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## Stigma and resistance: institutional action and community self-management in Alto Hospicio, Chile

Estigma y resistencia: acción institucional y  
autogestión comunitaria en Alto Hospicio,  
Chile

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**Abstract:** The article aims to analyze the institutional mechanisms that have operated in a stigmatized and impoverished territory, and the responses of community action by organizations and social groups. Through qualitative methodology, based on the interviews with 17 social leaders and activists from Alto Hospicio, institutional actions and omissions that have generated precariousness are described, but also a social capillarity of self-management. The results indicate that the social production of the territory involves public action, market dynamics and the collective agency of the inhabitants. The latter, subjected to the urgencies of subsistence, as well as to dissatisfaction with state actions, unfolds in community self-management, without yet achieving an articulation that challenges the state institutional framework in an organized way, but emerging components of identity and social revaluation that open up possibilities for both development and resistance.

**Key words:** stigmatization, institutional effects, self-management, territory, camps.

**Resumen:** El artículo tiene por objetivo analizar los mecanismos institucionales que han operado en un territorio estigmatizado y pauperizado, así como las respuestas de acción comunitaria por parte de organizaciones y colectivos sociales. Mediante la metodología cualitativa, a partir de los relatos de 17 dirigentes sociales y activistas de Alto Hospicio, se describen acciones y omisiones institucionales que han generado precariedad, pero también una capilaridad social de autogestión. Los resultados indican que la producción social del territorio involucra la acción pública, las dinámicas de mercado y la agencia colectiva de los habitantes. Esta última sometida a las urgencias de la subsistencia, así como a la insatisfacción respecto de las medidas estatales, se despliega en la autogestión comunitaria sin que se logre aún una articulación que interpele al marco institucional

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estatal de modo organizado, pero emergiendo componentes de identidad y revalorización social que abren posibilidades tanto de desarrollo como de resistencia.

**Palabras clave:** estigmatización, efectos institucionales, autogestión, territorio, campamentos.

## Introduction<sup>1</sup>

There exist places that graphically depict the dilemmas of society, the depth and complexity of social problems and the actions to deal with them. Poverty and deprivation, lack of decent housing, state and criminal violence, migrations and interculturality, social tensions; however, solidarity, mutual support, dignity and hope are noticed at once in the same territory.

Every territory is a socio-spatial construction with histories and meanings in circulation and struggle (Fernández-Labbé, 2020), and for the purpose of grasping the configuration of a place with the characteristics above, the concepts of stigmatization and institutional effects are useful.

The concept of territorial stigmatization is utilized to give an account of the phenomenon of devaluated places and socially delegitimized, discriminated and blamed for their deterioration (Wacquant, 2007; Slater, 2013; Wacquant *et al.*, 2014; Meade, 2021), places such as The Bronx in New York City, Cabrini-Green in Chicago (Wacquant, 2007) or La Legua in Santiago (Lin, 2021). In their configuration as stigmatized territories, State actions perform a central role (Wacquant, 2007), being it relevant to pay attention to the institutional mechanisms in the origin (Steinberg, 2010; Slater, 2013 and 2015) or, what Ruiz-Tagle *et al.* (2021) call institutional effects: effects from institutions with local impact in the emergence and escalation of social problems.

Even if the role of exogenous powers in the development of territories has been studied in rural zones (Berdegué *et al.*, 2015), the research trend

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on stigmatization has focused on metropolises or large cities, in which there are stigmatized sectors, while only emergently, non-metropolitan and non-urban territories are now observed from this standpoint (Hincks and Powell, 2022).

In Latin America, this approach has been resorted to describing the pauperization phenomena of urban sectors in Mexico (Bayón, 2021), Argentina (Kessler, 2012; Elorza, 2019), and Chile (Labbé, 2020; Lin, 2021). As regards the last country, studies have been conducted on *populations* in the center of the capital of the country (i.e., sections of the city with high poverty levels).

In the present case, we use it to analyze a territory which, adding to being a paradigmatic instance of precariousness, corresponds to an intermediate city, far from metropolises, and nestled in a desert landscape: Alto Hospicio. Adjoining the city of Iquique, head of the Tarapacá region in the north of Chile, its configuration as a population and commune has been explosive over time (its population has changed from barely 400 inhabitants to more than 100 thousand in under four decades), and the State role has been noticeable (Guerrero, 1995; Mansilla *et al.*, 2020).

We are interested in bringing to light, from the voice of the actors that live in the territory and set collective actions into motion, the institutional operations that may be producing and reproducing their pauperization, plus the actions of activists and social leaders as a response to State neglect or else, uncoordinated over-intervention (Labbé, 2020).

On the basis of the analysis of semi-structured interviews and discussion groups with activists and social leaders, on one side, the institutional mechanisms that operate on the territory of Alto Hospicio are studied, while on the other, the collective actions of the inhabitants, understating the inception of the territory as a result of the combination of them.

### **Territorial stigmatization, institutional effects and collective action**

Stigmatization operates by giving a lower social value to certain groups, which are the object of social discrimination and also blamed for their poverty situation, omitting or ignoring the structural causes or the role of public powers in it (Bayón, 2012).

In this process, territorialization reinforces the stigma, as when various deprivations concur in a place, there is a tendency to validate negative judgments as regards its inhabitants (Kessler, 2012). This is linked to

structural discrimination processes (Elorza, 2019), and their impacts might be physical, material, economic, and even ontological, reinforcing the spatialization of racism, sectarianism, colonialism and environmental hazards (Meade, 2021).

Stigmatized territories are deemed dangerous and are thought to have multiple social evils, in this way, they are feared, avoided and despised (Wacquant, 2007). Sectors which lack services and urban equipment and do not have public institutions become, for their part, zones neglected by private institutions, which turns into material deprivation and symbolic denigration. Ruiz-Tagle *et al.* (2021) summarize the mechanisms by means of which institutions affect poor neighborhoods: i) selective investments and disinvestments, public infrastructure and commercial services; ii) State inaction and efficacy; iii) symbolical promotion and territorial stigmatization.

Stigmatization is symbolical violence, exercised by means of public discourses, communication means, as well as State actions and omissions. Following Liberona and Piñones (2020), there is structural violence in territories such as Las Tomas;<sup>2</sup> such violence is generalized and systematic, it constrains the victims' agency and is installed in the social structure, where it is not easy to identify an individual agent (Galtung, 1969, cited in Liberona and Piñones, 2020), though the most visible actor is the State.

It has been supported that the stigma causes the weakening of social bonds in stigmatized territories (Wacquant, 2007) and which are depoliticized by blaming the very inhabitants of their own situations, and omitting the structural factors that surpass them (Bayón, 2021); however, other research works recognize the potential to create identity and resistance (Wacquant *et al.*, 2014; Meade, 2021; Power *et al.*, 2021). In the experience of living in a stigmatized territory, collective action can also take place as a response to social ailments.

Stigmatization, State action and omission translated as structural violence, and collective territorial action may produce a certain sort of territory, which in the present work we researched from the discourses of the social agents that live in it.

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2 Toma: irregular settlement or encampment with precarious inhabitability conditions and deficient access to basic services.

## Alto Hospicio (Tarapaca Region, Chile)<sup>3</sup>

### *Origin, settlement and role of public housing*

Alto Hospicio<sup>4</sup> has a peripheral character as regards Iquique, which is marked by being the destination of impoverished groups that gradually settled in the locality by means of occupying plots and building their own housing. According to Guerrero (1995), the first removal of population from a *toma* in Iquique and the later relocation to Alto Hospicio took place in 1986. Proprietors of agricultural plots and Aymara communities traditionally settled there were joined by urban migrants from other regions of the country (Guerrero, 1995), which later will increase their numbers because of international migrants. In 1982, Alto Hospicio held 381 inhabitants, while Iquique, 110 236 (Guerrero, 1995); in 2017, figures reached 108 375 and 191 468, respectively (INE, 2018), expressing the fast growth of the former, with population attracted by activities linked to mining and trade around ZOFRI (Free zone).

Given the low soil value, in the 1990's decade, it comprised social housing developments promoted by the housing policy of *Servicio de Vivienda y Urbanismo* SERVIU [Housing and Urbanism Service], being identified from the beginning as "Iquique's backyard" (Subdere, 2008). In the inception of Alto Hospicio territory, housing policies have had a leading role (Mansilla *et al.*, 2020). Subsidized housing developments located in this sector grew over the 1990's and 2000's decades, with neither infrastructure, services, nor institutional capabilities to meet the needs of the place. In 1996, the sector consolidated as Alto Hospicio was surrounded by irregular encampments in *El Boro*, *La Negra*, and *La Pampa*.

3 Table 1 shows some relevant data about the commune. It is worth pointing out that tables 1 and 2 are at the annex, at the end of the article (Editor's note).

4 According to *Real Academia Española* [Spanish Royal Academy] (RAE, 2022), a *Hospicio* [Hospice] is: 1.m. "Charitable establishment which shelters, supports and educates poor, illegitimate and orphan children; 2. in. Bolivia, Chile and Peru. A shelter for the destitute., 3. in Bolivia, Chile, and Ecuador. A shelter for the insane and elderly". While according to Merriam-Webster's Unabridged Dictionary, a Hospice is 1: an establishment providing rest or entertainment for travelers especially: one kept by a religious order; 2: a lodging for students, young workers, or the underprivileged often maintained by a religious order; 3: a facility or program designed to provide a caring environment for meeting the physical and emotional needs of the terminally ill. Retrieved on May 9<sup>th</sup>, 2023, from <https://unabridged.merriam-webster.com/unabridged/asylum>

The effects of neoliberal housing policies have been described on the basis of locating houses in areas with low soil value, residential segregation, lack of services, concentration of stigmatized population in poverty (Rodríguez and Sugranyes, 2004; Tapia, 2011), and higher indices of drug dealing, violence and marginality (Arriagada and Morales, 2006), all of which is noticed in Alto Hospicio, over its growth during the 1990's and 2000's.

Demographic growth accelerated as of 2014, after the 8.2 earthquake experienced in the region (Infobae, 2014), and which entailed the appearance of emergency neighborhoods for the victims; in addition to an increase in rents and the cost of plots in Iquique, which ejected large numbers of people toward Alto Hospicio.

By the turn of the 2010's and the early 2020's, the significant arrival of migrants from other countries entailed higher land occupation, which furthered the development of a nonformal housing market of irregular plots (Mansilla *et al.*, 2020). According to *Servicio Nacional de Migraciones* [National Service for Migrations] (2021), in 2020 there were 18 516 foreigners living in the commune, most of them individuals from Bolivia (52%); for their part, visas granted in 2020 and 2021 in the commune reached 24 225.

### *Public disinvestment and overflow of needs*

In 2004, the locality became a commune and became a municipality, whose management was surpassed by the territory (Mansilla *et al.*, 2020). In 2019, the local government depended 66% on *Fondo Común Municipal* [Common Municipal Fund] (Sinim, 2020), which are resources allotted from the center on the basis of the municipalities' contributions, which demonstrates their budget tightness.<sup>5</sup> To the extent the demographic size increased, the prevalence of social problems became critical: poverty, lack of access to basic services, drug addiction and drug dealing, crime, gender violence, micro-dumps, plus deficient social rights such as education, health care, transport and culture.

According to TECHO-Chile and *Fundación Vivienda* (2021), 49 out of the 62 encampments in the Tarapacá region are in Alto Hospicio, which holds 7 587 families living in precarious conditions with neither potable water, sewer system nor electricity. Comparing the

5 As an indication, the motto of *Plan de Desarrollo Comunal 2017-2020* [Commune Development Plan] is "Effort" (Municipalidad de Alto Hospicio, 2018).



Cadaster of encampments by *Ministerio de Vivienda y Urbanismo*, MINVU [Ministry of Housing and Urbanism], for 2019 and that by TECHO for 2021, increases of 107% and 55% in families living in irregular settlements and in encampments, respectively, are noticed in Tarapacá, of which 39.4% corresponds to migrant families (TECHO-Chile and Fundación Vivienda, 2021). The most critical problem is noticed in lack of formal access to potable water, which is distributed via water trucks.

In 2022, there were public investments worth 28.858 billion CLP,<sup>6</sup> according to *Banco Integrado de Proyectos*, BIP [Integrated Bank of Projects] (BIP Data, 2022), being distinguishable that 86% of the associated investment corresponds to health care, particularly for the construction of Alto Hospicio's Hospital, a project in the making since 2013, whose conclusion is expected in 2023. It is a large-scale investment, that amounts to 68% of the total investment in Iquique province, and 56% of the total investment in the region. However, its value and importance are not enough to hide the historically meager investments on the commune; such deficit has been present ever since its creation (Subdere, 2008).

According to the municipal budget calculation per inhabitant produced by *Observatorio de Gasto Fiscal* [Fiscal Expenditure Observatory] (Henríquez, 2019), the commune has a lowest per capita budget than the one with the lowest budget in the Metropolitan Region, and eight times lower than the country commune with the highest budget per inhabitant.

Furthermore, as regards education offer, only 6% of schools are public, since the private offer (subsidized) is ever present (BCN, 2021).

### *High mobilization capacity, low voter turnout*

As regards sociopolitical participation in Alto Hospicio in recent years, this may be schematically described considering three aspects: participation in demonstrations and contentious actions in the commune; establishing self-managed deliberation bodies; and, electoral participation (Observatorio Participación Popular y Territorio, 2021).

About the first, examples of contentious actions are marches, demonstrations, caravans, take-overs and land occupations, barricades and performances, among others, which were documented and are available in the database of *Centro de Estudios de Conflicto y Cohesión Social*, COES [Center for Conflict and Social Cohesion Studies] (2020). In relation to

6 Some 36 million USD (rate of exchange April 2023).



the second, deliberation bodies are *Encuentros Locales Autoconvocados*, ELAs [Self-managed Local Meetings], carried out in the context of the constituent process in 2016, available in the reports by *Comité de Sistematización del proceso constituyente* [Constituent Process Systematization Committee] (2016), and *Cabildos Ciudadanos autoconvocados* [Self-managed Citizen Town Halls] which took place between October 2019 and March 2020, systematized by *Unidad Social* [Social Unity] (2021). Finally, voter turnout, measured by means of the percentage of voters in relation with the total listing of voters in each commune in the elections between 2017 and 2021, with data from *Servicio Electoral de Chile* [Chile's Electoral Services] (Serval, 2022).

According to this, social mobilization capacity in Alto Hospicio is noticeable, there were 126 contentious actions during the 2009-2019 period, which means a rate of 11.6 per 10 thousand inhabitants, well above the average of the 245 communes with high poverty levels in the country, which amounts to 3.2. Conversely, as regards the creation of deliberation bodies, in the commune there were 14 ELAs in 2016, with a rate of 1.3 per 10 thousand inhabitants, which is below the average of the 245 communes with high poverty levels, which is 3.9. In like manner, between October 2019 and March 2020, two town hall meetings were held, which is a rate of 0.2 per 10 thousand inhabitants, also below the aforementioned set of communes, which reach 0.4.

The commune's electoral participation has always been, during the voluntary vote period, lower than the national average. In the 2017 presidential election, it reached 36.2% (at national level it was 49%) and in the 2020 Constitutional Plebiscite, it barely reached 26.5% (51% at national level), experiencing an upturn in the 2021 constituent election with 32.6% (41.6% national), and with a peak -voluntary vote- in the 2021 presidential election with 40.7%, and 40.1%, in the first and second rounds, respectively (47.3% and 55.7% national level) (Serval, 2022).

To sum up, there is noticeable demonstration and mobilization capacity, though poor self-management deliberation bodies to deal with constituent debates (2016 and 2019-2020) and low voter turnout either to elect political representatives or the process associated to the new constitution.

## Methods and materials

The materials are qualitative and are 12 semi-structured interviews and two discussion groups, comprising 17 leaders and activists from the most populated sectors in the commune, seven from informal settlements in La Pampa, and 10 from Alto Hospicio consolidated area (Centro and La Negra).<sup>7</sup>

The respondents belong to the following groups and collectives in the territory: *Flor de Población* Committee (La Pampa), *Cadena de Amor* Supportive Center (Renacer Encampment), Minka Soup Kitchen (La Pampa), *Solidaridad en Resistencia* (SER), *Semillarbols* Group, *Colectivo Cultural Vida y Arte*, NGO *Voluntariado Popular 18 de octubre*, Red HATHA, and *Sindicato de feriantes* Gladys Marín. As well, some activists participate in *Asamblea Abierta de Migrantes*, and *Pro-migrantes de Tarapacá* (AMPRO).

## Results and analysis

### *Institutional actions and omissions that lead to precariousness*

#### Stigma and identity

Between 1998 and 2001, the sector was known at national level because of the crimes on women performed by the so-called “Alto Hospicio Psychopath”, who murdered 11 female adolescents and 3 adult women. The missing women, which later were identified as victims of abuse, rape and murder, were reported by their relatives, who were discriminated by the authorities that stated that these women had ran away from their homes to escape from the poverty they lived in and from their family issues, disregarding the family demands. Jorge Burgos, by-then undersecretary of the Interior, declared in this regard: “At least two cases will prove voluntary actions that lead to departure, which are products of personal situations that have to do with the poor relationships they have with their parents, domestic violence...” (Cádiz and Campos, 2014). Somehow, “their sexuality and social background turns them into suspects [...] the victims became the culprits” (Tuozzo, 2003: 152-153).

7 Fieldwork was carried out over two visits; the first in September 2021 and the second in April 2022. Some activists were interviewed more than once or participated individually and in a group. Table 2 presents the full respondent listing.

After these events, the marks in the lives of Alto Hospicio inhabitants, the stigmatizing response from the institutions and the media persist twenty years later in their everyday experience of reality in a dangerous place, forgotten by the authorities.

I grew up with the fear of the psychopath, the girl who survived was my classmate, there were a lot of milestones in (*sic*) over my life, which marked me and were kinda weird (*sic*), the issue of the girls, then the boy that was dismembered was also a neighbor, then like a lot of important things marked history and my view on Alto Hospicio (Social Leaders' discussion group 1, September 2021).

We aren't even in the system [...] if a lot of squatters die, it is never reported in the papers, not even in the crime section, they are not interested in the people here in the settlements anymore (Leader 1, sector La Pampa, September 2021).

There is, by the way, a feeling of insecurity among the inhabitants themselves, nuanced, however, by a less homogeneous vision of daily life, for as it will be exposed, even if there is violence and crime, it is emphasized there are "good people", effort and talent, plus a sort of courage that comes from living and configuring a place "from scratch".

### State withdrawal and private disinvestment

In the face of the exponential demographic growth, boosted by the State itself, the experience of the actors of the territory allows noticing the permanent absence of the State adding to lack of private services –noticed in various aspects–, in contrast to the infrastructure and services of Iquique, the contiguous city.

With the boom of the growth of Alto Hospicio, it was difficult for me because everything was growing, but not work or education chances [...] I don't know why we still had unpaved roads or nor traffic lights or not everything was paved, then it was difficult, then one went to Iquique and it was another world, it was something like Miami (Social Leaders' discussion group 1, September 2021).

Lacks multiply and State responses to deal with them are slow to arrive or are never received. Over the Covid-19 pandemic (2020-2022), adding to lack of basic services such as potable water, sewer system, and electricity, there is scarce food assistance to face starving. In like manner, the inexistence of digital connectivity would become relevant in relation with education processes, given the change in school attendance from face-to-face to virtual lessons; this took place within an already deficient educational context, with children suffering delays in reading and writing. The service deficits are multidimensional, and abandonment from institutions is questioned.

The idea is that all this would not exist, neither take-overs nor emergency housing, soup kitchens, and nothing like this, the system is the one that fails, that's why we have to do it (Leader 1 sector La Pampa, September de 2021).

I'm worried by indolence, understanding that up to date, thousands of lunch boxes have been delivered and everything comes from solidarity and self-management, we're not with the authority, sometimes it is here to take thousands of photos, but not to help, all is love among neighbors, I believe this task has to be shared by the authority, this food has to be afforded by them, as with the hunger we experience here [...] but not the authorities in the past and now, never did a thing, things have to be solved by ourselves (Leader 1 sector La Pampa, April 2022).

Expressive are the declarations of the commune authority to the media as regards the situation of the territory: "the Chilean State left 160 000 people abandoned in Alto Hospicio" (Alto Hospicio Mayor, September 27<sup>th</sup>, 2022) (Cooperativa.cl, 2022).

### The problem of housing and bad management practices

In the context of pressing needs related to obtaining suitable conditions of inhabitability and housing access, the actors of the territory point out at vitiated mechanisms in the operation housing committees.<sup>8</sup>

In the experience of some respondents, people associated by the dwellers with housing committees would be profiting, selling spaces and charging for places in the invaded plots.

Committees charge 10 *lucas* [10 thousand pesos] every month [...] make money, a lot of, the plots are on sale now, a month before the alleged housing subsidy, they are selling for two or three million pesos, and apartment. How is that possible? Though the committee tells you you're next in the postulation (female leader 2 sector La Pampa, April 2022).

### State violence and irrelevant solutions

The inhabitants of occupied plots in Alto Hospicio experience structural violence. As pointed out by Liberona and Piñones (2020), evictions from taken plots entail direct police violence, relocation next to a dumpster expresses spatial segregation violence and injustice / environmental racism

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<sup>8</sup> Committees are groups of people who as a set with Endorsing Agencies (usually municipalities), collectively postulate subsidy in the context of social housing projects. Then, together with the initial role of family representatives, committees have become real estate agents and also political catalysts (Vergara, 2020).

violence; while the absence of the State represents violence in the form of abandonment. In the leaders' accounts these processes are made evident.

Due to the various irregular land occupations, evictions of informal settlements have been repeated by public security force, being distinguishable because of their violence those of 2016.<sup>9</sup>

In 2016 the take-over occurred here, *El Boro* became very dangerous, erm, it was also very far, that's true, we had the chance and came here, where they are presently building the new hospital. Well, the military arrived and evicted us. We moved a little bit away. The Ministry of National Assets arrived and evicted us all (Female leader 3 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

The growing presence of migrants has characterized the dynamics of the territory over the last five years, and the presence of exacerbated State violence according to a female leader:

A lot of migrants are also detained in jail, but these are not considered because the State is always classifying us, some others are more important but not here, and many have been evicted [...] those people not only needed to eat, they also needed information, guidance because there was total State abandonment. Then, it was only us (Social leaders' discussion group 2, April 2022).

Together with physical violence, deceit, waiting and inadequate solutions are noticed as suffering inflicted on the inhabitants. On one side, with the possibility to access subsidized housing, the 200 families of one of the encampments would be relocated to a housing development to accommodate 600 families from various sectors. On the other, long waits have consolidated the installation in the taken plot, with inhabitability and service improvements, which will be lost after moving.

It would seem as a "waiting territory", such as those described by Álvarez and Cavieres (2016), as it comes from mobility and it reproduces in it (eradications and evictions), and there is expectation about the delivery of housing solutions (becoming proprietors of a house via state subsidy), which takes long to arrive. However, there is no desire to leave the place, but to carry on living in it, in better conditions, though. Owing to this, inadequate State responses are received with mistrust.

When we arrived, we were told it would be three years, it's been eight now, an entirely life, my daughter is 10, she's been her entire life here and has friends, and as my daughter all the other children, we have an idea of community, it didn't matter, all of the 200 families are acquainted with one another, and now they'll put me with other 450

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9 Audiovisual recordings of the eviction from La Pampa in August 2016 on *IquiqueTVnoticias* (2016a and 2016b), and the eviction from El Boro in September 2020 on *Edición Cero* (2020).

families I don't know, in 650 apartments, is something mega-giant and if turns out well and people'll get along with each other (Female leader 2 sector La Pampa, April 2022).

We have been living for six years in the encampment. We had it hard with no electricity and water for three years, in the fourth they provided us with electricity because *Bienes Nacionales*, it's their soil where we live, recently signed an agreement to set up the electricity here. We paid 400 thousand pesos, each family per household, plus the meter, do you get it? We paid in two-year installments and just three months ago I stopped paying my electricity bills and now I pay the traditional receipt, right? and two months ago, we learnt the encampment will disappear, see? There is a megaproject coming to this plot, where there will be 600 apartments (Female leader 3 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

Being lack of potable water one of the most pressing problems for everyday life in the territory, there is a claim of neglect in the solutions delivered, as an expression of discrimination and disregard for the dignity of the inhabitants. The initial strategy to distribute water via water trucks would have entailed a health hazard for the population, spreading disease since the trucks did not transport water in a hygienical manner.

About water, the municipality doesn't have water trucks, or other similar trucks (Leader 1 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

In the beginning they were not suitable to move water and there were many illnesses, many kids with diarrhea, erm, colitis, also adults and elderly people also got sick, and it was because of the water, the water! (Female leader 3 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

For the life trajectory of the inhabitants and their future projection, the lack of relevance in State responses becomes central. After participating in postulation processes in housing policies to receive subsidized housing, lack of institutional coordination is noticeable when after accessing projects to furnish micro-entrepreneurial projects —*Fondo de Solidaridad e Inversión Social*, FOSIS [Fund for Solidarity and Social Investment] and *Servicio de Cooperación Técnica*, SERCOTEC [Technical Cooperation Service]— they are allotted housing as apartments in which it is not possible to place their working tools neither perform the promoted economic activity.

We didn't need that sort of housing, we fought for a place called house-workshop, which is where you as an entrepreneur live and work. Instead of locating the 200 of us in the encampment in 200 houses, the housing committees wanted to locate 650 families in there, sure SERVIU told us it was because of lack of plots and many families with not home, that was the reason for the towers. I told them as many times as I could that it wasn't suitable for us, but these committees already sold those (Female leader 2 sector La Pampa, April 2022).

Last year a SERCOTEC worth three million and a half was won, which they have set up as marvelous machines to make furniture in the house yard, tell me where on earth I can place them if I live in an apartment, got it? Or what do I do with my solidarity bakeshop, the one we set up, we have an oven, dough mixer, dough ball maker and the sheeter, or the canteen, what do I do with this? In point of fact I have a small room outside [...] I say, you see, FOSIS set up a business for the neighbor (Female leader 3 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

The above contributes, besides, to a vicious cycle regarding the appearance of occupations and encampments, since access to subsidized housing in such typology is not an efficacious response to the needs. Owing to this, some inhabitants who have received housing would have settled in like manner in other plots.

### Real estate market and eviction endeavors

The construction of a second access road to Alto Hospicio, over 2019 and a second time in 2022, would be a significant road investment that offers real estate development opportunities (Vilas Radio, 2022; *El Longino*, 2022). In 2021, the construction of “Las Américas Mall” was announced (Edición Cero, 2021), the first shopping center in the commune, in addition to residential projects, notable for their connectivity, and their closeness to economically dynamic zones.

It is noticeable that real estate development projects underscore positive aspects of the territory such as its multicultural<sup>10</sup> nature and quality of life: “This is the commune that is second place in development in the region of Tarapacá”, as stated by real estate publicity, without specifying that the only communes in the region are Iquique and Alto Hospicio, while the rest are small rural communes with fewer than 20 thousand inhabitants.<sup>11</sup>

The relocation offered to the population is associated to the necessity to vacate the places presently occupied because of already projected urbanist initiatives. It is mentioned that the road connection increases the cost of soil, attracting new investment for middle-income social groups.

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10 In 2017, the commune is officially decreed as the first multicultural municipality in Chile, recognizing *Wiphala* (a flag commonly used to represent some native peoples of the Andes, associated to multiculturality) as an emblem together with Chile’s national flag. A municipal office for indigenous affairs and a commission for indigenous and migration affairs were created in the Municipal Assembly (Prieto Navarrete, 2017).

11 See: “Por qué vivir en Alto Hospicio” [Why to live in Alto Hospicio]. Available at: <https://www.inmoby.cl/por-que-vivir-en-alto-hospicio>



We are not asking those niches realtors deal in, we want the plots to be delivered and each builds their house, and we have a serious problem because in the projection of the Regulation Plan in this regard is that this will be the axis of the connection in the south sector of Iquique and Alto Hospicio, the design of the mall is ready, and the design of the city for them is not thought for us here, but we won't move, this is big (Leader 1 sector La Pampa, April 2022).

### *Self-managed production of responses to problems and needs*

#### Self-management and self-help in a socially atomized environment

The conditions of precariousness, unrest, and the continuous flow of new families that settle in the territory have been described as a context that favors the weakening of associativity in Alto Hospicio. Early in the 2000's, some accounts attest that:

In Alto Hospicio there is no leadership capable of organizing people to pursue their goals [...] there exists an incredible amount of popular and neighbors' associations unrelated to one another, which leads to the atomization of the social fabric [...] a social outburst is unlikely here (Tuozzo, 2003: 151).

After twenty years, some leaders state something similar:

The community is so damaged that everyone was afraid of associating, talking, seeing each other, shady as that (*sic*) (Leader 5 sector centro, April 2022).

It makes us grow distant and that we don't even know what we want to fight for, we don't know, as a community, each one knows, but we don't know what to fight for as a whole, in the end, "I can go further on my own" as the saying goes (Female leader 7, April 2022).

However, despite social fabric is indeed torn or disarticulated, such large number of popular and community organizations recognized for two decades now is still presently a characteristic of the territory, but they have fulfilled a key social role over a period marked by the *Estallido Social* in 2019, and the Covid-19 pandemic from 2020 to 2022. Self-management is a characteristic of the territory, and in the face of the abandonment and institutional effects, already described, it becomes a powerful key to understand life in Alto Hospicio.

The social unrest and the pandemic caused a drop in the incomes of families (a large part of them engaged in informal trade, which was significantly affected, in the first place by the demonstrations, and then, by the lockdown), which together with the increase in the cost of living affected their housing status and generally pauperized their life

conditions. In the opinion of the respondents, housing, basic services, water, everyday food are needs, which in the absence of State response, are addressed by the actors themselves.

Then we created the canteen, it worked three days a week, we couldn't afford more days and had plenty of problems, until one day, it was not any more the kids, they had lunch, I started noticing more adults, moms and dads, older siblings, this time around soups, the first day was when we noticed the soups and people quietly queuing [...] that day we started asking here and there, it was good, people started being solidary at first, then more soup kitchens came to being (Leader 1 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

We noticed food was scarce and decided to turn our women association into this solidarity center, by means of a soup kitchen, which was the first we did, it was the first thing to be done in the encampment (Female leader 2 sector La Pampa, September 2021).

According to its inhabitants, the territory is characterized as a place of state neglect, however, at once, as a place they manage themselves.

### Collective actions and hope

Even if daily coexistence is not free from tensions, the inhabitants of Alto Hospicio have found ways to self-manage their needs and longings in the richness of intercultural neighbor bonds, organization and community solidarity. The leaders speak of the large number of housing committees that have existed in the settlements for years, plus the soup kitchens created out of food needs. Living in the territory and attaining less precarious conditions has been the main challenge.

By virtue of solidarity campaigns and voluntary work in a number of areas in the settlements, initiatives such as soup kitchens scaled their need coverage up, projected their community work beyond food, set up shelters for women who experienced gender violence, helped migrant population to regularize their housing status, or else, planned a space for the community's cybercafé to offer internet to the children due to the new education needs in the context of the pandemic.

Here we set up a shelter for immigrant women that experience domestic violence [...] think of an immigrant woman here with no documents and where she lives, the guy possibly returns to kill her (Leader La Pampa, September 2021).

Here, we have made a little school as well, there are some professors from Universidad Arturo Prat who have come to help, some university students and here we come, we realized some children don't know how to read or write (Female leader La Pampa, September 2021).

The leaders support and manage spaces of organization and participation inside their communities, which, even if predominantly focus on the need of basic solutions, they try to raise awareness as regards the value of good neighbor coexistence, community work, the richness of interculturality, the eradication of gender violence, and recycling. About this last, an emerging interest is the development of sustainable and healthful life, by means of recycling centers.

And there is no recycling, in Iquique I used to recycle everything, I came here and it became impossible, I started collecting water in the bottles and handed them to people passing by. I did the same with the bottles, to somehow reuse them [...] in the end, people feel safer in clean places, because of this reasoning they gave us the bucks [resources] to create the green points (Female leader 4 sector La Negra, September 2021).

These are initiatives that intend to retrieve the positive components of living in Alto Hospicio, associating them to the capability of the inhabitants to build something from scratch in unfavorable conditions in an arid place, where everyday life turns into a challenge.

There was nothing, this place popped up all of a sudden, and little by little people has known about it [...] we have been promoting it for a little, since the anniversary of Hospicio, which is the pride of hailing from Alto Hospicio. Then, we are part of such pride, it has been known for long. And it was worse after the pandemic, the indices and that was harsh. That is real hard. It is always clear and something we want to contribute with is the opposite, Hospicio has always been recognized by their talents, organizations, owing to the values organization has promoted (Leader 6 sector centro, April 2022).

The interviewed actors point that the process related to the New Constitution<sup>12</sup> has been far from the territory, with weak links with constituent, town councils, and meetings, and with the sensation that the problems in Alto Hospicio were not being considered. Despite such perception, the text of the constitution proposal included, among other things, the “right to decent and adequate housing” (Article 51), and also the “human right to water and sufficient, healthy, acceptable and accessible sewer systems” (Article 57) (*Propuesta Constitución Política de la República de Chile* [Proposal of Political Constitution for the Republic of Chile],

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12 El trabajo de terreno se realizó en un periodo en el cual a nivel nacional se estaba viviendo sociopolíticamente el proceso constituyente y la elaboración de una propuesta de Nueva Constitución por una Convención Constitucional electa, definida como respuesta política al estallido/revuelta social de octubre de 2019.

2022: 22 and 24), priority aspects in the commune. The above exposes the distance between actors and process.

Even if there is no contentious program aimed at the State, but particular reactions in the face of the evictions from the plots, electricity cuts because of their illegal access to the network, violence against women, the children's education needs, in the horizon of collective actions there is also an effort to go beyond survival and move toward the strengthening of future projections with higher welfare.

## **Discussion and conclusions**

The socio-spatial configuration of the territory in the case above takes place because of the priority operation of the State, the dynamic of the soil market and real estate development, as well because of the collective actions of community actors who take place in a context of precariousness and stigmatization. Housing policies, private and public disinvestment, ejecting urban projects, violence, and irrelevant solutions, self-management and hope shape the territory.

Public institutionalism which started the intensive demographic growth of the place, acts late and with limitations, reduced budgets, lack of urbanization, evictions and relocations in sectors with health hazards and irrelevant solutions. Here, one notices structural violence, which is referred by Liberona and Piñones (2020), and the role of public powers, as stated by Wacquant (2007), Slater (2013), and Wacquant *et al.* (2014), particularly, housing policies (due to action and little relatedness), together with the absence or insufficiency of other social policies.

Not only does housing policy contribute to spatial concentration in precarious urbanization conditions and indirectly produces an informal housing market, as pointed out by Mansilla *et al.* (2020), but also contributes to a vicious cycle in the reproduction of occupations, by offering solutions that do not fit the families' needs.

For their part, the soil market experiences an increase in valorization from investment on roadworks and infrastructure, promoting real estate trade and housing developments that force the eviction of informal settlements toward the furthest plots. A process to segment the territory into sections with higher and lower values. In such a context, encampments turn into the "periphery's periphery", understanding Alto Hospicio as Iquique's periphery, and the occupations as periphery of the areas with the most value in the commune.

As regards, community actors, self-management is capable of mobilizing a rich social fabric focused on responding to the pressure of subsistence, however it is not articulated with a view to contesting the State; an incapability that Bayón (2021) also verifies somewhere else, though in this case it is not lack of awareness of the structural factors. Leaders in Alto Hospicio are aware of the structural aspects in the origin of the present situation (“it is the system the one that fails”, “the least I can ask a State for”, “we were utterly abandoned by every institution”); nevertheless, no collective articulation is accomplished to interpellate the State institutional framework in the territory in an organized manner.

It is noticed, in the most consolidated areas of the city, an emerging broadening of action toward dimensions such as sustainable development and the advancement of culture, which intend to permeate the territory as a whole; it also promotes identity aspects that intend to fight stigmatization. The capability of building a house “from scratch”, organizing daily life in a solidary mode and answer with effort, while self-managing the challenges of precariousness, all constitute significant inputs for the appearance of “*Hospiciano* pride”, which may reinforce a resistance identity (Meade, 2021; Power *et al.*, 2021). In parallel, public power and market also intend to promote the positive aspects of the area, namely: its multiculturalism and connectivity.

The social production of the stigmatized territory and its configuration involve public action, market dynamics and the collective agency of inhabitants. The later, subjected to the pressing demands of subsistence and pauperization, as well as dissatisfaction against State measures are tackled by means self-management. The limits are not only in internal dynamics of the territory, but in a larger context of institutional processes which at general level has promoted the decline of organization in the neighborhood sphere, as described by Montes (2021): individuation of demands, loss of attributions, and fragmentation of neighbors’ association, focalization mechanisms, instruments that incentivize competence, technocratic logic and clientelism. Even with these frameworks, solidarity in the face of urgency appears and dyes the landscapes of desert.

The present article contributes by distinctively revealing the sort of collective action unfolded from a pauperized and stigmatized territory as a relevant factor in its social configuration, together with the institutional dynamics and social problems emphasized in general in the field of study. In like manner, it analyzes a territory that corresponds to an intermediate city, far from metropolises and their characteristics, also approached in research works.

The causes for the very low electoral participation and the distance from the ongoing constituent process, as well as the specific relationship dynamics between national and foreign families in a context of fluid international immigration are elements to be deepened in future analyses for an integral understanding of possibilities and limits for the collective action in pauperized, stigmatized, and multicultural contexts.

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## Annex

Table 1

### Selected characteristics of Alto Hospicio Commune

Characteristics	Alto Hospicio	National average
Geographic area	Norte grande (Tarapacá)	-
Rurality	Urban	-
Population (INE, 2018)	108.375	-
% multidimensional poverty (Casen, 2017)	27.6%	20.7%
Migrant population* (INE, 2018, *for communes > 10 thousand)	18.516	-
Electoral participation in the 2020 Constitution Plebiscite (Servel, 2022)	45.5%	51%

Characteristics	Alto Hospicio	National average
Electoral participation in the election of constituents 2021 Constitutional Convention (Serval, 2022)	32.6%	41.6%
Dependence on Fondo Común Municipal regarding Permanent Incomes, year 2019 (Sinim, 2020)	66.1%	63% (2015)
Education centers by dependence up to 2020 (BCN, 2021, Communal Reports)	Total: 48 (100%) Municipal: 3 (6.3%) Particular subvention: 44 (91.6%) Particular payment: 1 (2.1%) Corporation of Delegated Management: 0 (0%) Local education service: 0 (0%)	Total: 11 342 (100%) Municipal: 4.670 (41.2%) Particular subvention: 5 575 (49.2%) Particular payment: 676 (6%) Corporation of Delegated Management: 70 (0.6%) Local education service: 401 (3.5%)
Municipal budget per inhabitant 2019 (including Fondo Común Municipal) (Henríquez, 2019)	\$142 270 (under the commune with the lowest budget in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago. Eight times lower than the commune with the highest budget per inhabitant)	Reference: in the Metropolitan Region of Santiago (52 communes) the smallest budget is received by Cerro Navia with \$143 328 and the largest, Vitacura with \$1 136 044

Source: Own elaboration based on *Observatorio Social* (2020), INE (2018), Serval (2022), Sinim (2020), BCN (2021), and Henríquez (2019).

Table 2

**Listing of respondents**

Respondent's profile	Fieldwork date
Ángela Popo (Comité Flor de Población, La Pampa; Asamblea Abierta de Migrantes y Pro-migrantes de Tarapacá)	September 1 <sup>st</sup> – 5 <sup>th</sup> , 2021
Camila Bruna (Red HATHA)	
Fabiola Villarroel (Centro Cultural Vida y Arte)	
Andrea Cejas (Centro Solidario Cadena de Amor, Campamento Renacer)	
Enrique Solís (Comedor popular Minka, La Pampa)	
María (Sindicato Feriantes)	
Victoria Espinoza (Solidaridad en Resistencia [SER])	
Carla (Red HATHA)	
Discussion group: Camila Bruna [HATHA], Fabiola Villarroel [Centro Cultural Vida y Arte], Soledad Meneses, Javiera Molina [Red Mujeres Alto Hospicio], Victoria Espinoza [SER], Tiare Suazo, Renzo Pepe [Universidad Arturo Prat]	
Andrea Cejas (Centro Solidario Cadena de amor, Campamento Renacer)	April 28 <sup>th</sup> – May 3 <sup>rd</sup> , 2022
Enrique Solís (Comedor popular Minka, La Pampa)	
Jonathan Alvarez and Gloria Guerra (Semillarbol)	
Juan Barahona (Voluntariado 18 de octubre)	
Discussion group: Ana María Zuleta and Lorena Zambrano [Asamblea Abierta de Migrantes and Pro-migrantes de Tarapacá], Victoria Espinoza [SER].	

Source: Own elaboration based on fieldwork.

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