essential for academic work. Precisely because they are not intruders in a social “laboratory” from which they want to extract information, action researchers wind up entangled in events, unable to leave in order to think and write. The problem with the windmill is that it never stops turning. And the vertigo of this perpetual movement can inhibit the tranquility and distance necessary to theorize and unravel the patterns that connect the facts. I was acutely aware of this dilemma on an almost daily basis, as the never-ending demands and unpredictable twists and turns of public engagement kept crowding out my plans to sit down and write the book I had intended to write, which explains why it took me three extra years to complete it.

Finally, the flipside of emotional adrenaline is *burn-out*. Motivated by their moral and personal commitments to their audiences and institutions, action researchers can end up in the vortex about which Burawoy writes. Before reading his account of the sociological windmill, I had used the same word—vortex—to describe the sensation I felt when practicing action research, interacting with so many different people in so many diverse places at such a dizzying speed. The experience is as exultant as it is exhausting. Going from minefields to classrooms and then to hearings before national and international human rights agencies and courts is fascinating. But it requires a work pace that can be inadvisable and even unsustainable.

Amphibious Research: Action Research in a Multimedia World

How can such difficulties be negotiated? There are no simple solutions. In the end, they are existential dilemmas, the kind that go hand in hand with the job itself. Those who enjoy the benefits of action research also accept its costs.

In this chapter, in framing this book and Dejusticia's action-research project underlying it, I have sought to be reflective about the difficulties of this endeavor. However, I do not want to end this chapter with this pessimistic tone, in part because a characteristic feature of action research is optimism. Or, to paraphrase Antonio Gramsci (1971), its combination of scientific and moral commitments means that the pessimism of the intellect is mixed with the optimism of the will. Thus, an appropriate way to conclude is to mention, at least briefly, professional strategies that could mitigate the dilemmas and take advantage of the strengths of action research, as illustrated by chapters in this volume and the training program that led to it.

My argument is the following: to navigate the winds of the windmill, it is necessary to become amphibious. In the same way that amphibious animals or vehicles move from land to water, the action researcher should be able to move seamlessly through various media. In violent contexts, in addition to navigating water and earth, the action researcher must be able to face the fire.

This type of practice is what I refer to as amphibious research. Etymologically, "amphibian" means "one that lives a double life." And, as we have seen, this is the defining characteristic of the action researcher.

Two strategies seem especially promising to advance amphibious research: one related to the texts that it produces and the other to additional forms of diffusion. I believe that one of the main reasons that action researchers suffer from dispersion and burnout is that the valid formats for the academic world (articles in indexed journals and books published by university presses) use a language and codes of communication that differ markedly from those expected by their other audiences (such as newspaper readers, social movement leaders, marginalized communities, television viewers, and the anonymous public of social media).