

“Not god’s work”

- An analysis of local narratives of the 2010-2011 flooding in the Santa Lucia municipality (Colombia)

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Abstract

The dam collapse in Santa Lucia (Atlántico) during the intense rains of 2010-2011 in Colombia resulted in one of the worst floods on national record. Six municipalities were completely covered by water from the *Canal del Dique*, an artificial branch of the Magdalena River. Santa Lucia was one of the municipalities that suffered from the flooding, with large economic and social impact across the region.

This research aims to present and explore local narratives about the disaster, told by inhabitants of Santa Lucia. The concept of narrative, understands their stories as deeply embedded in the political, economic, social and environmental context. Using concepts like marginality, subalternity and liminality, this research unpacks different elements of the story, revealing tensions and power relations present in the pre-disaster and post-disaster contexts in Santa Lucia.

In its conclusion, this research uses the concept of a meta-narrative, as a reformulation of the story, presenting the disaster as part of a story of transformation, shock and reshaping of the Santa Lucia landscape, in which – per Oliver-Smith’s work - vulnerability emerges as an uneven distribution of risk among individuals.

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Introduction

On November 30th 2010, one of the worst floods in the history of Colombia took place. The waters from the *Canal del Dique* - an artificial canal branch of the Magdalena River- surged as a result of the most intense rainy season in the country's recent history, breaking the dam and entering the lowlands. Five municipalities in the department of Atlántico, in the north of Colombia, were completely covered by water. Most of them remained underwater for months. Houses, crops and animals were destroyed, damaged or lost. Life in those municipalities wasn't the same after the disaster.

Santa Lucia, a municipality located on the riverbanks of the *Canal del Dique*, was one of the most affected by the flood. It was also the location of the dam's first rupture. This research document discusses how people from Santa Lucia narrate this disaster; the *story* they tell about the flooding that changed their life. Yet, this research doesn't simply aim to find that *story* but also to explore *why* people tell that particular *story*. Avoiding clever or distorted word games, the main objective of this research is to find the local narratives which emerge from the 2010-2011 flood in the municipality of Santa Lucia, and to identify the kind of contextual elements (e.g.: historical, politic, economic) that help shape, explain and determine this narrative.

Before we move on, we must ask the questions: Why should we study disaster? First, disasters are complex phenomena, which emerge as opportune spaces for exploring different aspects of social reality. Disaster reveals social inequalities, exposes the core of the social repertoire of a society - in its physical and moral dimensions - and opens spaces for the reformulation of established power arrangements.

Defining disasters can be challenging in terms of the complexity of the phenomenon and its definition is still called into strong academic debate (Oliver-Smith, 1999). Yet three main elements remain crucial to understanding the social science – particularly anthropological - approach to

disaster. First, disasters must be understood as an ongoing relationship between societies and the environment in which they exist. In this regard, certain adaptation strategies are established by every society, in which risks are not evenly shared throughout the social structure (Oliver-Smith, 2004). Second, disasters need to be understood as a process/event (Oliver-Smith, 1999). Disasters should be seen as *processes* that occur due to a particular set of ongoing relationships between a society and its environment. At the same time, disasters are also *events* which impact over ongoing process must be acknowledged. Finally, disasters are *totalizing events*; they are temporary spaces in which different dimensions of social life are simultaneously shocked (Oliver-Smith, 1996).

Furthermore, what is the importance of studying the narratives of disasters? Disaster survivors' narratives emerge as an important object of study. Beyond a chronological account of the events, narratives are society's attempt to find a coherent story and meaning that can be used to position the disaster in the symbolic social order (Zizek, 2003:104). Narratives about disaster are deeply embedded in the societal context, and shaped by ideas, concepts and references at the core of the society in question.

It is also worth noting the difference between survivors' narratives – which are examined in this research as local narratives – and other types of narratives surrounding disaster, especially the state's official narrative. Official narratives about disaster traverse public policy, guide humanitarian assistance in the reconstruction phase, and mediate various actors' access to assistance-related resources. As Hewitt warns, this official narrative is mainly dominated by academic disciplines in which “persons, communities and their concerns must be reduced to mass, collective units, statistically distributed data points, and function of abstract dimension” (Hewitt, 1995: 321).

In this matter, this research aims to make local narratives visible, to position them as valid objects of study in disasters. Moreover, separate from its academic purposes, this research aims to tell the *other part of the story*: the

one that is often eclipsed by the hegemonic official state narrative. This work starts to return a human face to the statistical figures into which people have been transformed. According to Hewitt, “the work of recovering and listening to oral testimonies from the victims of calamity goes to the heart of the problem of finding the human and the social in risk and disaster” (Hewitt, 1995: 329)

How does this research relate to topics of rural change or natural resource management, as guiding elements from SLU Master’s in Rural Development and Natural Resource Management? This research combines both elements. Disasters, as manifestations of ongoing relationships between society and its environment, are specific situations – *events* – in a particular natural resource management history. The responsibility for the disaster in Santa Lucia lies in the *Canal del Dique*, an artificial channel, which history proves is at the core of the natural resource elements that made the disaster possible.

On the other hand, throughout history disasters have been catalyzers of rural change. Disaster, as a *totalizing event*, produces inevitable change in societies by transforming their landscapes and livelihoods. Santa Lucia, the municipality on which this research focuses, also experienced the massive transformation that disaster can generate in rural contexts. Nowadays, phenomenon like climate change will materialize into different type of disasters (e.g.: floods, droughts), which increasingly hit rural areas, threatening the livelihood of communities largely dependent on agriculture (Davis et al, 2009). Disasters are, and will be, inevitable realities faced by rural areas across the globe. This research can therefore be read as a *story* about both a particular set of decisions regarding the managing of the natural resource that made a disaster inevitable; and about how a disaster can shape rural change in a marginal place.

This document is divided into four parts. *I. General Framework*, introduces the research question and methodology which guide the fieldwork and information analysis. It also includes general contextual information about

Santa Lucia and the main events of the disaster. *II. Local narrative about the 2010-2011 flooding of Santa Lucia* will present local narratives gathered during fieldwork in the municipality. *III. Exploring the narrative*, conducts various forms of analysis of the narrative, including: a) an exploration of the construction of *meanings* that underline the narrative of the disaster; b) the process of transformation of the landscape; c) an examination of the concept of “criminal hands” and the *representation* of the neighbor municipality of Calamar; d) an analysis of the idea of “winners and losers” after the disaster in the municipality, based on the concept of liminality ; and e) an exploration of the configuration of local political power after the disaster. *Conclusions* present a meta-narrative about the disaster, which emerges from the different elements analyzed in this research.

I. General framework

This chapter presents general elements of the research, including: the research question which guides this work; the theoretical framework upon which the work is based; the methodology followed during the research and analysis; and general context about the municipality, the disaster and its main events.

A. Research question

The research question that guides this research is: What kind of narratives emerge at the local level, in the municipality Santa Lucia (Colombia) regarding the flood of 2010-2011, and how can these narratives be explored and explained as embedded in the political, social, economic, cultural and ecological context of municipality?

B. Theoretical framework

Social scientists have been highly critical about the disciplines that have historically monopolized the study of disasters. Based on purely physical and statistical approaches, these disciplines have overlooked the social dimensions of disasters (Hewitt, 1995: 321). From a social science perspective, disasters must be considered as part of the ongoing relationship

between society and the environment, with a “large framework of historical and structural process” (Oliver-Smith, 1996: 314). Even from social science perspectives, which – to varying degrees - share common ground in disaster research, the production of overall consensus remains challenging due to the complexity embodied by disaster phenomena (Oliver-Smith, 1999:19). Four central ideas emerge as central to studying disasters: a) disasters as part of the ongoing relationships between societies and their environment b) disasters as process/event; c) disasters as totalizing events; and d) narratives of disasters as a social need for positioning the event in the symbolic order.

First, this paper will discuss disasters as ongoing processes between societies and their environment. This ongoing process is marked by adaptive strategies, which must be seen as way to prevent or respond to calamities, but unable to completely eliminate all sort of hazards. Specific ways of prioritizing adaptive strategies respond to the composition of power relations in a particular society, rather than to purely biological needs (Oliver-Smith, 1999: 26). Disasters emerge as a failure of the adaptive strategy, making them the realization of *vulnerability*. Therefore, individuals who live in situations of *vulnerability* are more exposed to disasters and less likely to be integrated into the adaptive strategies formulated within the society’s established socio-economic structure. Ethnographic research has proven that “social stratification within a community promotes unequal distribution of risk and allocation of resources between the community members” (Ullberg, 2014: 8).

Second, disasters as process/event. The idea of conceptualizing disasters as process/event helps to examine the different levels and temporalities that comprise the complexity of the phenomenon. Disasters are the result of the historical *processes* in which they are made possible.

In this respect, the concept of vulnerability is connected to the conceptualization of disasters as a process. According to Oliver-Smith, “a disaster is made inevitable by the historically produced pattern of vulnerability, evidence in the location, infrastructure, sociopolitical

structure, production patterns and ideology, which characterize a society” (1999:29). Nonetheless, disasters also emerge from *events*. In this matter, disasters are not only part of the process, but also need to be seen as elements of transformation. Therefore, disasters “reconfigure on-going processes and thus change course of things in one way or another after they have occurred” (Ullberg, 2014:7).

It is important to maintain this duality in the definition of the disaster as a process/event, and to avoid the risk of falling into misconception of the phenomenon. Understanding disaster as just a *process* leads to undeniable physical dimension of the *event* and the capacity of the phenomenon to produce transformations. On the other hand, understanding disasters as just as an events, without seen the *process* dimension, “seems to incorporate an almost functionalist assumption of general societal equilibrium prior to disaster” (Oliver-Smith, 1999: 23).

Third, disasters as *totalizing events*. The main idea here relies on the understanding of disasters as temporal spaces in which the social structure is shocked in different dimensions: economic, social, political and symbolic (Oliver-Smith, 1999:20). In this matter, disasters need to be interpreted as multidimensional phenomena in which all the elements that make up social life are disturbed simultaneously, creating a profound sense of *chaos* and *disorder* in daily life. As *totalizing events*, disasters are also potential spaces in which power arrangements in a society are examined (Oliver-Smith, 1997: 309-310).

Fourth, and finally, the society affected needs to create a narrative of the disaster. In this case, the core idea relies on human nature’s need to integrate overwhelming experiences such as disasters into the symbolic order, though narratives (Zizek, 1989). Bode claims that “making destruction more tolerable to the spirit is perhaps what myths and explanations of disasters are all about” (1977:268). Creating a narrative about *what happens* and *why it happens* is a common and profoundly revealing social practice after any disaster. Narratives about disaster are the best portrait of “the moral and

ethical core of the belief system” of a society (Oliver-Smith, 1997:308) and should be examined as embedded in societal power arrangements. As Oliver-Smith affirms, “the linkage between concrete circumstances and ideological structure may be directly observed as people attempt to come to terms with disasters, to construct meaning and logic that enable them, as individuals or group, to understand what happened to them” (Oliver-Smith, 2004:18).

Moving aside from the conceptualization of disasters, this research will use three particular concepts to examine the local narrative of Santa Lucia: *representation*, *subalternity* and *marginality*. *Representation* is interpreted as a complete system of representation, organizing, gathering, arranging and classifying concepts and complex relationships between them (Hall, 1997:16). Therefore, *representation* is a fundamental element for formulating world order and for individuals and societies to reflect upon it.

In addition, and in connection with *representation* but with different purposes, this document will use the concepts of *marginality* and *subalternity*. The concept of *marginality* will be used to explain the relationship between Santa Lucia and the State. In contrast, the concept of *subalternity* will highlight aspects of the relationship between Santa Lucia and its neighbor municipality, Calamar. The difference between Santa Lucia’s *marginality* and *subalternity* with respect to the State and Calamar is marked by how each of the actors is *represented* to the Santa Lucians: the image of the State is more of a link to political processes of citizenship recognition, while the image of Calamar is linked to moral reflection.

Subalternity refers to the “relational position in a conceptualization of power” (Paldney, 2006). Without entering extended debate on the concept, this paper will rework Paldney’s definition and use subalternity to understand the historical position in which individuals have been placed in uneven power relations. In this matter, this concept of *subalternity* emerges from Antonio Gramsci’s work in *Prison Notebook* (Gramsci, 1971).

On the other hand, *marginality* here refers more to the notion of periphery and exclusion, in which certain individuals or territories are placed in the *limits* of the recognition of *citizenship*. Even without including a reification of the *state*, this concept of *marginality* is clearly related to the materialization of a particular State presence in those peripheries and the way in which the individuals present in those marginal territories are think and intervene by State narratives and technologies (Das and Poole, 2008).

C. Methodology

This research is based on ethnographic methodology with the use of interviews and participatory observation in the municipality of Santa Lucia, with a total of three weeks of fieldwork in Santa Lucia, Calamar, Campo de la Cruz and Barranquilla. Semi-structured interviews were conducted in Santa Lucia, most of them in groups of two to five people. The group selected for interview aimed to incorporate the widest possible sample to integrate variables such as gender, class and age. Participatory observation was also conducted by spending time with community members in their daily routines. In the other locations mentioned (Calamar, Campo de la Cruz and Barranquilla) interviews or participatory observation were conducted.

Methodologically, the concept of *narrative* guides the entire research work. This concept, taken from literature theory, refers to the understanding of particular stories through which societies organize and make sense of their reality. In this matter, Czarniawska claims that “to understand a society or some part of a society, it is important to discover its repertoire of legitimate stories and find out how it evolved“(2004:5).

Three interconnected elements remain central to the concept of *narrative*: *intentionality*, *plot* and *validity*. Starting with the idea of *intentionality*, narrative is a way in which experiences can be organized “with the help of a scheme assuming the intentionality of human action” (Czarniawska, 2004:7). Narratives ensure that different events can be integrated into the symbolic order, taking into account that there was a particular human (or

mystical) action that helped to shape the particular set of the reality. Therefore, “explanations are possible because there is a certain teleology – sense of purpose- in all lived narratives (Czarniawska, 2004: 13).

Moving on to the idea of *plot*, narratives go beyond the simple chronological review or expression of events. A narrative needs a *plot* that explicitly states and explains relationships that emerge between these events. Czarniawska claims that “usually plots are much more complicated and contain chains of actions and events, oscillating states of affairs, apparent actions, and wrongly interpreted events, as in suspense or mystery, but a minimal plot is enough to make sense of a narrative” (2004:19). The existence of a narrative is therefore based on the existence of a *plot* -in which a relationship emerges between different events- rather than for the level of complexity of the *story* itself.

Finally, regarding the idea of *validity*, when exploring narrative the concept of *validity emergence* is used here as a guiding criteria, but not in the usual sense. According to Czarniawska, “it is the plot rather than the truth or falsity of story element that determines the power of a narrative as a story” (Czarniawska, 2004:8). When considering a narrative, the question that should therefore be formulated is not whether the narrative is *true* or *false*, but rather what kind of context can make this certain narrative *possible*.

The methodological approach to this research and its different stages is therefore framed around this concept of *narrative*. At the beginning of the research, semi-structured interviews were used to ask survivors about their experience of the disaster. *Chronological questions* (or *what* questions) were asked with the goal of establishing a timeline of the disaster. In addition, a group of *interpretative questions* (or *why* questions) aimed to encourage people to make a connection between the different events stated. Even though one could argue that a blurry line exists between *chronological* and *interpretation* questions as a certain chronological order is also influenced by the interpretation approach, at a practical level this overlap

does not influence the capacity to advance exploration of the *narrative* of the disaster.

During the later analytical stage of the research, the interviews and participatory observation data was systematized into a narrative panel, which presents elements shared by the interviewees, and is guided by Ullberg's interpretation of the Malkki method (Ullberg, 2014: 77). Through this method, a common narrative emerges. The following step consisted of identifying core elements of the narrative and contextualizing them from a political, economic, social and ecological standpoint. This exploration resulted in the formulation of a meta-narrative that aimed to create a coherent narrative about the different elements that were analyzed more closely.

D. Context

The municipality of Santa Lucia is located in the Atlántico department in northern Colombia. Santa Lucia borders the municipalities of Manatí, Suan and Campo de la Cruz (also part of the department of Atlántico), and the *Canal del Dique* to the south.

Similar to many of Atlántico's southern municipalities, Santa Lucia has historically suffered from widespread social problems rooted in the high levels of poverty, lack of public services and the general absence of state institutions. As of 2010, the total population of Santa Lucia municipality was 11,947 inhabitants. According to official figures, 60% of the population in the municipality was below the poverty line. Only 27% of the inhabitants are served by the sewer system. Illiteracy of children between five and 15 years old is at 16%, and from 15 to 18 years old it is 3% (DANE, 2010). With regards to unemployment, only 18.59% of the population was considered economically active, with one of the worst unemployment rates in Atlántico department (Sanchez Jabba, 2012: 23).

The *Canal del Dique* constitutes a vital part of Santa Lucia's social life. The *Canal del Dique* is an artificial navigable channel, whose construction began in the sixteenth century and whose length has now reached 155 Km,

from Calamar (Bolívar department) to Cartagena de Indias (Bolívar department). This *Canal* is strategically essential for the transportation and export of resources (mainly oil) from the regions that border the Magdalena River and the port area. The Canal del Dique transports 80% of the 2,200,000 tonnes that move through the Magdalena River per year (BID and CEPAL 2012:193).

Municipalities in the south of Atlántico - especially Santa Lucía - were catapulted into the national headlines in November 2010, after the Canal del Dique dam broke, flooding five municipalities and affecting many others. This disaster took place during a national state of emergency, which had been declared due to the unusually intense rainy season of 2010-2011, called the *Ola Invernal*, which left a path of destruction all across Colombia¹.

On the afternoon of November 30th 2010, on the road that connects the municipality of Calamar and Suan with Santa Lucía, the dam broke creating a hole through which water from the Canal entered the lowlands, affecting close to 200,000 people (BID and CEPAL, 2011: 56). The Canal was overflowing due to the increasing and constant rain, and the strong flow caused the hole to grow until it reached 238 meters in width. It was only on January 25th 2011 that the dam was finally closed, after more than 2,200 million cubic meters of water had entered in the lowlands (Sanchez Jabba, 2012:10).

Official reports highlight the extraordinary phenomenon and the impact of the *Ola Invernal*, “this emergency was completely abnormal, affecting a big part of the country and with severe impact at economic, social and environmental level” (BID and CEPAL, 2012: 14). More than 3 million people across the country were affected by floodings or landslides, 2.3

¹ More than 3 million people across the country were affected by floods or landslides, 2.3 million directly affected by destruction of properties and loss of their sources of productive income. (BID and CEPAL, 2012: 27). The scale of the damage led the Colombian government to declare a national emergency for economic, social and environmental reasons (CIDHUM, 2014: 37).

million directly affected by destruction of properties and loss of their production. (BID and CEPAL, 2012: 27). The scale of the damage led Colombian government to declare a national emergency for economic, social and environmental reasons (UniNorte, 2014: 37).

The municipalities in the south of Atlántico were heavily affected by the disaster. Some municipalities such as Santa Lucia and Campo de la Cruz, were underwater for weeks (Sánchez Jabba, 2012:12). The damage exacerbated the high levels of poverty in affected areas and had a detrimental effect on the local economy, which is highly dependent on agriculture (BID and CEPAL, 2011:56). Official figures show that close to 30,000 hectares of crops were affected in the region. In terms of livestock, close to 70,000 animals (mostly cattle and pigs) were affected, with more than 10% dying from drowning or during transportation (Sanchez Jabba, 2012: 15).

In Santa Lucia, the impact of the disaster was overwhelming. The water covered 100% of the municipality, with official figures showing affectation to 2,000 houses. All six local schools were acutely affected, leaving the municipality without any educational institutions. At an economic level, 1,300 hectares were flooded, destroying crops and livestock. According to official records, 81.57% of the households in the municipality reported loss of livestock and 30.3% reported loss of crops (Sanchez Jabba, 2012: 22).

For the Colombian state, the official narrative that followed the dam rupture was framed in the bigger picture of the *Ola Invernal*. Furthermore, the official narrative presents climate change as the main element that clearly underlines all the disasters that the *Ola Invernal* produced across Colombia at the end of 2010 and beginning of 2011. Official reports highlight the extraordinary impact of the *Ola Invernal*: “this emergency was completely abnormal, affecting a big part of the country and with severe impact at economic, social and environmental levels” (BID and CEPAL, 2012: 14).

However, the state narrative conceived of the *Ola Invernal* as both a disaster and a possibility. Destruction, for the National Development Plan of 2010-2014, was considered a possibility for reconstruction and an opportunity for the State to create a presence in historically marginalized areas of the country, while preparing for additional impact of climate change in the territory (PND, 2011).

Probably the best portrait of the official narrative was the speech of Colombian President Juan Manuel Santos Calderon, at the inauguration of the municipal school on March 6th 2015. After mentioning that he was the first Colombian president to visit Santa Lucia, President Santos said,

I made a promise. I told Colombians: let's try to benefit from this difficult situation, this crisis (...) to see if we can, after several years, be better than we were before the natural disaster - probably the worst in the country's recent history. And it is so good to come to Santa Lucia and witness that the dream was accomplished. Who would have imagined? And I ask the parents here present, did you have such good quality schools for you children, four or five years ago? So we may say that we managed to take advantage of the disaster: it has changed the situation of many people. (Presidencia de la República, 2015)².

I. Local narrative of the flooding of 2010-2011

This chapter presents the Santa Lucians' narrative regarding the disaster. This narrative aims to present the results of the numerous interviews and observation conducted during fieldwork.

***Ola Invernal* and the imminent disaster**

For Santa Lucians, the narrative about the disaster is rooted in the beginning of the *Ola Invernal*, when the *Canal del Dique* started increasing its level beyond that of the usual *creciente*³. While the locals started to notice the extraordinary increase in the water far beyond its usual levels, regional and municipal authorities remained completely passive toward the hazard that Santa Lucia was facing. People in the municipality still remember that days before the disaster, former Governor Eduardo Verano claimed that “the

²Translated by the author

³ *Creciente* is, for the locals, the period of the year with the highest precipitation and therefore the highest levels of water.

south of the Atlántico is shielded”⁴ against the *Ola Invernal*. Former mayor of Santa Lucia, Osvaldo Santana, also failed to provide any kind of initiative to prevent the situation from worsening. The community therefore started organizing itself, alarmed by the levels of the Canal.

The community started working in early November. The initial task was to reinforce four points of the dam in front of the town that had the highest possibility of collapsing. Rocks and sand bags were used to reinforce the sensitive points. Men, women, kids, elderly people, and even some pregnant women took part in the massive community effort to prevent the water from entering Santa Lucia. The bell tolls by the Church in the main square, sounding in the middle of the night or during the day, were the signal for the community to immediately go to a certain point and work to prevent the water from overflowing. They cooked a communal *sancocho*⁵ and worked for hours. The main fear was that if any of the points broke and let the water in, the town would be completely flooded in minutes. The anxiety among the people increased every time the bell called everyone to work. Meanwhile, not a single working machine was mobilized by the governor to support this community effort.

The disaster materializes

Finally, on the 30th of November 2010, the dam broke. The event didn't take place at any of the four critical points on which the community had been working during the previous weeks. For the people of Santa Lucia, it was really suspicious that a high part of the dam, outside the town, and without any signs that threatened breakage, was the part that finally collapsed. In fact, Santa Lucians have heard a story about a motorcycle passing by just before the collapse, with people from the neighboring town of Calamar throwing a liquid called *azogue*⁶ into the road. People claim that, regardless

⁴ “*El sur del Atlántico está blindado*”

⁵ Colombian soup made of cassava, plantain and meat, chicken or fish

⁶ *Azogue* is a liquid that people in Santa Lucia claim that can destroy pavement or even rocks.

of the imminent danger faced by the town, these “criminal hands”⁷ were the ones who actually caused the disaster. According to the story, the Calamar inhabitants’ motivation for this act was to save their own town from being completely erased by the water from the Magdalena River, if the pressure of the water wouldn’t be reduced by the dam break.

Calamar⁸, which is located at the fork of the Magdalena River and the beginning of the Canal del Dique, saw the Magdalena River reach its highest historical level, rising so much that it threatened to break the 15-meter wall that protects the town from the river. Calamar couldn’t resist one more week. For Santa Lucians, Calamar was forced into a “them or us” decision, and people from Calamar decided to let Santa Lucia flood. After the dam broke, the levels of the Magdalena River decreased and Calamar was saved. People in Santa Lucia explained that no investigation about this matter was conducted by the authorities.

Apart from the story of the “criminal hands”, there is general recognition of the disaster event as a sort of blessing. If the dam had broken in any of the places the community was expecting, the outcome would have been catastrophic. However, given the way that it did finally break, there weren’t any casualties. “We would not be telling this story if the dam had broken in front of the town. He [who put *azogue* in the road] was a decent criminal”, said one Santa Lucian.

Regardless of actual responsibility for the incident, the floodwater initially did not surpass two meters in wide, and the community immediately responded. People desperately threw stones and sand bags, but the hole kept growing due to the strong flow of the channel during the *Ola Invernal*. Water entered directly into the lowland areas of Campo de la Cruz and Manatí municipalities, and then moved into the periphery neighborhoods of

⁷ It is remarkable how people repeated the exact same expression of “criminal hands” without it being brought up in the interview questions.

⁸ Calamar is a municipality within the department of Bolívar, with close to 22,000 inhabitants, located just 20 Km from Santa Lucia. Calamar is an important trade center for all the municipalities that borders the Magdalena River and Canal del Dique.

Santa Lucia, located on the other side of the road, and the rural area (*corregimiento*)⁹ of Algodonar. Meanwhile, the road –acting like a dam– offered protection for the center of the town, to which many people from the flood-affected areas moved. Mayor Santana, without any effort to control the disaster, ran first to save his own livestock. Governor Verano arrived two days later, by which time the hole was close to 100 meters wide.

“*Mal vendiendo*”

The initial stage of the flood was one of the most painful moments for the Santa Lucians. Livestock and crops were the first to be lost. Santa Lucians started selling their livestock at any price to prevent losing them to drowning. This phenomenon took place all across the flooded area in the south of the Atlántico. Lands were not part of the market. No-one in the town sold property.

People were “*mal vendiendo*” (entering unfair business transactions between parts) all their animals at any price offered. There were strong emotional consequences for people in Santa Lucia who sold their animals for not even a quarter of their normal price. A woman mentioned “my husband sold a cow for 300,000 pesos (120 US dollars), and 5 days later, a cow that originally cost 3,000,000 pesos (1,200 US dollars) was sold for no more than 100,000 pesos (40 US dollars)”. People were “*mal vendiendo*” all their cattle, pigs and hens.

There are also strong emotions associated with the particular buyers who arrived from Bolivar, Cesar and the northern municipalities of Atlántico to take part in this market, in which they benefited from the vulnerability of the townspeople. One Santa Lucian mentioned how “people took advantage of our need, but we couldn’t do anything at that time”. One older lady said, “it was so painful to see how the cattle, that we had because of the (hard work), sweat and suffering of my son in Venezuela, were sold for pennies”.

⁹ *Corregimiento* is the territorial unit below the municipality, within the Colombian territorial legal management system.

The fight for Santa Lucia

When the water had completely covered the lowlands of Manatí, Campo de la Cruz, Candelaria and the rural part of the municipality, it returned to Santa Lucia, with the road as the only protection. During the first week of December 2010, Santa Lucia was an island between two bodies of water: the Canal del Dique (south) and the flooded lands (north). The people blocked all the bridges across the road to prevent the water from flooding the town. The community again gathered to reinforce the bridges. For some Santa Lucians, Mayor Santana lacked any commanding qualities and was completely paralyzed by nerves, claiming that “there is nothing you can do about nature”. Yet, for others, Mayor Santana was actually eager to let the water enter the town so that all traces of the corruption during his administration would be erased.

Meanwhile, the rain was another worry for the people in Santa Lucia. Completely surrounded by water, rain kept pouring down incessantly. With all the bridges blocked, there wasn't a way for the rain water to leave the town, therefore flooding its lowest part. Around this time, people also started moving their belongings and anything they could save from their houses. They were desperate times, and people collected their most valuable possessions in their hands or in the few boxes that they could find during the chaos.

The dimension of the hole in the dam outside Santa Lucia was now reaching 200 meters, almost the width of the channel itself, with no solution in sight. It was clear to Santa Lucians that politicians and contractors involved in the area had no interest in fixing the damage. They named the gap the “*boquete millonario*” (*the millionaire hole*), as a way to describe the huge amount of resources that regional politicians and contractors were gaining from the disaster, and which would continue flowing if the disaster continued.

On December 12th, a bridge collapsed. The water from the flooded area finally entered the town. This was, for Santa Lucia, the most shocking

moment experienced by its people. One recurring phrase among Santa Lucians regarding this moment is that, “even the manliest guy cried”¹⁰. This emotion is marked by the impotence of being completely surrounded by water without any way to stop it from entering the houses, and without being able to find a dry place for shelter. People gathered desperately waiting for a boat to take them out of the town. That day -December 12th - the rain suddenly stopped. The next day was the celebration of Santa Lucia, patron saint of the municipality. It took three days for the water to completely cover town.

The only dry point within that massive water landscape was the road. People and animals shared a 3-meter wide road, taking the few things they were able to save and leaving a small space for some motorcycles to pass. Mayor Santana, in an act that some Santa Lucians qualify as “cowardice”, moved his office to Barranquilla, and “abandoned his responsibility for the town”. Those with nearby relatives or economic means moved to Barranquilla, other towns, or even Venezuela. The rest of the people were forced to move to the road or to *Lomita Arena*.

Lomita Arena -which translates as *little sand mountain*- is a high place by the riverside, located at the other side of the channel, in the municipality of Calamar (Bolívar). The place’s name originates in its use as the dumping ground from previous dredging of the Canal. More than 100 families from Santa Lucia found shelter from the flood in *Lomita Arena*.

Even as humanitarian assistance was arriving, *Lomita Arena* was a difficult place in which to live. The high temperatures were exacerbated by the plastic cover of *cambuches*¹¹, and there was a lot of wind, which covered everything including the food with sand made life in the shelter a challenge. There was no rainfall to relieve the situation during this period.

¹⁰ “Hasta el más hombre lloró”

¹¹ *Cambuche* is a houses made of plastic and wood

Meanwhile, ransacking increased in the town. Santa Lucians blame their own neighbors for these incidents. One Santa Lucian mentioned “they didn’t feel any sorrow, they just started robbing”. Houses abandoned during the flood were the target for ransacking. People lost TVs, fridges, cooking materials, furniture, and other items. One Santa Lucian affirmed that “people who had nothing then appeared with two TVs or three fridges. Everyone knew who they were but no-one did anything”. After a few days, the Colombian army entered and declared a curfew, warning people that they had orders to open fire on anyone found outside after sundown. Even to this day, the topic of looting is still an open wound among the Santa Lucians.

The aid that started to appear revealed some characteristics of the town. One Santa Lucian stated that “for people who had never had anything, this [the food and other elements from the aid] was perfect”. Going a little deeper, another mentioned that “I started seeing people as if they were all chubby. I used to think that some people in Santa Lucia were skinny, but that wasn’t the case. People were starved”.

Drying out and rebuilding the town

On January 15th, three motor pumps were donated by the singer Shakira, to finish removing the water from the town. People started returning to clean their houses against the recommendation of state agencies, who warned about the health risks associated with the stagnant water. The residents’ potentially reckless action resulted from fear of a possible relocation effort instigated by the government. Santa Lucians emphatically refused to participate in any relocation effort. They feared that any sort of new house offered to them would not include a proper *patio* for their animals and crops. One Santa Lucian said “they [the State] want to relocate me, and even the whole town. But where am I going to find a house like mine, where I have a big *patio* in which I can have plants and animals? They won’t give us that”.

People outside the town center had to wait even more to start cleanup and renovations. Neighborhoods such as *Pueblo Nuevo*, located in the periphery of the town, were inundated by water until June 2011. In the *corregimiento* of Algodonar, 10 Km from the town center, the floodwater remained until March.

Problems with reconstruction also presented themselves at this time. *Fundación Santo Domingo* was chosen by the Colombian government as a partner to lead the reconstruction process in the municipality. Many people complained about bad distribution of building materials. In contrast, others recognize the scale of assistance they received for reconstruction of their houses, including great quantities of building materials. However, in the *corregimiento* of Algodonar, a farmer argued that they haven't seen the "Fundación Santo Domingo in more than three years" and that people started rebuilding using their own money because they grew tired of waiting for help.

Throughout this reconstruction plan, the greatest shortage was in mental support for the survivors. After the disaster, many inhabitants didn't recover from the shock. There wasn't any kind of psychological support. A local fisherman told the story of his neighbor who "died from pure sorrow". Other cases of depression were reported in Algodonar.

A blessing and a curse

When drawing conclusions about the disaster, people in Santa Lucia often think of it as a dual phenomenon: a *blessing* and a *curse*. For an elderly lady, "the disaster was a blessing and a curse at the same time. First everything was sad but look at the town now: the hospital, the roads and the school. We didn't have that before". People tend to see the disaster as a *blessing* when pointing out the new infrastructure that Santa Lucia now has, that previously wasn't even possible in the townspeople's wildest dreams. The hospital, the roads, the sport facilities, the school: these are all results of the attention that the disaster attracted to Santa Lucia.

That *blessing* is marked, and moreover personified, by the figure of the current governor of Atlántico, Jose Antonio Segebre. Among Santa Lucians, the Governor Segebre is incredibly popular, with some even claiming “the mayor of Santa Lucia is Governor Segebre”. They recognize Governor Segebre’s efforts to persuade Mayor Santana to work. However, as a local merchant said, “to make things work, sometimes he [Governor Segebre] needed to skip the mayor’s authority. It’s the only way”.

On the other hand, the *curse* of the disaster is marked by the economic crisis that followed the destruction of agriculture and livestock. Those sectors, vital for Santa Lucians’ livelihood, were completely destroyed after the disaster. Fishing activity, another source of income, has almost disappeared. Nowadays, people in Santa Lucia sometimes need to go to Calamar to buy food supplies that were available in their town before the disaster. The losses in livestock represent a particularly acute difficulty for Santa Lucians, not only because they derive their livelihood from agriculture, but also because livestock is a form of saving money gained through remittances and work.

In this general economic crisis, working in infrastructure construction remains the only employment opportunity in the municipality. Many in the municipality fear what will happen when the construction is over and no more employment for it is needed. One Santa Lucian claims, “What’s the good of having nice houses, a beautiful school, a beautiful hospital, a nice garden if we don’t have any food. Everything that I mentioned is really good, but with a full belly”. Another community leader mentions how “in Santa Lucia, most of the people who eat lunch don’t eat dinner”.

The social and economic crisis in Venezuela made matters worse. Venezuela has historically been a destination for migrant workers from Santa Lucia, and the source of large remittances entering the municipality. Every house in Santa Lucia has family members who are living or have

lived in Venezuela. The depreciation of the Bolivar (the Venezuelan currency) has had impact on remittances in the municipality, so its economy has also weakened. In addition, the social unrest in Venezuela has made many people return to Santa Lucia. Many of those returning to the town are suspected of being part of the rising robbery and drug consumption there.

Winners and losers

For the people in Santa Lucia, the story of the disaster is also characterized by *winners* and *losers*. After the disaster, poor people and politicians were on the winning team. The rest are the losers. “The poor win, the rich lose”, stated one lady.

The disaster was an opportunity for people living in extreme poverty, sometimes living in overcrowded or fragile *bahareque*¹² houses, to obtain a decent home for their families. They also obtained food and goods (fridges, TVs, mattresses) that they wouldn't have had the financial capacity to buy in the past. On the other hand, people who had the capacity to satisfy their needs in the past, even with some difficulty, were now much worse off, especially if they had lost livestock. In some cases, people in Santa Lucia claim that the disaster was even worse for the rich. One Santa Lucian expresses this feeling when saying, “the disaster made us all poor”.

Local politicians were the other winners. Politicians got rich in new corruption schemes and gained greater control over local politics. Even when agreeing on the corruption and lack of action of the current administration, people consider that it would be difficult for the political elite in the municipality to change. Within the disaster context, corruption practices increased in the municipality¹³. Large resources, aimed at helping

¹² *Bahareque* is a type of construction made up of mud and wood sticks.

¹³ But probably the biggest corruption case was made with money that the *Fondo de Adaptación* gave to the municipality, as an additional help for the rebuild of the municipality.

Some households were offered 1.500.000 pesos (600 USD) so they can do certain improvements to their houses. The problem was that none of that money reached any Santa Lucians. In a corruption scheme that involved the actual mayor, Teodomiro Ariza - the authorities created a false database, with people from Barranquilla, the northern municipalities of the department and even people living in Venezuela. Then they promised

the Santa Lucians, arrived in small quantities or didn't arrive at all to those for whom they were intended. Other people mention how those benefits targeted only the employees of the municipality.

Probably the biggest corruption case was conducted with money from the *Fondo de Adaptación* given to the municipality as an additional help to rebuild housing. Some households were supposed to be granted 1,500,000 pesos (600 USD) for certain improvements to their homes. None of that money reached any Santa Lucians. Mayor Ariza is involved in this corruption scheme. Since the time that aid was being distributed, national oversight entities discovered the case and it is now under investigation. No one in Santa Lucia knows the amount of money involved in this corruption scheme.

II. Interpreting the narrative

As was mentioned previously, it is important to interpret the *narrative* on the basis of *validity*, not in terms of *true* or *false* but rather with a focus on understanding what kind of contextual elements made the narrative *possible* in the society in which it was created. Narrative about disaster is a precious object of research due to its multiplicity of references, concepts and ideas, which people build to produce meaning about the destruction and suffering. In addition, the process of *making sense out of the disaster* is completely embedded in the specific social, political, cultural and economic characteristics of a society, revealing “the linkage between concrete circumstances and ideological structure” (Oliver-Smith, 2004:18).

A large quantity of ideas, concepts and perceptions worth exploring lies throughout the narrative presented about the Santa Lucia flooding. However, the attention of this research will focus on five core elements that

those people registered in the database between 300.000 (120 USD) and 500.000 (200 USD) for being part of the corruption scheme. Finally the national oversight body discovered the case and it is now under investigation. No one in Santa Lucia is clear about the amount of money involved in this corruption scheme.

emerged and will help to expand and contextualize the narrative, framing the political, social, ecological, cultural or economic processes and events that make the people in Santa Lucia to consider this narrative as socially *possible*.

This section will present those different elements. First, it will explore the construction of meaning, or general teleology that underlines the narrative of the disaster. Second, the chapter will analyze the process of transformation of the landscape and the emergence of vulnerability in Santa Lucia. Third, it will examine the idea of “criminal hands” and Calamar municipality’s responsibility in the disaster. Fourth will come an analysis of the idea of “winners and losers” after the disaster in Santa Lucia. And finally, the chapter will explore the configuration and elements of local politics.

A. What is the meaning of the disaster?

A narrative must have an inner *sense of purpose* or teleology that helps the actors to make sense of the story. This notion focuses on the fact that what happens during the narrative (*suffering, sorrow*) was an essential element to produce an outcome. This sub-chapter will examine the meaning that Santa Lucia gives to the disaster.

Not god’s work

Spiritual leaders (priests and preachers) interviewed during fieldwork refused to give a pure divine interpretation of the disaster. They emphasized the political dimension and importance of the disaster for overcoming the historic poverty and state neglect in the municipality. All of them also expressed that the disaster was not a *mystical experience* for the people in the municipality, and that the churchgoers, remained the same in a pre-disaster and post-disaster context.

This lack of mystical interpretation runs across the different actors in the municipality. They failed to deliver that interpretation even when

deliberately asked for a mystical interpretation of the disaster, or when asked about the curious coincidence from a previous massive flood in Santa Lucia, in November 30th 1984. A smile, a joke, but nothing more.

Besides the explicit reluctance to manifest a mystical interpretation of the disaster, there are also actions that prove that interpretation. The reluctance to give this disaster a mystical dimension is marked by the story of a Christian Church in the town that, exactly one year after the disaster, in November 2011, claimed that by December of the same year, the whole town would be completely destroyed. Despite the recent trauma in the municipality, nobody except the closest followers of the preacher abandoned the town. Some weeks later the members of the Church returned.

Two interconnected elements lie in at the core of the Santa Lucians reluctantly for giving the disaster a mystical interpretation: a shared notion of the transformation of the landscape and the conception of the disaster as a *chronical technical disaster*.

It is important to examine the shared notion of the experience of transformation of *the landscape*. This notion is gradually spread among people in Santa Lucia, especially from one age group to another. Some people can still remember places where the water was before the construction, before the road and the dam. They recall the places in which their fathers fished, some of them in the actual town¹⁴. This notion of *transformation of the landscape* among Santa Lucians is close to what Ullberg presents as *memoryscape*, in which the “spatiality of memory and the notion of landscape” interact (Ullberg, 2014: 14).

Similar to the shared notion of *transformation of the landscape* is the experience of the disaster as a *chronic technical disaster*. This concept, developed by Kroll-Smith and Couch (1987), is used to describe “human origin disasters” that escalate chronically, originating in a failure to create

¹⁴ This notion of the transformation of the landscape is expanded in the next sub-chapter “*B. the emergence of the vulnerability of Santa Lucia*”

technical solutions to problems that can cause disasters. This type of disaster must be differentiated from an “immediate catastrophe event (like earthquake or hurricane), which caused suffering and called for religious response and explanation” (1987:34). The most important contribution of Kroll-Smith and Couch lies in the idea of defining a disaster as being made possible by a systematic failure to provide a technical solution and which “has a structure and a pattern of victimization that are not readily adapted to local religion” (1987:36).

This definition of *chronic technical disaster* fits into the narrative of how Santa Lucians experienced the disaster. In contrast to other disasters that would be considered *immediate*, the disaster in Santa Lucia was one in which the national, regional and local authorities systematically failed - from the prevention stage to the closure of the hole in the dam, and protecting Santa Lucia from the collapse of the bridge. People expressed anger when remembering the words of Governor Verano, days before the dam burst, on November 30th - “the south of the department is shielded against the Ola Invernal” - and failing to put any machinery in the town to reinforce the dam. Similar reactions were seen when considering Mayor Santana’s “cowardice” and “nervousness” in managing the situation before, during and after the disaster and the contractors’ and regional government’s unusual tardiness to close the burst. People also stated frustration over the systematic failure to provide a technical solution to the disaster, relating to the clear notion of the landscape transformation process which prevented mystical interpretation of the disaster.

The lack of a leading divine element in the narrative –or what Kroll-Smith and Couch might see as the “irrelevance of the religious meaning” in a narrative (1987) – opens other elements as the possible main drivers in the narrative. In the case of Santa Lucia, this *chronic technical disaster* perception of the situation also presents an extension of the State’s neglect for all aspects of social life in the municipality.

Historically, Santa Lucia has been a *marginal* territory, and in this historical *marginality* the disaster emerged as an *opportunity*. Without any commodities in their territory (e.g.: oil, minerals) that could attract the attention of the State, disaster emerges as the only way for Santa Lucia to position itself in the State's scope of attention. The official narrative reinforces this kind of interpretation of the disaster as an *opportunity* for the State to fulfill its responsibility. In other words, *the lack of attention from the State, which made the disaster possible, was now an opportunity for the State to be present and promote change*. This teleology of the narrative, or *sense of purpose*, frames the disaster for Santa Lucians.

In addition, the presence of Calamar in the narrative made the interpretation more complex and distances this paper from Kroll-Smith and Couch's definition of *chronic technical disaster*, which does not allow for moral interpretation of disaster. Calamar embodies the *representation* of negative moral attributions¹⁵. Calamar, finding itself at a survival crossroad against Santa Lucia, made the decision to sacrifice Santa Lucia. The context of *lack of attention from the State, which made the disaster possible, became an opportunity for the State to be present and for things to change*. Finally, *Calamar was the one responsible for the disaster*.

In conclusion, Santa Lucian's interpretation of the disaster is not a divine interpretation of the events, but rather a clear result of the process of transformation that had been taking place in the municipality, and the authorities' failure to deal with and prevent the risk. Yet, there is also a moral element that enters and underscores the narrative, connected to the action (*representation*) of the neighbor town of Calamar.

B. The emergence of *vulnerability* in Santa Lucia

¹⁵ The *representation* of Calamar will be examined in the sub-chapter C" *Criminal hands*" (or the moral condemnation of Calamar)

Among the Santa Lucians, there is a strong notion of transformation of the landscape that has taken place in their territory during recent decades. This process of transformation had produced profound change in the **socioeconomic** structure of the municipality over time. However, this transformation of the landscape also produced risks for the population. This sub-chapter will examine the interaction between *transformation of the landscape* and *marginality* from which the *vulnerability* of Santa Lucia emerges.

Marginality

Santa Lucia has historically been positioned at the margins. Maps from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries show how what is now Santa Lucia was part of a large system of *cienagas*¹⁶ which connect with the *cienaga de Matuna*, near Cartagena de Indias, during the rainy season (Mogollón Vélez, 2012:12). This territory, covered by a multiplicity of *cienagas*, was a perfect place for runaway black slaves (called *cimarrones*) escaping from their slave masters. This territory was therefore referred to as *Canoga de Negros*. The territory remained a marginal place for the subsequent centuries, offering no natural resources for regional or national interests, and becoming a place where fishermen settled and were able to obtain their livelihood from the numerous *cienagas* that cover the territory.

Despite being the third smallest department with only 3,386 Km² Atlántico presents extreme political contrasts within its own territory. Southern municipalities of Atlántico have been considered marginal places at the regional level. With the highest poverty rate, at between 75% and 55%, the southern municipalities of Atlántico (Manatí, Campo de la Cruz, Suan, Candelaria and Santa Lucia), experienced great problems in terms of public services and lack of state institutional presence (Sanchez Jabba, 2011: 24). Two hours north of Santa Lucia, is the regional capital, Barranquilla, which offers a completely different landscape.

¹⁶ *Cienaga* is a particular ecosystem similar to a swamp.

Barranquilla, known as the “Colombian golden gate”, is a prosperous industrial city, which has 1,200,000 inhabitants (Dane, 2010) and continues to attract investment for its development and strategic location as a port for the Caribbean Sea. In contrast to the alarming poverty rates of the south of the department, Barranquilla’s poverty rate reaches only 17%. The Barranquilla elite also holds great economic and political clout at the national level.

Santa Lucians clearly understand their marginality, as they claim that it was the disaster of 2010-2011 that brought them out of the invisibility they experienced with respect to the national and regional government. “No one had even cared for Santa Lucia before the disaster”, said Jose, a farmer. Doña Berta said that, “we are the most southern municipality of the department. No one cares about us”. Many Santa Lucians say that the only time their invisibility was partially alleviated was during regional elections, when politicians eager to access the regional movement visited them, and never came back. They then returned to invisibility.

A (short) history of the transformation of the landscape

Lemaitre examines how the construction of the *Canal del Dique* was a massive project that has aimed to produce a route connecting the Magdalena River with the port of Cartagena since the seventeenth century, and produced a large ecological transformation of the landscape across the territory (Lemaitre, 2010). Yet in this process of transformation, the most dramatic impact on the landscape came from rectification, canalization and expansion works during 1923 and 1984 (Mogollon, Velez, 2011: 33). Mogollon Velez refers to this transformation as “slow [transformations], which were not detected by the affected inhabitants, but which took place over many generations; only the elders can remember how a landscape or determined geography was before”¹⁷ (2011:33).

¹⁷ Translated by the author.

Matching Mogollón Velez's observation, among older Santa Lucians there exists a notion of transformation of the landscape. The elders express a particular event as the main trigger of the transformation: the road/dam¹⁸ built in the 1950s. They still remember how dictator General Gustavo Rojas Pinilla, who ruled from 1953 to 1957, was behind the large works that dried out the *cienagas* that surround the town.

However, many Santa Lucians also have the notion of transformation of the landscape without experiencing it directly. People of around 50 years old made statements such as “my dad told me that he fished right here” or “this was all water, in the place where we are now”. Therefore, without actually experiencing the landscape transformation, there still exists indirect experience through oral tradition.

This transformation of the landscape was marked by the sudden availability of land in the municipality. From the dry *cienagas* emerged lands that allowed people in the municipality to consider new sources of income. Mamerto, an elder from Santa Lucia, explains, “Rojas Pinilla was the one who dried the *cienagas*. Before then, everyone in town was a fisherman. There wasn't any agriculture at all. All the agriculture was from the town of Manatí. They were merchants who brought the food through the *cienagas* by boat. They tied their canoes in what is now *Pueblo Nuevo*”.

In Santa Lucia, distribution of new lands was conducted according to the work capacity of the individual who claimed ownership. Without the presence of capital or large landlords in the area, family workforces were the only forces available to exploit the land. Therefore, tenure of this new land was mainly characterized by smallholding, unlike other dry *cienagas*, especially in the neighboring department of Bolívar.

In the long term, this availability of land transformed the social structure of the municipality. The capacity to have land and thereby enter the livestock

¹⁸ The dam has in its top a road

and agriculture sector not only increased population income, but also produced the capacity to accumulate capital in the territory. The livestock sector, especially, also became a way for the Santa Lucians to save and invest.

Parallel to these ongoing transformations, migration developed as an important livelihood strategy. All municipalities from south of the Atlántico have had a strong historic relationship with migration. For Santa Lucians, their main migration destination has been Venezuela. The need for cheap labor and the high currency exchange between the Venezuelan bolivar and Colombian peso increased the number of people from Santa Lucia who migrated to the neighboring country. Remittances flowed into the town, supporting the households and were transformed into capital through investments in cattle. This helped support the economic transformation.

Spatially, the landscape of Santa Lucia transformed after the dam finally dried the *cienagas* that surrounded the town. This transformation led to the expansion of the town, creating a *periphery* in places that just years before had been covered by water. People started building their houses in these *peripheries*, for example the neighborhood of *Pueblo Nuevo*. During the nineties some *invasiones*¹⁹ started appearing at the periphery. *Si nos dejan* (*If they let us*) was one of those *invasiones*, and was eventually legalized by the local authorities.

This spatial expansion of the town needed to be seen from a stratification approach, understanding the emergence of the new neighborhoods as the rise in demand for housing to serve people who weren't able to find housing in already-established legal neighborhoods. The type of construction also varies largely between center and periphery. In the center, houses were predominantly made from bricks and cement. On the other hand, in the peripheries, houses were more commonly constructed of *bahareque*.

¹⁹ *Invasiones* are shanty towns

The uneven distribution of risk

The transformation of the landscape carried with it the possibility for Santa Lucians to explore other sources of income, but also implied an uneven distribution of risk.

Even though the channel began construction in the seventeenth century, it was not until the twentieth century that the most important landscape transformations took place due to the area's rise as a place of national interest and economically strategic importance. The *Canal del Dique* became economic infrastructure for transporting oil from the center of Colombia to the refinery center in Cartagena²⁰. According to Mogollón Vélez (2012), it is important to differentiate between the “old, small and harmless Canal del Dique before 1923, and today's channel, which is an enormous artificial branch of the Magdalena River” (2012:13).

According to Mogollón Velez (2012), 97% of the current Canal del Dique was built between 1923 and 1984. Furthermore, in the two last renovations and expansions of the channel, the number of curves in the channel decreased from 270 to 50, and its width doubled to allow increases in transport. This also dramatically increased the level of sediment carried by the channel (2012:16). Drying the *cienagas*, as was done in Santa Lucia, was a general practice throughout the route of the channel. The large *cienagas* that in the past helped maintain the flooding, disappeared in a couple of decades. Nowadays, 85% of the water flow that enters Calamar exits through the bays of Cartagena (2012:13).

The transformation of the landscape, driven by economic interest, resulted in the appearance of certain risks. These risks were not shared equally among the actors involved in the landscape transformations. Furthermore, the risks affected local communities living near the *Canal del Dique*. People across the channel had experienced, and mostly suffered, the

²⁰ In 2010, from the 2,200,000 tonnes of oil that move through the Magdalena River annually, 80% of them go through the Canal del Dique (BID and CEPAL 2012:192).

realization of risk from a clear state of neglect of the administration of the channel by local, regional and national authorities.

The flood of 2010-2011 was not the only disaster in the Canal del Dique in the last few decades. People in Santa Lucia still remember that the dam broke in 1984, at a point close to the one that broke in 2010. That time, the water reached only the rural areas, not the town center. Mamerto²¹ -the local hero responsible for repairing the break the first time – told a story about this disaster that more or less reproduced the series of events from the flooding 2010-2011²².

Santa Lucians are aware of those responsible for increasing the risks they face. At the highest level is the State. There is a general consensus about the State's abandonment of dredging works in the channel. Without the dredging, the channel's level had increased due to the large deposits of sediment from the Magdalena River. Oscar, a community leader who also worked in the dredging works, commented "it's been close to 20 years without any dredging". The State is also responsible for not reinforcing the dam all across the municipality. As Cristo mentioned, "they start working when the *creciente* starts and it is impossible to work. They need to do the work in the *verano* (dry season)".

In addition, people are aware of the dry *cienagas* close to the town as an additional risk. Regarding the drying of the *cienagas*, Santa Lucians acknowledge the importance that they had in failing to manage the increase of the channel's water level. According to Mamerto, "if all the water entries

²¹ Mamerto was a living legend in Santa Lucia. Stories about his mythological strength were shared among people in the town. The main story about Mamerto was the massive amount of material that he lifted and threw into the river to repair the dam during the 1984 flooding in Santa Lucia, saving the town. Mamerto sadly died by the time the thesis was written.

²² The more detailed story goes: It was a strong rainy season in which the dam burst on the road between Calamar and Santa Lucia, in a place called *Diquito*. Some people said that people from Calamar were responsible for breaking the dam in a desperate act to save their own town from the alarming levels of the Magdalena River. The municipal authority, inspector Jose Maria Polo, was overwhelmed by the disaster and ran away, and was only found a couple of weeks later in a nearby municipality. The only one who offered some assistance during the disaster was the Governor of the time, Fuad Char, who brought machinery to the site.

(to the *cienagas*) had been open during the 2010-2011 flooding disaster, the damage would be less. All that lands were crying out for water, and water always seeks its course”.

In conclusion, we might claim that a dramatic transformation of the landscape -which also produced great socioeconomic transformation in the social structure of the municipality- was followed by the emergence of risk which was not shared equally among the actors involved. Risks emerged from the transformation of the landscape, which historically had been neglected by the state. The emergence of Santa Lucia’s vulnerability must be understood as the juxtaposition between an intensive landscape transformation and the marginality of the territory.

C. “Criminal hands” (or the moral condemnation of Calamar)

Calamar plays a central role in the Santa Lucians’ narrative of the disaster, as being responsible for breaking the dam. This implies the *representation* of Calamar as the embodiment of negative moral attributes for the Santa Lucians. This *representation* needs to be examined closely to understand how it is mediated by certain events and historical process.

“It was them or us”

Established in 1840 as the town of Gamarra, what is now Calamar lies between the Magdalena River and the *Ciénaga de Negros*. At the end of the nineteenth century, Calamar was a prosperous town, thanks to a train that connected the municipality with a port in the Magdalena River - the city of Cartagena. Because of these links to the waterways, Calamar became an important merchant center. Those glorious days were over when, in 1952, the then-president Roberto Urdaneta Alvarez closed the train between Calamar and Cartagena for economic reasons (Lemaitre, 2010).

Still, nowadays, given its strategic location in the River Magdalena and near the beginning of the Canal del Dique, Calamar is a social and economic center for many communities along the river, in the departments of Bolivar,

Atlántico and Magdalena. Daily, numerous canoes and boats dock in this port, buying and selling products like fish and fruit.

On account of its location, Calamar has been threatened by disappearance if it becomes submerged by the waters of the Magdalena River. As Santa Lucians mentioned, during the emergency of 2010-2011, Calamar was at very high risk of disappearing because of the increase in the levels of the Magdalena River. Calamar, with a 15-meter wall, which protects the town from the river, was experiencing rising water levels that exceeded the wall, and started pouring into the town. Santa Lucians believe that the imminent destruction of Calamar was the main trigger for its people to decide to break the dam at Santa Lucia. One fisherman said, “they [the people of Calamar] couldn’t last a few days more. The walls couldn’t resist the water”. Another man in the town stated “it was them or us. So they made a decision”.

Santa Lucians say that the Calamar people decided to drop a liquid called *azogue* in the road outside the town. This caused the dam to break, allowing the water to enter across from their town. The idea of the “criminal hands” behind this act in the disaster is widely shared idea among Santa Lucians.

For Santa Lucians, the way that Calamar managed its *risk* caused detriment to the survival of Santa Lucia. One elder from the town goes further, blaming Calamar for both disasters (1984 and 2011-2012): “every time there is a *creciente* they only think about acting wickedly. They don’t understand that people live here”. Jose and Carlos, local fishermen, specifically talk about the impact that drying the large *cienaga* had on Santa Lucians. The drying operations took place at the opposite side of the channel, in lands belonging to Calamar. These *cienagas* were useful not only as a way to manage increasing levels of water in the channel, but also as a source of income for a great number of fishermen in Santa Lucia. The former *cienaga* is now a livestock farm. Carlos stated “I wish that I could take back a *cienaga* for fishing, but what can I do? I am only a fisherman against livestock men”.

Hermógenes Ramírez

A field visit to Calamar was planned, but people in Santa Lucia were really concerned and insisted on having a local *mototaxista* to “*dar solo una vueltica*” (only a small look around the town). Regardless of the proximity and Santa Lucia’s economic dependence on Calamar, people in the municipality consider their neighbors in Calamar to be *others*. Santa Lucians use a moral perspective to describe Calamar as a town full of “bad people” or “a bad town”.

The strongest presentation of the moral condemnation of Calamar is seen in the story of Hermógenes Ramírez, who God sent to the earth²³. This story, which is not only common among Santa Lucians but is also present in the Campo de la Cruz, describes the arrival of a man sent by God to Calamar and Campo de la Cruz, or to Santa Lucia in other versions.

According to the story, Hermógenes Ramírez was a short man (“the size of a child”, some said) who, according to some, was sent by God to the earth. Ramírez arrived in Calamar asking for water and something to eat. The people of Calamar started mocking him and even hurting him instead of helping him. Ramírez had no other option but to leave the town. However, before he left, as punishment for their behavior, he said “*This place will no longer be called Calamar, but rather Calamities*”, condemning the town to numerous tragedies. After leaving Calamar, Ramírez reached Santa Lucia (or some say Campo de la Cruz) and found food and good people, so he blessed those territories. This story was repeated again and again across different conversations during fieldwork, with just some small variations, all clearly coinciding in the condemnation of Calamar for their immoral behavior.

²³ Apparently the figure of Hermógenes Ramírez is also present in many places in the Colombian Caribbean. For more information about Hermógenes Ramírez see: McGraw, Jason (2014) *The work of recognition. Caribbean Colombia and the postemancipation struggle for citizenship*. The University of North Carolina Press.

Calamar as the terror

Other events mediated with this *representation* of Calamar. During the late 90s and early 2000s, Calamar was a place of *terror*. Paramilitary groups created their headquarters in the municipality, and then expanded their domination all across the municipalities of southern Atlántico.

People in Santa Lucia remember those days as really difficult times. According to Santa Lucians, the “*paras*” were brought to Calamar by the rich people in town. One Santa Lucian affirmed that “in the beginning, [the rich] were trying to clear the town of thieves, especially cattle robbers. They started by clearing the town of thieves. But at the end, they themselves turned out to be worse than thieves”. Another Santa Lucian argued “they choose Calamar because it’s the place where the money is. Here in Santa Lucia, there is none at all. They came to kill”.

The paramilitary boss was the feared and cruel *Pambe*. After a couple of months of operations there, the whole town and region was completely under his control. Santa Lucians mentioned how during *Pambe*’s rule, no-one from other towns was authorized to enter Calamar. Daring to question *Pambe*’s orders would result in death, and the victims’ bodies would then be thrown into the channel passing in front of Santa Lucia. One Santa Lucian said that “people entered by the road, and then we saw them leaving down the Canal”. There was an explicit order from the paramilitaries that no-one could bury the bodies floating down the channel. One older woman remembered, “for a time I never looked at the channel. It was so painful. There were just bodies passing by”. Even despite the 9km proximity of the two towns, for many years Santa Lucians would not dare to enter Calamar.

Nevertheless, the *terror* was not only restricted to visit Calamar. The paramilitary squads often came into Santa Lucia and established curfew starting at 8 pm. A woman recalled, “I could leave my chair outside all night and next morning they would be there”. However, the biggest fear was the

grey pick-up - the car in which the paramilitaries entered at night to kill people in Santa Lucia. One man mentioned that “when we saw the grey pick up, everyone started running. Someone was going to be killed”.

One of the victims of the *grey pick-up*'s action was a young politician from the town. His nephew remembers how his uncle was a highly appreciated young politician who entered local politics without support from the local elite. Without a wife or children to maintain, he used his modest salary to buy sports equipment for the children in the town. One night, the paramilitaries pushed him into the *grey pick-up*. To this day, his location remains unknown.

Finally, “*Pambe*” was shot during a dispute with another paramilitary group. After that, according to the people, the situation improved. With the paramilitary demobilization during the administration of Alvaro Uribe (2002-2010), some of the local paramilitary leaders, like *Caracortada* (*Scarface*) entered civilian life through the Justice and Peace process²⁴. However, even though *Pambe* is gone, Santa Lucians still believe that there is “*gente rara*” (strange people”) in Calamar. One lady warns that “if the robbery is starting again, they (paramilitaries) could come back again”.

Why blame Calamar for the disaster?

Without entering the debate about whether the incident with the *azogue* actually took place or not, certain events and historical processes that have taken place between the two towns made the idea that Calamar was responsible for the disaster *plausible* for Santa Lucians. These include: the drying of the *cienaga*, which had been the source of income for a large number of fishermen in Santa Lucia, and increased the population's risk along the channel; and the brutal rule of the paramilitaries in the town, with the horrible victimization that they waged in Santa Lucia.

²⁴ *Justicia y Paz* is a transitional justice process created by the Colombian government. It dealt with the paramilitary's demobilization process during the early years of the presidency of Alvaro Uribe. In this process, high-ranking members of the paramilitaries obtained jail sentences for a maximum of 8 years, if they actively helped in the process of establishing justice, trust and relief for the victims of their crimes.

Behind the *representation* lies the historical *subalternity* present between Calamar and Santa Lucia. Calamar is the municipality with the most economic power in the region, and this affects Santa Lucians for better or worse. Even the origins of the towns - one as a fishing village and the other as a strategic merchant town - mark the historically uneven power relationship between them.

Nevertheless, there is a narrow window of *justification* that Santa Lucians open for Calamar, regarding the disaster, which needs to be mentioned. Many people say that Calamar “was forced to do that”. This comment shows that Santa Lucians, at some level, recognize that Calamar also suffered from the lack of maintenance and dredging of the Magdalena River. In this matter, they (Calamar and Santa Lucia) both share the State’s neglect of the nearby natural resources. Yet, in the historical power structure that has marked their relationship, Santa Lucia is always at the bottom. “We always end up screwed. When someone needs to pay the price, it is Santa Lucia” an elder said. For them, the *subalternity* of Santa Lucia is shown by the fact that whenever there is a choice between “us or them”, Calamar will always be the one that’s safe, and no-one will make a case for, or protect, Santa Lucia.

D. The liminality of winners and losers

The narrative about the disaster portrays the strong social structure transformation it produced. It is necessary to understand how the disaster emerges as an *event* that transforms the landscape. From *creature* to *creator* of the transformation process in the landscape, the flooding, as a *totalizing event*, shocks the entire social structure of the municipality.

The landscape, once a reflection of the social stratification in the town, is now completely transformed after the flooding. A new landscape has emerged that changes the patterns previously established among Santa Lucians. This new landscape is characterized by a shared experience of

liminality, although it is not free of tensions. This transformation of the social structure should be framed as part of a shared *rite de passage* (Turner, 1995).

Disasters and rites de passage

Rites de passage is a concept that defines all processes of social transformation that an individual, through his life, experiences (Turner, 1995: 33). These *rites de passage* are divided into three particular stages: *separation*, *margin* and *aggregation* (Turner, 1995). These different stages mark the route through which an individual transitions from one particular status to other. The first stage, *separation*, is marked by a symbolic detachment from the previous status or position held in the society. The second *margin*, is characterized by a *liminal* stage in which the individual is assigned “few or none of the attributes of the past or coming state” (Turner, 1995: 94). It is in this *liminality* stage that the concept of *communitas* emerges, referring to the horizontal bond and “comradeship” that marks the relationship between individuals who share this transition between *statuses* (Turner, 1995:96). Finally, there is the stage of *aggregation* in which the transitional phase is over, and the *liminal* identity is relegated to give the individual a *status*, with the rights and obligations implied by the social structure (Turner, 1995:96).

The concepts of *liminality* and *communitas* have been applied to the study of disasters. For Bode (1977), the “social nakedness”, or the “form of release or liberation from social structure” that emerges after a disaster can be closely related to Turner’s definition of *communitas* (Bode, 1977: 266). Bode’s definition of *communitas*, applied to a disaster context, “is a vision – no matter how transitory - of society as unstructured, undifferentiated, equal, whose borders are ideally coterminous with those of the human species” (Bode, 1977:266). Bode examines the case of Ancash (Peru), connecting this *communitas* analysis to understanding the sacking that took place after a disaster that affected poor farmers, as part of a “ritual of status reversal” (Bode, 1977:266).

About *winner*s and *loser*s

“The flooding brought everyone to the lowest common denominator” said Reiner, one of the few local merchants. When people in Santa Lucia talk about *winner*s and *loser*s in the disaster, they not only refer to the outcome, but also to the process of transformation of status among the individuals. The disaster shook the social structure of Santa Lucia by destroying the assets that *economically*, but also *symbolically*, created social differentiation between Santa Lucians. This transformation was marked by three events, which we can frame in the different stages of the *rite de passage*: an initial *separation stage*, marked by the loss of the assets; then a *liminal stage*, marked by the humanitarian assistance that followed the disaster; and then an *aggregation stage*, marked by the effort of trying to get back the lost status, but not being able to leave the *liminal stage*.

There is a strong emotional narrative about how people experienced shock to the social structure – the disaster - and the transformation of status it implied. “For the rich it was worse”, said a lady from near the plaza. “The poor people didn’t suffer as much as the people with money. At the end, they [the poor] didn’t have anything to lose”.

Separation stage: the destruction

The *separation stage* was marked by the destruction of individuals’ assets. The ways in which the destruction took place should be defined in terms of the emotional narrative that underlies each of them. The three ways in which the assets were destroyed were: *flooding* (livestock, crops and other houses / labor-related assets); “*mal vendiendo*” (mainly livestock); and *sacking* (mainly houses / labor-related assets).

In terms of *what was lost by the flooding*, there is an impotent acceptance of the overwhelming magnitude of the disaster. Without anyone benefitting

from the assets, the narrative highlights the sadness due to the loss of capital and work deposited in those assets. In contrast, about *what was “mal vendido”* and *what was sacked*, there is a moral narrative. Regarding *what was “mal vendido”* there was a sense of unfairness in the transaction, and a question about the morality of the individuals involved; how they could have participated in such a despicable activity, taking advantage of people in need. Again the image of people from Calamar (and Bolivar more generally) appears as taking part in those immoral transactions.

Furthermore, the moral condemnation of sacking practices was even more drastic. Even if *what was sacked* consisted of a small part of the redistribution of wealth – following Bode’s (1977) idea of “ritual of status reversal” - the intense moral condemnation of the practice is highlighted by the repeated mentions of people from the town who benefited from the disaster. The idea of benefit from disaster emerges as similar to the buyers in “mal vendiendo” practices, as a morally condemnable activity.

The sacking activities that took place during and after the disaster remain an open wound for the people of Santa Lucia. One lady said, “After the sacking I started to mistrust everyone around me”. However, there weren’t any direct sanctions for the sackers. Another man mentioned that “everyone knows who they are, the ones who ransacked. Right now they have two or three TVs, when in the past they wouldn’t have had a single one”. For some Santa Lucians, the disaster was therefore a way to highlight the immorality of some of the town’s inhabitants. Even though it is not explicitly said in the interviews, it was implicitly stated that sacking was an activity conducted by low status individuals.

Marginal stage: Everyone in the same line

The marginal stage for Santa Lucians was represented by the experiences of high and low status individuals who were forced to share outside traditional structural patterns. Santa Lucians, immersed in the *liminality* of a stage in which they didn’t have their usual status, experienced their surroundings

differently. Two particular stories told during fieldwork exemplify the perspectives and tensions that emerged in Santa Lucia when individuals found themselves facing this new situation.

In the first story, Doña Gripi, a beloved matriarch, said that, “I thought that some of the people in the town were just skinny. But then, after the disaster when the aid started to appear, people started to get chubby. It was then that I understood that people were not skinny, in the past people were just starving”. Doña Gripi, from *Barrio Bajo*, wasn’t aware of hunger being such a large issue for some of her neighbors before the disaster. When everyone was eating the same food as it was distributed as part of aid assistance, the inequality that had been invisible or normalized in the past, became more visible and clear to everyone. This kind of experience might be categorized as an empathizing experience from this stage of *liminality* following the disaster.

The other story shows the tensions that underline this *liminality* process in Santa Lucia²⁵. A rich lady from the town was queuing for food after the disaster, when suddenly a poor lady asked her: “Why are you here?” to which the rich lady replied, “Me? Well, I lost more than you”. In contrast to the first story, this story shows more clear confrontation and greater lack of empathy between the individuals, when they were placed in this new context. This contrast deserves further analysis.

First, the poor lady, seeing the rich lady in the line, questioned the legitimacy of the other woman’s claim for help. The poor lady refused to acknowledge the disaster as capable of reducing the social distance that had marked their differences previous to the flooding. For her, the rich lady should have had enough resources to support herself, despite the disaster. Aid must be delivered to the poor who have no safety nets and therefore have greater need. This comment demonstrates denial by low status individuals, who are unwilling to accept the *lowering* of those who had

²⁵ This story was told by Doña Queta, the owner of the restaurant in town.

formerly had a higher status than them, in the *liminal* context that followed the disaster.

On the other hand, the rich lady responded to the poor lady, “Well, I lost more than you” - a phrase that expresses the opposite view of the disaster. For the rich lady, poor people always live in need. This new experience, which some describe as being *new poor*, appears when the needs of the rich can no longer be satisfied under the current conditions. Furthermore, *suffering* is directly mediated by the process of losing status – the *separation stage* mentioned previously - and without going through the process of loss, there is no significant experience of suffering. Therefore, the larger quantity of assets these people had, the greater the loss and the greater the suffering. Here we can see how some high status individuals in Santa Lucia examine the tragedy that emerged from their loss of status after the disaster.

Aggregation stage: The “unfairness” of the reconstruction

People with a previously high status took the position that the state should respond and take responsibility for reconstruction. This marks the extension of the *liminality stage*. One lady complained, “For the person who loses a cow, the State can give one or two. But I lost 40, how many are they planning to give me? The same: one or two”. In this matter, the reconstruction efforts failed to reproduce the previous social structure. As a result, the policies created and even exacerbated a more horizontal social structure, thereby intensifying the *liminality stage*. Beyond good intentions, this element is further marked by the need for a homogeneous process to characterize state response. Doña Queta tells the story about how everyone in the town received two jars of paint for their entranceway. For some houses that was enough, but the biggest houses couldn’t finish the job.

This extension of *liminality* can be argued by proving that poor people in Santa Lucia lacked basic services like housing, and are now benefiting from the aid. The *Bahareque* houses were removed from the landscape of Santa

Lucia, and now new stilt houses are starting to cover a good part of *Pueblo Nuevo*. People in *Si nos dejan* are also finally capable of having sturdier, brick-built (not bahareque) or even stilt houses. Furthermore, families that lived in overcrowded houses also found the opportunity to own a house of their own.

In Santa Lucia, reconstruction works therefore overlap with long-due basic infrastructure efforts. More than reconstruction, there is construction taking place in Santa Lucia. “The poor are now having what they never had”, said Reiner. This transformation of the landscape reduced the gaps between *center* and *periphery* in Santa Lucia. Now the *periphery* is an active place of works and infrastructure. Brand new houses, roads and sport facilities, like the football and softball field, which are under construction in *Pueblo Nuevo*, show the transformation of the spatial social landscape after the disaster.

E. The well-oiled machine (or the local political power)

Disasters as *totalizing events* directly affect the way that power relationships are established in society (Oliver-Smith, 1996: 309- 310). However, disasters don’t inevitably lead to the complete transformation of those power arrangements. Furthermore, in some cases, disaster can also strengthen the previous set of power arrangements. In the case of Santa Lucia, unpopular Mayors with outrageous track records of corruption increased their power after the disaster, and people perceived them as being unbeatable in the next elections. Why does Santa Lucia feel hopeless to the perpetuation of an elite they define as corrupt and cowardly – an elite that has no interest in the town?

The inherency of corruption in the politics

For Santa Lucians, politics is a smear campaign. It is possible that the historical *marginality* suffered by the municipality taught them that the main motivation for entering politics is not to represent the collective interest, but rather to obtain wealth. Corruption remains an inherent part of politics in the

local and regional political arena. A local lady was asked for her opinion on the subject of why don't things change, and why a new leader doesn't run against the mayor in the next elections. She replied: "I don't trust in leaders. Here, all leaders work solely for themselves".

This representation of Santa Lucians' belief in the inherency of corruption in politics is best portrayed in a statement from a lady asked who she considered to be the last good mayor in Santa Lucia. She replied that Norberto Medina, a mayor during the 80s, "stole, but the important thing is that he did things. The others just stole". Another lady also tried to justify Mayor Ariza's actions by saying "he can steal, but he's such a good person when you talk with him".

In Santa Lucia, as in many parts of Colombia, a vote is the most precious commodity a poor person has. Large quantities of money are spent to keep the political elite in power. However, this quantity "invested" is recovered through the control the politicians gain over municipal resources. It's a common understanding among Santa Lucians that many of them sell their vote, even though no-one can provide specific cases of people who actually did.

"Everyone lives from politics"

However, the power of the local elite doesn't depend solely on purchasing votes. They also hold the power to control employment opportunities through public procurement. These contracts are completely controlled by the Mayor, who assigns them as he wishes, without regulation from state authorities. The lack of economically viable activities in Santa Lucia makes municipal contracts the only hope for making a living. "Here everyone lives from politics. There is nothing more than that", said a Santa Lucian. Younger generations, better educated and more influenced by urban culture, are looking for different sources of income than agriculture. In the current context of Santa Lucia, finding a position in municipal politics appears to be their only option, other than informal *mototaxismo*.

Younger generations are not the only ones who desire a contract with the municipality. With an alarming rate of unemployment, any contract in the municipality represents the capacity to make a living. People vote with the fear, or hope, of having or losing their contract. Yet having a contract doesn't translate to economic stability. Regardless of the abundant resources administered in the municipality, people stated that the municipality owes its employees more than six months of salary. Johan, a local *mototaxista*, mentioned that for him it is better to remain a *mototaxista* than to work for the municipality. He said that he prefers earning 20,000 pesos daily (8 USD), than working for the municipality and waiting months to get paid.

The economic crisis that followed the disaster created a dearth of employment in the municipality. With the crisis in agriculture and livestock, the disappearing canal fishing, and the increasing arrival of residents from Venezuela, things are not looking easy ahead. State reconstruction efforts turned the focus to construction work, but failed to provide other economic options for the population. People in Santa Lucia fear that when the construction works finish, the economic crisis is going to be even worse.

Oiling the machinery

According to the Santa Lucians, the disaster was an incredible opportunity for politicians. With a clear tendency towards corruption, the flows of state resources that followed the disaster were more than a blessing for them. Some people go a little further, claiming that the destruction of the town was a way for politicians to clear themselves of past charges of corruption.

This direct cash flow provided the opportunity for the local political elite to steal cash directly, but this was not enough to keep them in power. The disaster context made it possible for them to intensify their traditional corrupt practices. The disaster offered them resources for oiling (and expanding) their machinery: more vote buying and contract assigning. Bigger resources transform into a more efficient way of running the

business. More money to “invest”, and more “returns”. With even more poverty, and the destruction of the weak economy following the disaster, money or contracts turn out to be more powerful than ever.

Conclusion: *A three act meta-narrative of the disaster*

The concept of *meta-narrative* used in this section must be explained. Beyond the traditional concept of *meta-narrative* as a “*grand theory*” (i.e.: marxism, structuralism, among others), the sense in which this concept is used here is narrower, and its interpretation is framed as the *story about the story*. This meta-narrative emerges from a re-reading of the local narrative about the disaster, understanding deep political, social, economic and cultural dimensions that shape it.

This meta-narrative is a three-act story about the transformation of the landscape: an initial stage in which this landscape is shaped in a certain way; a second stage, in which the landscape is shaken; and finally, a third stage, in which this landscape is reshaped. It is also a way of conceptualizing disaster as creatures / creators (paraphrasing Sartre’s famous quote) of the particular landscape. This coincides with Oliver-Smith’s (1996) definition of disaster as both process and event.

First Act: transforming the landscape

The first stage is a transformation of the landscape, which also produced large social transformations in Santa Lucia. This historically *marginal* territory experienced a profound landscape transformation process, starting in the first decades of the twentieth century. Land was suddenly available in a previous *cienaga* ecosystem. Land availability triggered two occurrences in the territory: a transformation in the socioeconomic structure of the municipality, and new capacity for capital accumulation.

The availability of land made possible the transition from fishing economy to agriculture/livestock economy. Those new sources of income increased profit for individuals. During the fishing-focused stages of Santa Lucian society, the lack of capital in the municipality limited the workforce; this new available land permitted the capacity to provide more income. New land provided the proper landscape for the accumulation of capital, something that wasn't possible in the fishing economy. Livestock provided the perfect receptor for capital and remittances. This capital also created a division in the social structure, which in the past had been more or less flat. The landscape of the municipality then started expressing this social differentiation. An emerging *periphery* appeared in the landscape of Santa Lucia, with housing on the new land surrounding the town.

Yet, in what might be considered a positive transformation, the process of modification of the landscape also consolidated some risks. Bigger and more powerful national interests, such as providing crucial infrastructure for commodity exchange, transformed the landscape, radically changing its ecosystem. This risk was not equally shared among the different actors, yet it was manifested in the riverside municipalities of the Canal del Dique. This risk was also increased by the State's neglect regarding the upkeep of the channel and the dam, which was meant to protect the inhabitants of the area. However, for Santa Lucia, this risk among the riverside municipalities was not shared in equal terms. Calamar, the neighbor municipality, has always faced the bigger risk.

The historical *subalternity* of Santa Lucia with respect to Calamar is marked by their differences. Calamar, a former important port city in the Magdalena River, and the beginning of the *Canal del Dique*, is a crucial merchant center for riverside towns in Atlántico, Bolívar and Magdalena. *The subalternity* of Santa Lucia with respect to Calamar marked Santa Lucians' *representation* of Calamar as the embodiment of negative moral attributes. This *representation* has been strengthened by certain events and historical processes such as the drying of cienaga, which was fundamental

to the livelihood of fishermen of Santa Lucia, and has been the focus of the paramilitary squads that controlled the zone for years.

Second Act: Shocking the landscape

The second act is marked by the shock to the landscape. The flood, understood as a totalizing event, completely shook the landscape and the social structure that were produced during the transformation process. The disaster, a creature of the transformation process, emerged as the creator of a new transformation of the landscape.

Regarding the events of November 30th when the dam broke, Santa Lucians believe there is a juxtaposition of elements. First is the *marginality* in which the State had placed not only the administration of the channel, but also the general aspects of the territory. Second, the *subalternity* towards Calamar, which is made evident by Calamar choosing to save itself and break the dam regardless of Santa Lucia's luck. There is no attempt to create any mystical interpretation of the disaster. Regardless of Santa Lucians' disposition to consider the flood as a *chronical technical disaster*, there is a trace of suffering, which needs to be understood and explained from a moral perspective. The representation of Calamar, as the embodiment of all negative moral attributions, suits that purpose.

The disaster, emerging from the landscape transformation, produces a sudden and radical transformation of the landscape and the social structure linked to it. This landscape had produced certain social structure differentiations, such as the availability of land and the capacity to accumulate capital, and was now completely covered by water, and the capital invested in it was destroyed. This destruction took place in three differentiated processes / stages - losses, *mal vendiendo* and sacking - which produced differentiated moral / emotional narrative around the Santa Lucians.

The destruction of capital led to a *liminality* process in the municipality, which emerged after the disaster. The former more hierarchical social structure of the municipality, which placed former high status individuals alongside low status individuals, was transformed into a more flat social structure, in which all individuals needed state aid and support agencies. This *liminal* process wasn't only excluded from tensions, but also from learning to the individuals. Tensions were marked by the emotional experiences that former high-status individuals had while adapting to their new status. Also, former low-status individuals also questioned the truth of this transformation from high to low status, believing it to be a strategy for accessing aid. Yet, this liminality process also unveiled certain inequalities that had been completely invisible in the past.

Third Act: Reshaping the landscape

The reconstruction processes that followed were marked by the continuity of the *liminality* process. Beyond a reconstruction process, what took place in Santa Lucia was the arrival of public services and state investment in items that were not destroyed, but rather had been completely absent prior to the disaster. The State provided housing projects for people, who in the past lacked decent housing, or did not have a house at all.

However, reconstruction has failed to reactivate the municipal economy. The capital invested in the landscape before the disaster hasn't recovered. Reconstruction efforts provide temporary employment, which will finish when the planned works are concluded. Without remittances from Venezuela, there is nothing in the municipality that can drive the economy and replace the capital in the landscape.

Surprisingly, outside the liminality process, the local political elite emerges stronger from the disaster. A disgraced and corrupt elite continues to manipulate the opportunities that the disaster offers them. Support from the great flow of resources that enters the municipality after the disaster helps to oil the machinery, increasing the politicians' vote-buying and public

procurement power. Without any kind of economic activity in the municipality, the capacity to make strategic decisions on employment, or the fact that they have money to buy votes, gives them the perfect way to stay in command.

(Epilogue): After the opportunity...

Santa Lucians fear that the historic *opportunity* to overcome the *marginality*, granted by the disaster, will soon wane. Yes, there are less *bahareque* houses, however, many feel even worse than before the disaster struck. Santa Lucians think there are too many bricks in the street and too much hunger in the houses. Reconstruction is an illusion in which a new life was offered; yet sadly not delivered.

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Annex

Annex 1. Photos



Bahareque house´s



Dry trees years after the flooding



New houses build by the State after the flooding



The Calamar wall that almost collapsed during the *Ola Invernal*



Mr. Mamerto