'Unmitigable': Reflecting on the power of language

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Figure 1: Picture of a sign in a designated unmitigable risk area. Reads: Property in unmitigable high risk: land under protection because of risk.

As my group and I were sitting in our classroom in a university building in London and discussing issues of risk in the neighbourhoods that we would be working in months later in the Eastern Hills of Bogotá, we could already begin to tell that the language that was being used was shaping the socioecological fabric of the territory.

As we began to look through the existing research in the area, it quickly became apparent that there was a disconnect between the state and the communities in how risk was being perceived and constructed (Allen et al., 2015). This disconnect is particularly exemplified through the use of the word '**unmitigable**' to discuss the risk situation in these communities. Although I could partially tell the extent of the issue from the other side of the world, it was only when I began to work with residents in the area that I really understood the power that language can hold. Throughout my time in the neighbourhoods of Triángulo Alto, Triángulo Bajo, and Manantial, I found that the word '**unmitigable**' was being used as a tool by the state to suppress residents' agency and ability to inhabit the hills in a sustainable way.

Jacobs (2002) says that "knowing what language does has commonly been thought to be superfluous to knowing what language is" (p.213) saying that instead, the term 'discourse' has been adopted. Those that study discourse pay attention to *how* language shapes interpersonal communication. As Hyde (2010) notes: "Ethics, rhetoric, and discourse show themselves in our everyday existence" (p.32) and that when you analyse the language used in a text, you must look further than *what* it means, looking also at *how* it means: how it produces understanding, attitudes, beliefs, and calls for action (Farrell, 1983 in Hyde, 2010; p.32). It is this thinking that allows me to dive into the word **unmitigable** and examine the context behind why it has been used, and the potential that a word holds to shape realities and livelihoods.

The classification of **unmitigable** leaves little room for nuance, and clearly ignores many of the factors that combine to create the level of risk in an area. The idea of a risk being mitigable or not is one that has been made from a distance, both a physical and imagined distance that leaves lots of room for misrepresentation of the level of danger and hinders effective risk management.

Consequences and insights from language

The Bogotá mayoral office is the body responsible for designating areas as at '**unmitigable** risk', and throughout our time in the field it became clear that there was an agenda behind the decisions that the office has taken. While trying to avoid the common pitfall of completely demonising the government, discussions with residents revealed that the state has been trying to remove communities from the Eastern Hills of Bogotá for some time, and risk designations were being weaponised for this purpose. The state, through the Plan de Ordenamiento Total (POT), has designated much of the eastern hills, particularly where settlements exist, as areas of 'riesgo no mitigable' (**unmitigable** risk; see figure 1). The areas that are given this designation are then systematically displaced by the Caja de la Vivienda Popular de Bogotá (the municipal housing agency) through processes of eviction and resettlement that can increase the vulnerability and infringe upon the rights of residents of **unmitigable** risk areas in Bogotá (Lopez et al., 2016).

These processes exist in a difficult landscape, where the area of the Eastern Hills that these neighbourhoods occupy has been made part of the forest reserve and later part of a buffer zone, which is the background for why the state wants the area to be cleared. It was during our fieldwork it became evident that the government and the communities had different ideas on how the forest reserve should be inhabited. The state are of the opinion that the best approach is to have no anthropic residents and to prioritise the non- and more-than-human, whereas the communities have a desire to stay and live sustainably in the hills.

The use of the term **unmitigable** is in itself evidence that the process of risk assessment is flawed, as it instantly eliminates the agency and the ability of the community to cope with risks. It is also representative of the overreliance on solely

technical aspects of assessment and the ignorance of local knowledges and techniques. Lee (2015) details some of the drawbacks of the typical risk assessment process, particularly the information base that they operate on which often ends up being a mix of established knowledge, assumptions, and guesses. It is this information base that ends up using a mixture of knowledge and ignorance where preliminary assumptions, scenarios, and expert knowledge mask the ignorance (Van der Slujis, 2005 in Lee, 2015; p.21). Policy is often based in this flawed information base, as is the case in the neighbourhoods in the Eastern Hills, where policy decisions are made before proper evidence is available, meaning that 'the distinction diminishes and gradually vanishes between real risks and the perception of risk' (Beck, 2006; p.42 in Lee, 2015). It is this distinction that has taken form in Triángulo and Manantial as the perception and designation of risk is becoming separate to the real lived experiences in the area which in turn infringes on resident's livelihoods.

Unmitigable risk is a term that the government employs to push a certain rhetoric that supports their end goal of having the forest reserve free of settlements. The effectiveness of this rhetoric is evident through the eviction of one neighbourhood, Corinto, that occurred after the settlement was designated as in an area of **unmitigable** risk.

Situating the case in wider rhetoric & Discourse

As discussed, the displacement of communities from the eastern hills is part of the state's desire to have the ecosystem of the hills untouched by man, but I would suggest that there are other actors at play that influence the interactions between community, state, and nature. The wider neoliberal logic that has shaped the world's relationship with nature, perhaps most clear in Latin America, where nature has often been commodified and responsibility for the environment is shunned by national level institutions (Liverman & Vilas, 2006). Although policies by the state (like the establishment of the forest reserve in Bogotá) can appear to be making ecological sustainability a priority, the private sector has the tendency to find ways to get what it wants, which is often not what is best for the environment.

During our time in the field, we found that the private sector was indeed permeating and influencing the decision-making processes in the locality, exerting pressures on the state to make occupying the hills a more exclusive practice. As a community leader from Triángulo Alto told us, organisations like the CAMACOL (Colombian Chamber for Construction), whose motto is 'Constructing More', have intercepted government legislation that aimed to legalise previously informal settlements in the Eastern Hills. The residents of Triángulo Alto and Bajo and Manantial are aware that there are pressures from the construction sector, as the border of the forest reserve zone threatens to move closer to their neighbourhood, in turn allowing private construction companies to build multi-storey apartment blocks. This process comes as a result of the **unmitigable** risk designation that invalidates residents' right to

inhabit the hills, whilst contradicting the motivation by allowing actors who provide more financial gain but ecologically damage the natural environment.

The **unmitigable** designation and the suppressive effect it has on these communities' agency has given rise to a form of resistance that also uses language and discourse to demand the right to inhabit the hills. This came through the form of an 'Ecobarrio', which is a way of living that prioritises harmony with nature, and hinges on coexistence. The notion was formulated initially by the Colombian government but was reclaimed by community leaders like Hector Álvarez who understood that it could be utilised to resist the government's push to displace the community through **unmitigable** risk designations (Ome, 2017). The Ecobarrio movement directly challenges the standardised idea of what a 'developed' city should look like and how territory should be lived in, providing an alternative discourse as a form of resistance.

During the time I spent in the neighbourhoods of Triángulo Alto, Triángulo Bajo, and Manantial I was able to see how language can have huge impacts on the everyday lived experience of people who have no say in what language is used. The choice by the government, whether consciously or unconsciously, to use the word **unmitigable** to describe the risk level in this territory first reflects the lack of due diligence that the state takes when formulating risk, and second damages the agency of the community to be able to inhabit the hills in a way that is sustainable for the residents and for the natural environment.

From a personally reflective point, seeing how the choice to use of a single word can be extremely insightful to a set of processes and can have such a huge impact on a territory initially came as a shock to me, but I began to understand how important language is in shaping discourse and rhetoric and how powerful those are in the real world. Ethically as a development practitioner, this has made clear to me that I must pay extremely close attention to the words used in official documents, legislation, and academic work and think about how it can provide insight into the thinking of the author as well as the impacts the text may have in the real world.

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