DOSSIER: REFOUNDING URBAN-REGIONAL LATIN AMERICAN THINKING: NAVIGATING VARIEGATION, NEGATION, AND CONSTITUTION

LAND AND TERRITORY IN DISCOURSES ON *BUEN VIVIR*: TOWARDS THE REFOUNDING OF LATIN AMERICAN URBAN AND REGIONAL THOUGHT

Janaina Marx[*]
Karina Leitão[**]

[*]Universidad Central del Ecuador, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Quito, Pichincha, Ecuador
[**]Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo e de Design, São Paulo, SP, Brazil

Abstract

Rooted in the Andean cosmovision, Buen Vivir is a sociopolitical construct that proposes alternatives to hegemonic development paradigms, grounded in humanistic, ecological, and collective values. As a critique of the modern Western civilizational model, it challenges the foundations of capitalist rationality – characterized as being individualistic, utilitarian, and productivist – and the ways in which space has been produced, appropriated, and segmented under this logic. Despite its growing diffusion, the concept remains marked by semantic disputes, since prevailing interpretations have frequently marginalized its territorial dimension, even though it is essential for envisioning alternatives to the status quo. This article investigates how the notion of territory appears, both explicitly and implicitly, in discursive and theoretical currents associated with Buen Vivir, identifying different approaches with particular attention to the Ecuadorian case. By recognizing the centrality of territory within this framework, the study seeks to critically reconfigure Latin American urban and regional thought, highlighting alternative epistemologies and practices of dwelling and coexistence.

Keywords

Buen Vivir; Sumak Kawsay; Indigenous Movement; Global South; Territory and Territorialities; Sustainable Development; Development Policies.

TERRA E TERRITÓRIO NOS DISCURSOS DO BEM VIVER: IDEIAS PARA REFUNDAR O PENSAMENTO URBANO-REGIONAL LATINO-AMERICANO

Janaina Marx[*]
Karina Leitão[**]

[*]Universidad Central del Ecuador, Facultad de Arquitectura y Urbanismo, Quito, Pichincha, Equador
[**]Universidade de São Paulo, Faculdade de Arquitetura e Urbanismo e de Design, São Paulo, SP, Brasil

Resumo

O Bem Viver, noção inspirada na cosmovisão andina, é uma construção político-social que propõe alternativas às concepções hegemônicas de desenvolvimento, fundamentada em valores humanistas, ecológicos e coletivos. Enquanto crítica ao modelo civilizatório moderno-ocidental, questiona os fundamentos da racionalidade capitalista – individualista, utilitarista e produtivista – e os modos como o espaço tem sido produzido, apropriado e segmentado sob essa lógica. Apesar de sua crescente difusão, o conceito segue marcado por disputas semânticas, com ênfases que frequentemente marginalizam sua dimensão territorial – ainda que esta seja essencial para pensar propostas de desenvolvimento alternativas ao status quo. Este artigo investiga como a noção de território aparece, de forma explícita ou implícita, nos discursos e correntes referentes ao Bem Viver, identificando diferentes abordagens a partir do caso equatoriano. Ao reconhecer a centralidade do território nessa proposta, busca-se contribuir para reconfigurações críticas do pensamento urbano-regional latino-americano, valorizando epistemologias e práticas alternativas de habitar e conviver.

Palavras-chave

Bem Viver; Sumak Kawsay; Movimento Indígena; Sul Global; Território e Territorialidades; Desenvolvimento Sustentável; Políticas de Desenvolvimento.

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1. The Invention of Buen Vivir

Over recent years, *Buen Vivir*[1] has emerged as a paradigm offering significant contributions to debates on development in Latin America. Its incorporation into the constitutions of Ecuador (Equador, 2008) and Bolivia (Bolivia, 2009) has furthered the diffusion of this notion, rooted in the *cosmovision* (worldview) of Andean-Amazonian Indigenous peoples, among intellectuals, social movements, public institutions, and international organizations. From a decolonizing perspective, *Buen Vivir* proposes a rupture with hegemonic conceptions of development, grounding itself in humanistic, ecological, and collective values.

Despite its growing use, the concept of *Buen Vivir* has remained marked by semantic disputes and by a lack of consensus regarding its definition. For some, it constitutes an "invented tradition" developed by intellectuals on the basis of an idealized version of the Andean cosmovision (Viola, 2014), or a "usurped term" appropriated by States (Plan V, 2014). Others have understood it as a "social phenomenon" rooted in communal forms of life in harmony with nature, as argued by Amazonian Indigenous intellectuals (Cubillo-Guevara; Hidalgo-Capitán, 2015a). There are also those who interpret it as an "opportunity to be constructed" that enables the emergence of other possible worlds (Acosta, 2008).

1. Although *Buen Vivir* is often translated into English as "Good Living" or "Living Well," such renderings inadequately capture its conceptual and political meaning. Rooted in Indigenous notions, the term refers to collective forms of life grounded in relationality and harmony with human and non-human worlds. Given its established use in the literature and the risk of semantic reduction, the original Spanish is retained throughout.

In Ecuador, *Buen Vivir* is commonly associated with the translation of the Quechua expression *Sumak Kawsay*, which conveys the idea of "living well" or "life in plenitude". Despite ongoing controversies, both are grounded in processes of resistance and political affirmation within the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement. Throughout the twentieth century, this movement developed a critical understanding of the exploitation and marginalization experienced within Western society. As a result, it incorporated a new politico-discursive repertoire expressing a distinct cosmovision, as an alternative to the dominant civilizational model. In this context, terms such as "interculturality", "Indigenous nationality," *Sumak Kawsay*, and *Buen Vivir* gained prominence.

Buen Vivir and *Sumak Kawsay* are thus linked to the socio-political construction of the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement. At the turn of the twenty-first century, these notions were re-signified in academic and political contexts, particularly during the 2008 Montecristi Constituent Assembly and under the governments of Rafael Correa. In this context, *Buen Vivir* became a central axis of reflection and a foundation for national planning, as expressed in the National Plan for *Buen Vivir* (2009–2013 and 2013–2017), which sought to institutionalize the concept within public policy (Equador, 2009, 2013).

The political-institutional context that propelled the incorporation of *Buen Vivir* into Ecuadorian public policy expanded its visibility but also intensified disputes over its meanings. The concept has been consolidated as a heterogeneous discursive field, encompassing different interpretations of alternatives to capitalist development. Authors such as Cubillo-Guevara and Hidalgo-Capitán (2015b), as well as Le Quang and Vercoutère (2013), have identified at least three currents: (i) culturalist, indigenist, and Pachamamist; (ii) eco-Marxist, socialist, and statist; and (iii) ecological and post-developmentalist. This diversity reveals both the potential of *Buen Vivir* to challenge traditional development paradigms in Latin America and the challenges inherent in a process of political construction marked by ongoing dispute and reinterpretation.

The polysemous character of *Buen Vivir* is reflected in the selective emphasis placed on certain themes in current debates, while others remain marginalized. One example is the limited attention given to the concept's territorial dimension, despite the fact that development necessarily entails a spatial perspective. As a critique of the capitalist rationality underlying the modern Western model, *Buen Vivir* also challenges hegemonic ways of producing and organizing territory, marked by functionalist and commodifying logics of neoliberal planning. Hence, it questions the fragmentation and unequal appropriation of space, proposing instead solidaristic forms of coexistence integrated with nature, grounded in collective rights, and oriented towards alternative knowledge and modes of inhabiting.

Buen Vivir advances a relational conception of life, in which nature is recognized as a subject with its own rights, and human existence is embedded within natural cycles. This perspective breaks with utilitarian and extractivist logics by promoting an ethics of care, reciprocity, and balance, guiding social and political practices oriented towards sustainability and environmental justice. By challenging traditional models of development, *Buen Vivir* affirms ways of life based on mutual respect between humans and nature, offering a basis for rethinking territory as a space of shared life. This perspective was enshrined in the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution, which recognizes the rights of nature and the need to respect its vital and regenerative cycles.

Despite its significance, territory has, however, remained marginal in analyses on *Buen Vivir*. This article argues for the centrality of territory in understanding the concept as an alternative development paradigm, emphasizing its potential to critically reconfigure Latin American urban and regional thought. This perspective is particularly salient in Latin America, where struggles over land—and, more recently, over territory—have become a key axis of social mobilization. In Ecuador, these demands have been strengthened through the struggles of the Indigenous movement for the recognition and protection of collective territories, thereby underlining their contemporary political and social relevance.

2. The emergence of Buen Vivir in the Ecuadorian context

Although *Buen Vivir* gained prominence in the political-institutional sphere with the rise of progressive governments in Latin America during the first decade of the twenty-first century (Vanhulst, 2015; Altmann, 2016), its origins lie in processes of resistance, organization, and political elaboration led by Ecuadorian Indigenous peoples since the early twentieth century. Its emergence in Ecuador, therefore, cannot be understood apart from these struggles.

Since the early decades of the twentieth century, Ecuadorian Indigenous peoples organized as a social movement, establishing a complex relationship with the Socialist (1925) and Communist (1931) parties. The left played a fundamental role in the politicization of the Andean rural world, promoting the first peasant unions[2] (Altmann, 2017). The Ecuadorian Communist Party (PCE) was crucial in

2. In 1926, the unions El Inca, in Pesillo; Tierra Libre, in Moyurco; Pan y Tierra, in La Chimba; and a union in Juan Montalvo were founded, all in the Andean region (HARNECKER, M.; FUENTES, F. *Ecuador: una nueva izquierda en busca de la vida en plenitude* [Ecuador: A New Left in Search of a Life in Plenitude. 1. ed. Quito: Intervención Cultural, 2011).

the formation of Indigenous leadership[3] and in the founding of the Federación Ecuatoriana de Indios (FEI) in 1944.

Over time, diverse currents have shaped the political organization of Indigenous peoples. Initially, Marxist thought played a central role in framing Indigenous peoples as an exploited class within the capitalist system, especially through the influence of José Carlos Mariátegui. In *Siete ensayos de interpretación de la realidad peruana* [Seven Interpretive Essays on Peruvian Reality], Mariátegui (1928) identified "the problem of the land" as the core of the Indigenous question, arguing that the oppression of Indigenous peoples was not merely ethnic or cultural, but fundamentally economic—linked to the expropriation of their territories ever since the colonial period.

Decades later, liberation theology—particularly through the work of Bishop Leonidas Proaño—played a key role in advancing Indigenous political organization. Proaño founded the Escuelas Radiofónicas Populares del Ecuador [Popular Radio Schools of Ecuador] (ERPE) to provide literacy classes to Indigenous peoples in their own languages (Equador, 2014), promoted the return of Church lands to communities, and supported the formation of cooperatives, anticipating agrarian reform. His pastoral work emphasized social justice, dignity, and culture, fostering critical consciousness among poor and oppressed Indigenous communities.

These ideas converged with Indigenous knowledge systems and cosmovisions, creating fertile ground for profound reflections on cultural and ethnic issues within the Indigenous movement itself. This consolidation of critical thought in Ecuador proved essential for the construction of *Buen Vivir* as both a political proposal and an alternative to the hegemonic model of development.

The recent national and international prominence of the concept is largely attributable to the dissemination efforts of actors linked to the Indigenous movement, such as Alberto Acosta, former president of Ecuador's National Constituent Assembly. Through these efforts, *Buen Vivir* has become established as a theoretical and political framework that proposes alternatives to hegemonic development. It integrates environmental and intercultural concerns and has become a "platform for envisioning new worlds"[4] (Gudynas, 2011, p. 13). Acosta further expanded this perspective, emphasizing that *Buen Vivir* "questions the Western concept of well-being and, as a proposal for struggle, confronts the coloniality of power", thereby positioning it not solely within the Indigenous world but as "Aristotelian, Marxist,

3. Prominent among the Indigenous leaders are Dolores Cacuango, Jesús Gualavisí, and Tránsito Amaguaña.

4. This and all other non-English citations hereafter have been translated by the authors.

ecological, feminist, cooperative, humanist, etc." (Acosta, 2013, [n. p.]), and thus connecting it to broader universal philosophical principles.

Beling and Vanhulst (2016) argued that the inclusion of *Buen Vivir* in the Ecuadorian Constitution resulted from a process articulated across multiple scales and embedded in the political and economic redefinition of neoliberal capitalism. This context of global political contestation, facilitated the convergence between environmentalist, anti-globalization, and identity-based discourses and the principles of *Buen Vivir*, reflecting the intersection of Indigenous struggles with local, regional, and global forces (Beling; Vanhulst, 2016; Le Quang; Vercoutère, 2013). At the global level, factors such as the rise of environmentalism, the consolidation of multiculturalism, reflections on the "good life" within political ecology, the search for alternatives to hegemonic development, debates on the left and the role of the State, and the 2008 crisis intensified critiques of neoliberalism. At the regional level, historical transformations—including the return of democracies, the recognition of Indigenous rights, the strengthening of social struggles, and the leftward turn in Latin America—further shaped this process (Beling; Vanhulst, 2016).

As *Buen Vivir* has gained wider visibility, it has also become a site of political contestation over its meaning. In Ecuador, these tensions were particularly evident during debates surrounding the Montecristi Constitution, which gave rise to three prominent interpretations: (i) the culturalist, indigenist, or Pachamamist; (ii) the statist or socialist; and (iii) the ecological and post-developmentalist.

The culturalist current, also referred to as indigenist or Pachamamist, understands *Buen Vivir* (*Sumak Kawsay*) as a discourse rooted in Andean and Amazonian cosmovisions that values ancestral traditions and Indigenous self-determination. This perspective does not advocate a return to the past; rather, it proposes a political and epistemological paradigm for reconfiguring Latin American societies, grounded in community values, solidarity, and harmony with nature. It draws on ancestral knowledge and practices that resist both colonial impositions and capitalist dynamics (Cubillo-Guevara; Hidalgo-Capitán; García-Álvarez, 2016; Macas, 2014).

For Indigenous peoples, *Sumak Kawsay* represents the culmination of millennia of historical accumulation and ongoing struggles of resistance. As Macas (2014, p. 180) emphasizes, it is "a proposal constructed through a continuous process of mobilization, constituting the center and essence of community life. It is the foundation of the civilizational matrix of our peoples, which remains in force despite the violent interruption caused by coloniality and the aggression of the capitalist model".

This current emphasizes the recovery of identity and ancestral knowledge as a pathway to *Buen Vivir*. Politically, it advocates the self-determination of Indigenous peoples and the construction of plurinational States. Economically, it advances a community-based model grounded in solidarity, reciprocity, and mutual aid. By rejecting the Western concept of development—which is absent in the Andean cosmovision—this perspective presents an "alternative to development" (Gudynas, 2011), a proposal for civilizational transformation based on community values—such as reciprocity, solidarity, and the common good—and on ancestral ways of life that prioritize harmonious coexistence with nature, collective management of resources, and the centrality of communal life.

Given the predominantly oral nature of much Indigenous knowledge, indigenist intellectuals connected to Latin American movements have played a crucial role in disseminating *Sumak Kawsay*. Key references include Ecuadorian thinkers such as Luis Macas, Blanca Chancoso, Nina Pacari, Luis Maldonado, Ariruma Kowii, Carlos Viteri, Humberto Cholango, Floresmilo Simbaña, Mónica Chuji, Pablo Dávalos, and Atawallpa Oviedo; and Bolivian thinkers such as Simón Yampara, Javier Medina, Xavier Albó, Fernando Huanacuni, David Choquehuanca, Rafael Bautista, Raúl Prada Alcoreza, Josef Estermann, and Mario Torrez.

The statist or socialist current, originating from the constitutional experiences of Ecuador and Bolivia, links *Buen Vivir* to a project of social transformation aimed at overcoming capitalism. It conceives *Buen Vivir* as an alternative to the developmentalist paradigm, prioritizing redistributive public policies oriented toward social equity and the eradication of poverty. Within this framework, the concept takes on variations such as "*Buen Vivir* socialism," "*Sumak Kawsay* socialism," "twenty-first-century socialism," and "Andean community socialism" (Ramírez, 2010; Linera, 2015).

In this perspective, the State assumes a central role as an agent of social transformation and coordinator of critical modernity that recognizes ancestral knowledge, community values, and cultural diversity. This vision is expressed in the proposal for a sustainable, knowledge-based productive matrix, reconfiguring the role of the State beyond neoliberal logic and orienting it toward the expanded reproduction of life rather than capital.

This current represents a paradigmatic renewal by prioritizing equality and social justice, expanding collective well-being across both material aspects (such as access to infrastructure, equipment, and public services) and immaterial aspects (such as quality of life and harmony with nature), in line with the National Plan for *Buen Vivir*. In this sense, *Buen Vivir* also entails "having time for contemplation and emancipation," enabling "individual and collective freedoms, capacities, and

potentialities to flourish," and envisioning a desirable life that respects diversity "without producing any form of domination over others." This vision requires "reconstructing the public sphere so that we recognize, understand, and value one another," promoting "the possibility of reciprocity and mutual recognition" and thereby enabling "self-realization and the construction of a shared social future" (Equador, 2009, p. 10).

The institutionalization of *Buen Vivir* and the expansion of public debates have strengthened this current; however, its implementation reveals persistent contradictions between discourse and practice (Vanhulst, 2015). It is therefore essential to understand this strand of *Buen Vivir* as a concept shaped within institutional contexts marked by challenges and structural tensions. Among its principal exponents are Latin American intellectuals such as José Luis Coraggio, Fander Falconí, René Ramírez, Álvaro García Linera, Pedro Páez, and Ricardo Patiño—some of whom are linked to the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia—as well as European thinkers such as Michael Löwy and François Houtart (Cubillo-Guevara; Hidalgo-Capitán, 2017; Vanhulst, 2015).

In turn, the ecological and post-developmentalist current emphasizes the need to overcome the extractivist paradigm and capitalist development as an essential condition for the realization of *Buen Vivir*. Grounded in critiques of coloniality and dependency, this approach underscores that Latin America remains trapped in predatory extractivism, a colonial legacy sustained by economic dependency and the imperatives of global trade (Le Quang; Vercoutère, 2013). The end of formal colonialism did not eliminate the exploitation of nature; rather, it merely reconfigured it within capitalism, revealing extractivism as an intrinsic expression of the predatory logic of capitalism that must be overcome.

Building on this critique, *Buen Vivir* emerges as an alternative to linear and hegemonic development, advocating post-extractivist economies and sustainable forms of coexistence between society and nature, thereby taking on a clearly post-developmentalist orientation. However, Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta (2014) highlight the tensions and risks associated with the co-optation of the concept by discourses such as the "green economy" or "sustainable development," which may dilute the transformative potential of *Buen Vivir*. The post-developmentalist current thus adopts a critical stance toward perspectives grounded in economic growth and neoliberal rationality. Within this framework, *Buen Vivir* is conceived as a multidimensional, plural, and evolving platform that articulates Indigenous, feminist, socialist, decolonial, and environmental knowledge, configuring itself as a utopian, hybrid proposal, resulting from the synthesis of multiple theoretical influences and grounded in a process of civic construction.

This perspective resonates with the World Social Forum (WSF), a space for contesting neoliberalism and the Western development model. Authors such as Alberto Acosta, Eduardo Gudynas, and Boaventura de Sousa Santos engage with the WSF, contributing proposals centered on ecological justice, epistemic diversity, and the valorization of Indigenous knowledge (Acosta, 2016; Gudynas, 2011; Santos, B., 2007). There are also clear affinities with European degrowth currents. The articulation between Latin American intellectuals (such as Acosta, Gudynas, Svampa, Martínez, Lander, and Aguinaga) and European thinkers (such as Tortosa and Unceta) has contributed to the international projection of *Buen Vivir*. Likewise, the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation has funded several publications on the topic, thereby facilitating its wider dissemination (Acosta, 2013; Brand; Acosta, 2017; Schavelzon, 2012).

3. Territory in debates on Buen Vivir: alternatives to the development paradigm

Buen Vivir can be understood as a mobilizing idea that epistemologically breaks with the hegemonic notion of development, historically grounded in liberal, Western, and colonial foundations. Its incorporation into Latin American constitutions has constituted a challenge to this dominant paradigm, requiring the recognition of dimensions that had previously been marginalized, particularly territory.

Various authors have highlighted territory as a fundamental anchor of development processes. As Altmann and Waldmüller (2018, p. 9) argue, "if we assume that every development process—whether economic, human, legal, anti-capitalist, ethical, or political—is necessarily territorial; [...] there is an initial place or concrete materiality where some development process occurs, which constitutes it."

The relationship between territory and development is particularly critical in the Latin American context, where access to land—both rural and urban—has historically constituted one of the main axes in the reproduction of social inequalities (Maricato, 2008). In rural areas, persistent land concentration and restricted access to productive land have driven rural exodus, contributing to the unplanned expansion of cities. In urban areas, rapid growth—marked by the proliferation of informal settlements in peripheral zones—combined with real estate speculation and land valorization, has constrained access to land and exacerbated problems such as poverty, sociospatial segregation, and environmental degradation.

As a paradigmatic proposal, *Buen Vivir* seeks to move beyond the dominant view of development that prioritizes economic indicators over social, cultural, and

environmental consequences. Marcelo Lopes de Souza (2010, p. 60–61) emphasizes that "a development that brings serious side effects is not legitimate and, therefore, does not deserve to be called as such." These impacts are materialized in territory, which not only reflects but also produces the dynamics of power, exclusion, and resistance embedded in development processes. Given this centrality, it becomes essential to reconstruct the different understandings surrounding the notion of territory in contemporary debates on *Buen Vivir*, revealing the potential contributions of its various currents to critical approaches committed to transforming sociospatial inequalities in Latin America.

In the Andean cosmovision, the notion of territory extends beyond physical space, assuming an ontological and epistemological role; that is to say, territory is constitutive of being and identity and enables the production and organization of knowledge (Estermann, 2006; Walsh, 2009; Cusicanqui, 2010). It is within territory that the relationships between ways of life, sociocultural practices, and alternative forms of political and economic organization have materialized, in line with the idea proposed by Haesbaert (2004), for whom territory is a historical, social, and political construction. Recovering the territorial dimension of *Buen Vivir* implies a departure from dominant epistemologies that have guided extractivist territorial policies in Latin America, shaped by the coloniality of power and developmentalist rationality (Escobar, 2014; Gudynas, 2011). Hence, territory becomes a central element for understanding the challenges, potentialities, and concrete pathways toward *Buen Vivir*. In the field of urbanism, this shift is not only conceptual but also methodological, requiring approaches that valorize care, reciprocity, and sustainable coexistence with the cycles of nature, while recognizing the plurality of ways of inhabiting and producing territory.

In this context, it seems essential to integrate territory as a structuring element in proposals that seek alternatives to hegemonic development. By proposing a new normative horizon for the relationships between society, nature, and economy, *Buen Vivir* calls for a deeply territorialized reflection in order to envision concrete possibilities for its realization. This perspective underscores the importance of understanding territory as a foundation for integrated territorial policies and transformative practices that recognize the sociospatial complexity of Latin America, articulating economic, social, and environmental dimensions in the construction of a more inclusive form of development (Escobar, 2016; Porto-Gonçalves, 2011). Having established the relevance of the territorial dimension in this debate, it is necessary to analyze the conceptions of territory present in the three currents that shape *Buen Vivir*, highlighting the conceptual and political implications of each in order to broaden critical reflection on the articulation between development and territoriality in this field.

Within the indigenist current, territory assumes a central role not merely as physical space, but as a living expression of the cosmovision and sociopolitical organization of Indigenous peoples. From this perspective, one of the critiques directed at current debates on *Buen Vivir* concerns the erasure of an element considered essential by these peoples: the spiritual dimension, which decisively shapes how territory is conceived, experienced, and inhabited. Within the Indigenous movement, the concept of territory had already been under discussion since the 1980s, well before the incorporation of *Buen Vivir* into the Andean constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. This conceptual construction sought to re-signify historical Indigenous demands, particularly with regard to the struggle for land (Pacari, 1984).

The adoption of the term "territory" represented a significant shift in Indigenous discourse, moving beyond the materialist and productivist framing of the struggle for land, which had characterized the early organization of the Indigenous movement and had been influenced by the left and trade union traditions. In this earlier perspective, land was primarily associated with agrarian reform and understood as a means of production, reflecting a predominantly liberal, production-oriented focus that persisted until the mid-1970s (Altmann, 2013). Although this view marked the discourse of the time, Indigenous relationships with land have always been permeated by symbolic, spiritual, and relational meanings, grounded in their ancestral cosmovisions, which Sánchez-Parga (1992) defines as the territorial dimension of land. Thus, this conceptual transformation is not merely terminological but constitutes a political and epistemological reconfiguration: land came to be understood as territory—a totality that articulates cultural, spiritual, political, and symbolic dimensions. For Altmann (2013), "territory" can be interpreted as a synthesis of identity-based demands and earlier class-based references within the movement, such as trade unionism and socialism. Understanding this shift is essential for interpreting contemporary Indigenous mobilizations and their relationship with *Buen Vivir*.

Accordingly, territory can be understood as the space within which Indigenous life is reproduced in all its dimensions: culture, memory, spiritual practices, and autonomy. The notion of "Indigenous nationality," systematized by Nina Pacari (1984) in the 1980s, reinforces this conception by articulating territory with distinct social, legal, and cosmological structures. According to Pacari, "the struggle for land is the first demand, because without it the people do not survive; our culture is born from the land and is part of it." At the same time, she cautions that "the land factor and the cultural factor do not encompass the entire problem" (Pacari, 1984, p. 145), pointing toward a broader conception of territoriality. She

further proposes the collective, inalienable, and sufficiently extensive recognition of territory as a condition for ensuring the demographic and cultural development of Indigenous nationalities (Pacari, 1984). In this way, territory emerges as the ontological foundation of collective existence, moving beyond a purely geographic or economic viewpoint and instead constituting a relational web that integrates knowledge, practices, and worlds in coexistence, as suggested by Arturo Escobar (2016).

Pacari's perspective resonates with contemporary land struggles in Brazil, where the defense of territory brings together Indigenous peoples and social movements such as the Landless Workers' Movement (MST). Within this convergence, the phrase "Mother Earth is the mother of all struggles," frequently invoked in Brazil, encapsulates a shared horizon of resistance, denouncing the historical usurpation of Indigenous territories while also foregrounding the broader processes of expropriation that affect impoverished populations, for whom the products derived from the land—fruits of their own labor—should constitute the material basis of collective existence.

Alfredo Viteri (2004), an Ecuadorian Indigenous thinker, argues that territory constitutes the "natural space of life", where the social, economic, political, and spiritual dimensions of peoples develop in an integrated manner. Territory is thus conceived as a living, relational totality, in which all beings—human and non-human—are mutually interdependent. In the words of Luis Macas (2014, p. 181), a historic leader of the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement, territory is "the space that provides us with all the possibilities of life." This understanding is grounded in the principle of relationality, through which land is recognized not only as a source of resources but as Pachamama—a living being with whom relations of care and reciprocity are established. Viteri (2004, p. 10) further concludes that the "vision of territory is linked to exercising our collective rights and self-determination as peoples."

This expanded conception of territory calls for a critical reassessment of the foundations of public policy and of the very structure of the State. From this standpoint, the Ecuadorian Indigenous movement proposes a plurinational State as a means of recognizing territorial and cultural diversity, in opposition to traditional homogenizing models of development and national integration. In Ecuadorian Indigenous discourse, the notion of territory exceeds its physical dimension, emerging as a matrix of life, identity, and struggle, while simultaneously proposing alternative horizons to the hegemonic development paradigm.

Within the socialist current of *Buen Vivir*, territory is conceived as an essential foundation for the construction of a new development model. This perspective

establishes an explicit connection between territory and *Buen Vivir*, emphasizing the need to rethink the country's territorial configuration as a prerequisite for the viability of this emerging paradigm. It finds institutional expression in both the 2008 Ecuadorian Constitution and in the National Plans for *Buen Vivir* (PNBV), which seek to translate these principles into public policy.

The promulgation of the 2008 Montecristi Constitution redefined Ecuador's social pact and explicitly linked development to *Buen Vivir* through the Development Regime, understood as "the organized, sustainable, and dynamic set of economic, political, sociocultural, and environmental systems that guarantee the realization of good living, of *Sumak Kawsay*" (Equador, 2008, [n.p.]). Although these principles were not fully consolidated within the constitutional text, the political actors and projects involved in the constituent process signaled a significant reorientation of the State.

This new development model is expressed in the constitutional enshrinement of the so-called "rights of *Buen Vivir*", which encompass a broad set of economic, social, cultural, and environmental guarantees, including access to water, food, a healthy environment, communication, education, housing, health, work, and social security. The Constitution thus establishes the legal and political foundations that directly link development to the guarantee of these rights.

In the 2009 and 2013 National Plans for *Buen Vivir* (PNBV), territory is conceived as a strategic element for guiding development and promoting the redistribution of wealth and equality. The National Territorial Strategy proposed in these plans aimed to guide public policies through an understanding of territory as a dynamic, complex, and constantly evolving system (Equador, 2009, p. 371). Within this framework, a polycentric, articulated, and complementary territorial model is proposed, capable of integrating different levels of the urban system and overcoming the longstanding asymmetries associated with the concentration of power and resources in Quito and Guayaquil (Equador, 2013, p. 126). The strategy also incorporates objectives such as environmental sustainability—through the rational use, balanced occupation, and conservation of natural resources—as well as the restructuring of the productive matrix, based on a logic of the functional specialization of territories that take into account the socioeconomic and environmental potential of each region.

The National Territorial Strategy is structured around two complementary pillars: deconcentration and decentralization. The former aims to ensure the effective presence of the State across the national territory, through the provision of infrastructure and public services adapted to regional specificities; the latter seeks to redistribute political and administrative power by transferring

competencies and resources to local governments. These principles are articulated with the proposal of a polycentric network of human settlements and with the social and territorial redistribution of the benefits of development, with the aim of mitigating historical inequalities and overcoming exclusion. To this end, the strategy emphasizes the strengthening of political, administrative, and financial autonomy across multiple territorial scales—regions, provinces, cantons, parishes, and special constituencies defined by ethnic and cultural criteria. Accordingly, the territorial proposal associated with the socialist strand of *Buen Vivir* reveals a multiscalar and redistributive interpretation of territory, committed to social justice and to the democratization of the State through space.

In the PNBV, territory is conceived not only as a means of enabling the new development model, but also as a social and cultural construction. Influenced by authors such as Milton Santos and José Luis Coraggio, the plan affirms that territory should be understood not merely as a physical-spatial dimension, but as an expression of culture in interaction with nature, produced through social and historical processes (Santos, M., 1992, 1996; Coraggio, 2009; Equador, 2009, p. 89). This approach valorizes endogenous economies, environmental sustainability, and intergenerational justice, calling for a multiscalar interpretation attentive to the relationships between systems of objects and systems of actions. Territory is therefore also understood as the repository of a nation's economic, political, and social history, reflecting modes of accumulation, exclusion, and wealth distribution. It is within territory that public and private policies materialize and where the power relations that shape the organization of space are expressed (Equador, 2009, p. 371).

Within the post-developmentalist perspective of *Buen Vivir*, territory does not initially occupy a central role, since this strand prioritizes a critique of the hegemonic development model, particularly in its extractivist and neo-extractivist expressions, which are seen as drivers of environmental degradation and socioeconomic inequalities (Acosta, 2016; Gudynas, 2015). Nevertheless, territory emerges implicitly as a crucial dimension in struggles for environmental justice and for the construction of civilizational alternatives (Escobar, 2012; Svampa, 2020; Acosta; Brand, 2017; Korol, 2021).

Buen Vivir, understood as a concept in the making and as a rupture with modern Western development paradigms, articulates contributions from critical strands such as ecofeminism, degrowth, post-extractivism, post-colonialism, and post-development. Within this framework, territory is conceived as both a material base and a space of social and political construction, in which multiple projects of life and rationalities—capitalist and non-capitalist, colonial and decolonial—confront one another.

In this regard, Maristella Svampa (2019) contributes the notion of the "eco-territorial turn", which articulates Indigenous, environmental, feminist, and commons-based movements, revalorizing territory as a space of dispute and of the construction of alternatives to hegemonic development. This turn is aligned with the principles of environmental justice, which originated in Black communities in the United States during the 1980s and denounces the unequal distribution of environmental impacts, the exclusion of traditional peoples from decision-making processes, and ethnic-racial, gender, and ecological injustices. In Latin America, this perspective has been appropriated by networks that expose environmental racism, ecological debt, and institutional violence directed at Indigenous peoples and local communities.

Within this conception, territory acquires a symbolic, sociopolitical, and historical dimension, rooted in cultural, spiritual, and ancestral ties. It emerges as an arena of dispute between the expansion of capital—supported by State policies and corporate interests—and ways of life grounded in reciprocity, respect, and ecological balance.

Maristella Svampa (2019) observed that territories shaped by extractivism tend to intensify social problems, such as inequality, land speculation, violence, the presence of criminal networks, and the erosion of community ties—conflicts that take on a socio-territorial character. In response to this scenario, she emphasizes the need to democratize decision-making processes and strengthen the territorial autonomy of peoples and communities. The defense of territory, the commons, the rights of nature, and *Buen Vivir* thus emerges as an expression of a counter-hegemonic project aimed at reconfiguring the relationship between society and nature on the basis of non-predatory logics. Territory is thereby resignified as a space of resistance, re-existence, and the creation of civilizational alternatives.

4. Challenging development paradigms: toward a territory-centered alternative

By challenging Western development paradigms, *Buen Vivir* calls for a profound reassessment not only of their ends but also of their means, questioning the ways in which territory is conceived and organized—thereby bringing it to the fore as a structuring axis in the construction of a new civilizational horizon. An analysis of the main interpretative strands of *Buen Vivir*—Indigenist, socialist, and post-developmentalist—reveals distinct conceptions of territory, reflecting perspectives that, while divergent in certain respects, may converge in the formulation of alternative pathways in Latin America. Although not always explicitly stated, the territorial dimension lies at the core of the disputes and possibilities mobilized by *Buen Vivir*, making its critical rethinking essential to the construction of concrete alternatives to the hegemonic development model.

This article does not claim that the debate surrounding *Buen Vivir* is, in itself, sufficient to constitute an alternative development agenda in Latin America. Nevertheless, this concept has undeniable potential to mobilize territories, identities, traditions, and human–nature relations in ways that unsettle established notions of justice and equality within the capitalist order. The region has long produced an original and critical body of thought on the specificities of Latin American capitalism—such as dependency theory, the features of underdevelopment, and structural inequalities that have inspired public policies and strategies for a less subordinate insertion into the international system (Prebisch, 1950; Furtado, 1961; Santos, T., 1979). In the current conjuncture, counter-colonial perspectives have gained renewed prominence—critical proposals that challenge historically entrenched logics of domination, and, rooted in long-standing experiences of resistance, are being reworked to inspire alternative modes of existence beyond an extractivist, primary-export-oriented, and socially and environmentally.

It is in this sense that the present article has sought to recover what we consider to be central in displacing prevailing economistic and functionalist approaches to development: territory, understood as a relational, material, symbolic, and historical category. To recognize this dimension is to acknowledge the cultural, symbolic, ecological, and relational aspects that constitute life. From this perspective, territory emerges as an expression of social practices, ways of life, cultural identities, and the multiple relations between society and nature, constituting the point of departure for an integral vision capable of opening pathways to the refoundation of Latin American urban-regional thought from other epistemologies—ones that do not separate nature and society, culture and economy, or tradition and innovation.

Buen Vivir thus calls for an understanding of territory that transcends its physical dimension: it is a space of life, memory, and identity, expressed through ancestral knowledge, community practices, and historically situated ways of producing and inhabiting space. This perspective gains further relevance at a moment when the history of urbanism is being revisited in light of archaeological findings in the Ecuadorian and Brazilian Amazon, which point to early forms of urbanity integrated with the forest (Bush et al., 2025; Heckenberger et al., 2003). Such discoveries not only broaden our understanding of the past but also open up new possibilities for imagining cities and regions grounded in alternative rationalities. Urbanism itself is being rethought from the earliest records of cities, just as anthropogenic interventions in forest environments have been reassessed, revealing the active role of human beings in shaping cultivated and built environments. The historical configuration of our territories, as evidenced

by Amazonian archaeology, challenges conventional notions of urbanity and reinforces the urgency of a distinctly Latin American mode of thought, connected to local histories, challenges, realities, and potentialities.

Lastly, we are faced with a mobilizing idea that places a crucial issue for the future of Latin America at the center of debate: development. Building a new paradigm requires substantial reflection on key themes, such as territory. The literature review shows that there is still ground to be covered in consolidating the integration between *Buen Vivir* and urban studies, revealing new approaches that merit further investigation and expanding. In this regard, certain themes stand out, such as the relational perspective of territory in ancestral cosmovisions, the centrality of the struggle for land within Latin American social movements, and the shift from a merely material claim to land toward a broader dispute over territory—understood as a right that valorizes land in its multiple cultural, social, economic, and political dimensions.

In sum, *Buen Vivir* invites a re-signification of territory, restoring its complexity and potential. For this to be realized as both policy and praxis, it is essential to articulate integrated visions of development and territory, committed to social justice, cultural diversity, ecological sustainability, and the self-determination of peoples. Along this path, the refoundation of Latin American urban-regional thought emerges not only as a theoretical challenge, but as an ethical, humanistic, and ecological commitment.

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Janaina Marx

Professor at the Faculty of Architecture and Urbanism at the Universidad Central del Ecuador (FAU-UCE). She holds a bachelor's degree in Architecture and Urbanism from the Universidade Federal de Minas Gerais (UFMG, 2009), a master's degree from the Postgraduate Program in Architecture and Urbanism (NPGAU) at the School of Architecture of the same university (2014), and a doctorate in Architecture and Urbanism from the Faculty of Architecture, Urbanism and Design at the Universidade de São Paulo (FAUUSP, 2024). She is co-founder of the Observatorio de la Producción del Territorio Ecuatoriano (Opte) at FAU-UCE, where since 2017 she has developed research and outreach projects in the fields of urban policies and the social production of space. She is also a member of the Observatorio Ecuatoriano de Conflictos (Llamas), where she conducts research on socio-spatial conflicts and the production of territory.

Email: jmarx@uce.edu.ec

ORCID: 0000-0002-2322-7262

Authorship contribution: Investigation; Writing – Original Draft.

Karina Leitão

Professor at the Faculty of Architecture, Urbanism and Design at the Universidade de São Paulo (FAUUSP). She holds a bachelor's degree in architecture and Urbanism from the Universidade Federal do Pará (UFPA, 1999), a master's degree from the Postgraduate Program in Latin American Integration at the Universidade de São Paulo (Prolam-USP, 2004), and a doctorate in Urban and Regional Planning from FAUUSP (2009). Since 2002, she has been a researcher at the Laboratório de Habitação e Assentamentos

Humanos [Housing and Human Settlements Laboratory] (LabHab) at FAUUSP, which she coordinated between January 2016 and March 2020. Since 2024, she has coordinated the research line on advisory services and interventions in informal settlements at the Instituto Nacional de Ciência e Tecnologia [National Institute of Science and Technology] (INCT) A Casa e a Cidade [The House and the City]. Her research has focused on themes such as social housing, urban and regional planning, municipal management, urban public policies, and the impacts of large-scale projects.

Email: koleitao@usp.br

ORCID: 0000-0002-5581-5704

Authorship contribution: Supervision; Writing – Review and Editing.

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