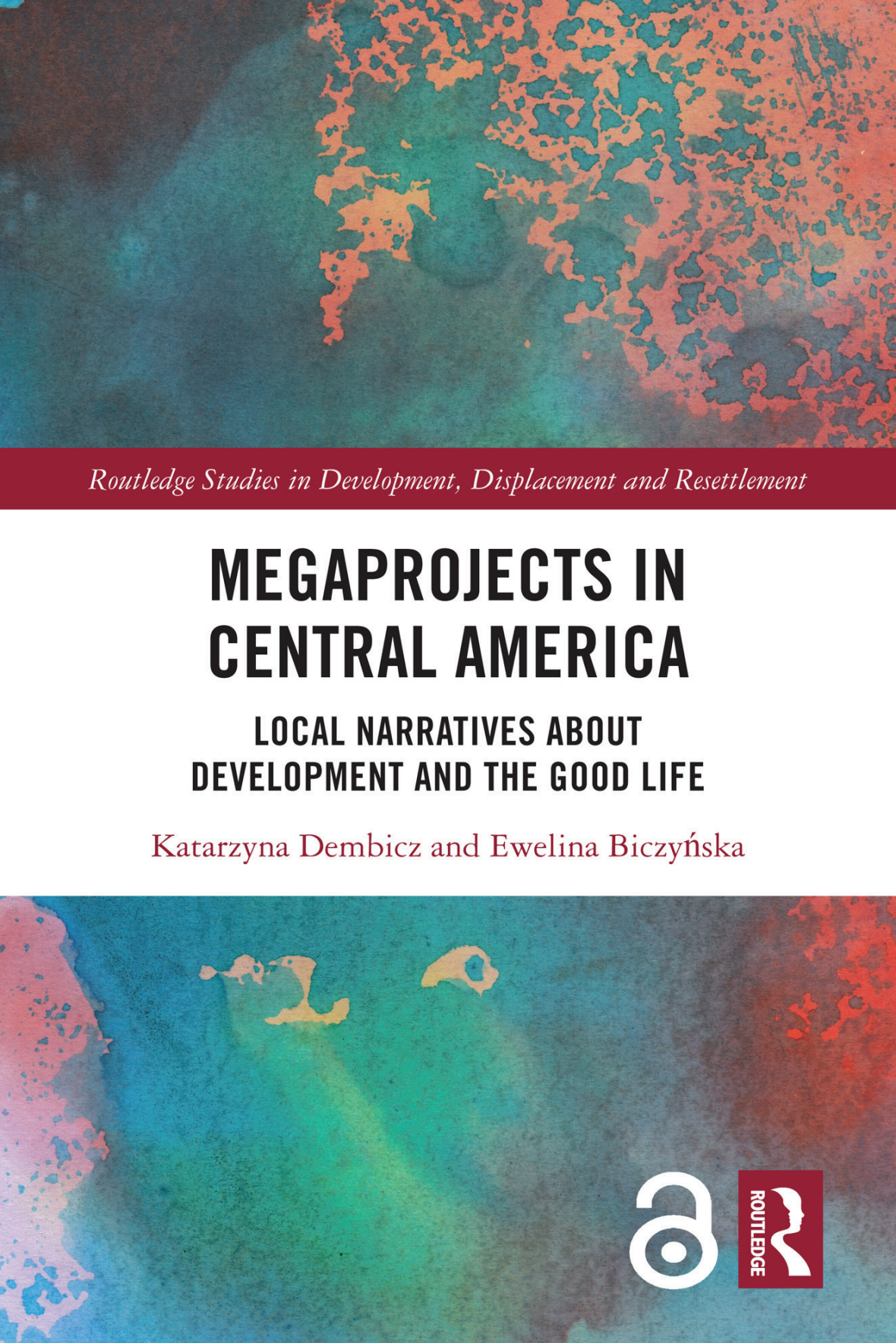




Routledge Studies in Development, Displacement and Resettlement

MEGAPROJECTS IN CENTRAL AMERICA

LOCAL NARRATIVES ABOUT
DEVELOPMENT AND THE GOOD LIFE

Katarzyna Dembicz and Ewelina Biczyska



“Bringing solid analysis on the development challenges of countries in Central America, this book reaches a much broader scope, the knowledge and practices of the Global South. Top-down large infrastructure projects, when not connected to local effective needs, miss the main point: empowerment of communities in the countries involved. A powerful book, with direct on the ground research.”

Professor Ladislau Dowbor, *Pontifícia Universidade Católica de São Paulo, Brazil (dowbor.org)*

Megaprojects in Central America

Embedded in Southern voices and epistemologies, this book explores how local communities in Central America understand development and the good life in the context of large-scale infrastructure projects.

The analysis focuses on six case studies: The Reventazón hydropower plant and the Guanacaste tourism projects in Costa Rica, the Barro Blanco hydropower plant in Panama, the Bahía de Tela tourism area in Honduras, and the La India and La Libertad gold mines in Nicaragua. The book draws on extensive in-depth interviews, participatory workshops and surveys to demonstrate how different social groups interpret the impacts of megaprojects. It critically examines the tensions between externally driven investment initiatives – and the values they promote – and locally rooted worldviews, well-being and ways of life. The volume concludes with a practical workshop proposal to help communities strengthen their resilience and formulate alternative development pathways based on their own cultural and social frameworks.

This book will be of particular interest to scholars in the fields of development and Latin American studies, as well as policymakers and practitioners working in the region.

Katarzyna Dembicz is Associate Professor at the Institute of Iberian and Ibero-American Studies at the University of Warsaw. Her research focuses on social and economic change, regional development and demographics in Latin America, particularly in Cuba and Central America. She is a member of the EU's "Foro Europa-Cuba" network. She is the former Secretary General of REDIAL and is currently the Editor-in-Chief of *Ameryka Łacińska*, a Polish quarterly scientific journal about Latin America. She also serves on the CEISAL (Council for Social Science Research on Latin America in Europe).

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Megaprojects in Central America

Local Narratives About Development and
the Good Life

Katarzyna Dembicz and Ewelina Biczynska

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We'd like to dedicate this book to all our interviewees and members of the local communities in Central America. We couldn't have done it without them.



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Notes

- 1 The project has its own website: dissonance.wn.uw.edu.pl
- 2 For more information about the Working Group see: Grupo de Trabajo CLACSO, <https://www.clacso.org/grupos-de-trabajo/grupos-de-trabajo-2023-2025/?pag=detalle&refe=5&ficha=2664>



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Introduction¹

The establishment of intercultural dialogue between Europe and Latin America and the associated research is crucial for the promotion of mutual understanding. Initiatives to promote dialogue are vital for addressing the legacies of cultural colonialism and for reconstructing historical narratives from different perspectives (Todorov, 1987; Dembicz, 1997; Sen, 2006). This assertion is supported by the following statement by Leopoldo Zea, a well-known Mexican intellectual:

Both the European and the American find themselves without solid ground, in a completely problematic situation, both need to continue elaborating a culture; but now the American cannot remain under the cover of European culture, what the European man does, because now there is no such shelter, there are only problems, emptiness, and one cannot exist on emptiness. Europe has nothing concrete to offer our America today, because it has nothing but problems.

(Zea Aguilar, 1972, pp. 16–17)²

Zea refers to the crisis of values in which European and American societies find themselves, including the state of human-environment relations. His words also inspire decolonial thinking by emphasizing the need for Latin Americans and inhabitants of other regions to listen to indigenous voices and formulate their own solutions to internal challenges. He emphasizes the importance of epistemic pluralism and the recognition of knowledge produced outside the hegemonic global center.

Our book is an example of the many years of scientific cooperation between Latin America and Europe. We have worked with Latin American colleagues to build bridges of dialogue. It is also the culmination of our extensive research experience in Central America. Within a decolonial academic paradigm, this study calls for a critical reassessment of dominant Eurocentric narratives in education, politics and academia. It emphasizes the importance of local histories, cultures and epistemologies (Mignolo, 2011; Santos, 2009; Walsh, 2013). This perspective is reflected in the deliberate anchoring of the work in

2 *Megaprojects in Central America*

Latin American intellectual traditions and in the analysis of local perspectives and sociocultural realities.

The present book is thematically connected to large-scale infrastructure, with a particular emphasis on local narratives and perceptions of development, a good life and visions for the future. The research aims to describe and interpret understandings of development from a bottom-up perspective. Crises – whether economic, environmental or sociopolitical – often intensify interest in development issues. In Central America, natural disasters and sociopolitical unrest are especially significant. Accordingly, the research framework focuses on communities in the areas transformed by the establishment of large economic infrastructures or megaprojects. The construction of these projects generates debates regarding their impacts, benefits and justifications, all of which are closely tied to visions of the future and development. This process often results in either conflict and polarization of interests or cooperation for mutual benefit.

This study posits that megaprojects in Central America cast a shadow over development trajectories – both historically and at present – and shape the quality of discourse and narratives surrounding them. Therefore, the research centers on the notions of development constructed both individually and collectively by members of selected communities in Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama, focusing on three key economic sectors: Tourism, mining and energy. The study also addresses the dilemmas that arise in this context. Interactions during fieldwork informed the development of a workshop proposal, designed as an exercise in formulating responses to questions about the pathways of local communities affected by large-scale investments.

To address these objectives, the book is organized into six interconnected chapters, each of which can also be read independently. Chapter 1 provides a theoretical introduction, tracing the historical evolution of the concept of development. Adopting a philosophical approach, it distinguishes ontological, epistemological and axiological dimensions of development understanding. The discussion draws on several perspectives: The “conventional” definitions formulated by Western thinkers, critiques from the epistemology of the South, contemporary development discourses advanced by international organizations such as the United Nations, and local alternatives that move beyond a linear, extractivist and growth-oriented model. The diversity of this discourse, only briefly outlined in this chapter, underscores the need for open dialogue among equal social actors.

Research methods in the social sciences are often shaped by implicit assumptions and biases, which underscores the importance of a detailed and critical account of the research instruments used, as provided in Chapter 2. The primary methods included in-depth individual interviews, group discussions and workshops, a quantitative survey and content analysis of news articles concerning selected megaprojects. This chapter also outlines the criteria for case selection. It also briefly describes the analyzed sites – the areas marked by

varying degrees of success in implementing large-scale economic projects: The Reventazón hydroelectric power plant and the Golfo de Papagayo tourism development area in Costa Rica; the Barro Blanco hydroelectric power plant in Panama; the Bahía de Tela coastal tourism area in Honduras; and the La India and La Libertad gold mines in Nicaragua.

Chapter 3, the core of the book, presents the findings from in-depth interviews, supplemented by workshops and surveys. Participants' narratives are contextualized within the development of megaprojects in or near their communities. Visions of the good life frequently center on fundamental values and needs such as family, health, security and tranquility. The extent to which these needs are unmet – varying across countries – influences individuals' conceptions of a "better life." In this chapter, these basic values and expectations are analyzed in detail and confronted with the vision of development. Although the good life and development coincide in some aspects, they also contain opposing elements that sometimes complement each other. Perceptions of megaprojects differ, yet their connection to development visions remains evident. The impacts of megaprojects are experienced directly within the studied communities, shaping both individual lives and collective histories. Assessments of these projects range from enthusiasm and hope to regret, resentment and rejection.

Chapter 4 introduces the concept of mental boundaries as a complementary framework to the broader discussion of development visions. The analysis seeks to identify boundaries shaped by individual and collective perceptions, drawing on the notions of cultural barriers and fluid boundaries. Within this framework, the chapter examines divergent perceptions of megaprojects and development among stakeholders, as well as the ways different social groups view one another. The discussion revisits and identifies key values – such as individualism versus collectivism, activity versus passivity and tangible versus intangible values. A significant axis of differentiation is the perception of nature as object or subject. Additional variation arises from differing conceptualizations of territory and its significance for communities.

Chapter 5 analyzes news coverage from six national newspapers in Nicaragua, Panama and Costa Rica, complementing the study of development perceptions. The articles address the hydroelectric and mining megaprojects central to this research, reflecting the national discourse constructed by leading traditional media outlets. The main social actors represented are communities, government/public sector entities and the agencies responsible for constructing the megaprojects. As with the projects themselves, these actors are portrayed in varying ways and to differing extents. The chapter examines the topics addressed in the selected articles, the perspectives on investments, the actors involved and the representations constructed within the media narratives. Of the 657 articles collected, 124 were selected for analysis from six national newspapers with different historical origins. The digital versions of

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these newspapers are *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* in Nicaragua, *CRHoy* and *La Nación* in Costa Rica, and *La Prensa* and *Panamá América* in Panama.

Chapter 6 concludes the book by highlighting the dissonances and divisions within the studied societies, which stem from differing attitudes toward development, the good life and visions for the future. These disparities can lead to conflicts, often arising from limited knowledge and understanding of other perspectives within local communities. A key question that emerged from fieldwork in Central America, and from building authentic relationships with the communities, concerns how to prevent such conflicts or transform them into constructive engagement. It aims to support local communities in achieving deeper self-understanding and making informed decisions about their developmental paths. This section also synthesizes the diverse local development visions encountered during the research – visions that may appear conflicting but are also positioned to foster complementarity and dialogue.

Given the complexity of the research, as described above, a multidisciplinary approach was essential. In addition to the decolonial perspective introduced earlier, the research model is grounded in the following key paradigms:

- The epistemologies of the South³ paradigm seek to broaden the scope for rethinking the world through the knowledge and practices of the Global South. This approach challenges epistemicide, linguicide and epistemic subalternization. It provides theoretical and methodological tools for critically diagnosing the present and opens up avenues for the reconstruction, formulation and legitimization of alternatives aimed at building a more just and independent (free) society;
- The paradigm of interdisciplinarity intentionally integrates and synthesizes insights from multiple disciplines to create new understandings of phenomena. This study draws on theoretical reflections on borders and spaces from geography, sociology and cultural studies. In this case, multidisciplinary is also an attempt to rebel against modern Western science, which is a tool of colonialism alongside politics, economics and technology (Seth, 2009; Chakrabarti & Worboys, 2020). MacLeod (1996), writing about colonial science, points out that it developed in parallel with empires and later nation-states in Europe, and that the same intellectual and political currents shaped power and science, whose structure adapted to the needs of that power. “Cultural possession comes with military conquest, with ‘tools of empire’, but more deeply with the naming of geological strata, plants and animals” (MacLeod, 1996, p. 81). In our opinion, it is difficult to maintain and defend disciplinary “purity” within the decolonial paradigm;
- Empirical research is a methodological approach based on observation and experience – not just theory. This approach is used to understand human behavior, societies and social systems. There are numerous sources and techniques for collecting empirical data. Each approach serves the core objective

of empirical research: Observing phenomena in the social world to generate meaningful knowledge about them (Bhattacharya, 2008, p. 254);

- A constructivist and qualitative approach, utilizing in-depth interviews, field observations and group discussions to gather perspectives and deepen understanding of the ongoing debate on development.

These frameworks justify the research aims as follows:

- There is an increasing need to incorporate the perceptions and knowledge of diverse social actors into research on development, the good life and megaprojects – areas that have been insufficiently addressed to date;
- Including micro-level perspectives enriches meso- and macro-level theories and models of development;
- Inhabited and delimited territories are characterized by fluid boundaries, shaped by tensions between local communities and external actors trying to influence local populations. Misunderstandings between these groups that identify themselves as “us” and “them” can result in mistrust, emotional distance and hostility;
- Social interaction within bounded territories fosters familiarity, security and identity. Borders, therefore, not only demarcate physical spaces but also separate socialization systems, identities and nations, which are constructed through collective social imaginaries.

Leff (2014) underscores the importance of social imaginaries, noting that they enable individuals to become social actors in constructing their lifeworlds and open new avenues for understanding historical and social phenomena. When expressed linguistically, these imaginaries acquire a collective dimension, enabling dialogue in which the imaginative and prospective power of a community is manifested in the invention of new lifeworlds (Leff, 2014, p. 247).

With these considerations, we invite readers to continue exploring the book.

Notes

- 1 This book is a result of the research project “Discourses and Development Dilemmas of Central American Local Communities,” financed by the Polish National Science Center (NCN), as part of the OPUS 15 competition. Project number: 2018/29/B/HS6/00187.
- 2 Original quote: “Ambos, el europeo y el americano, se encuentran sin suelo en qué apoyarse, en una situación de plena problematicidad, ambos tienen necesidad de continuar elaborando una cultura; pero ahora, el americano no puede permanecer al abrigo de la cultura europea, de lo que haga el hombre de Europa, porque ahora no existe tal abrigo, no hay otra cosa que problemas, vacío, y sobre el vacío no se puede existir. Europa no tiene en nuestros días nada concreto que ofrecer a nuestra América; por ahora no tiene más que problemas.” (Zea Aguilar, 1972, pp. 16–17)
- 3 According to Santos (2009), the epistemologies of the South are grounded in three fundamental principles: (1) The interpretation of the world must extend beyond Eurocentric frameworks; (2) global social justice is unattainable without global

cognitive justice; and (3) emancipatory transformations worldwide should not be confined to the grammars and scripts developed by critical theory in the Global North. Instead, the epistemologies of the South advocate for a diversity that must be recognized and appreciated.

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1 Why talk about development?

A philosophical approach from a Latin American perspective

The understanding of development and its models has been subject to changes and shifts over the last eight decades, since the Second World War. Hinkelammert¹ (1970) summarizes these changes and refers specifically to Latin America:

The discussion about the problem of development in Latin America has become increasingly widespread in recent decades. Starting from more economic approaches, it has moved on to discuss the social structures in the development process and the political structures, and is now increasingly focusing on the problem of development as a global problem linked to all the structures of society and the cultural consciousness in which they develop.

(Hinkelammert, 1970, p. 8)²

This period is significant because, prior to the 1940s, the development as a topic received little attention in academic literature.³ Two major events – the Great Depression of 1929 and the Second World War – prompted a broader scholarly and political engagement with development as an economic and social phenomenon. Sunkel⁴ (1977, p. 33), among others, points out this fact in his article “El desarrollo de la teoría del desarrollo” (“The Development of the Theory of Development”) that before 1950, references to the word “development” were rare in book titles, university curricula did not include the subject and no scientific institutions focused on it. Notably, the postwar narrative in the Western world popularized the term development in both political and academic discourse, with international organizations such as the United Nations (UN), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), World Bank (WB) and the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) playing a central role. This trend was further reinforced by events such as the First Interregional Meeting on Research, Communication and Education on Development, organized by the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex in collaboration with the OECD in September 1976.

Development subsequently became both a goal and a means to address economic conditions and crises, as well as a tool for promoting specific economic and social attitudes at both individual and collective levels. The prevailing narrative advanced by international and interregional institutions, heavily influenced by the United States and Europe, led to the prevalence of Western values, which were adopted and promoted by the oligarchies and political elites of Latin American countries (Gudynas, 2023). Since the late 20th century, however, critical and decolonial perspectives have gained prominence, arguing that the concept of development functions as a form of modern colonialism that imposes Western models on societies in the Global South (Escobar, 2014).

The implementation of development projects and plans required not only economic and sociopolitical changes but also processes of categorization and multiscale analysis. Boisier⁵ observes that development is simultaneously a utopia and a non-utopia:

Ultimately, development is also a utopia in one sense and a non-utopia in another. It is a utopia – even asymptotic to the axis of its own realization, for otherwise we would still be drawing bison in European caves – in the sense that it is an unattainable dream, and for that reason it is nowhere.

(Boisier, 2006, p. 146)⁶

This observation prompts two central questions: Why is it important to discuss development? And – has everything already been said about development?

Viewing development as a utopia suggests two possible responses. First, since it is seen as an unattainable ideal, some scholars argue for abandoning the concept altogether and replacing it with alternative frameworks, a position advanced since the 1990s. For example, Esteva⁷ (2010, p. 1) asserts in *The Development Dictionary* (edited by Wolfgang Sachs) that development is a term destined for extinction, likening its continued use to perpetuating a chronic state of agony, with development becoming “unburied corpses” from which “all kinds of pestilence” emanate. Similarly, Gudynas⁸ critiques the classical Western understanding of development, describing it as a “zombie concept” that is simultaneously alive and dead (Gudynas, 2011). Gudynas contends that while development strategies are plural and diverse, they all share a prepolitical background rooted in modern Eurocentric and anthropocentric traditions. He introduces the concept of “varieties of development” to differentiate between such approaches to development as conventional, neo-extractivist and post-extractivist (Gudynas, 2016).

Alternatively, viewing development as an ideal and visionary concept of social change frames it as a catalyst for action – a driving force behind the pursuit of alternative models of development distinct from conventional proposals. In this sense, development represents humanity’s aspiration to reach an

ideal state, a goal that remains perpetually out of reach, much like the unattainable utopia described by Boisier (2006, p. 146). Birri's⁹ unique depiction of utopia further illustrates this notion:

Utopia is on the horizon. If I approach it by two steps, it retreats by two steps. If I take ten steps forward, it quickly slips ten steps forward. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. So what is the purpose of utopia? Exactly this: to walk.

(Mori, 2010)¹⁰

Thus, development can be understood as a kind of utopia – a never-ending process and a story to be told. This ongoing relevance justifies continued discussion about development as an economic, social, ecological, political, spatial and cultural phenomenon that encompasses the past, present and future. Such a multidimensional perspective requires engagement with diverse methodological and philosophical approaches that have shaped the concept, as well as an analysis of the key elements that drive definitions and models of development in specific contexts.

Consequently, alternative proposals based on the decolonial paradigm are gaining ground within the traditional Western discourse that equates development with growth. Although we – as researchers – would like to free ourselves from this view, it persists. Mazzucato's (2023) recent work, *Transformational Change in Latin America and the Caribbean: A Mission-Oriented Approach*, as well as the proposal of "development in transition" (*desarrollo en transición*) coined by ECLAC (CEPAL, 2021) and the EU (Costafreda & Cortés Sáez, 2021), both exemplify this dilemma. As Kuhn (1996) and Keynes (2017) note, it is challenging to move beyond paradigms and frameworks ingrained through education. Nevertheless, recognizing these limitations is essential for decolonizing our thinking, as Latin American scholars emphasize. Argentinian thinkers such as Dussel (2020) and Mignolo (2005) elaborate on this need. Dussel¹¹ advocates for overcoming modernity (without rejecting it) to achieve a pluriversal world where cultures are respected as equals, while Mignolo's¹² decolonial perspective focuses on power relations and highlights enduring power structures of colonial thinking that impose Eurocentric knowledge, values and geopolitical relations. These perspectives contribute to a deeper reflection on the evolution of development.

This chapter does not aim to provide a comprehensive review of the existing literature on development, nor does it seek to offer an exhaustive account of the current state of the art in this field. Despite the breadth of scholarship on development and its objectives, further discussion remains essential, as development is a dynamic process shaped by contextual factors such as economics, the environment and politics. These factors, along with the paradigms from which development proposals emerge, evolve over time. We posit that definitions of development have shifted from a cognitive, universalizing approach

dominated by a Western worldview to a more pluralistic understanding that incorporates local and community knowledge or presents alternative visions rooted in the experiences and perspectives of indigenous peoples.

Accordingly, in the following analysis, we adopt three perspectives: Ontological, axiological and epistemological. While axiological and epistemological approaches have previously been applied to the study of development, we have not encountered a work that synthesizes all three categories in this manner. This is an original approach, through which we aim to identify the dominant paradigms at various stages in the evolution of development thought and explain their emergence. Such an analytical framework justifies the inclusion of local ideas and narratives about development in our research. It is also important to note that contemporary understandings of development increasingly reflect the complexity of these three approaches.

The original meaning of development is associated with the biological sphere, referring to processes of transformation, improvement and growth in humans and other living and non-living elements. Cultural and natural geographic factors have influenced the etymology of the term in different languages. Many modern Indigenous American languages have no direct equivalent for “development.” For example, in Kichwa (a Quechuan language), the closest term is *wiñay*, meaning eternal or a process of growth. In Guaraní, the nearest word is *guerojera*, which denotes an ongoing process and direction of change. In Nahuatl, *izcaltiliztli* or *hueyiliztli* are closer to “growth” than to “development,” with *izcaltiliztli* originally referring to the maturation of a person or plant.¹³

The common meaning of the term development was shaped by the ideas of the European Enlightenment, positivism and, particularly, the theory of evolution. With globalization and the spread of Western culture, the world has adopted an occidental understanding of development, characterized by a linear perception of time with a clear distinction between past, present and future, and a focus on the modernization of nation-states and societies (Mignolo, 2005). This framework defines change as progress from a less perfect to a more perfect state. The modern Western notion of development, therefore, evaluates changes that happen over time and their components, including the affected territories. This is why the historical and temporal classification of the development debate is so important. As Tapia¹⁴ (2011, p. 19) notes in his essay “El tiempo histórico del desarrollo” (“The Historical Time of Development”): “Development refers to the temporal dimension of societies, that is, to the direction of their movement. In this sense, it is appropriate to speak of development in relation to historical time.”¹⁵ This highlights the significance of the paradigm in which development concepts emerged – whether influenced by premodern, modern, postmodern or alternatively, alter- or transmodern thought.

In the 20th century, economics (including spatial economics) and sociology played central roles in shaping development debates and theories.¹⁶ In

the 1990s, ecology and related sciences began to influence thinking about development, and the topic became a focus of trans- and interdisciplinary debate, with contributions from cultural studies, history, geography, philosophy, psychology, management and education. This is reflected in the 1997 anthology *Philosophy of Development: Reconstructing the Foundations of Human Development and Education*, edited by Wouter van Haften, Michiel Korthals and Thomas Wren, which analyzes development on various cognitive levels and dimensions of learning. The role of pragmatism in studies on development should not be overlooked, in line with the philosophical position of Charles Sanders Peirce, who pointed out the practical consequences of accepting certain ideas as true (Tatarkiewicz, 2005).¹⁷ In line with this, Koehler (2015, p. 735) observes, “Moreover, real-world politics is what ultimately decides which ideas and policy choices are deemed acceptable, taken to heart and, in some fashion, implemented.” The evolution of the ideas of development has thus been conditioned by prevailing intellectual currents and worldviews. Ontological, axiological and epistemological frameworks have all shaped the formation of the concepts of development, which will be the focus of the following discussion.

The universalization of the Western way of understanding and conceptualizing development

The universalization of the Western approach to understanding and conceptualizing development has been significantly shaped by the efforts of scientific communities and political elites, particularly in Europe and North America (the United States and Canada), to define global standards and pursue universal solutions to socioeconomic challenges (Sachs & Comelieu, 1988; Sen, 1999; Stiglitz, 2002; Raworth, 2018). These actors assume that the principles and objectives of development should not only be understood by the general public but also accepted and implemented without reservation worldwide. The United Nations’ (1970) *International Development Strategy* exemplifies this perspective, establishing development goals intended to drive the dynamic growth of national economies:

As the ultimate purpose of development is to provide increasing opportunities to all people for a better life, it is essential to bring about a more equitable distribution of income and wealth for promoting both social justice and efficiency of production, to raise substantially the level of employment, to achieve a greater degree of income security, to expand and improve facilities for education, health, nutrition, housing and social welfare, and to safeguard the environment. Thus, qualitative and structural changes in the society must go hand in hand with rapid economic growth, and existing disparities-regional, sectoral and social-should be substantially reduced.

(UN, 1970, paragraph 18)

This drive to define the nature of development as a pathway to a better existence under modern or postmodern circumstances has been a central focus of scientific inquiry. The ontological approach¹⁸ to development – historically dominated by the Western paradigm – has informed many of the definitions advanced by international organizations, granting them the status of universal truths. Despite increasing recognition of diverse worldviews and local solutions to global challenges, top-down development models and policies designed to address issues such as poverty, inequality, pollution and climate change continue to be promoted.

Gunnar Myrdal's work exemplifies the search for universal solutions to socio-economic problems. He was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 1974, alongside Friedrich Hayek, for his research on the interdependence of economic, social and institutional phenomena. His book *Asian Drama: An Inquiry Into the Poverty of Nations* provides a detailed analysis of the mechanisms of underdevelopment and development and models for their planning. In his 1974 article "What Is Development," Myrdal defines development as follows:

By development, I mean the movement upward of the entire social system, and I believe this is the only logically tenable definition. This social system encloses, besides the so-called economic factors, all noneconomic factors, including all sorts of consumption by various groups of people; consumption provided collectively; educational and health facilities and levels; the distribution of power in society; and more generally economic, social, and political stratification; broadly speaking, institutions and attitudes-to which we must add as an exogenous set of factors induced policy measures applied in order to change one or several of these endogenous factors.

(Myrdal, 1974, pp. 729–730)

This quotation highlights the metaphors inherent in Western culture that associate directions with values: "forward" and "up" are imbued with positive connotations, while "down" and "backward" are viewed negatively (Raworth, 2018). Despite this progressive view, it is important to note that Myrdal's conception of development foregrounds the social dimension of change, marking a significant departure from earlier perspectives that equated development primarily with quantitative economic growth. Nevertheless, his approach remains situated within the prevailing assessment scheme characteristic of industrialization, urbanization and modernization, in which the value of geographic, social and cultural spaces was assessed accordingly. This led to the categorization of countries into Industrialized versus Agricultural, Core versus Peripheral or First World versus Third World.

Political and scientific discourse adopted these binary divisions, reinforcing narratives that distinguished between "us" and "them." The widespread

belief that agricultural regions were inherently backward and less developed than industrialized areas – labeled as “developed” – was a direct and problematic outcome of such thinking. Escobar (2007), in *La invención del Tercer Mundo: Construcción y deconstrucción del desarrollo* (*The Invention of the Third World: Construction and Deconstruction of Development*), examines how Latin America came to be perceived as an underdeveloped “Third World” region and explores the broader implications of this categorization.

A pivotal moment in cementing this discourse and introducing its terminology into international relations was President Harry Truman’s speech on January 20, 1949. In the final paragraph of his “Point Four Program,” Truman outlined a plan to support “weak” countries, thereby introducing the term “underdeveloped” into international political vocabulary.

Fourth, we must embark on a bold new program for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for *the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas*. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is *primitive and stagnant*. *Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas*. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve the suffering of these people. *The United States is preeminent among the nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques* I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life. And, in cooperation with other nations, we should foster capital investment in areas needing development.

(Congressional Record-Senate, 1949)

Certain terms in the quoted excerpt from Truman’s speech were intentionally emphasized to highlight the conservative orientation of political thought in international relations. These terms evoke the colonial legacy and the dominance of Western civilization. The notion that external actors – particularly the United States – determine the rules and prescribe solutions for other countries’ challenges is evident in this discourse. Regions inhabited by less affluent, primarily agricultural societies with lower incomes are characterized as underprivileged and, consequently, underdeveloped, with their local economies labeled as primitive. This perceived primitivism and poverty are simultaneously constructed as threats to other regions and countries. Following Truman’s call to overcome “stagnation” and strive for a better life, foreign direct investment (FDI) emerged as the prescribed remedy for the “disease of backwardness” – a strategy that remains prevalent in Latin American, Caribbean and African countries today. To achieve maximum universality, FDI initiatives were typically implemented with the consent of national political and economic elites;

however, when faced with local resistance, opposition was frequently suppressed by force.

An ontological approach is also evident in *The Limits of Growth*, the influential study conducted by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) for the Club of Rome's Executive Committee. While the authors emphasized their aim to draw attention to the scale and complexity of human activity in a world of finite resources (Meadows et al., 1972, p. 18), their analysis aligns with the "top-down" discourse of the era, promoting a global, universal model of the limits of growth as articulated by developed countries.

Regional experiences and values to rethink development proposals

From the 1960s onward, countries in Latin America, Asia and Africa began to exert greater influence on development policies – primarily through international institutions such as the United Nations. This shift was reflected in the United Nations General Assembly's declarations of the International Decade for Development in the 1960s and 1970s, as well as in subsequent decades, which increasingly emphasized social issues, individual and collective well-being and happiness – moving away from a sole focus on economic growth and modernization as the foundation of development (Koehler, 2015). Despite the end of formal colonialism, economic and political dependence persisted in these regions – even as international development aid programs were launched after the Second World War.

The Argentinian economist Raul Prebisch¹⁹ was among the first to critique the inequitable economic and trade relations between core and peripheral countries – using Latin America as a case study to illustrate these dynamics and propose solutions. As Executive Secretary of the United Nations Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Prebisch led a group of scholars and intellectuals – including Celso Furtado, Osvaldo Sunkel, Henrique Cardoso and Aníbal Quijano – who established what became known as the Latin American school of economic thought and developed structuralist economic theory.

Their proposals – such as import substitution industrialization²⁰ and regional integration – introduced innovative approaches to development that emphasized the importance of regional identity and context. This perspective foregrounds an epistemological approach²¹ in which regional identity becomes central to the concept of development (Dembicz, 2008). ECLAC aimed to structure its development proposals in such a way as to promote the formation and strengthening of regional ties within specific geographic areas, emphasizing their positive impact on the effective implementation of regional and local development projects (Dembicz, 2008, p. 152) and the advancement of economic independence and political sovereignty. This approach highlights dialectical practices to understand reality from an endogenous (grass-roots) (bottom-up) perspective, continuously comparing proposed strategies with local and regional contexts, and thought with action. Consequently, this

entails an ongoing transformation of ideas in response to changing circumstances. Thus, an epistemological approach characterizes the ideas generated within ECLAC and other research centers, such as CLACSO,²² as well as those outside Latin America.

The heyday of development research from a local perspective and its promotion occurred in the 1980s and 1990s in response to the deepening crisis of centralized administrative models, growing criticism of top-down models of development activity, economic stagnation and deepening territorial (including regional) disparities. These approaches are considered part of the so-called “third generation” of development theories (Rudowski, 2015). Walter Stöhr, one of the leading proponents and architects of the theoretical foundation for “bottom-up development,” argues that this model is driven by local initiatives that leverage both individual and collective potential, such as that found within local communities (Stöhr & Taylor, 1981). Stöhr identifies local development as the fullest expression of this process, observable in the socio-economic advancement of basic administrative units (such as municipalities and cities) or groups of them. He also outlines the necessary conditions for this process: Social transformation, local competition, intensive information flow and exchange, synchronized cooperation, cultural diversity, flexibility in decision-making and the existence of common goals (Stöhr, 1992).²³ Stöhr’s proposal fits into the decolonial discourse, as well as into the paradigm of the epistemology of the South (Santos, 2011), discussed in the Introduction of this book and in the following sections.

The evolution of the theories on development demonstrates that reflection and debate regarding its objectives, actors and implementation methods intensify during periods of profound crisis. This pattern was evident during the economic collapse following the 1929 New York Stock Exchange crash, after the Second World War, in the 1970s amid growing dependence on oil and related energy crises and in the 1980s, when Latin American and Eastern European countries experienced the effects of the debt crisis and subsequently implemented neoliberal reforms with significant social consequences. Boisier (2006) similarly notes that development debates have been enriched and informed by the mounting challenges facing Latin American, Asian and African regions. The emergence of the environmental crisis has become an additional catalyst for the evolution of development ideas and models.

Research on climate change and its associated threats to humanity, along with the rapidly expanding political discourse on these issues, has led to the emergence of broader ecodevelopment proposals. The epistemological approach discussed here considers the dialectic between theory and practice, as well as between local and regional perspectives and knowledge. Within this paradigm, experiential knowledge is central to the development of new theories and conceptual frameworks designed to address specific challenges, paralleling the concept of local development. Although the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro brought the term “sustainable development” to public attention,

the scientific community had introduced the concept much earlier. Its origins can be traced to the 19th-century sustainable forestry policy in Germany, but the term gained traction in socioeconomic thought during the 1960s under the name ecodevelopment. Ignacy Sachs, who studied this concept, critiques the exploitative use of natural resources and the unequal distribution of revenues from their sale. He argues that developing countries with traditional and environmentally sustainable economies should devise new and their own development strategies, enabling them to avoid reliance on external – particularly Western – development models that have demonstrated ecological limitations and failed to provide effective solutions for socioeconomic advancement (Robin, 2021).

Many attempts have been made to break away from the conventional development framework at the national level. Costa Rica has made efforts in this direction in Central America in the 21st century. Based on its own economic and social experience, Costa Rica has strongly advocated for the creation of the REDD+ program and its national implementation. While REDD+ has faced criticism for commodifying nature and perpetuating conventional development paradigms, in Costa Rica, it exemplifies efforts to reconcile local and traditional values with modern and Western approaches. The country stands as a notable example in this context. However, the natural environment and its resources are a point of contention in most regions around the world, a dynamic explored by Keucheyan (2016) in *La naturaleza es un campo de batalla. Finanzas, crisis ecológica y nuevas guerras verdes* (*Nature is a Battlefield: Finance, Ecological Crisis, and the New Green Wars*), where he analyzes the subordinate status of nature and local societies in resource-rich areas. Keucheyan contends that achieving genuine ecological justice requires dismantling the monetization and militarization of nature and promoting eco-socialist alternatives. This perspective leads to the legal empowerment of nature and emphasizes a local dimension in the human-environment relationship, where sustainability and justice are more attainable at the micro level.

The “Small Is Beautiful” and “Human Scale” proposals align with this trend, though they emphasize local and community experiences within small geographic areas and their relationship to the environment and its resources. These concepts were popularized by Ernst F. Schumacher’s *Small Is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as If People Mattered* and Manfred Max-Neef’s *Human Scale Development* and *La dimensión perdida: la inmensidad de la medida humana* (*The Lost Dimension: The Immensity of Human Measure*).

Max-Neef,²⁴ a Chilean economist, extends Schumacher’s proposals by placing greater emphasis on territory, local values and a qualitative approach to development objectives. The Human Scale Development framework (Max-Neef et al., 1991) exemplifies the integration of epistemological and axiological²⁵ approaches, highlighting not only the significance of an endogenous, subjective perspective but, above all, the need to consider what constitutes value for individuals and their communities by listening to local voices:

Such development [human scale development] is focused and based on the satisfaction of fundamental human needs, on the generation of growing levels of self-reliance, and on the construction of organic articulations of people with nature and technology, of global processes with local activity, of the personal with the social, of planning with autonomy and of civil society with the State.

(Max-Neef et al., 1991, p. 8)

Based on the experience of Latin American countries, the authors of this proposal (Max-Neef et al., 1991) assert that development cannot be achieved through top-down measures and decisions. They argue that the prerequisite for development is the self-determination of local communities in identifying and addressing their own needs, especially within the context of increasing global influences:

Human needs, self-reliance and organic articulations are the pillars which supports Human Scale Development. However, these pillars must be sustained on a solid foundation which is the creation of those conditions where people are the protagonists in their future. If people are to be the main actors in Human Scale Development, both the diversity as well as the autonomy of the spaces in which they act must be respected. Attaining the transformation of an object-person into a subject-person in the process of development is, among other things, a problem of scale. There is no possibility for the active participation of people in gigantic systems which are hierarchically organized and where decisions flow from the top down to the bottom.

(Max-Neef et al., 1991, p. 8)

The significance of Schumacher and Max-Neef's reflections is highlighted by Raworth (2018), who emphasizes the need to center discussions and debates about values and development goals within the 21st-century economic mindset.

Following the Chilean economist, Colombian scholar Escobar²⁶ articulates his vision for an alternative development path for Latin America in "Otro posible es posible" ("The Other Possible Is Possible") (Escobar, 2018). Escobar deconstructs the Eurocentric and neocolonial vision of development in the modern world, instead foregrounding the values and capacities of indigenous peoples and their ability to perceive contemporary ecological experiences in a universal way (Dembicz, 2021). Escobar's argument is predicated on the premise that human beings are inextricably linked to the Earth and, as such, should strive to empathize with the rhythms of life on Earth. In order to achieve this, it is essential to heed the voices of local communities in the Global South and to draw upon the rich experiences of matriarchal cultures, where dialogue and consensus prevail. Escobar's ideas are situated within the broader

framework of what Boaventura de Sousa Santos²⁷ terms the epistemologies of the South, a theoretical approach offering alternatives to the impasse faced by the Western-centric critical tradition (Santos, 2011, p. 18). This perspective is grounded in knowledge ecologies, cross-cultural interpretations and translations and research aimed at illuminating what has been marginalized in the universalizing discourse of the Western world.

I understand the epistemology of the South as the demand for new processes of production and evaluation of valid scientific and non-scientific knowledge and for new relations between different kinds of knowledge based on the practices of social classes and groups that have systematically suffered from the unjust inequalities and discriminations of capitalism and colonialism. The Global South is then not a geographical concept, even though the vast majority of these populations live in countries in the southern hemisphere. Rather, it is a metaphor for the human suffering caused by capitalism and colonialism on a global scale and the resistance to overcome or minimize it. It is therefore an anti-capitalist, anti-colonial and anti-imperialist South. It is a South that also exists in the Global North, in the form of excluded, silenced and marginalized populations such as undocumented immigrants, the unemployed, ethnic or religious minorities, victims of sexism, homophobia and racism.

(Santos, 2011, p. 35)²⁸

Eclecticism in the new development proposals

As previously noted, the current development debate integrates ontological, epistemological and axiological perspectives. However, the latter two – epistemological and axiological – are particularly prominent in contemporary Latin American academic approaches. This predominance is largely attributable to the increasing influence of decolonial thought and the expanding role of social movements, which frequently represent the local and regional interests of specific social groups.

The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), adopted by the United Nations in 2015, exemplify the clash of different visions of development presented in this text. As a universal, top-down initiative, the SDGs – while widely discussed and also subject to criticism – reflect the enduring legacy of ontological approaches to development challenges and their solutions. Notably, the process of formulating the SDGs involved negotiation and consensus-building among multiple stakeholders to establish a common, universal development model responsive to both global challenges and local issues. The so-called “third core” of the UN (the third UN), comprising nongovernmental organizations that incorporate local community narratives, played a significant role alongside the General Assembly (the first core) and UN agencies (the second core) (Koehler, 2015).

As Escobar and Pedrosa (1995) observe in their study of the Colombian Pacific, “El Pacífico colombiano: ¿entidad desarrollable o laboratorio para el desarrollo?” (“The Colombian Pacific: A Developable Entity or a Laboratory for Development?”), each local community possesses accumulated experiences related to population dynamics and the development of its territories, as well as its relationship with the biophysical, cultural and spiritual environment. This observation extends to Latin American societies, which, while modernized through externally initiated development programs, have also pursued alternative modernization pathways influenced by matrices and models distinct from Western paradigms (Escobar & Pedrosa, 1995, p. 87).

Rejecting the hegemonic character of the Western model of modernization and development, local communities can, therefore, construct their own development pathways, supported by the third sector, scholars and institutions. This process requires not only the decolonization of existing power relations but also a transformation in the intellectual orientation of scholars, who – immersed in Western models of knowledge – must adopt a more nuanced and holistic perspective.

To address this challenge, authors such as Escobar and Pedrosa (1995) and Gudynas (2011, 2016) advocate for listening to local voices and examining how ideas and practices of development and modernization circulate within regional communities. Gudynas (2017, 2023) emphasizes the necessity of implementing post-extractivist transitions to counter the destructive impact of extractivism on Latin American territories and societies, which increasingly drives states toward dependency. According to Gudynas, extractivism can be defined by its relation to its alternative, post-extractivism. Extractivism, for example, is strengthened by the creation of its own language: It is called industry, which suggests the potential for transformation, but in reality, no such transformation takes place. As this process affects many sectors, such as mining, agriculture or forestry, we can speak of multiple extractivisms (Gudynas, 2017, p. 2). These are glocal by nature, being determined at a global level despite their local implementation. In addition to local impacts (environmental, social, health, etc.), they generate spillover effects that contribute to a culture of extractivism in which human rights violations are tolerated. This is what Gudynas refers to as “extrahection” (Spanish: *extrahecciones*). “This new term comes from the Latin word *extraher*, which means ‘to pluck with violence’” (Gudynas, 2018, p. 69). That’s why Gudynas explains:

post-extractivism proposes profound changes to what is currently understood as development. It insists on a more measured use of natural resources, adapted to the ecological capacities and social context of each territory, with the overriding priority of meeting national and regional needs rather than exporting them as raw materials.

(Gudynas, 2017, p. 4)²⁹

Post-extractivism is grounded in economic solidarity and the establishment of equitable relationships between humans and nature, recognizing nature as a subject of law. Gudynas's proposal also seeks to move beyond extractivist economies, aligning with the concept of *sumak kawsay* (from Kichwa), *suma qamaña* (from Aymara) or *buen vivir* (good living). This proposal can be broadly summarized as a framework of rights and responsibilities that promotes harmonious coexistence among individuals, communities and nature (Constitución de la República del Ecuador, 2008).

These proposals found “fertile political ground” in some of the Latin American states, which led to legislative changes in Bolivia and Ecuador at the beginning of the 21st century. In the case of the Bolivian government, the application took the form of ethical guidelines for government, and the Ecuadorian government introduced the idea of *buen vivir* to the fullest, including the “Rights of Nature” in the 2008 Constitution (Chassagne, 2020, p. 39). Both countries adopted the cosmogony of their indigenous peoples, particularly the concept of *buen vivir*, as the foundation and objective of socio-economic transformation. The contemporary notion of *buen vivir* does not reject the achievements of modern societies – especially in terms of well-being – but instead seeks balance, dialogue, respect, solidarity and a shift in priorities. As the Quechua poet Kowii notes, the Andean world is based on complementary dualisms, which is difficult for the Western world with its emphasis on antagonisms and differences (Mignolo, 2005).

Ana María Larrea Maldonado, who served as Undersecretary General of Planning for Buen Vivir within the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES) during the government of Rafael Correa (Ecuador), referred to the *buen vivir* concept by using the first person plural, “we.” She emphasized collective values and pointed out the importance of the past and “our” ancestors who are still with “us” today. She spoke about unity with society, nature and the universe, as well as the interdependence of people and their environment. *Buen vivir* means harmony and enjoying life to the full (Larrea Maldonado, 2011; Szkwarek, 2012, p. 92).

Therefore, the concept of *buen vivir* can be summarized in four points (Acosta & Martinez, 2009):

- It encompasses the harmonious coexistence with nature, respect for cultural diversity and the promotion of human dignity;
- It focuses on the effective enjoyment of the rights of individuals, communities, peoples and nationalities, as well as the exercise of their responsibilities;
- It promotes sustainable development, the eradication of poverty and the equitable redistribution of resources and wealth;
- It fosters interculturalism and democracy, prioritizing the general interest above particular interests.

Buen vivir is thus a political proposal that was also subject to widespread criticism, as it was described as utopian on the one hand and radical on the other (Chassagne, 2020). However, it should not be forgotten that, at its core, it is a practice, a way of life and a worldview of many indigenous communities that have inspired this political project. These visions and practices are diverse and specific to each place, inextricably linked to it. Banach and Brito Herrera (2021) describe their research among women of the Maya Ixil community in Guatemala and refer to their concept of *tiichajil*, the good life. The good life encompasses values such as health and food, but also serenity, freedom and peace, community life, cosmic order, harmony and equality. Equally important is the ability to preserve customs and ceremonies and to have access to places that are important for daily life as well as for celebrations (Banach & Brito Herrera, 2021).

While *buen vivir* is the most widely recognized alternative to conventional development globally, local and indigenous perspectives on the good life – rooted in specific regions – are gaining increasing acknowledgment, including from international institutions such as the United Nations (UNDP, 2022). Similarly, to *buen vivir*, these perspectives stress the profound interconnectedness between human and non-human nature and frequently incorporate a non-linear conception of time, where past, present and future coexist. Notable examples include the Hawaiian concept of pono and the Māori mātauranga Māori (UNDP, 2022, pp. 4–5).

Comparable ideas are also found in Western literature, particularly the concept of flourishing, present in psychology and philosophy (Hartwig, 2015; Townshend, 2020). Thinkers from the Global South employ the concept of flourishing to “translate” indigenous understandings of the good life (UNDP, 2022, p. 4). Human flourishing “encompasses satisfaction with life, happiness and positive psychological function, [and] that individuals are free to develop and reach their potential” (Townshend, 2020, p. 184). This notion extends beyond the commonly referenced “well-being” or the more measurable “quality of life” and is often used interchangeably with the term *eudaimonia* (Gorski, 2017; Las Heras et al., 2023). Smith (2015, p. 205) explains: “Eudaimonia does not mean simply enjoying a pleasurable condition or experience, being content with one’s state of life, or savoring subjective gratification or contentment (...). Eudaimonia suggests meanings and conditions that are richer and more profound.” In recent years, the concept of flourishing has been further developed within Marxist-influenced critical realist philosophy, notably through the work of Bhaskar (Hartwig, 2015; Gorski, 2017). Human flourishing opposes the modern and capitalist exploitation of nature, emphasizing the unity of humanity with the natural world. As Gorski (2017, p. 30) observes: “On its own, the word ‘flourishing’ highlights the ways in which all life forms are similar to one another.”

Emerging from these eclectic and pragmatic approaches is a lesser-known and quite new proposal: A Central American concept of transdevelopment,

constructed within the paradigm of transmodernity (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2016). Transmodernism, a cultural movement founded by Dussel (1999), originates from a critique of modernity and represents a worldview that seeks to interpret all spheres of life through intersubjective consensus that combines faith, reason and imagination to facilitate the participatory construction of projects that fulfill people's expectations. Consensus and participation are central to this worldview.

This "trans"-modernity should adopt the best that the modern technological revolution has to offer—discarding antiecolological and exclusively Western aspects—and put it at the service of differentiated valorized worlds, ancient and actualized, with their own traditions and ignored creativity. This will allow the emergence of the enormous cultural and human richness that the transnational capitalist market now attempts to suppress under the empire of "universal" commodities that materially subsume food (one of the most difficult things to universalize) into capital. The future "trans"-modernity will be multicultural, versatile, hybrid, postcolonial, pluralist, tolerant, and democratic (but beyond the modern liberal democracy of the European state). It will have splendid millenary traditions and be respectful of exteriority and heterogeneous identities. The majority of humanity retains, reorganizes (renovating and including elements of globality), and creatively develops cultures in its everyday, enlightened horizon. The cultures of this majority deepen the valorative "common sense" of their participants' real and particular existences, countering the exclusionary process of globalization, which precisely because of this process inadvertently "pushes" toward a "trans"-modernity. It is a return to the consciousness of the great majorities of humanity, of their excluded historical unconscious!

(Dussel & Fornazzari, 2002, p. 236)

In *Transmodernidad y transdesarrollo* (*Transmodernity and Transdevelopment*), Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara (2016, p. 67, 126) define transdevelopment as the transmodern paradigm of well-being. This approach emphasizes the satisfaction of both tangible and intangible needs through the process of participation grounded in social justice and environmental sustainability, wherein communities themselves articulate their needs and determine the means to address them. This participatory model allows each community to define and concretize the importance of its own well-being, which may differ from that of other communities, provided these foundational principles are respected.

Their proposal of transdevelopment encompasses the local, regional, national and international levels of action, thanks to a comprehensive vision and the acceptance of the globalizing element with social connections through media. Within this framework, individuals are envisioned as critical, solidaristic

and environmentally conscious. The roles of men and women are not confined to traditional indigenous constructs but are understood as collaborative builders of social and environmental harmony. Nature, within the transdevelopment paradigm, is seen as a living entity to which all living beings belong, including all inanimate material and energetic elements, all living beings, humans and all spiritual beings; a living entity that, according to the idea of Pachamama (Mother Earth), has a degree of collective consciousness (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2016, p. 83–84).

This chapter sought to briefly outline the origins of the concept of development and to highlight the complexities of contemporary approaches to this topic. The emergence of alternative concepts to conventional development across different regions and historical periods underscores the ongoing need for critical discussions on development. Research practices grounded in axiological and epistemological approaches are attracting increasing support within the scientific community. Indeed, it appears essential to move beyond the universalizing discourse of the Western world and consider alternative perspectives on development by incorporating the local viewpoints and discussions on possible pathways and the pursuit of well-being (*vivir bien*).

The following two quotations from Escobar’s works further reinforce the perspectives and arguments presented earlier in this chapter – they have led us, as scholars, to adopt such approaches as the foundation for our own development research.

One way out of this apparent impasse is to examine the ways in which indigenous peoples, for example, critically position themselves ‘on the path of development,’ the ways in which they elaborate ‘life plans’ that respond to both modern/global processes and long-standing place-based cultural logics.

(Escobar, 2014, p. 23)³⁰

While moderns occupy spaces, non-moderns inhabit places, moving along threads that produce the place.

(Escobar, 2018, p. 44)³¹

It is fitting to conclude this chapter with Gudynas’s words (2014, p. 92): “The new debate on development in Latin America is underway, and it is fascinating.” They aptly conclude this chapter, encapsulating our response to the question posed in the chapter title: “Why talk about development?”

Notes

- 1 The prominent German-Costa Rican intellectual, who died in 2023, had been an authority in social sciences and critical thinking in Latin America since the 1970s. In 1963, he settled in Santiago de Chile, where he worked at the School of Sociology (Escuela de Sociología) and the Center for the Study of National Reality at the

Pontificia Universidad Católica de Chile (Catholic University of Chile). In 1973, he returned to his homeland, following a coup by Augusto Pinochet. In 1976, he returned to Latin America and settled in San José, Costa Rica, where he helped to found the Department of Ecumenical Studies in San José and where, apart from a brief stay in Honduras, he remained for the rest of his life. His works on liberation theology, sociology and criticism of capitalism are only part of an extensive body of work that should be mentioned here: *Hacia una economía para la vida*; *El subdesarrollo latinoamericano: un caso de desarrollo capitalista*; *La crítica de las ideologías frente a la crítica de la religión*; *Totalitarismo del Mercado*; *Por una condonación de la deuda pública externa de América Latina*; *Antología esencial: La vida o el capital. El grito del sujeto vivo y corporal frente a la ley del mercado*.

- 2 Original quote: “La discusión sobre el problema del desarrollo en América Latina se ha ido ampliando cada vez más en los últimos decenios. Empezando con enfoques más bien economicistas pasó a la discusión de las estructuras sociales en el proceso del desarrollo y de las estructuras políticas, llegando a enfocar en la actualidad cada vez más la problemática del desarrollo como un problema global vinculado con todas las estructuras de la sociedad y con la conciencia cultural dentro de la cual se desarrollan éstas” (Hinkelammert, 1970, p. 8).
- 3 If it was, it concerned exclusively economic issues. After the publication of Adam Smith’s *Wealth of Nations* in 1776, the development of capitalism was at the core of economic thought, and the idea of so-called “progress” was the grand inspirational narrative for the social sciences. The publication, in Lviv in 1888, of the book *Nędza w Galicyi w cyfrach i program energicznego rozwoju gospodarstwa krajowego* (*The Misery of Galicia in Numbers. A Program for the Vigorous Development of National Agriculture*) by Stanislaw Szczepanowski can serve as an example.
- 4 Chilean economist (born 1929 in Puerto Montt), representative of Latin American structuralism. Since 1952, he has been associated with ECLAC and the University of Chile, and between 1975 and 1986, he worked with the Institute of Development Studies at the University of Sussex and since 1987 with the Development Research Corporation (CINDE), of which he was president. He is the author or coauthor of more than thirty books and nearly 150 articles published in different countries and languages on inflation, economic development, socioeconomic history, international relations, Latin American integration, environment and sustainable development. Outstanding works: *Transnacionalización y dependencia*; *El subdesarrollo latinoamericano y la teoría del desarrollo*; *Debt and Development Crises in Latin America: The End of an Illusion* (with Stephany Griffith-Jones); *El desarrollo desde dentro: un enfoque neoestructuralista para América Latina*; *Rebuilding Capitalism: Alternative Roads after Socialism and Dirigisme*; *Sustentabilidad Ambiental del Crecimiento Económico Chileno*; *Globalization and the New Regionalism* (Ed. with B. Hettne and A. Inotai).
- 5 Chilean economist, died in 2022. A true pioneer and promoter of regional and local planning in Latin America. A large part of his professional life was linked to ECLAC. Among his books, the following are particularly noteworthy: *Diseño de planes regionales, métodos y técnicas de planificación regional*; *Plannin A System of Regions*; *La gestión de las regiones en el nuevo orden internacional: cuasi-estado y csi-empresa*; *Imágenes en el espejo, aportes a la discusión sobre crecimiento y desarrollo territorial*; *Modernidad y Territorio*; *Reflexiones sobre los procesos territoriales en el siglo XXI*.
- 6 Original quote: “En definitiva, también el desarrollo es una *utopía* en un sentido y una *no utopía* en otro. Es utopía – asintótica además al eje de su propia realización, ya que si no lo fuera todavía estaríamos dibujando bisontes en las cuevas europeas – en el sentido de ser un sueño inalcanzable y que por lo mismo *no está en ninguna parte*” (Boisier, 2006, p. 146).

- 7 Gustavo Esteva (1936–2022) was a Mexican intellectual, researcher, critic of the conventional concept of development and activist. He worked intensively on questions of alternative development and the decolonization of thought. He was an adviser to the Zapatista Army of National Liberation (EZLN) and founder of the Centro de Encuentros y Diálogos Interculturales y de la Universidad de la Tierra Oaxaca. His works include books on Zapatismo: *Crónica del fin de una era* (1994) and *Celebration of Zapatismo* (2004) and on development: *Desarrollo: metáfora, mito y amenaza* (1985), or (with Salvatore Babones and Philipp Babcicky) *The Future of Development: A Radical Manifesto*, Bristol, Policy Press, 2013.
- 8 Prominent Uruguayan scholar and activist who has written extensively about development and its alternatives, specializing in environmental issues and social ecology. He has made significant contributions to the discourse on *buen vivir* and environmental sustainability. Some of his notable works include *Desarrollos alternativos. Alternativas al desarrollo. Una guía ante las opciones de cambio* (2023); *Extractivisms: Politics, Economy and Ecology* (2021); *Violencia y derechos en los extractivismos* (2020).
- 9 Fernando Birri (1927–2017): Argentinian film director and the co-founder of the San Antonio de los Baños International Film and TV School (*Escuela Internacional de Cine y Televisión*). Among his works as a screenwriter and director are *Tire dié*, *Buenos días*, *Buenos Aires*, *El siglo del viento*, *Che ¿Muerte de la utopía?*
- 10 Original quote: “La utopía está en el horizonte. Me acerco dos pasos, Y ella se aleja dos pasos. Camino diez pasos, Y ella se corre diez pasos allá. Por mucho que camine, Nunca la alcanzaré ¿Para que sirve la utopía? Para eso sirve, para caminar” (Mori, 2010, online)
- 11 Enrique Dussel (1934–2023), a prominent Argentine philosopher, approaches the ontological paradigm from a critical and liberating perspective. In his work “El método analéctico de la filosofía latinoamericana” (1973), Dussel criticizes traditional ontologies of identity and totality, which tend to exclude or subsume the “Other” within a closed system of thought. Dussel proposes an “ontology of alterity,” where the “Other” is not simply a part of the system but an entity with its own existence and dignity. This perspective is framed within the “philosophy of liberation,” which seeks to dismantle the structures of domination and oppression and promote an ethical and just relationship with the “Other.”
- 12 Walter Mignolo is a distinguished Argentine philosopher and thinker. For over thirty years, his research and teaching have centered on understanding and unraveling the historical foundations of the modern/colonial world system and its associated ideologies since 1500. Mignolo is a founding member of the Modernity/Coloniality Group, alongside intellectuals such as Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel and Arturo Escobar. The group has been instrumental in developing the concepts of coloniality of power, knowledge, difference and border thinking. Mignolo received the Katherine Singer Kovacs Prize from the Modern Language Association (MLA) for *The Darker Side of the Renaissance: Literacy, Territoriality, and Colonization* (1996) and the Frantz Fanon Prize from the Caribbean Philosophical Association for *The Idea of Latin America* (2006). For more information, visit his webpage: <https://provost.duke.edu/profile/walter-d-mignolo/>.
- 13 The given examples of translations of particular words come from conversations with speakers of the mentioned languages or with researchers of these languages. Many thanks to Agnieszka Brylak, Gustavo Ayar and Paweł Wiechetek for advice and support.
- 14 Bolivian philosopher, researcher and teacher, coordinator of the doctorate in development sciences at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés in Bolivia.

- 15 Original quote: “El desarrollo se refiere a la dimensión temporal de las sociedades, es decir, a la dirección del movimiento de las mismas. En este sentido, es pertinente hablar de desarrollo en relación al tiempo histórico” (Tapia, 2011, p. 19).
- 16 The role of political science in implementing development proposals cannot be overlooked.
- 17 An example of this is the “Polish School of Development,” which is an expression of the intellectual work of Polish economists and sociologists gathered around the Inter-University Department of Problematic Economy of Underdeveloped Countries at UW and SGPiS (MZPGKSR): Czesław Bobrowski, Zofia Dobrska, Jan Halpern, Michał Kalecki, Tadeusz Kowalik, Jan Kulig, Oskar Lange, Józef Pajestka, Ignacy Sachs (Popławski, 2012).
- 18 That attempts to identify universal principles and truths that are independent of subjective experiences and perspectives.
- 19 1901–1986; representative of structuralism in economic policy. In the 1930s, he co-founded and directed the Central Bank of Argentina (Banco Central de la República de Argentina). It was thanks to him that the banking law that was being developed at the time contained elements that enabled the state to pursue an anti-cyclical policy. He authored the first economic study on Latin America, published by CEPAL in 1948. As Secretary General, he chaired the Economic Commission for Latin America from 1950 to 1963. The University of Warsaw honored him with the doctorate *Honoris Causa* (Dembicz, 2008).
- 20 ISI – Industrialización por sustitución de importaciones.
- 21 The epistemological approach examined here involves a consideration of the dialectic between theory and practice as well as local and regional perspectives and knowledge. In this paradigm, experiential knowledge plays a crucial role in the development of new theories and conceptual frameworks designed to address specific challenges.
- 22 Consejo Latinoamericano de Ciencias Sociales (Latin American Council of Social Sciences), <https://www.clacso.org/>.
- 23 The systemic transformation of the former Eastern Bloc countries, including Poland, led to innovative academic work in this regard, such as those by Bohdan Jałowiecki (1989) and Grzegorz Gorzelak (1989).
- 24 Manfred Max-Neef was a renowned Chilean economist known for his work on human needs and development theory. He presented a taxonomy of fundamental human needs and introduced the concept of Human Scale Development. In 1983, he received the Right Livelihood Award for his efforts in revitalizing small and medium-sized communities. Some of his books include *Economía descalza. Señales desde el mundo invisible* (1982); *Economics Unmasked: From Power and Greed to Compassion and the Common Good* (2011).
- 25 The axiological approach focuses on the study of values and value judgments. For example, a comparative axiological approach compares different value systems, both between cultures and over time, to understand how they differ and what factors influence these changes.
- 26 A prominent Colombian-American anthropologist known for his critical perspectives on development and his work in political ecology introduced the idea of the “pluriverse,” which envisions a world where multiple ways of being and knowing coexist. This concept is central to his book *Designs for the Pluriverse: Radical Interdependence, Autonomy, and the Making of Worlds* (2018) (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, n.d.).
- 27 Renowned Portuguese sociologist, jurist and critical thinker Boaventura de Sousa Santos is widely known for his contributions to the sociology of law, critical epistemology and studies on social justice and globalization. He founded the Center for Social Studies (CES) at the University of Coimbra, which has become an inter-

national benchmark for interdisciplinary and critical research. One of his most influential contributions is the concept of “epistemologies of the South,” which challenges Eurocentrism in the production of knowledge. Selected publications: *Decolonising the University: The Challenge of Deep Cognitive Justice* (2021), *The End of the Cognitive Empire: The Coming of Age of Epistemologies of the South* (2018). For more information, visit <https://www.boaventurasantos.com/>.

- 28 Original quote: “Entiendo por epistemología del Sur el reclamo de nuevos procesos de producción y de valoración de conocimientos válidos, científicos y no científicos, y de nuevas relaciones entre diferentes tipos de conocimiento, a partir de las prácticas de las clases y grupos sociales que han sufrido de manera sistemática las injustas desigualdades y las discriminaciones causadas por el capitalismo y por el colonialismo. El Sur global no es entonces un concepto geográfico, aun cuando la gran mayoría de estas poblaciones viven en países del hemisferio Sur. Es más bien una metáfora del sufrimiento humano causado por el capitalismo y el colonialismo a nivel global y de la resistencia para superarlo o minimizarlo. Es por eso un Sur anticapitalista, anticolonial y anti-imperialista. Es un Sur que existe también en el Norte global, en la forma de poblaciones excluidas, silenciadas y marginadas como son los inmigrantes sin papeles, los desempleados, las minorías étnicas o religiosas, las víctimas de sexismo, la homofobia y el racismo” (Santos, 2011, p. 35).
- 29 Original quote: “Los post extractivismos postulan cambios profundos en lo que se entiende actualmente como desarrollo. Insiste en un uso de recursos naturales mas moderado, ajustado a las capacidades ecológicas y los contextos sociales de cada sitio, y cuya primera prioridad es sostener las necesidades nacionales y regionales, y no la exportación como materias primas” (Gudynas 2017, p. 4)
- 30 Original quote: “Una manera de salir de este aparente callejón sin salida es investigar la forma en que, por ejemplo, los pueblos indígenas se posicionan críticamente ‘en el camino del desarrollo,’ la forma en que elaboran ‘planes de vida’ que responden tanto a los procesos modernos /globales como a lógicas culturales basadas-en-lugar de larga data” (Escobar, 2014, p. 23).
- 31 Original quote: “Mientras, que los modernos ocupan espacios los no modernos habitan lugares, moviéndose a lo largo de hilos que producen el lugar.” (Escobar, 2018, p. 44). This sentence reflects the ideas of Jałowiecki (1984, 2010) on the social production of space from the late 1980s and early 1990s, which were informed by the Polish transformation experience and addressed the country’s socioeconomic and political challenges at that time.

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2 The research project and its methodological basis

Shaping the future in the world of polycrises is becoming increasingly complex (Orłowski, 2023). The superimposition of economic, environmental or social difficulties – often unprecedented in nature and occurring simultaneously at a local, regional and global level – makes the search for universal solutions needed for shaping the future increasingly difficult. In this context, we draw on the position of the Mexican philosopher Leopoldo Zea (1972), who argued half a century ago that the world as we know it, and the reality that surrounds us, belong to the past. This prompts us to ask: What now and what next? Although the question is very broad, it encompasses both contemporary reflections on imagining the future and the paradigms that will inform our planning.

As discussed in Chapter 1, concepts of development are integral to designing futures for specific social groups and territories. However, until recently, the dominant development paradigm has constrained our capacity to imagine truly desirable futures (Esteva et al., 2013, p. vii). The ongoing evolution of thinking about development, the large number of definitions and their diversity underscore the relevance of this issue, highlighting the growing importance of local perspectives, qualitative dimensions and, above all, the empowerment of local communities and their environments. The existence of multiple development trajectories and outcomes suggests that development processes must be studied from diverse perspectives and in various places.

Epistemological bases of the study

Our study draws on the epistemologies of the South; the approach emerging from decolonial studies. It is based on the recognition that colonialism is a tool of domination – not only political, economic or social, but also cognitive, leading to the extermination of non-Western worldviews and systems of knowledge production. The decolonial movement is developing in many regions of the world, especially in Africa and Latin America. In contrast to other epistemological approaches, it does not reproduce the “neutrality” and distance characteristic of modern Western science, but actively engages with practice and politics. Decolonial thinking inspires and is directly inspired by

grassroots actions and proposals. According to Bravo (2017, p. 31), “The decolonial option arises from the diversity of world and local histories that, over the course of five centuries, have opposed the Eurocentric view as the only possible interpretation of reality.”¹ Decolonial thinking breaks the dominance of modern Western science, which has acquired a monopoly on the truth. Moreover, this “truth” is linked to power over nature and the division of societies into those who have this power and those who do not. With the conquest of the American continent, the Eurocentric understanding of space and time subordinates local narratives to a single world history narrated by Europeans, creating a system of center and periphery (Bravo, 2017, pp. 34–36). In the course of this political and social conquest, the West also began to dominate the way we understand and talk about the world. This too is a form of violence, epistemic violence. This concept, proposed by Gayatri C. Spivak in the late 1980s, has been intellectually stimulating and further developed in the decolonial and feminist movements, among others. Epistemic violence emerged when Europe established itself in the position of the subject who has the monopoly to speak about and explain the Other, while the Other has no right to speak (Pulido Tirado, 2009). It should not be forgotten that epistemological violence is not independent of physical and political violence; on the contrary, these phenomena are intertwined (Brunner, 2021). Pérez (2019, p. 82) proposes the following definition of epistemic violence:

The concept of epistemic violence refers to the various types of violence exercised in connection with the production, dissemination and recognition of knowledge: the denial of the epistemic agency of certain subjects, the unacknowledged exploitation of their epistemic resources, their objectification and much more.²

(Pérez, 2019, p. 82)

The concept of epistemological violence thus allows us to unveil the invisible and becomes a tool in the struggle for the voice and rights of the subaltern.

As a younger strand of decolonial studies, epistemologies of the South seek ways to connect and achieve equality between knowledge produced by modern Western science and other diverse, territory-based sources of knowledge (Santos, 2021).

Thambinathan and Kinsella (2021, p. 1), in their article on decolonizing methodologies, state: “For those who have been oppressed by colonization, research is a dirty word.” Western modern science was inextricably linked to colonization, capitalism and exploitation (Kato et al., 2023, p. 218) and developed on the basis of these processes. The development of modern measurement and classification techniques and technologies shaped Western science in the service of colonialism. As Mignolo (Mignolo, 2023, p. 179) states,

Western concepts of space and time were consolidated in tandem with processes of dispossession, appropriation, and destitutions in the name of salvation and betterment of the people dispossessed and destituted. The logic of coloniality was, and still is, the underlying technology of dispossession.

(Mignolo, 2023, p. 179)

Moreover, modern Western science was “totalitarian,” which meant that there was no room for other visions and knowledge systems (Mignolo, 2023). Blaser (2013) develops the notion of “all-encompassing modernity,” which shows how we have become incapable of even imagining epistemological and ontological diversity, automatically pushing non-Western and non-modern worldviews out of social and political life.

As Quijano (1992, p. 16) points out:

Consequently, other cultures are different in the sense that they are inherently unequal, even inferior. They can only be ‘objects’ of knowledge and/or practices of domination. From this perspective, the relationship between European culture and other cultures was established as a relationship between ‘subject’ and ‘object’ and has been maintained ever since.³

Decolonial studies and decolonial research methods aim to raise awareness of the power relations in the production of knowledge and to break with these practices. Many authors point out that there is no single set of rules to follow when working with a decolonial method, no checklist to ensure that our research does not reproduce Western domination (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Denscombe, 2025). However, some authors leave us with a series of troubling questions that need to be answered honestly, such as those posed by Smith (2012) in her already classic work *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. Smith asks (2012, p. 10): “Whose research is it? Who owns it? Whose interests does it serve? Who will benefit from it?” Therefore, in our study, at every stage, we paid attention to:

- The scholars’ intentions and the possible and desirable impact of the study on the studied community (Smith, 2012; Bradley & Kavanagh, 2024);
- The greatest possible participation and influence of people from the studied territory on the design of the study (Smith, 2012; Lenette, 2022; Smith et al., 2024; Denscombe, 2025);
- The critical evaluation of the scholars’ attitudes and beliefs and the shaping factors (Thambinathan & Kinsella, 2021; Kato et al., 2023; Bradley & Kavanagh, 2024). This also included the reflection on their internal and external motivations.

Critical reflexivity and positionality

The responsibility of scientists is usually considered from two perspectives: Internal and external (Lenk, 2022; Pain, 2013). The internal refers to a high standard and quality, “the best possible, efficient, clean, truthful research (‘good practice’)” (Lenk, 2022, p. 13). This responsibility is controlled by the scientific community (Pain, 2013). However, scientists also have a responsibility toward society, or even humanity. Popper (Popper, 1977, p. 304, as cited in and translated by Lenk, 2022, p. 14) says: “Everyone has a special responsibility where he has either special power or special knowledge.” While in the case of internal responsibility there are more rules, codes of conduct or golden standards available (Lenk, 2022; Bezuidenhout, 2017), responsibility toward society is much more blurred and case-dependent (Lacey, 2014). This aspect becomes more and more important in decolonial research. The main challenges related to internal responsibility are addressed in this methodology section. Throughout this project, we collected and analyzed data to the best of our knowledge and ability. However, as is common in social research, the responses obtained often generate further questions, and the study is rarely exhaustive. Despite our commitment and diligence, we acknowledge potential limitations for which we remain responsible.

Our concerns and dilemmas regarding external responsibility relate to the unwanted power relations between the people in the studied places and the scholars, and the possible implications of the results of this study. The grant that made it possible to present this study was awarded by the Polish institution, the National Science Center, on the basis of a detailed research plan. By awarding research grants, this institution aims to develop science in its own country according to the criteria of so-called modern Western science. Thus, measurable success within this science’s criteria is the objective of the grant provider.

Yet, “every seeking gets guided beforehand by what is sought” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 24, as cited in Bradley & Kavanagh, 2024, p. 35), and the choice of topic was completely free and independent of any external pressure. The motivation behind this choice was the conviction that discussions about development and its visions are of ongoing importance. At the same time, we realize that many local voices are not taken into account in this discourse.

With our study, we want to enrich the discourse on development with local voices from the South. Although it is “only” a discourse, the power of words can be evidenced by the aforementioned 1949 speech by US President Harry Truman (see Chapter 1). While we were guided by the idea of scientific neutrality when collecting and analyzing the data, outwardly, we are guided by a specific, morally motivated intention to ensure greater diversity, equality and inclusivity in shaping a desired future. We recognize that we present only a portion of these perspectives, but we hope to raise broader awareness of their diversity.

At this point, it should be noted that the literature on decolonial methods focuses on indigenous peoples and First Nations. Our study strongly represents mestizo local communities, which to varying degrees see themselves as autochthonous peoples. These are often communities that have grown up in the spirit of the Western worldview, but at the same time have a much deeper connection to the indigenous worldview than the typical resident of the Global North. Although these communities remain under the influence of globalization, just like the scholars, we still consider the decolonial approach to be a valid and appropriate practice in this study.

Grounded in decolonial method, our approach is critical and constructivist (Denscombe, 2025, p. 235). We assume that people create knowledge, meaning and sense in consultation and interaction with others (Amineh & Asl, 2015). Knowledge is not discovered but created, and this process is the subject of research.

At the conclusion of this section, we wish to clarify our positionality. Katarzyna Dembicz is a Polish scholar who was born and resides in Poland, though she has spent many years living in Latin America. Her academic background is in geography, and she comes from an academic family. As a child, she lived in Cuba for seven years. Since 1986, she has been continuously engaged in the study of Latin America. Her fluency in the language and familiarity with the culture have facilitated fieldwork, while her self-assurance is accompanied by a continual process of critically reassessing her own conclusions and observations to minimize the risk of misinterpretation. Ewelina Biczynska is also a Polish woman, born and residing in Poland, with only brief stays in Latin America. Her primary academic discipline is sociology, which initially shaped her research through a positivist approach and a focus on quantitative methods. In recent years, she has shifted toward a critical perspective and qualitative methodologies. Throughout each stage of the research, we confronted our beliefs and interpretations with one another and with a broader, international and interdisciplinary research team. Additional measures to ensure equality between scholars and research participants are detailed below in the description of specific research procedures.

Research approach: Case study

Methodologically, our investigation is a complex case study: A research strategy with a long tradition that is very popular in the social sciences. Moreover, its use in academia continues to grow (Yin, 2015, p. 23). Its proponents reject accusations that case studies “cannot provide reliable information about the broader class” (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 301). On the contrary, by carefully examining a specific part, we can better understand an entirety (Gerring, 2007, p. 1). In our case, the insight into the dilemmas surrounding the development paths of Central American local societies and their future enriches our knowledge and encourages us to consider this problem in other regions of the world, including countries of the Global North. Tilly (1984, p. 14) writes:

When it comes to understanding proletarianization, for example, much of the most valuable work proceeds at the scale of a single village. Keith Wrightson and David Levine's study of Terling, Essex, from 1525 to 1700 tells us more about the creation of a propertyless underclass than do reams of general essays about capitalism.

(1984, p. 14)

We have chosen a case study approach because it is a particularly appropriate method for obtaining an answer to the question "How?" in relation to contemporary phenomena (Yin, 2015, p. 34).

In this project, we are looking at specific, purposefully selected communities in Central America in order to contribute to the understanding of contemporary discourse on development from the communities' perspective and, at a later stage, to formulate recommendations for a comprehensive and inclusive dialogue on development. In doing so, we also consider the literature on this topic from a macro perspective, as described in the previous chapter.

Case studies are also often criticized for their vague selection criteria and analytical procedures, which are meant to serve as a cover for "whatever a researcher wishes to do with a chosen topic" (Gerring, 2007, p. 6). In order to avoid such an accusation, we describe below the methodological procedures applied. Our choice of cases is an information-oriented selection, as classified by Flyvbjerg (2011, p. 307). This means that the cases – megaprojects and their surrounding communities – were carefully selected based on the above-mentioned criteria. According to Flyvbjerg's types of strategies, our cases are the "critical" ones, so those where the assumed strength and diversity of the development discourse should be the largest (Flyvbjerg, 2011, p. 307). At the same time, we assume that these cases may be representative of other Latin American local societies in terms of their content, which depends on the values, norms and needs of these communities. Furthermore, we believe that understanding the discourse on development among them can help spread the discussion on development to other local societies in the Global South.

Our project contributes to the level that Tilly (1984, p. 64) calls micro-historical, stating: "In tracing the encounters of individuals and groups with the big structures and large processes, we make the necessary link between personal experience and the flow of history." By listening to the voices of individuals and groups, we analyze their meaning in the context of global and long-term processes, such as development. In this respect, classical qualitative research techniques are leading the way in this project, as a bridge between the worlds of the South and the North. They allow an openness to the narratives of the study participants and a flexibility to follow them, while at the same time providing transparency for the reader in relation to the research process.

For this case study, we assume that Central America is a kind of laboratory in which many megaprojects are located in a relatively small area with the aim of stimulating development and, according to the assumption of this research

project, stimulating a discussion about development. For this reason, four countries in Central America were selected for the study, which differ in terms of the level of human development (HDI), democratization and the security situation (see some indicators in Table 2.5 at the end of this chapter). At the same time, megaprojects in three important sectors of the national economy – energy, tourism and mining – were selected according to their diversity, so that each type of megaproject was represented by two investments with very different implementation experiences. We also included in the study those that enjoy support and those that face strong opposition from local communities.

Megaproject as a promise of development and a stimulus for discussion

The multipolarity of the arrangement in international relations, as well as the impact of dynamic climate change, the associated natural challenges and the depletion of natural resources, have reinforced the narratives of local communities and indigenous peoples, as well as the critique of previous models of development. Until the end of the 20th century, the paradigm of modernity was the intellectual framework within which the vast majority of development proposals were made, many of which originated in the Global North and were subordinated to the conditions of a bipolar world. For decades, a universal recipe was sought to achieve development, which was equated with economic growth and technological progress, as well as the adoption of Western cultural values (above all, consumer-oriented and individualistic attitudes). The designation of economic enclaves or growth poles, where foreign investment (including large infrastructure) was located, was a common means of driving the development of a region.

In the course of the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries, Central America became a kind of laboratory for such ventures. The transoceanic railroad, inaugurated in 1855, connected the two port cities of Aspinwall (now Colón) with the city of Panama. The Panama Canal, which connects the Pacific with the Atlantic, and the Panamericana (highway), which crosses the American continent from north to south, are the other outstanding examples. Each of these projects has been praised as progressive and promoting development. Such a narrative also characterizes today's political and economic elites in the region, as well as in other areas that consider themselves and are considered "less developed." This is reflected in current investments in the construction of megaprojects for transportation (such as Mexico's Tren Maya or the Grand Canal on Lake Nicaragua), tourism (such as Cancún, the island of Roatán or the Polo Turístico Golfo de Papagayo), energy (such as the Reventazón power plant in Costa Rica or the Provincia Solar power plant in El Salvador) or mining (First Quantum's Minera Panamá copper mine). Megaprojects have become synonymous with progress, modernization and development.

According to Flyvbjerg (2017, p. 4) "Megaprojects are large-scale, complex ventures that typically cost \$1 billion or more, take many years to develop and build, involve multiple public and private stakeholders, are transformational,

and impact millions of people.” However, these structures are defined by more than just scale and cost. As Flyvbjerg emphasizes, scaling up a small project does not make it a megaproject. This is why the prefix “mega” is so important in the definition. The term “mega” refers to the scale of their impact and their transformative capacity. Megaprojects do not adapt to existing social, economic and territorial structures and conditions but reshape them. Another characteristic is the connections that are made between the local, national and international levels (Wiecheteck, 2023, pp. 15–18).

Examples of megaprojects are high-speed rail lines, airports, seaports, motorways, disease or poverty eradication programs, hospitals, national health or pension ICT systems, national border control, national broadband, the Olympics, large-scale signature architecture, dams, wind farms, server farms, offshore oil and gas extraction, aluminum smelters, the development of new aircrafts, the largest container and cruise ships, high-energy particle accelerators, and the logistics systems used to run large supply-chain-based companies such as Apple, Amazon, and Maersk.

(Flyvbjerg, 2017, p. 4)

As can be seen, we are dealing with a variety of projects that are becoming increasingly popular despite controversies and challenges.

The scale of these investments leads to a debate about their impact and also about the gains they generate. That is why they receive growing attention from the academic milieu. Undeniably, megaprojects are complex undertakings, and the same is true of their links to their direct surroundings and the network of global connections of which they are a part of. As Latta(2018, p. 16) says, megaprojects exemplify a distinctive modality of interplay between nature and society. These phenomena are distinguished not only by their inherent complexity and, frequently, by the injustice of the socioeconomic and material processes that engender them, but also by the cultural and symbolic role they play in shaping the contemporary global landscape. The prevalence of megaprojects has emerged as a notable phenomenon, necessitating a comprehensive examination of the factors that influence their location and construction (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021). A common argument used to convince entire societies or only selected groups of the legitimacy of such construction projects is the development they will bring. In the public debate, development is presented as the all-powerful culprit, the “cure for all ills,” as illustrated by the following press headlines: “Mining’s Economic Contribution and Direct Jobs,”⁴ “An Alliance for a Better Future,”⁵ “Communities Seduced by Project.”⁶

Therefore, megaprojects are initiated, developed and implemented in response to the processes of modernization and urbanization. These ambitious undertakings have emerged as significant phenomena during the 19th and

20th centuries. The reproduction of capital plays a fundamental role, given that today's questioning of the modern paradigm and the need to change lifestyle patterns call into question these large-scale undertakings (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021, p. 125). According to Sánchez (2018, pp. 24, 35), such projects are “drivers of economic, technological, and social ‘development,’” and a road toward a “civilized” and “modern” space.

However, what civilization are we talking about here? A modern civilization as defined by the Western world and the Global North, with completely altered geographical spaces in which time and progress are subjected to a linear form of the paradigm of monetary value and materialism (Dembicz & Carrillo, 2021, p. 125). Del Cerro Santamaría (2019, p. 89) names four major processes, that favor the emergence of new megaprojects, namely international competition between cities, the growing and mobile knowledge economy, the shift of investment from physical capital to human capital and the dominance of market-based ideology and politics.

Large infrastructure projects in Central America – in our case: in Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama – fit this general profile outlined above. Although they refer to objectives related to the common good and progress, their main drivers are the financial and political gains of a few. In the following section, we present the megaprojects selected in our project.

The above considerations led us to investigate the perception of development in the context of megaprojects' construction. We aim to analyze the local perceptions of development in Central America, including the discourse in public debate. Our hypothesis is that local communities are exposed to a Westernization of their way of life through the localization of infrastructure projects and that the values of Western civilization clash with the traditions and values of local cultures. This is expressed in their dilemmas and discourses concerning development. These often take the form of protests and social conflicts resulting from a mutual misunderstanding of what development is and how the individual actors and social groups perceive and understand it. Such conflicts are usually caused by the interference of external forces, such as foreign capital, large investments in economic infrastructure and the official neoliberal political discourse.

Study objectives

In order to achieve the main objective and verify the hypothesis, this work was subordinated to the following specific objectives:

- To present and explain the social perception of development in relation to the local changes resulting from the location of large economic infrastructures (megaprojects);
- To convey knowledge about the individual and collective attitudes of local communities in Central America toward their way of life;

- To expand knowledge about the social understanding of development by creating an image (or images) and a definition of development based on the research.

To meet these challenges, we have drawn on the experience of interdisciplinary research, which aims to consciously and purposefully create a new understanding of a topic by integrating and synthesizing the achievements of several scientific disciplines (Repko, 2012; Moran, 2010; Klein, 1990). In our case, these are sociology, human geography, cultural studies and history, which belong to the social sciences and humanities.

Before detailing the research and analytical tools employed, it is necessary to clarify the terms “local society” and “community” as used in this study. Both terms are interrelated and refer to groups of people who have developed connections and associations with each other. However, these terms differ in size, structure and degree of interaction. The local society has a clear relation to the geographical area (municipality, city, town); the community may be smaller or larger than the local society, but its members share values, traditions and goals. For this reason, both terms are used in this study: Community generally refers to indigenous populations with whom we conducted interviews, such as the Garifuna, Chorotega and Ngäbe. When we speak of populations in specific areas, such as La India in Nicaragua, Sámara in Costa Rica or the population of La Ceiba in Honduras, we use both terms, local society and local community, interchangeably.

Territorial scope of the study

Six megaprojects (sites), described below, were selected for the fieldwork: Reventazón Hydroelectric Power Plant, Barro Blanco Hydroelectric Power Plant, Guanacaste Tourist Area, Bahia de Tela Tourist Parks, La Libertad Mine and La India Mine. These cases were not chosen at random. We focused on key sectors of Central American economies and selected investments that were functioning or in the implementation phase. Additionally, we aimed to select pairs corresponding to investments with high resistance and social contestation, as well as those that did not generate major conflicts.

Reventazón Hydroelectric Power Plant

The Reventazón hydroelectric power plant is located on the Reventazón River in the province of Limón. The riverbed of Reventazón has a long history of being the source of energy production, with the first hydroelectric power plants on the Macho River in 1963 and on the Cachi in 1966 (Chaves, 2020). The catchment area hosts twelve power plants, including two major ones: PH Angostura and PH Reventazón (Rojas & Dembicz, 2023). The Reventazón hydroelectric power plant, the subject of this study, “came into operation in 2016, becoming the largest hydropower project in Central America with an installed

Table 2.1 Megaprojects selected for analysis and their characteristics

<i>Hydroelectric power plants</i>	<i>Tourist parks</i>	<i>Mines</i>
<i>Reventazón</i> • Region: Limon province, northeast of Costa Rica • In operation since: 2016 • Capacity: 305 MW • Constructor: Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), the state electricity and telecommunications company of Costa Rica • Owner: Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE) • Protests or social unrest: Criticism, mainly resulting from socioeconomic changes	<i>Guanacaste</i> • Region: Guanacaste, northwest of Costa Rica • Developing since: the end of the 20th century • Rooms available: 15,000, which is 26% of the country's offering • The biggest tourist parks: Polo Turístico Golfo de Papagayo • Hotel resorts: Four Seasons, Andaz, Planet Hollywood, Secrets, Occidental Grand Papagayo, Golden Palms • Protests or social unrest: Protests and criticism, the majority of which result from water scarcity and restricted access to the coastal areas; the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJAtlas) mentions Marbella as a conflict zone, but this type of problem occurs in many communities	<i>La Libertad</i> • Region: Chontales in central Nicaragua • In operation since: 1996 • Owner: B2Gold first, then Colibre Mining • Processing capacity: 2.25 million tons per year (tpa) • Protests or social unrest: Artisanal miners and residents of Santo Domingo, La Libertad y San Pedro de Lóvago oppose large-scale mining
<i>Barro Blanco</i> • Region: Chiriquí, west of Panama, including Ngäbe-Buglé Comarca • In operation since: 2017 • Capacity: 29 MW	<i>Bahia de Tela</i> • Region: Atlántida Department, North of Honduras • Developing since: 2003 and more intensively 2010 • Rooms available: 3,600, which is 12% of the country's offering	<i>La India</i> • Region: León in West Nicaragua • In operation since: 2010 • Owner: Condor Gold but the mine is on sale (2024)

(Continued)

Table 2.1 (Continued)

<i>Hydroelectric power plants</i>	<i>Tourist parks</i>	<i>Mines</i>
• Constructor: Honduran private company, Generadora del Istmo S.A.(GENISA)	• The biggest tourist hotel resorts: Indura Beach & Golf Resort, Telemar Resort, Honduras Shores Plantation, La Ensenada Beach Resort & Convention Center, Villa Escondida & Rosa Negra Beach Club	• Processing capacity: 886,512 tons per year (tpa)
• Protests or social unrest: Mobilizations and confrontations spread throughout the country; high-intensity conflict has existed since 2007 (the clashes caused two deaths and forty injuries); the plant affected over 500 people	• Protests or social unrest: Protests on the side of the Garifuna people and acts of violence against them; Global Atlas of Environmental Justice classifies the conflict as high intensity and the project affected up to 700 people (14 missing)	• Protests or social unrest: Severe conflict with criminalization of the protesting population in 2017

Sources: This elaboration is based on: Rojas and Dembicz (2023); Dembicz et al. (2023); Roux (2023) and the Global Atlas of Environmental Justice (EJAtlas, n.d.).

capacity of 305.5 MW” (International Hydropower Association, n.d.). It was built by the Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE), Costa Rica’s state-owned electricity and telecommunications company. This megaproject has been internationally recognized by the International Hydropower Agency for “remarkable sustainability performance across a range of performance criteria, meeting or exceeding international good practice in all 19 assessment topics,” and awarded the Blue Planet Prize (International Hydropower Association, 2019; Rojas & Dembicz, 2023). The project enjoyed national support, was preceded by public consultations and was promoted by the government as key to the green economy. However, it also placed pressure on nearby residents and overlooked concerns about natural risks and the river’s socioeconomic importance, particularly for the city of Turrialba (Rojas & Dembicz, 2023).

Barro Blanco Hydroelectric Power Plant

The Barro Blanco hydropower project is located on the Tabasará River in western Panama. Since the 1970s, there have been plans to use the Tabasará River to generate electricity. However, a change in the law removed the requirements for the participation and consent of the indigenous communities and made it possible to award a concession for the construction of a hydropower plant. The concession was awarded to Generadora del Istmo S.A. (Genisa), a

company founded specifically for this purpose (Felipe Pérez et. al, 2016). The Barro Blanco is a 45-meter-high gravity dam with a 2.6 km² reservoir and an installed capacity of 28.5 MW. It began operating in 2017 after years of conflict, delays and cost overruns – rising from an estimated \$150 million to over \$1 billion. The project was built without adequate consultation with the Ngäbe-Buglé⁷ people, who suffered cultural, environmental and social damage as a result (Rojas & Dembicz, 2023). NGOs estimated that around 5,000 people would suffer from the construction of this project (Chatziantoniou & Alford-Jones, 2016). The project sparked national and international criticism and ultimately led to Panama withdrawing the project from the UN Clean Development Mechanism. The community continues to advocate for the rights of indigenous peoples and environmental justice (Rojas & Dembicz, 2023).

Guanacaste tourist area

In Costa Rica, the province of Guanacaste is one of the main recipients of investment in the tourism sector, which underlines its importance for the national economy. Due to its natural resources and cultural wealth, this region has long been attractive to tourists and investors in the tourism sector (Dembicz et al., 2023). The development of tourism investment accelerated in the late 1990s and continued into the 2000s, until the financial crisis in 2008 put the brakes on this investment (Cañada, 2019). In Guanacaste, around Culebra Bay and overlooking the Gulf of Papagayo, large, high-end hotel projects (between four and five stars) were built, including Four Seasons, Andaz, Planet Hollywood, Secrets, Occidental Grand Papagayo and Golden Palms. As a result of this dynamic investment activity, the province of Guanacaste dominated the national tourism landscape in 2015 with 30.4% (6,964 rooms) of the total number of rooms declared as destinations in the country and 33.8% (5,071 rooms) of the total number of rooms in the four or five-star category, surpassing the provinces of Puntarenas and San José (Blanco, 2019, p. 135, as cited in Dembicz et al., 2023). Currently (2019), over 25% of the labor force in Guanacaste is directly linked to tourism (Blanco, 2019, as cited in Dembicz et al., 2023).

Although the development of tourism in the region contributed to a significant reduction in unemployment and improved the financial situation of many inhabitants, it is also the subject of debate and criticism. The region's economy heavily depends on tourism, which makes the population vulnerable to economic fluctuations (Dembicz et al., 2023). In addition, competition for natural resources, especially water, intensifies in the region. Large tourist parks and hotels have priority access to water, while water is no longer available to residents, which leads to conflicts (Cañada, 2019).

Bahia de Tela tourist parks

Although tourism plays a relatively small role in Honduras's economy, the government is actively promoting its growth, especially along the Caribbean

coast, with plans to transform the Bay of Tela into a future “Cancún” of the country. Known for its rich biodiversity and cultural diversity, the Bay of Tela area – within the 1,163 km² municipality of Tela, home to about 92,800 people – has been considered for tourism development since 1974, and the idea was revived by the government in the early 2000s (Dembicz et al., 2023).

Indura Beach & Golf Resort was launched in 2015. It was created through the joint efforts of the Honduran government, with support from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB) and the Central American Bank for Economic Integration (CABEI) in infrastructure (Jouault, 2024).

The resort is located within the Jeannette Kawas National Park, a Ramsar site of international importance, where investments that could endanger the wetland ecosystem are prohibited. It is important to emphasize that this first major investment spurred the implementation of other hotel construction plans, but at the same time, it increased the mobilization of opposition from the Garifuna community fighting for their rights (Dembicz et al., 2023; Jouault, 2024).

La Libertad Mine

La Libertad mine, located about 110 km east of Managua, is a key gold mining operation in central Nicaragua and has been operating continuously since 1996. It uses both open-pit and underground methods (Roux, 2023). The Libertad exploitation concession covers an area of almost 11,000 hectares and has a processing plant capable of handling 2.25 million tons annually (calibremining.com). It has been the site of mining activity since 1862, with a long tradition of exploration, as well as small-scale and artisanal gold production (*güiriseros*). In 2019, the Canadian company Calibre Mining acquired the mine from B2Gold (Montoya et al., 2020). In the second decade of the 20th century, the mine’s operations were met with protests from local residents, who expressed dissatisfaction with the increase in jobs that were supposed to compensate for environmental damage. Pollution, especially water contamination, highlighted the conflict between mining and agriculture, which suffered as a result of the contamination (Roux, 2023).

La India Mine

Mina La India is a gold mining project in the town of Santa Cruz de la India in the department of León in Nicaragua. This community is dominated by artisanal gold mining, which attracts new settlers (Roux, 2023). The concession for mining in this mine was held by Condor Gold, a British company, until early 2025, when the company was acquired by Metals Exploration, another British company (Metals Exploration, 2025).

Since acquiring the concession in 2006, Condor Gold has had a strong presence in the Santa Cruz community, conducting training, education and

social programs. In fact, the inhabitants of the community have become heavily dependent on the mine, and not just in terms of economic dependence on jobs (Roux, 2023). The water in the area is so polluted that it is unfit for human consumption, and the mine has become the sole supplier of drinking water. In 2017, the community was divided by a conflict over the mine. Some residents protested against Condor Gold, fearing further environmental damage and displacement. The protest was suppressed. Recently, following the acquisition of shares by Metals Exploration, work has resumed on the construction of infrastructure for industrial mining (Table 2.1).

The case study, as the main methodological framework for our analysis, does not intend to make any generalizations but to use these case studies as a means to make visible and understand the dilemmas posed by development as a concept, proposal and vision. What needs to be emphasized is that this research does not aim to compare the results between specific megaprojects or achieve full representativeness, but to take into account the diversity of visions and contexts (Figure 2.1).

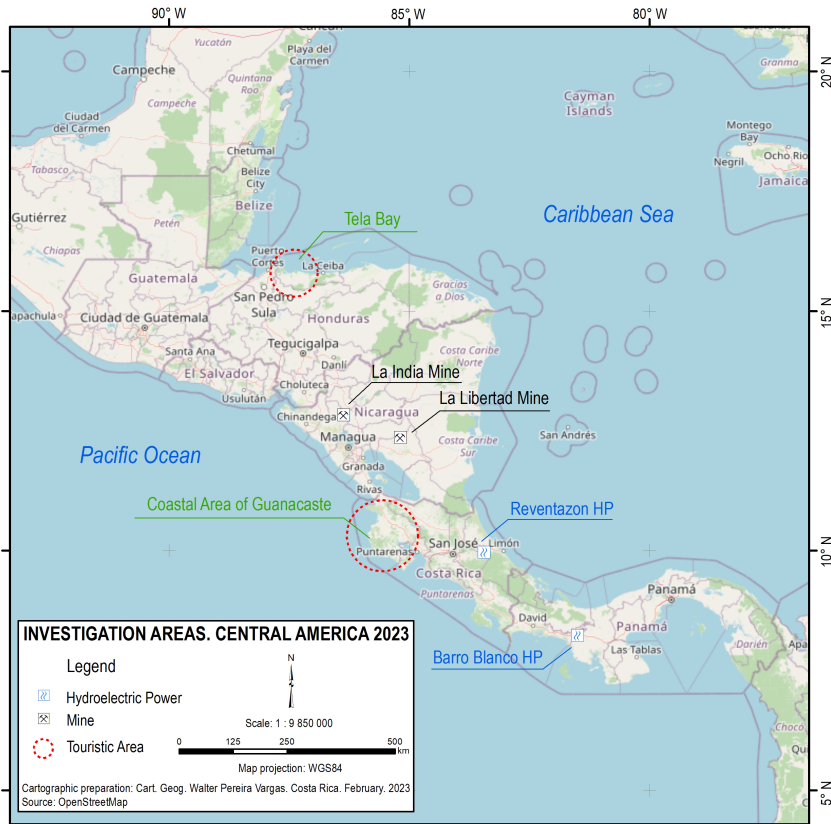


Figure 2.1 Map of the research areas in Central America.

Author: Walter Pereira.

Research techniques

A case study is usually associated with qualitative research techniques, but in reality, it can include both qualitative and quantitative ones (Gerring, 2007, p. 10). As Yin (2015, p. 49) writes, this method “draws evidence from multiple sources and confirms the convergence of data through a triangulation method.” Our project employs both qualitative and quantitative research techniques; however, our analysis relies predominantly on qualitative and ethnographic methods to provide an in-depth understanding of the cases examined. We agree with and adopt the approach advocated by Hammersley (2004, p. 241), among others, that studying a particular social reality requires approaching it and experiencing it directly. This decision is supported by our previous research experiences (Biczyńska, 2017), which show that a quantitative survey based on closed response cafeterias and scales, such as Likert, can sometimes be an uncomfortable and inappropriate tool of expression for Latin American local societies. Alers (1983, p. 188) came to similar conclusions after careful quantitative analysis, proving that cafeteria questions are not best suited for surveying communities in the Global South. Moreover, the quantitative research popular in the West places the world of the scholar and his categories above the world of the researched, which often has the character of reproducing the dominance of knowledge of the Global North over the knowledge of the Global South. Escobar and Pedrosa point to this phenomenon of the power of quantitative data, also referring to Foucault’s thought: “Let us remember that the belief that we can know ourselves through numbers is essentially modern. It was modernity that invented ‘statistics’ as a science and an instrument of the state to manage ‘the population’” (Escobar & Pedrosa, 1995, p. 87).⁸ Escobar bases his research on development primarily on discourse analysis: “Thinking of development in terms of discourse makes it possible to maintain the focus on domination” (Escobar, 2011, p. 5) and equates development with a discourse that emerged at a particular historical point in time. Taking into account in his analyses the discourse concerning the entire Global South, Escobar reaches primarily for secondary data, that is, the products of discussions between politicians, intellectuals and economists, analyzes these narratives and proposes his own alternative vision. Using Tilly’s (1984) classification, Escobar’s analyses can be classified as macrohistorical, that is, carried on a level where one perceives the actions of states and economies. Also, such large processes as proletarianization, urbanization, capital accumulation, state formation and bureaucratization lend themselves to effective analyses (Tilly, 1984, pp. 63–64).

When considering the methods used in studies with a similar theme to ours and in the same region, it is worth mentioning: *La concepción de la vida deseable de los pueblos indígenas y las comunidades étnicas. N° 3. Nahoas. El buen vivir nahoa en la comunidad de Urbaite – Las Pilas, Altagracia* (The Concept of Desirable Life of Indigenous Peoples and Ethnic Communities. No. 3 Nahoas: Buen Vivir Nahoa in the Community of Urbaite – Las Pilas, Altagracia), a study edited by Hidalgo-Capitán and Romero Arrechavala (2018), and “Percepción Sobre el Impacto del Turismo en Guanacaste, Costa

Rica” (“Perception of the Impact of Tourism in Guanacaste, Costa Rica”) by Espinoza-Sánchez (2019). In the case of the first study, which examines the understanding of a desirable good life in a local community in Nicaragua, qualitative interviews with intellectuals and community leaders and workshop techniques were used in addition to the analysis of existing material and data. The fieldwork also provided ethnographic information (Hidalgo-Capitán & Romero Arrechavala, 2018). The results obtained by the research team are clear on the one hand, but also rich and complex on the other hand. In this study, the understanding of *buen vivir* is revealed in the context of identity, equality and balance; it encompasses individual and communal, present and past perspectives (Hidalgo-Capitán & Romero Arrechavala, 2018, pp. 62–74). The second example mentioned above is a study on the perceptions of the impact of tourism in the Guanacaste region, which we have also included in our project, but in this case, the scholar opted for a quantitative survey with a representative quota sample. The results have, therefore, been widely interpreted as the “voice of Guanacaste.” Although they indicate a clear preponderance of positive evaluations of the tourism sector, it is also true that the more one is exposed to tourism, the less positive their attitude toward it (Espinoza-Sánchez, 2019, p. 188).

In our study, we employed the following research techniques: Semi-structured qualitative interview, research workshop, quantitative survey and press content analysis.

Semi-structured qualitative interview

The semi-structured qualitative interview was the primary research tool used in our project. As a research team, we conducted seventy-eight interviews in twelve localities near infrastructure megaprojects (see Table 2.2 for interview details). The interviewees included the residents of these localities from diverse age groups and social backgrounds, as well as a separate group consisting of decision makers and NGO activists. In contrast to many studies on

Table 2.2 Number and type of qualitative interviews (with indication of the locality where the interview was conducted)

<i>Area of interest interviews with</i>	<i>Reventazón</i>	<i>Guanacaste</i>	<i>Bahía de Tela</i>	<i>Barro Blanco</i>	<i>La India</i>	<i>La Libertad</i>
“Ordinary” people	2	10	16	2	6	8
Groups (min. 6)	1	2	2		1	
Experts and community leaders	1	6	13	6	2	

Sources: Own elaboration.

local societies (for example, the above-mentioned study by Hidalgo-Capitán & Romero Arrechavala, 2018), we put a strong emphasis on a broad representation of so-called “ordinary” people.

The sampling strategy aimed to gather the diversity and depth of explanations of people’s views on what a good life and development are. Our objective was not to achieve statistically significant results, but rather to gain insight into participants’ opinions and beliefs, including their underlying reasoning, illustrative examples and narrative constructions, as is typical in qualitative research (Cleary et al., 2014, as cited in Conlon et al., 2020). In the resident survey, we used a two-stage sampling. In the first stage, the primary criterion for respondent selection was residence in, or a strong connection to, an area affected by the megaproject. In the second stage, individuals were sought to maximize diversity in terms of age, gender and education. Also, a snowball sampling technique was used.

Interviews were conducted in settings that were natural and meaningful to the interviewees. These interviews formed part of the fieldwork, in which participant observation also played a significant role. Frequently, interviews took place while participants engaged in their daily activities, and, due to these everyday circumstances – such as being in a household – multiple people often participated in the interview. This dynamic positively influenced the well-being of interviewees and contributed to richer discussions and more diverse perspectives (Figures 2.2 and 2.3).



Figure 2.2 Photo from fieldwork during cheese production (K. Dembicz, Costa Rica).

Author: Katarzyna Dembicz.



Figure 2.3 Photo from fieldwork interview at a local market (M. Czerny, Honduras).
Author: Andrzej Czerny.

Including both individual and group interviews, we conducted interviews with more than 100 participants across four fieldwork countries. Table 2.2 presents the detailed characteristics of the sampling. It is important to emphasize that our intention was not to analyze each megaproject individually or to compare them with one another. Rather, our aim was to explore and better understand the diversity of visions regarding the good life and development.

In Panama, we primarily relied on expert interviews and field observations. In Costa Rica, Honduras and Nicaragua, interviewees were selected using the snowball sampling method, and interviews continued until data saturation was reached, ensuring diversity in terms of gender and age. Although these projects span four different countries, we analyze the collected interviews collectively, treating the experiences of local populations encountering “outside development” through megaprojects as a shared point of reference.

On the one hand, the topics discussed were generally public rather than private or confidential, allowing for open conversation (Junker, 2004, p. 222). On the other hand, they involved issues that are rarely the subject of everyday discussions. Most of these exploratory interviews, therefore, took place in a relaxed, unhurried atmosphere, enabling respondents to reflect and articulate their feelings.

During the operationalization phase, we confronted a key question: How can we inquire about development without explicitly using the term

“development”? We hypothesized that the term carries an ideological charge that could trigger specific associations, particularly those shaped by official narratives or social media.

Our goal was to prompt responses aligned with the respondent’s understanding of development while avoiding the term itself. This was inspired by Furtado’s definition – “a person who desires to use his own potential transforms the world and generates development” (Furtado, 1980, p. 7). Drawing on approaches tested in previous studies and pilot interviews, we chose to use the terms “good life” and “better life,” which emphasize quality and positive change, both in the respondent’s personal life and within their community. The final general procedure of the survey was as follows:

- Presentation of the purpose and duration of the study, obtaining informed consent for participation and recording;
- Elicitation of personal narratives regarding daily life and individual history;
- Exploration of the history of the community and place of residence, including perspectives on and recollections of social, infrastructural, environmental and cultural changes in recent years (as far back as the respondent could remember);
- Discussion of future aspirations and reflections on a “good life” or “better life” for oneself and the community;
- Confrontation with the concept of “development” through participants’ associations and evaluations.

Analysis

The analytic tools applied to the qualitative interview data in our study followed Maxwell’s (2013, p. 105) framework, including memos, categorizing strategies and connecting strategies. Memos, a standard element in qualitative research, consisted of the research team’s field notes, which captured preliminary conclusions, scholars’ reflections and methodological considerations to facilitate self-learning. As Lofland (2004) notes, “field notes provide the observer’s *raison d’être*.” Memoing continued throughout data collection, transcription and the analytical phase.

The categorization strategies, as described by Maxwell (2013, p. 105), primarily involved coding and thematic analysis. Codes were derived both deductively from preexisting hypotheses and concepts (for example, good life, change for the better, development, infrastructure, social life) and inductively from themes that emerged during analysis (for example, conflict, tradition and agriculture), resulting in a mixed inductive–deductive approach (Kuckartz, 2019). Feelings and evaluative judgments were also used as parallel code sets.

Connecting strategies, which focus on identifying relationships between elements rather than merely similarities and differences (Maxwell, 2013, p. 106), were employed throughout the research process, including during memoing, individual interview analysis and the search for correlations among codes.

The data analysis process was further informed by thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2006), which included the following steps:

- Transcription of all interviews;
- Preliminary text analysis, with the paragraph as the unit of analysis;
- Coding of the data;
- Identification of themes and subthemes (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

All analytical strategies were supported by NVivo software.

Artificial intelligence-based translation and language improvement tools were used in the creation of the book. In particular, the InstaText Scholar tool was used.

While the qualitative in-depth interview was the primary research tool, additional research techniques were employed to ensure triangulation and enrich the findings; these are discussed in subsequent sections.

Research workshop

The workshop, as a research method, is seldom mentioned among traditional qualitative research techniques. Its closest conventional counterpart is the Focus Group Interview (FGI). The method leverages group dynamics to foster mutual inspiration and stimulate the articulation of opinions and viewpoints. Through the interplay of contrasting and parallel statements, participants are better able to formulate their own perspectives. This dynamic data collection process enables the rapid elicitation of multiple viewpoints. The workshop offers these advantages while also allowing for a high level of participant engagement and the integration of various research techniques within a single session (Ahmed & Asraf, 2018, pp. 1505, 1508).

In this project, we conducted three workshops with distinct participant groups: Staff from the Universidad Internacional Antonio Valdivieso in Rivas (Nicaragua), members of the Chorotega indigenous community in Matambú (Costa Rica) and members of an agricultural cooperative in San Vito (Costa Rica). Collectively, these workshops involved thirty participants. Each session was held in a workplace or community space familiar to the participants, ensuring a natural and comfortable environment.

The primary topics addressed during the workshops included

- Characteristics of the inhabited community and observed changes within it;
- Readiness for change, visions for the future and identification of opportunities and obstacles to achieving desired goals;

- Perceptions of desired changes among different social groups;
- Definitions of the good life and values.

The tasks for the participants consisted of both group work and wide-ranging discussions. Each workshop included ten to fifteen participants. Our intention was for these forums to serve not only as sources of data but also as safe spaces for mutual learning and the cultivation of understanding among community members (Figure 2.4).



Figure 2.4 Photo from research workshop (K. Dembiczy & E. Biczyska, Nicaragua).

Author: Katarzyna Dembiczy.

Quantitative survey

Despite our earlier critique of quantitative techniques, our study incorporated a survey targeting students from Central America and Mexico. Mexico was included due to the significant public debate generated by the country's largest recent infrastructure project, the 1,500-kilometer Tren Maya railway. In total, we collected 114 complete responses. For this group – young people living in a globalized context – a quantitative survey is a familiar and natural tool. Moreover, the perspectives of young individuals are particularly relevant for understanding definitions of development and the desired future.

The survey addressed the following topics:

- The concept of a good life, both personally and within the community;
- Perceived threats to achieving desired goals for themselves and their communities;
- Understanding the term development.

The quantitative survey was created after the initial round of in-depth interviews and was informed by a prior quantitative pilot study, as well as insights

from the qualitative phase. This survey serves primarily as a supplementary component to the main study, which is grounded in qualitative interviews on a triangulation basis (Table 2.3).

Press content analysis⁹

Another source of knowledge in this project was the analysis of the content of the national daily newspapers. The information they provide is a very important source of knowledge that contributes to the formation of opinion. Those that have a national reach enjoy great trust among their readers, who at the same time can make a critical interpretation of the journalistic message by analyzing the author's intentions, the persistent trends in the presentation of various phenomena and actors that shape their visions and perceptions. The

Table 2.3 The structure of the sampling in the quantitative online survey among students

		<i>% of respondents</i>
Gender	Female	59
	Male	39
	Other	2
Age	17–19	26
	20–24	40
	25–29	15
	30–39	9
	40–49	6
	50 and more	4
Economic status	My income allows me to invest and/or purchase luxury goods	4
	My income allows me to make small savings	25
	My income only allows me to satisfy basic needs	41
	The income is not enough, I use savings	8
	The income is not enough, my family helps me	18
	The income is not enough, I go into debt	3
Nationality	Costa Rican	39
	Honduran	20
	Mexican	33
	Panamanian	5
	Other	3
	<i>Base (n)</i>	114

Source: Own elaboration.

more subtle and camouflaged the trend, the easier it is to numb the reader's vigilance and critical eye. This applies to a large extent to topics that are under-represented or not represented in the news. So it takes a very attentive and sensitized reader to ask the question "What's missing in the news?" and try to find topics or actors that are left out of the news.

An important category of analysis is the figure of the "social actor," that is, the participant in the interaction. According to Szacka (2003, p. 122), this term is sometimes applied to all persons involved in social activities. Such a theatrical metaphor, frequently used in the social sciences, fits discourse analysis very well. In our case, the social actor takes on a collective or institutional character.

To conduct our analysis, we first identified the sources of the informative articles – specifically, the newspapers themselves – and selected relevant articles. We developed a set of guiding questions, presented below:

- Which social actors are mentioned in articles concerning megaprojects in Central America, and which are omitted? How frequently do they appear?
- In what contexts are megaprojects discussed? Which topics are rarely or never addressed?
- Do the news articles present a debate and multiple perspectives on megaprojects, or is the coverage one-sided?
- How are megaprojects evaluated by different information sources?
- Do news articles about megaprojects articulate any vision of development, and if so, what kinds?

To address these research questions, we employed the following procedure:

Step 1: The name of each megaproject was used as a search keyword to retrieve all articles referencing the project. Articles were selected if they specifically referred to a megaproject; items mentioning a locality with the same name but unrelated to the project were excluded.

A total of 657 articles were collected. The highest numbers were from *La Nación* (Costa Rica) with 256 articles and *La Prensa* (Panama) with 209. The lowest were from *El Nuevo Diario* (Nicaragua) with fifty-five, *La Prensa* (Nicaragua) with thirty and *CRHoy* (Costa Rica) with eighteen.

Step 2: To ensure greater representativeness of the analysis by source, articles were randomly selected so that at least thirty articles were chosen for each of the four megaprojects analyzed. Where possible, each newspaper contributed approximately half of the articles (about 15 each). For Nicaraguan projects, this was not feasible due to the limited number of available articles. Ultimately, 124 articles were selected for analysis (see Table 2.4).

Step 3: The selected articles were coded according to predefined parameters. For this purpose, a "questionnaire" with open and closed questions was used, similar to an "interview" based on a quantitative questionnaire. The variables

Table 2.4 Number of articles selected for analysis, according to megaproject

Name of newspaper and country	Mine India	Mine La Libertad	Reventazón Hydroelectric	Barro Blanco Hydroelectric Plant	Total number
El Nuevo Diario, Nicaragua	13	15			28
La Prensa, Nicaragua	14	8			22
CRHoy, Costa Rica			14		14
La Nación, Costa Rica			20		20
La Prensa, Panama				20	20
Panama America				20	20
Total number	27	23	34	40	124

Source: Own elaboration.

coded included the stakeholders represented, the dominant voice, the frequency and manner in which society, the public sector, investors and other actors were presented, the main topic of the article (context) and the depiction and understanding of development.

Step 4: Responses to open-ended questions were manually coded, and a quantitative analysis was conducted. The primary dependent variables were the responses to the aforementioned questions, while the key independent variables were the specific megaproject and the newspaper (information source). The coding process was performed manually by a single scholar, without automation or artificial intelligence assistance, thereby reducing the risk of internal inconsistency. Manual coding also enabled a more nuanced analysis beyond the constraints of purely quantitative methods.

Chapter 5, which presents the results, also includes an analysis of the profiles of the newspapers whose content was analyzed.

Study implementation

Qualitative interviews were conducted by six scholars from mid-2019 to early 2022. However, no interviews were conducted in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic. This global health crisis affected the study in several ways. First, it disrupted the continuity of the fieldwork and extended the overall duration of the project. Scholars' travel was only possible during the periods when anti-Covid-19 restrictions were temporarily lifted. Travel was characterized by heightened uncertainty regarding the potential reintroduction of restrictions. Second, the pandemic affected respondents' perceptions of many important life issues. The threat of the pandemic may have increased the importance of health and a sense of security; the significant decline in tourism has affected perceptions of this important economic sector, which was also the subject of the survey. Notably, most interviews were conducted after the onset of the pandemic, ensuring that the data reflect respondents' experiences during this period; otherwise, the results obtained might lose their validity today.

Fieldwork in Nicaragua presented further challenges due to the political climate and restrictions on academic freedom, which constrained the ability to conduct open scientific research. Consequently, interviews in the two Nicaraguan localities with gold mining operations were shorter, not recorded and documented through note-taking. Greater emphasis was placed on participant observation and informal conversations. Importantly, no threatening or dangerous situations were encountered during fieldwork in Nicaragua or other locations.

Socioeconomic differences in Central America

While the primary focus of this study is not the quantitative economic, social or political characteristics of Central America, a brief overview is provided to contextualize the research for the reader.

Table 2.5 Principal data for Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama.

	Area in km ²	Population, total (mln) for 2023	Urbanization (%) of total population for 2023	Life expectancy (both sex) For 2022	Human Development Index for 2021	Forest area (%) of land area) 2021	Democracy Index For 2021
Costa Rica	51,100	5.212	80.1	79	0.806	59.5	8.1
Honduras	112,492	10.593	57.7	71	0.624	56.0	5.1
Nicaragua	130,373	7.046	59.5	75	0.669	27.5	2.7
Panama	75,420	4.468	68.0	77	0.820	56.0	6.8

Sources: CEPAL STAT n.d.; World Bank; Human Development Reports; Our World in Data.

Central America comprises small countries with dynamic population growth and predominantly young societies, marked by pronounced economic and political disparities. These disparities are evident in the varying degrees of democracy, territorial self-governance, human rights and environmental protection across the region. The roots of these differences lie in colonial history and the early formation of nation-states, which established social hierarchies and created oligarchic and political elites. These elites, often closely aligned with the United States and Western cultural perspectives, typically regard traditional and indigenous practices as regressive. As a result, much of the arable land is controlled by these elites, organized into export-oriented agribusinesses. In contrast, smallholder farmers generally practice subsistence agriculture and, particularly in Honduras, El Salvador and Nicaragua, face the risk of dispossession due to investments in tourism, monoculture, mining or electrical and transportation projects.

Since the 1990s, Central America has undergone political transformation aimed at societal pluralization and democratization, as well as overcoming the traumatic past associated with the civil wars experienced by its inhabitants. In this process, Costa Rica is notable for its long-standing commitment to peace, having demilitarized the state and opted to build a country with strong democratic and social institutions. Following the 1989 US military intervention, Panama similarly disbanded its armed forces and strengthened its territorial governance. In contrast, Nicaragua and Honduras continue to experience lower levels of political stability, as reflected in the data presented in Table 2.5.

Notes

- 1 Original quote: “La opción decolonial surge desde la diversidad del mundo y de las historias locales que, a lo largo de cinco siglos, se enfrentaron con la visión eurocéntrica como la única manera de leer la realidad” Bravo (2017, p. 31).
- 2 Original quote: “La noción de violencia epistémica se refiere a las distintas maneras en que la violencia es ejercida en relación con la producción, circulación y reconocimiento del conocimiento: la negación de la agencia epistémica de ciertos sujetos, la explotación no reconocida de sus recursos epistémicos, su objetificación, entre muchas otras” (Pérez, 2019, p. 82).
- 3 Original quote: “En consecuencia, las otras culturas son diferentes en el sentido de ser desiguales, de hecho inferiores, por naturaleza. Solo pueden ser ‘objetos’ de conocimiento y/o de practicas de dominación. En esa perspectiva, la relación entre la cultura europea y las otras culturas, se establecio y desde entonces se mantiene, como una relacion entre ‘sujeto’ y ‘objeto’” (Quijano, 1992, p. 16).
- 4 Original “Aporte económico de la minería y empleos directos,” an article in Nicaraguan newspaper *El Nuevo Diario*, from August 16, 2016, about the positive impact of gold mining and foreign investment in it.
- 5 Original “Una alianza para mejorar el futuro,” an article in Nicaraguan newspaper *El Nuevo Diario*, from 02.12.2013 about a foreign investor in a gold mine who offers courses and training to young people.
- 6 Original title “Comunidades seducidas por Proyecto,” an article in Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación*, from December 9, 2008, about support for the construction of a hydroelectric plant.

- 7 In this work, we will use two spellings, Ngäbe and Ngöbe, which is due to the fact that the website of the Congress of this people uses these two spellings, and the Panamanian legislation uses the spelling without the letter “ö” <https://docs.panama.justia.com/federales/leyes/10-de-1997-mar-11-1997.pdf>
- 8 Original quote: “Recordemos que la creencia, que podemos conocernos a través de los números es esencialmente moderna; fue la modernidad quien inventó las ‘estadísticas’ como ciencia e instrumento del Estado para el manejo de ‘la población’” (Escobar & Pedrosa, 1995, p. 87).
- 9 The text analysis has been previously published in Spanish in the book: Dembiczy, K. (Ed.). (2023) *Megaproyectos en Centroamérica: dilemas, discursos, debates*. Wydawnictwa Uniwersytetu Warszawskiego. <https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.9788323561002>, chapter: Biczynska, E. (2023), “El debate sobre megaproyectos mineros y energéticos en la prensa nacional de Nicaragua, Costa Rica y Panamá,” <https://doi.org/10.31338/uw.9788323561002.pp.269-318>

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3 Development from a local perspective

Guided by the principle of avoiding the “single story” narrative (Adichie, 2016), this analysis prioritizes the inclusion of local voices – individual and collective – of people representing different social strata, ethnicities, age groups or genders. Our approach intentionally moves beyond consulting only experts or activists, seeking instead a “bottom-up” perspective. As Esteva et al. explicitly express:

Today millions, perhaps billions of people are resisting development in all its forms, and affirming themselves on their own paths, culturally and locally defined. It is no longer acceptable (if it ever was) to continue to impose on them an outside definition of what it means to live well.
(Esteva et al., 2013, p. 20).

This chapter presents findings from individual and group interviews, complemented by a quantitative survey of students from Central American countries and Mexico. The interview protocol was designed to encourage participants to discuss development spontaneously and voluntarily. By focusing on the values important to interviewees and conducting interviews at a slow pace, we gave the participants space to freely articulate their perspectives on development and related processes, particularly those associated with megaprojects or dominant economic sectors in their regions. The areas selected for the study also included communities experiencing social conflict (such as the Garifuna population in the coastal area of Tela Bay, artisanal miners of Santa Cruz de la India in Nicaragua or the inhabitants of La Cruz in Guanacaste). Consequently, some responses were highly emotional and expressed dissatisfaction with external actors, including the government and investors. In total, seventy-eight individual and group interviews constitute the material for analysis, complemented by over 100 surveys on the same topic.

The chapter begins by examining how interviewees access information about their surroundings and evaluate the consistency and diversity of opinions within their environment. We then analyze these attitudes in depth, emphasizing the values identified as essential for a good life. Finally, we deconstruct and

define the term development from a local perspective, with particular attention to the perceptions of megaprojects.

Sources of information and consistency of worldviews

Media play a significant role in shaping both collective and individual imaginaries. Recent technological advances have diversified information sources and expanded access; yet, internet availability varies substantially between countries and between urban and rural areas, introducing new dimensions of inequality. According to the World Bank (World Bank Group & UNDP, 2022), approximately two-thirds of households in Latin America have high-speed internet at home; however, all Central American countries fall below this average, with Costa Rica at 65% and Nicaragua at 25%.¹ The urban–rural gap in internet access is also pronounced in Central America (World Bank Group & UNDP, 2022, pp. 5–6). In addition, despite technological progress, limited financial resources are the main obstacle to the expansion of connectivity and infrastructure, especially in rural areas of Latin America (Ziegler et al., 2020).

As our research focused on areas outside of major cities, it can be assumed that the internet was not the primary or only source of information. This became clear during the pandemic, when rural and semi-urban communities relied more frequently on community radio, community meetings, mobile phones (with limitations), posters and murals and interpersonal communication, also known as “word of mouth.”

In our case, most respondents – except the youngest – reported that neighborhood conversations, or what is commonly referred to as “informarse por boca a boca” or “de voz a voz” (word of mouth), were preferred sources of information. Additional sources included neighborhood and community meetings, such as those held in the indigenous territory of Matambú or in the town of 27 de Abril in Costa Rica. These meetings not only facilitate information sharing but also strengthen multiple dimensions of social capital. There is a reciprocal relationship between information exchange and social capital, with each reinforcing the other (Katungi et al., 2008; Díez-Vial & Montoro-Sánchez, 2014). Personal information exchange also provides opportunities to reconcile or challenge viewpoints and to recognize differing opinions early on. In contrast, most younger respondents reported relying primarily on social media platforms – such as Facebook, WhatsApp, Telegram or Twitter (now X) – as their main information sources. One interviewee reflected on both the advantages and disadvantages of relying exclusively on these platforms:

So, notice how the power of social media is now so strong that many people who use it don’t even realize it. But people are already changing. People express themselves a lot through Facebook, through platforms like Twitter, and that allows more people to see it. So the act of retweeting something or liking a comment about “X” or the current situation really contributes a lot. All of that – social media exists for that: for public

opinion and for expressing what you, as a person, think about X or any given topic.

(21-year-old man, Costa Rica)²

In addition to the generational differences, the following pattern emerged: Respondents who reported higher levels of education also described using a more diverse array of information sources. In addition to the press and social media, books, television and radio were also mentioned. Radio is particularly noteworthy, as it plays an important informational, social and political role. In many countries in Latin America and the Global South in general (Shittu & Abdulkadir-Imam, 2018; Sharma & Gupta, 2024), community radio stations are a popular, easily accessible, non-commercial source of information for listeners. Their value lies in the participatory and bottom-up creation of content (García-García, 2024). Indigenous communities use this type of medium to preserve tradition and identity and to achieve political goals (Manjarrez, 2023; Tapia et al., 2024). For many of our interlocutors in Central America, community radio was a primary and trusted source of news, especially regarding local events and concerns.

Radios played a very important role in community struggles Community radios provide information in our language and from the conviction of our organizations and communities. The information is received in our own language and worldview.

(man, Honduras)³

This was also emphasized, among others, by interviewees in Turrialba (Costa Rica), who pointed out the importance of Radio Turrialba, as well as by members of the Garifuna communities in Bahia de Tela, where Radio Progreso operates. It is also worth mentioning that in areas with intense social conflicts (for example, on the coast of Bahia de Tela), some stations had to cease operations due to a lack of appropriate permits⁴ or funding. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the problem, as many stations remained closed for months due to the sanitary restrictions introduced (Reyes, 2021).

Apart from those already mentioned, our interviewees also indicated specific public institutions (universities, chambers of commerce) as sources of information. For example, local women leaders (of cooperatives or educational projects) mentioned training programs as a valuable source of information. Indeed, the rural or small-town environment, in addition to personal and individual characteristics of interviewees, also influences the way people communicate and obtain information. Residents of rural or small-town areas also use the previously mentioned sources of information to solve everyday problems. Although many respondents use different sources of information, they have various levels of trust in these sources. Personal communication is still seen as one of the most reliable and important sources:

Researcher: What media do you use to get information?

Interlocutor: I think, social networks, and communication between the people you work with, not much television. (37-year-old woman, Honduras)⁵

Mainly social networks. And if it's a matter of concern, of urgency, we hold a community meeting to which all members of the community are invited to get informed. Television and radio are for entertainment, not information.

(40-year-old activist, Honduras)⁶

Personal communication and obtaining information from the immediate environment are, therefore, still popular despite the development of technology and social media. Does this impact the cohesion of views and attitudes among communities? During the interviews and in the surveys, we were interested in whether respondents thought that others around them shared their opinions or thought differently about what a good life or development is (the two key values we wanted to examine in our study). Most of our interviewees perceived a diversity of opinions in their immediate environment, which does not necessarily translate into conflict. A similar observation can be drawn from the quantitative study among the students from Central America and Mexico (Table 3.1).

The study showed a general sense of consistency in the diversity of opinions and an almost nonexistent sense of being isolated in one's worldview. Many also detect differences in varying attitudes between generations, an observation that is fairly universal:

I think that most young people today have no goal, perhaps because of a lack of motivation or support. They have other ideas that are perhaps not so defined, but they have no goal or aim.

(32-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁷

Table 3.1 Responses from a question with an answer list: “Do you think that your friends, your environment, agree with your opinions?”

<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
Everyone agrees	10.5
The majority agrees	41.2
Half/half, some agree, others don't	27.2
The majority does not agree	1.8
Everyone disagree	0.0
Hard to say	19.3
Base	114

Source: Own elaboration based on 114 responses from the students from Central America and Mexico. Fieldwork: September 2022 to June 2024.

A frequently noted difference concerns life values in the context of a good life. Interestingly, some of our respondents identified more with immaterial values, while others ascribed attachment to material values.

Most of them think very materialistically, the guys like fancy cars, but not when it comes to helping their family and their people.

(23-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁸

For some, the good life is tranquility, for others it is only nature, for still others it is the economic, the having.

(51-year-old woman, Costa Rica)⁹

Good life

The concept of values has a long-standing history in the social and human sciences. Initially, “values” referred primarily to material aspects, as seen in the works of Smith and Marx. Over time, however, values have come to be understood in more subjective terms and are increasingly linked to cultural contexts (Spates, 1983, pp. 28–29). More recently, scholars have called for a renewed focus on values as a response to the dysfunctions of late capitalism (Shaikh, 2016; Fraser, 2022), the need to move beyond extractivism (Esteva et al., 2013; Gudynas, 2023), the environmental crisis and the growing influence of technology and algorithms on individuals and social relations (Hatalska, 2021).

In this study, we explored the values that constitute the “good life” by asking respondents about their understanding of “good life” or “living well,” intentionally avoiding references to political concepts or movements. A typical response to a question about the “good life” was:

To have health, to have food, to have the basics for living and what you need to live from day to day.

(40-year-old woman, Honduras)¹⁰

Such statements recurred frequently in our interviews. Key elements of the good life identified by respondents included health, tranquility, employment, family and satisfaction with what one has. Expressions such as “the minimum” and “the basic” were common. Other frequently mentioned aspects included education, security, identity, community life, self-fulfillment and nature. These values varied somewhat by age and country. Notably, the results of the quantitative survey among students from Central America and Mexico closely aligned with the interview findings, as shown in Table 3.2.

Similarly, for the students in our study, the prerequisite for a good life is security, the satisfaction of basic needs and the absence of fear regarding health or safety. Spiritual values and mental balance are also highly valued.

Table 3.2 Coded responses to an open-ended question: What do you understand by a “good life”? What is the “good life” for you?

<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
Basic economic/material needs/living comfortably/economic stability	40.4
Personal/spiritual development/faith/mental balance/mental health/success	37.7
Health	28.9
Peace/security/tranquility/less problems/no fear/harmony	25.4
Access to public services/their quality/for all	16.7
Friendship/relationships/support/networks/my people	14.9
Employment	14.0
Stability	12.3
Enjoy from what you have/live life	12.3
Family/loved ones	7.0
Pleasures/recreation/free time	7.0
A lot of money/economic well-being	6.1
Environment/nature	5.3
Freedom/independence	5.3
Travel	3.5
Dignity	2.6
Other	6.1
Base (<i>n</i>)	114

Source: Own elaboration based on 114 responses from students from Central America and Mexico. Fieldwork: September 2022 to June 2024.

These qualities were frequently shared by experts who, despite generally having more favorable material conditions and experience living in diverse contexts, expressed similar priorities. Thus, the assumption that basic desires and values are limited to the middle and lower social classes was not confirmed by the study.

But if you had it and you lived in a country where there was no crime, where you lived with the doors and windows open, where the water was pure, the air was clean. That’s a good life and if you had it, you long for it.

(28-year-old man, social anthropologist, Panama)¹¹

To live well is to have the essentials, to have enough to eat, to have a house, to have a job, to have the environment and the freedom to go out and breathe fresh air. It’s not about having lots of things, but about having the essentials to feel good.

(40-year-old woman, NGO worker, Panama)¹²

A closer examination of these values reveals more complex backgrounds:

Economic safety – fulfillment of the basic material needs – is the most frequently mentioned condition for the good life, reflecting the widespread experience or observation of life-threatening poverty in Central America. This was mentioned less often in Costa Rica, a relatively wealthier country, and more often in Nicaragua and Honduras. Quantitative data support this: Costa Rican students mentioned economic safety less frequently (27%) than those from Honduras (48%) and Mexico (53%) (bases: 44, 23, 38, respectively).

Employment is closely tied to economic security. None of our participants expressed the belief that well-being could be secured without work. Desired employment is typically described as “decent” (Spanish: *digno*), meaning legal, safe for health and life and sufficient to provide for oneself and one’s family at a basic level. Nearly all interviewees in Honduras, particularly those near touristic megaprojects, cited employment as essential for a good life.

And the children go away because they have work outside. I want them to stay here in the village.

(45-year-old Garifuna woman, Honduras)¹³

For Garifuna and other communities in Honduras, the loss of livelihoods and lack of employment are not only existential threats but also the reasons for large-scale emigration, especially among youth. Given the traditionally communal values of the Garifuna, unemployment and emigration contribute to family and community breakdown, loss of cohesion, identity and cultural practices. These observations align with analyzes of qualitative changes in the Garifuna community (Castillo, 2020; Mollett, 2024).

Emigration also results in remittances, which have become a significant income source, accounting for 28% of GDP and continuing to rise (Orozco, 2024). Emigrants remain part of the community even in the diaspora; countries of the so-called Northern Triangle of Central America (Guatemala, Honduras, El Salvador) are major sources of migration to the United States (Ward & Batalova, 2023).

Employment also represents a point of overlap between the concepts of “good life” and “development,” though the two are not synonymous. Employment is often used by companies as a primary argument to attract support for megaprojects, and by political and business stakeholders to justify new investments. However, these promises frequently prove unfulfilled, as some interviewees noted:

There have been many short-term investments that do not look to the future, foreign investments that leave people out of work with the crisis.

(35-year-old man, member of Cooperativa,
Costa Rica)¹⁴

For this reason, the impact in this sense was rather negative, just like the hotels that have been built here in the community. Big buildings, for me and for the members of the community there are no job opportunities, there are very few people working there.

(40-year-old man, expert, Honduras)¹⁵

Security is the value that underpins and shapes many other aspirations and desires. It encompasses several dimensions, which can be summarized as follows:

- Social security: This dimension relates to access to public services and essential utilities, ensuring support in times of need;

A good life ... from that I guess economic stability, security, access to basic services, water, electricity and internet. I didn't used to see that as basic, but now it's part of life. (26-year-old man, Costa Rica)¹⁶

- A secure future: This aspect concerns the community's prospects, particularly in contexts marked by forced emigration, political instability and limited state involvement;

The community is destroyed by gold and by immigration. The people who arrive live in the mountains and engage in artisanal mining. The good life is perhaps security. And the problem is the identity that is lost and the solidarity that is lost. Gold attracts people, but it also drives them out of the town, because they have no future here. (50-year-old man, Nicaragua)¹⁷

This aspect is also expressed as "stability" and was spontaneously mentioned by over one in ten students in our quantitative survey (Table 3.2).

- Safety from direct threats to life: This dimension refers to protection from organized crime and violence through the use of firearms.

There are more police, we are sold this as more security. But in reality you don't feel safe, you are afraid.

(40-year-old woman, Honduras)¹⁸

Notably, these interviewees represent the dominant security concerns in their respective countries: Social security in Costa Rica, anxiety about the future and existential decisions in Nicaragua and crime-related threats in Honduras. Honduras remains one of the most dangerous countries in Central America and globally (UNODC, 2023).

Connection to others, expressed as "social interaction," "solidarity" and "community," is also seen as an essential part of a good life (the aspect of collectivism is explained in more detail in the next chapter). Community plays an important role in communication, daily safety and emergency situations, while also reinforcing shared values, customs and identities. Respondents were typically surrounded by others in similar circumstances and expressed a desire for collective well-being (Figure 3.1):



Figure 3.1 Picture of Garifuna women preparing a collective meal (fish soup) for the whole community.

Author: Andrzej Czerny.

[the good life] It means to seek happiness, personal fulfillment. It implies the balance between one's own well-being and that of society.

(18-year-old woman, Costa Rica, open-ended answer from the survey)¹⁹

Researcher: Do you strive for a good life?

Interviewee: Yes, to be at peace. Not so that I'm well and my neighbor is doing poorly. (23-year-old man, Costa Rica)²⁰

Nature is typically mentioned as fresh air, clean water or green public spaces. These “ecosystem services” are closely tied to daily well-being, representing comfort, beauty and the foundation of life itself. Proximity to large investments and megaprojects often increases the risk of environmental degradation. For example, in the La India gold mine area in Nicaragua, water is contaminated with arsenic and mercury, leaving the community without access to safe drinking water. In Guanacaste, Costa Rica, tourist developments have priority access to water, disadvantaging local communities. At the same time, nature is often taken for granted. (Figure 3.2)

The environment is so present every day that we do not mention it.

(35-year-old man, Costa Rica)²¹

Freedom and travel also emerge as spontaneously mentioned elements of the good life among students, with younger respondents more frequently expressing a desire to travel and explore the world. While these are considered “secondary” factors, they represent key aspirations for many young people in Central America ().

The good life is the satisfaction of personal needs, which now means that I can travel, because I already have a house and a car.

(28-year-old woman, Nicaragua)²²

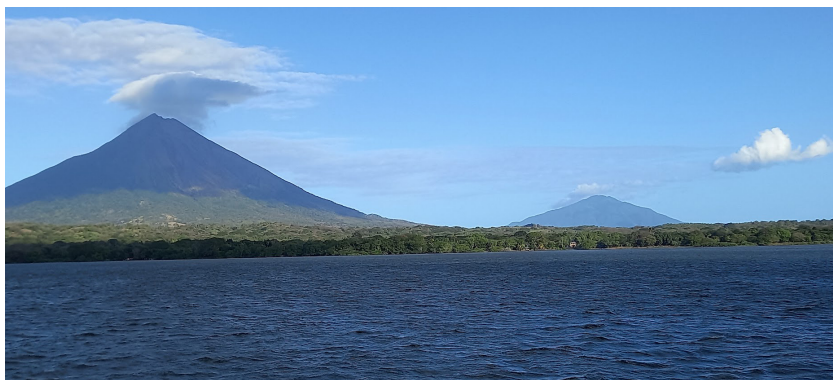


Figure 3.2 View of the Concepción volcano, located on Lake Nicaragua, where the new canal project was proposed.

Author: Katarzyna Dembicz.

People's definitions of a good life that emerged from our conversations align with the concept of *buen vivir*, or what is generally understood as such, as "There are no rules for a good life or the *buen vivir*. Any attempt to define it in absolute terms nips this evolving concept in the bud. What we can do is approach its essence" (Solón, 2017, p. 17 as cited in: Montano Morales, 2025, p. 166).²³ Esteva et al. (2013, p. 20) summarize the idea of *buen vivir* as "an idea based on a verb: it is life lived well, a principle realized in action. It puts the emphasis on doing, rather than consuming." They identify eating, learning, healing, settling and knowing as the fundamental needs that marginalized communities seek to fulfill creatively, in accordance with their identity and tradition, without exploiting the land or creating power hierarchies (Esteva et al., 2013, pp. 20–21). These five verbs came up again and again in our interviews.

The subject of food, although so commonplace, almost always comes up in conversations about the good life. Montano Morales (2025) focuses on the indigenous Misak people in the Guambía reserve in Colombia. The ritual associated with production and consumption is an essential part of the good life, but it is under severe pressure from modernity, both in terms of agriculture and consumption. Food is particularly important because it is directly linked to health and well-being, production traditions and ceremonies, plants with special properties and meanings, social order and roles in the community, sharing, time and the cycle of life and finally the role of all the inhabitants of a place, both human and non-human (Montano Morales 2025). Although the rituals and perceived importance of food in mestizo communities differ from those of indigenous communities, their involvement in agriculture and their own traditions of food preparation make it a key element of a good life.

In his original study, Fischer (2014), an anthropologist from the USA, asked what a good life means to German shoppers and Guatemalan Maya coffee farmers, using the terms "good life" and "well-being" interchangeably. Interestingly, Fischer's analysis establishes a strong link between the respondents' economic activity and the markets in which they operate and their understanding of well-being. Comparing such different and distant social groups, he found that "adequate material resources ('adequate' being relatively defined), physical health and safety, and family and social relations are all core and necessary elements of wellbeing" (Fischer, 2014, p. 5). However, he notes that there are other, more complex needs for a good life, which can be grouped into the following categories: Aspiration and opportunity, dignity and fairness and commitment to larger goals (Fischer, 2014).

Our interviewees also rarely omitted values such as being together with others, living harmoniously in a community, and basic equality from their reflections on the foundations of a good life. By the latter, we mean a state in which the basic needs of the respondent, as well as those of the community as a whole, are met. Fischer calls this a "social obligation" (2014, p. 162), but in our analysis, we tend to emphasize the organic interdependence and relationality of those who live in a community.

We would also like to relate the above considerations to the research and analysis of large global institutions and organizations. We find similarities between the main elements of a good life mentioned by our interlocutors and those in the United Nations' guidelines, which are deeply embedded in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. These elements include a healthy life, decent work and economic opportunity, peace and justice and solidarity (UN, n.d.). Pew Research Center's report, "What Makes Life Meaningful? Views from 17 Advanced Economies" (Silver et al., 2021), surveyed 19,000 adults in seventeen "advanced economies" to understand what they find meaningful in life. The study found that while family, health and work were common themes, the importance of material wealth and social context varied considerably by country, reflecting different economic and cultural conditions.

The World Value Survey (WVS) is an international scientific research program that has been conducted since the 1980s and covers over 120 countries. The quantitative survey, based on a questionnaire conducted among representative samples of each society, has for years focused on the most important values: Social, political, economic, religious and cultural (WVS, 2020). Among the countries participating in the survey are the countries of Latin America and Central America in particular: Guatemala and Nicaragua. The World Value Survey is a trusted and widely used data source. Although the questions asked in the societies surveyed do not exactly match the issues discussed here, we present the results for the question that provides some approximation as they address the most important values in life. For comparison, the United States, UK and Poland have been added to the Latin American countries. Table 3.3 shows the percentage of "very important" responses for each value available in the survey for each country.

Among the values listed, the family ranks first in all countries, although this value is relatively low in Nicaragua. It is also worth mentioning the value of work, which is much higher in all Latin American countries than in the US and the UK, most likely related to prosperity and economic growth. In countries such as Bolivia, Colombia and Nicaragua, religion is also highly valued.

What is equally remarkable, however, is the fairly clear discrepancy between the values available in the survey and the observations from our study, as well as from other studies conducted among local communities in the Global South. In addition to family and friends, there is a lack of community and values such as security, harmony and connection with others. We are, of course, aware of the importance of the World Value Survey project and know how important it is to leave the questions as unchanged as possible in subsequent years in order to ensure the comparability of the measurements. We are also aware of how difficult it is to capture many important values in a quantitative survey. Today, however, it is becoming increasingly clear that the WVS is largely a survey with and about modern values.

Table 3.3 Responses from a question with an answer list: For each of the following, indicate how important it is in your life. Would you say it is ... (Responses available: Very important, Rather important, Not very important, Not at all important). Below, only the % for “very important” responses are presented

	<i>Family</i>	<i>Friends</i>	<i>Leisure time</i>	<i>Politics</i>	<i>Work</i>	<i>Religion</i>	<i>(N)</i>
Argentina	92	52	33	8	61	24	1,003
Bolivia	81	21	45	15	77	58	2,067
Brazil	85	39	36	17	61	45	1,762
Chile	91	44	60	10	49	21	1,000
Colombia	81	39	55	19	72	58	1,520
Ecuador	87	26	50	17	78	54	1,200
Guatemala	87	39	48	17	61	52	1,229
Mexico	97	37	60	16	80	51	1,741
Nicaragua	78	39	48	19	69	60	1,200
Peru	88	17	36	12	69	45	1,400
Uruguay	91	47	55	16	71	20	1,000
Venezuela	83	36	44	10	65	39	1,190
United States	91	51	40	15	39	37	2,596
Poland	93	41	42	8	59	37	1,358
Great Britain	92	59	48	15	41	16	4,403

Source: Own elaboration based on Haerpfer et al. (2022), World Value Survey. Fieldwork: 2017–2022.

Better life

To capture the ideas behind the word “development” without directly invoking the term, we asked respondents what a “better life” would mean to them or what they need to live better (Spanish: *que necesitas para vivir mejor*). Since development implies change, we sought a neutral expression to capture the idea of “change for the better.”

Banach and Brito Herrera (2021), who discuss *tiichajil* as an approximation of *buen vivir* in the Maya community of Ixil, also refer to the research conducted by Batz (2017, cited in Banach & Brito Herrera 2021) among the Ixil. Batz formulates an interesting conclusion about the meaning of “better life” (*vivir mejor*). According to his study, “better living” is thought to be from different, “consumerist mindset aimed at increasing profit and superficial, individualistic possessions” (Batz, 2017, p. 171 as cited in Banach & Brito Herrera, 2021, p. 55), contrary to *tiichajil*, which “promotes balance within the family, neighbors and community” (Batz, 2017, p. 171 as cited in Banach & Brito Herrera, 2021, p. 55).

The meaning of “better life” is strongly shaped by respondents’ current circumstances and unmet needs. While the conditions for a “good life” are

relatively consistent across countries and generations – typically referring to basic necessities – the understanding of a “better life” varies, especially across national contexts. The conditions for a better life can be categorized as:

- (1) Material improvement of the immediate environment (including better infrastructure or more aesthetically pleasing surroundings);

The road network is of poor quality and generally creates a lot of dirt, a lot of dust in the summer, in the dry season because of the wind, since there is no sidewalk, ... The houses have been flooded with dirt, there is dust in the houses. So we would also need better road infrastructure, we would also need better water infrastructure, because the road was built for a town of, let us say, 100 families. And we have already far exceeded that.

(46-year-old man, Costa Rica)²⁴

- (2) Social improvement encompasses social relations, such as women’s emancipation, a stronger sense of community and social services. These include greater access to higher-quality public services, such as the educational and cultural offerings.

I want to see enterprising women who can develop their professional aspirations. Women have this ability to work for our community.

(49-year-old woman, during workshop, Costa Rica)²⁵

Despite the forward-looking focus, thinking about a better life often led to a longing for lost relationships, values and practices:

To save the tradition of Nicaragua, the dance, the food.

(woman, Nicaragua, during workshop)²⁶

That’s what’s important, let us say, not to lose your own identity, because if you lose your identity, you become one of the others.

(32-year-old man, Costa Rica)²⁷

- (3) More and better employment, economic improvement: These aspirations are closely tied to personal and national: Political, social and economic conditions. In Nicaragua and Honduras, the desire for a better life often overlaps with the need for basic necessities, as these are frequently unmet. Some respondents explicitly expressed a wish for “more development” or “more progress.” More employment and stable income sources are seen as essential for keeping communities together

and reducing forced emigration. In Costa Rica and Panama, emigration typically involves movement to larger cities or other economically dynamic regions, while in Honduras and Nicaragua, it often means migration abroad. Across all sites, employment is viewed as vital for community cohesion (Figure 3.3).

I am 47 years old, and because of my age they do not give me work, but the young people do. But now there are no more jobs, the young people take what they can get. Young people are thinking about emigrating, but there are many who have lost their lives or are in prison because they wanted to go to the United States, or because of delinquency.

(47-year-old woman, Honduras)²⁸

I want more jobs for my community. The mine offers work and brings good money. If there is work and money, other businesses will also do well.

(60-year-old woman, Nicaragua)²⁹

[I want] the migrants to return so that families can be reunited and that the government offers us good working conditions.

(woman, Nicaragua, during a workshop)³⁰



Figure 3.3 The hard work of a young *güiriserero* (an artisanal miner), who crushes stones from which gold is extracted through further chemical processing (La India, Nicaragua).

Author: Katarzyna Dembicz.

[I wish] to give young people a tourism project ... so that they have a job here.

(man, Costa Rica, during workshop)³¹

The quantitative study among the students (Table 3.4) confirms the importance of the economic foundations for a better quality of life.

- (4) Finally, many people cite personal desires and aspirations for a better future, such as furthering their education and acquiring technological skills, developing personally or starting their own business. These goals were most frequently mentioned by younger participants, who tended to focus on individual goals.

Well, I would like to have a business here, but for that you need money and support from others, but for that you also need to gain experience. And I am looking for that experience.

(25-year-old woman, Costa Rica)³²

Older interviewees also expressed such wishes and emphasized the importance of youth in the stories about a better life. They wished for an improvement in the education and technological skills of young people, including their grandchildren and children.

I am fine, now I am thinking of my granddaughter and hope that she will find a place where she can develop herself in the future.

(45-year-old woman, Costa Rica)³³

Table 3.4 Responses from a question with an answer list: What needs to be changed for you and your family to live better?

<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
Better income/better salary	69.3
Employment	42.1
Social security (services of a welfare state)	37.7
Access to education	24.6
Medical service	23.7
Better access to housing	19.3
Access to transportation infrastructure (public)	14.0
Migrate to city	4.4
Have family	4.4
To have friends	2.6
Other thing	7.0
Base (<i>n</i>)	114

Sources: Own elaboration based on 114 responses from students from Central America and Mexico. Fieldwork: September 2022 to June 2024

Improving knowledge in new technologies, because with the generational change with which we collide with, the peripheral communities are losing.

(50-year-old man, CR Cooperativas)³⁴

An attempt at a collective definition of development

Development most often spontaneously emerged as a term and a theme related to expected change and a better life among our interlocutors. The most common associations with development in both the interviews and the surveys were improvement, change, evolution and growth. Survey results (Table 3.5) indicate that economic growth, progress and investment were the predominant associations.

The topic of development was a recurring theme throughout the interviews and offered the participants the opportunity to reflect in depth on its meaning. Very interesting debates arose in the group interviews. Although the participants held different opinions, they tried to listen to all the arguments, both for and against. The results show that development is a concept that encompasses a number of specific elements, the common denominators of which are change and the future:

Table 3.5 Coded responses to an open-ended question: What do you associate the word “development” with?

<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of respondents</i>
Improvement/change/evolution/progress	43.9
Growth/economic growth/production/foreign investment/ expansion/advancement	41.2
Quality of life/well-being/happiness	14
Social/cultural development/integration	9.6
Access/change in public services/housing/more security	9.6
Equality/less poverty/opportunities/human rights	7
Infrastructure/technology	7
Benefits	3.5
Personal success/personal development	3.5
Sustainable/respect for nature	3.5
Better government/political action	1.8
Stability/healthy growth/harmony	1.8
Negative/destruction/critical/something foreign	1.8
Employment	0.9
More money	0.9
Having sufficient resource	0.9
Other	0.9
Base (n)	114

Sources: Own elaboration based on 114 responses from students from Central America and Mexico. Fieldwork: September 2022 to June 2024.

- (1) *Economic and quantitative growth* – including the expansion of manufacturing and service sectors and, above all, employment – was the most frequent spontaneous association with development. This aligns with the tendency for media coverage in the region to frame “development” primarily in economic terms (see Chapter 5).

For me, development means setting up businesses, maquilas, so that people can earn their money with dignity and not to sell drugs. And there is nothing here, you only see bad things.

(47-year-old woman, Honduras)³⁵

- (2) *Qualitative change for the better* – a transformation into something new – tended to arise later in conversations. Many interviewees described development as a process of positive change or evolution.

[Development is] to progress, that it does not stagnate in one thing, well, as if today we sow this seed and tomorrow it must be a tree.

(49-year-old woman, Costa Rica)³⁶

The good life is a state of being and development is a process of change.

(25-year-old woman, Costa Rica)³⁷

- (3) *Infrastructure improvements* – in the place of residence, such as new or modern roads, schools and public works – were frequently cited as tangible indicators of development that make daily life easier and more connected:

The development would be, I repeat, to make sure that [when] strong water recedes and ... one thing is to repair these roads that are there so that there is no more water front here, that is, so that we do not ... That there is no flooding.

(51-year-old man, Costa Rica)³⁸

For me, development is everything positive that has been done for the community. Of what I know, the restoration of the school ..., now there are more modern facilities, so to me that's a great development ... one project that you cannot see yet, is that they are going to pave this whole area ..., it's a project that will develop the community.

(32-year-old man, Costa Rica)³⁹

Now, as far as the municipal authorities are concerned, work is being done, small roads are being paved, projects are being carried out, so that development is noticeable.

(54-year-old man, Honduras)⁴⁰

Development harms the good life. The good life is tranquility and development is infrastructure, growth of urban infrastructure, skyscrapers.

(40-year-old woman in Nicaragua)⁴¹

- (4) *Better living conditions for the community*, as well as equality, cohesion and solidarity, were also highlighted. Both “good life” and “development” were often described as collective aspirations:

From an academic point of view, I understand it as a process of change, a positive change for a country, where structural changes are brought about, not cosmetic changes, that level out inequalities in a society.

(42-year-old man, sociologist, Honduras)⁴²

They never taught us how to fish, they only gave us the fish ... If the people of Santa Cruz become self-determined, know what they have, value it and know how to defend it, this town ... will be an example worldwide. We will pollute with development, but in the best way.

(33-year-old man associated with the Chamber of Tourism, Costa Rica)⁴³

Helping and sharing with others is development. But when we have a lot, we often show no consideration for our neighbor, and that is not development.

(42-year-old man, Honduras)⁴⁴

- (5) *Cultural and civic development* – including community empowerment, local governance and pride in one’s “small” homeland – was associated with bottom-up initiatives and the strengthening of collective identity.

The development of a community should be comprehensive and include social, economic, infrastructural, consumptive and public services. Development should mean that everyone or the majority benefits from it. Development implies the cultural part, the social interaction associated with the goods we need to have the fullness of citizens that we are.

(50-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁴⁵

Now the cavalcade goes to a national level, it was even documented in the news: And the festivities as such, that was also part of the development: the desire to popularize the town to such an extent, to improve it not only in terms of structures, but also in terms of people, and to distinguish itself from other villages.

(21-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁴⁶

Development is infrastructure, roads. A good life is community, it means being together with your loved ones, but also education, knowledge.

(25-year-old woman, Nicaragua)⁴⁷

Overall, among both community residents and students, development was most often rated positively or neutrally (see Table 3.6).

When comparing respondents’ understandings of development, the good life and the better life, we observe both significant overlaps and notable divergences, including some contradictions. Both the good life and development are linked to state or community provisions that ensure security, such as employment, public services and housing. These elements form the foundation of a secure existence and often encompass additional aspects, such as infrastructure that supports daily life and enables opportunities. The relevance of these areas varies according to individual circumstances and national context.

A key distinction between the good life and development emerges in several respects:

- Stability versus dynamism: The good life is typically associated with stability, which is frequently identified as a fundamental prerequisite. In contrast, development implies change, which, while often desirable, is also frequently accompanied by uncertainty.
- Internally versus externally achieved: The good life is generally rooted in family and close relationships, reflecting achievements from within.

Table 3.6 Responses from a question with an answer list: Is development for you a positive or a negative thing?

<i>Responses</i>	<i>% of responses</i>
It's negative	0.9
It's positive	78.1
Neutral	21.1
Base (<i>n</i>)	114

Sources: Own elaboration based on 114 responses from students from Central America and Mexico. Fieldwork: September 2022 to June 2024.

Conversely, development is closely tied to external factors and engagement with the broader world, including interactions with unfamiliar actors such as foreign investors.

- Nature versus economic growth: Among the communities studied, the tension between environmental values and economic growth is particularly salient. Nature is often regarded as an essential component of the good life, an element of identity or an object to long for. In contrast, economic growth is perceived as a potential threat to the environment, a theme that will be further explored in subsequent sections (Figure 3.4).

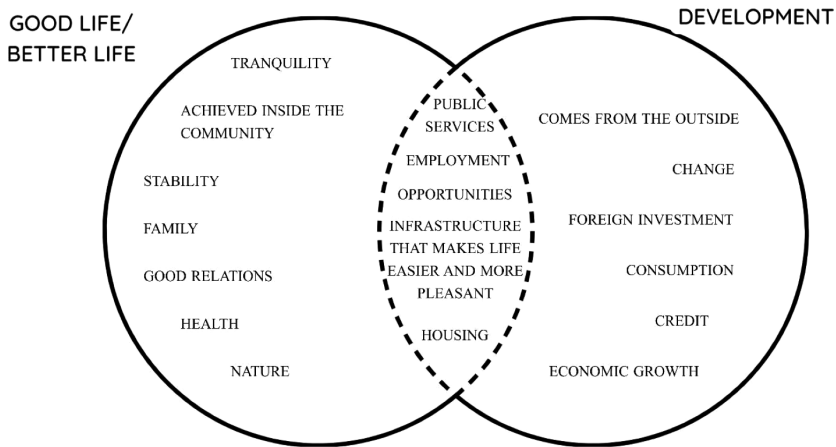


Figure 3.4 Encounters and oppositions between development and the good life.

Sources: Own elaboration.

Approximately one-fifth of the neutral assessments of development in the quantitative study (see Table 3.5) constitute a significant proportion. In extended interviews, residents' attitudes toward development often became more ambivalent and ambiguous. In contrast, respondents from professional and activist groups tended to be predominantly neutral or critical. Across all groups, various dilemmas and a heightened awareness of the risks associated with development emerged. While doubts and concerns were most commonly voiced by experts and activists, they were not exclusive to these groups.

- (6) *Concern for the natural environment* is among the most frequently cited dilemmas in discussions of development. Development and environmental preservation are often viewed as mutually exclusive, with one seen as a trade-off for the other.

Half of the canton is a reserve. This whole part that we as a people have sacrificed [to preserve nature] and we have said “no” to development has cost us a lot, because life here is very hard and that makes people emigrate because of the lack of work.

(33-year-old man associated with the Chamber of Tourism Association, Costa Rica)⁴⁸

I mean, the fact is not that we are obviously 100% natural, because that’s impossible, because of course I chose to have a house, I chose to have clothes, right? I am not going to walk around naked, am I? I need money, I need to go to the bank, I need medication, drugs and so on.

(21-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁴⁹

So, when we accompany the theme of sustainable development, we try to qualify this development with a development that reaches a community to provide it with all the infrastructure it needs, but that does not harm the environment. This is complicated because it will always have an impact on the environment.

(40-year-old woman, activist, expert, Panama)⁵⁰

- (7) *Concern for cultural identity* also accompanies the idea of development. Development is often linked to materialism and consumerism, which are particularly attractive to younger generations. Western lifestyles and values are frequently perceived as more appealing than local traditions and customs. The fear of the disappearance of indigenous and local culture was widespread among interviewees, especially older respondents.

The big problem is that when we are young, we live in the present and leave the past and our roots behind us. Everything that is globalization enables inefficient development and sends us into underdevelopment. And why? Because you copy everything that comes your way and forget your own culture. We have the United States very close to us, and you are copying materialism and mercantilism.

(70-year-old man, folklorist, Costa Rica)⁵¹

I have always imagined a community in which there is development, but a well-thought-out development This is how I imagine my community, with a lot of nature, with people who have a good conscience and

who work together and revive and value customs and traditions. Because differences are wealth.

(40-year-old man, academic, workshop in Nicaragua)⁵²

- (8) *Stigmatization due to a lack of development.* Many people in Central American countries perceive themselves as living in underdeveloped regions, adopting global discourses and internalizing their assigned place within them. This labeling occurs not only between the Global North and South but also within countries. However, many respondents, particularly professionals, are critically aware of this stigmatizing label and express their rejection of it. In this way, they reflect the current trend of critical decolonial thought

The organic law of ZEDE in 2007 and the decisions of the country's executive led to a very strong campaign called "The Hour of the South" They talked about the development of the southern part of the country, in relation to the north of the country, which was considered developed, and the southern part of the country, which was not developed.

(man, activist, Honduras)⁵³

We are poor in development. Nicaragua is a poor country, but it is developing and there is progress.

(60-year-old man, Nicaragua)⁵⁴

People want a change of system, they demand a fairer, more sustainable development Therefore, I believe that development must be discussed from a different perspective and that people have the right to decide and shape their own development No one can justify whether one is developed or not, because prosperity should not be measured by material things, at least not exclusively.

(28-year-old man, social anthropologist, Panama)⁵⁵

These perspectives highlight the frequently noted distinction between external and internal, or endogenous, development – a topic discussed further below.

- (9) *The Source and Nature of Development:* Questions regarding the origin and type of development were central to many interviews: Where does development come from? What kind of development? Development is often perceived as externally imposed action or plan, as reflected in the common phrase "bringing development" (Spanish: *traer desarrollo*).

However, there is also recognition that development should originate from within and be shaped by local communities.

Now development comes from above because money comes from outside, but in reality this is not development, development should come from within.

(35-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁵⁶

I believe that my community ... needs more development. I want them to strive for greater development, to be more outstanding. I want people to have the same opportunities: both those who are here and those who are outside.

(21-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁵⁷

The trade that develops creates benefits for businesses that are not local, they are foreign, there is no lasting benefit for the community.

(45-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁵⁸

A question we asked a child was: What was development for him And he said ... “I would like to continue living here, with the same things that my community has, but I would like to know more so that I can contribute” And sometimes we understand development to mean arriving and making a difference. What is here will not allow them to develop, but the new things that we bring or that they can bring to us, will.

(40-year-old woman, activist, expert, Panama)⁵⁹

A more critical discourse refers to the “selling” of development (Spanish: *vender el desarrollo*), particularly regarding projects related to infrastructure and foreign investment. These initiatives are often promoted as beneficial to communities but frequently result in extremely high, multidimensional costs with little or no benefit to the local society.

I see development as a positive process. But ... reality and vision are two different things, because we do not take into account the costs of this vision They *sell you* prosperity, but what you get is misery. They let people sink into consumerism.

(51-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁶⁰

The road construction projects in the Comarca *are sold* as development for the Comarca and benefits for the Ngäbe people. But when you look

at it from the outside, you realize that these projects are just connecting roads for mining and tourism projects in the Caribbean.

(40-year-old man, sociologist, Panama)⁶¹

The form of development that is “brought” or “sold” to communities – often in the guise of infrastructure or externally driven projects – frequently conflicts with local cultural values. As one engineer from Panama observed, such projects are unlikely to succeed when imposed from outside, as they are neither adopted nor adoptable by the community:

This is the big problem that exists at the moment and is not understood: that development projects must be borne by local communities from the cradle that receives them. Because if not, it does not live.

(50-year-old man, expert, engineer, Panama)⁶²

A more critical perspective, especially prevalent among experts and activists, frames development as an instrument of domination by Global North countries and foreign capital over Central American communities:

I believe that the Central American countries have many alternatives to develop with or without the support of the big countries. And now they are doing it in a way to come here and have economic and military power. But that restricts the societies here and the poor, ignorant, uneducated people pay for it ... I am not against development, I am against domination through development.

(70-year-old man, folklorist, Costa Rica)⁶³

This study has explored diverse understandings of development, highlighting its characteristics, actors and objectives. Recognizing the importance of these perspectives is essential for understanding development as a social phenomenon. Our project aims to synthesize these varied visions, making both their similarities and differences visible. Although a standardized, collective definition of development may contradict the premise of our project, which is that it should be constantly discussed and negotiated, we wish to propose a general definition that reflects the broad range of voices of respondents in our study.

Drawing on recurring themes and terminology used by our interlocutors – representatives of local Central American communities – development can be defined as a phenomenon associated with change, encompassing both quantitative (more) and qualitative (new, better) processes oriented toward the future. It spans multiple domains of human life, yielding positive outcomes but also involving risks. Economic change is central, with foreign investment, public services, employment and new opportunities frequently cited alongside expectations of economic growth. Development may originate within a

community or be externally initiated, linking it to questions of power and agency in determining its form and benefits.

This general definition echoes Myrdal's conceptualization from the 1970s:

By development I mean the movement upward of the entire social system, and I believe this is the only logically tenable definition. This social system encloses, besides the so-called economic factors, all noneconomic factors, including all sorts of consumption by various groups of people; consumption provided collectively; educational and health facilities and levels; the distribution of power in society; and more generally economic, social, and political stratification; broadly speaking, institutions and attitudes – to which we must add as an exogenous set of factors induced policy measures applied in order to change one or several of these endogenous factors.

(Myrdal, 1974, pp. 729–730)

Such an approach makes the definition ambiguous, but at the same time offers more room for interpretation, in which the community becomes visible as the subject of development. Expanding the definition to encompass additional voices incorporates values such as community, solidarity, harmony, health, equality, self-governance and the significance of geographical space and nature. Such an integral approach challenges the prevailing paradigm of modernity in two ways: Epistemologically, by overcoming the dominance of modern science and embracing diverse forms of knowledge; and sociopolitically, by shifting focus from global capitalism to new forms of social organization, such as social movements and solidarity networks (Santos, 2002).

This “collective” and pluralist vision of development rejects the interpretation of development coming from Eurocentric or Western culture and aligns with the concepts proposed by Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara (2016) in *Transmodernidad y transdesarrollo*:

Thus, we can define transdevelopment as the prosperity paradigm associated with transmodernity, which seeks to satisfy the material and immaterial needs of society through a participatory process in which the principles of social justice and environmental sustainability are used to decide what these needs are and what means should be used to satisfy them. This participatory process implies that each community can determine the importance of its own well-being, which need not be identical to that of another community, although it must respect these principles.

(Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2016, p. 126)

Transdevelopment can be articulated at local, regional, national and international levels, all of which acknowledge the globalized reality shaped by social

interdependencies facilitated by modern communication technologies that transcend national borders. Unlike the post-development individual, who is critical, transdevelopment emphasizes solidarity and environmental awareness. Gender roles are fluid and not confined to traditional community roles; both men and women are recognized as contributors to social and environmental harmony. This vision of development cannot be realized if political and economic power remains unbalanced and if development is externally imposed (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2016) – a condition evident in Central America, where development unfolds under the shadow of foreign investment and megaprojects.

Megaprojects in people's lives

Megaprojects epitomize externally imposed development. They are foreign to local communities and often embody values conflicting with indigenous and local traditions. Nearly all interviewees acknowledged that megaprojects entail costs that must be borne. However, perceptions diverge sharply regarding the balance of benefits and losses resulting from megaprojects. Economic gains and infrastructure improvements are often cited as benefits, while environmental degradation and loss of territory are viewed as significant costs.

Building a canal would be good because it would attract a lot of tourist traffic, for example cruise ships. The disadvantage of the canal? There would be less fish, and the wrong species of fish would come into the country. But all in all, the benefits would far outweigh the losses, because we would have tourists making pilgrimages here.

(35-year-old man, Nicaragua)⁶⁴

The canal, according to national policy ... cannot stop working in a drought, I take this to mean that people die while the ships pass. It is water for the canal.

(40-year-old man, sociologist, Panama)⁶⁵

Well, they will build roads, they will build some schools, in the capital of the Ngäbe Comarca and so on. So in terms of infrastructure, they envisioned the development of the Comarca. Well, in terms of “loosing” the river anyway, I think they were going to put it there anyway, if we lose it, we are going to gain something. But the loss has occurred, the loss of several things, not only the ecological loss of the river, the loss of credibility in the strength of the people, not the leadership that many had ... they have also lost a little of the unity that they showed.

(40-year-old woman, activist, expert,
Panama)⁶⁶

But beyond that, some actors benefit from the advantages, while others bear the costs. Megaprojects are therefore associated with conflicts that often lead to division within the affected communities. One such internal conflict became particularly clear in the case of the La India gold mine in Nicaragua, where the community was split:

When the company emerged, *people were divided*: half were in favor, the other half against.

(60-year-old woman, Nicaragua)⁶⁷

In Honduras, regarding tourist megaprojects, such voices could be heard:

The Garifuna people are fundamental *in this battle*, for we are united in the fight, even if we have many internal disagreements.

(woman, activist, Honduras)⁶⁸

Or such as the one below, regarding the construction of the Barro Blanco hydroelectric plant in Panama:

In fact, there was some kind of negotiation, of agreement between the parties. But *the conflict is very complex*, with many parts that feed on the same complexity, not only of the land, but also of the indigenous people, but also at the internal level of the Ngäbe people.

(40-year-old man, sociologist, Panama)⁶⁹

Megaprojects exacerbate conflicts within communities and between social classes, ethnic groups, local communities, political authorities and investors. Chapter 4 in this book addresses these conflicts.

Decisions to establish megaprojects are typically top-down, with minimal local community involvement, underscoring power imbalances and local powerlessness. Consultations generally serve to promote the project and its promises, especially those of development. Once a megaproject has been approved, the local population has little or no opportunity to oppose it. Opponents of megaprojects have to reckon with legal tricks, strategies aimed at breaking community cohesion and the violent suppression of protests. This widespread awareness that there are limited options for resistance goes beyond experts and activists. Moreover, investors often present comprehensive investment plans that include socially important infrastructure to fill gaps left by the state.

These projects are programmed by the government with the aim of development, without the participation of the communities, the people in these communities. And the people perceive this as a threat because they are to be driven off their land. And for a farmer, his land is the most important thing. And the proposal for a mega project without prior consultation

usually comes during the election period, and they are offered a school, a health center or a road in exchange for accepting the project.

(60-year-old man, activist, Panama)⁷⁰

This brings with it a series of conflicts. There are areas that are completely militarized and that the community is not allowed to enter, even though they are on their territory.

(woman, activist, Honduras)⁷¹

If the private company files a complaint with the state institutions because the municipalities are preventing them from developing their business, the state immediately militarizes the area, but if the municipalities file a complaint about investor abuse against the municipalities, there is no response.

(35-year-old man, expert, Honduras)⁷²

I think that Barro Blanco was a symbolic process for our country ... it is an example of how fragmentation or division can arise when a government is able to get leaders to think in such a way that it is better to lose something and gain something than to lose everything. I think that was the point at which they started to split.

(40-year-old woman, activist, expert,
Panama)⁷³

Not all megaprojects provoke the same level of protest or conflict. For example, the Reventazón hydroelectric plant in Costa Rica was built with relative “silence,” while Panama’s Barro Blanco project became a focal point of multilevel conflict. Among the gold mines studied in Nicaragua, La Libertad is less controversial than La India. Similarly, tourism projects in Tela, Honduras, generate more acute conflict than those in Costa Rica, including Guanacaste, although Costa Ricans also express strong criticism of tourism development in this region.

Details of some of these conflicts can be found in Chapter 5, which analyzes the content of information on these investments. In summary, the conflicts associated with megaprojects are particularly pronounced when:

- Communities are highly dependent on the investment due to weak or absent state institutions;
- There are open and blatant violations of democratic principles and equality before the law;
- The distribution of benefits from the megaproject is clearly unequal.

Tourism represents a unique form of investment, capable of taking both large-scale, externally driven forms and more sustainable, community-based models,

benefiting communities and families. On Honduras's Caribbean coast near Bahia de Tela (Tela Bay), large-scale projects have led to fear of displacement and disappointment over the limited number of jobs and benefits for local communities. Nevertheless, many residents continue to hope that tourism will bring jobs and income.

If tourism is attractive for people to visit our communities, we wonder why they do not support us? A more environmentally friendly tourism that is more community based and does not bring huge complexes to our communities. I imagine the tourist would like to stay in a traditional hut (a bit cheaper) and eat what we eat and produce. This is the real tourism that we can develop in our communities, a tourism that is more in harmony with nature, with the coexistence that we have as Garifunas with nature. But she, a minister, said that her dream is for Honduras to become a Cancún. That means destroying everything and getting the communities to go to the mountains and observe the development of this process from there. For the municipality, the Garifuna communities are the obstacle to development.

(37-year-old man, activist, Honduras)⁷⁴

Thanks to tourism! We clean the beaches, we produce the food, we take care of the people who come to us because we eat from them.

(50-year-old man, Honduras)⁷⁵

Tourism has developed here, there is more investment. Before, the city was underdeveloped, but tourism has given it the right touch, so it has developed in terms of food, drink and, as you say, investment.

(30-year-old man, Honduras)⁷⁶

The second type of investment, community-based and aiming at benefiting communities and families, is developing in the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica (albeit also alongside large foreign tourist parks). In Costa Rica's Guanacaste region, tourism – including agrotourism – is widely viewed as a desirable, community-controlled activity with moderate environmental impact, where benefits remain local and development can be transformed into improved quality of life. However, the Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the sector's vulnerability to external crises.

The change lies in education, expanding knowledge and developing knowledge of tourism, learning English – hotel management, tour guides and 80% of the staff hired should be from Cruz.

(33-year-old man associated in the Chamber of Tourism Association, Costa Rica)⁷⁷

Researcher: And you have nothing against the growth of tourism?

Interviewee: No, because it is a means of survival for people.

(49-year-old woman, Costa Rica)⁷⁸

Tourism brings good investment, job creation for many people, so I say we must not demonize it, because it is not all bad. However, I believe that the pandemic must teach us a very important lesson at this moment, namely what happens when tourism stagnates.

(49-year-old woman, academic, expert, Costa Rica)⁷⁹

Notes

- 1 Please note that the survey was conducted among owners of a landline or cell-phone, so data on penetration must be treated with caution (World Bank Group & UNDP 2022).
- 2 Original quote: “Entonces, fíjate que ahora el poder de las redes sociales es tan fuerte que muchas personas que las utilizan no se dan cuenta. Pero ya la gente está cambiando. La gente se promulga mucho a través de Facebook, de medios como Twitter, y eso permite que más personas lo vean. Entonces, el hecho de retuitear algo o darle ‘me gusta’ a un comentario acerca de ‘X’ [una persona] o la situación que está pasando le aporta mucho. Todo eso, las redes sociales están para eso, para la opinión pública y para saber qué es lo que usted piensa como persona acerca de ‘X’ o un tema.”
- 3 Original quote: “Las radio jugaron un papel muy importante en las luchas comunitarias La radio comunitaria son informadoras en nuestro lenguaje y bajo la convicción de nuestras organizaciones y comunidades. Se recibe información en la propia lengua y cosmovisión.”
- 4 Many of these community radio stations are unlicensed, but those run by Catholic religious orders (for example, the Jesuits) require permission from the church authorities, and in times of social conflict, the church prefers to suspend the radio operations. For more information, please consult: Red Centroamericana de Radios Comunitarias Indígenas <https://redradiosindigenas.org/>.
- 5 Original quote: “Investigadora: Para informarte que medios utilizas? Interlocutora: Creo que más las redes sociales y la comunicación entre personas con las que trabajas, poco la televisión.”
- 6 Original quote: “Redes sociales principalmente. Y cuando es una cuestión mas preocupante, urgente, hacemos una asamblea comunitaria donde se invita a todos los miembros de la comunidad, para que lleguen, informen. Televisión y radio es para entretenimiento no para informarse.”
- 7 Original quote: “Yo pienso que, que ahora la mayoría de los jóvenes no tienen algo como un objetivo, tal vez por falta de motivación, por apoyo, tienen diferentes ideas, tal vez no tan definidas, pero no tienen un objetivo o una meta.”
- 8 Original quote: “La mayoría piensa de forma muy material, a los chicos les gustan carros de lujo, no en ayudar a su familia y su pueblo.”
- 9 Original quote: “La buena vida para algunos es la tranquilidad, para otros es solamente la naturaleza, otros lo económico, el tener.”
- 10 Original quote: “Tener salud, tener alimentos, tener lo básico para vivir y lo que se necesita para vivir de día a día.”
- 11 Original quote: “Pero cuando ya lo tuviste y viviste en un campo donde no había delincuencia, donde vivías con las puertas y ventanas abiertas, donde el agua era pura, el aire era puro. Ese es buen vivir y cuando lo tuviste, lo añoras.”

- 12 Original quote: “Vivir bien es tener lo esencial, tener para comer, tener tu casa, tener un trabajo, tener el ambiente y la libertad de poder salir y respirar aire puro. No se trata de tener muchas cosas, sino de tener lo esencial para sentirte bien.”
- 13 Original quote: “Y los hijos se van porque afuera tienen trabajo. Quisiera que se quedaran aquí en el pueblo.”
- 14 Original quote: “Hubo muchas inversiones a corto plazo que no miran al futuro, inversiones extranjeras que con la crisis dejan a las personas sin trabajo.”
- 15 Original quote: “Entonces por esa razón el impacto ha sido más negativo en ese sentido, igual con los hoteles que se han construido aquí en la comunidad. Grandes edificios, para mí y para los miembros de la comunidad no hay fuentes del trabajo, son muy pocos los que trabajan ahí.”
- 16 Original quote: “Una vida buena ... de ahí supongo que estabilidad económica, seguridad, acceso a los servicios básicos, agua, electricidad y el Internet, antes no lo consideraba básico, pero esto es parte de la vida de ahora.”
- 17 Original quote: “La comunidad se destruye por el oro y por la inmigración que se da. La gente que llega vive en las montañas y se ocupa de la minería artesanal. Tal vez buena vida es seguridad. Y el problema es la identidad que se pierde y solidaridad que se pierde. El oro atrae a la gente pero también empuja a la gente a salir del pueblo, porque acá no tienen futuro.”
- 18 Original quote: “Hay más policías, nos lo venden como un aumento de la seguridad. Pero en realidad uno no siente seguridad, siente temor.”
- 19 Original quote: “[la vida buena] Es buscar la felicidad, la realización personal. Este implica el equilibrio del bienestar propio y el de la sociedad.”
- 20 Original quote: “Investigador: Apuesta usted por una buena vida? Interlocutor: Sí, para estar tranquilo. No para que yo esté bien y el vecino mal.”
- 21 Original quote: “El medioambiente es tan presente diariamente que no lo mencionamos.”
- 22 Original quote: “La buena vida es satisfacer las necesidades personales, lo que ahora significa poder viajar, porque ya tengo casa y carro.”
- 23 Original quote: “No hay un decálogo del vivir bien o el buen vivir. Todo intento de definirlo de manera absoluta asfixia esta propuesta en construcción. Lo que podemos hacer es aproximarnos a su esencia” (Solón, 2017, p. 17 as cited in: Montano Morales, 2025, p. 166)
- 24 Original quote: “La red vial es de mala calidad y, por lo general, esto genera mucha tierra, mucho polvo en el verano, en la época seca por el viento, al no haber pavimento, (...). Las casas se han inundado de tierra, hay polvo en las casas. Entonces ocuparíamos una mejor infraestructura vial, también ocuparíamos una mejor infraestructura, también de agua, porque la calle estaba hecha para un pueblo de, digamos, de 100 familias. Y ya lo superamos muchísimo.”
- 25 Original quote: “Deseo ver mujeres emprendedoras, que puedan desarrollar sus deseos profesionales. Las mujeres tenemos esta capacidad de trabajar para nuestra comunidad.”
- 26 Original quote: “Que se rescate la tradición de Nicaragua, la danza, la comida.”
- 27 Original quote: “Es eso lo importante, digamos, no perder la identidad, porque donde uno pierde la identidad, ya se vuelve uno más de los demás.”
- 28 Original quote: “Yo tengo 47 años, y a mí ya por edad no me dan trabajo, pero a los jóvenes sí. Pero ahora no hay trabajo, los jóvenes agarran lo que sea. Los jóvenes piensan en salir, pero hay muchos que perdieron la vida o están en la cárcel, porque querían salir a Estados Unidos, o por delincuencia.”
- 29 Original quote: “Me gustaría tener más empleos para mi comunidad, la mina da trabajo y se gana buen dinero. Cuando hay trabajo y dinero, a otros negocios también les va bien.”

- 30 Original quote: “[Quiero] Que los migrantes regresen para que las familias se unan, y que el gobierno nos de buenas condiciones de trabajo.”
- 31 Original quote: “[Deseo] Dejar a los jóvenes un proyecto de turismo ... para que tengan trabajo acá mismo.”
- 32 Original quote: “Bueno, a mí me gustaría tener un negocio acá, pero para eso uno necesita dinero y tener apoyo de otros, pero para eso necesita también adquirir experiencia. Y estoy buscando esta experiencia.”
- 33 Original quote: “Yo estoy bien, ahora pienso en mi nieta y espero que encuentre en un futuro un lugar donde se pueda desarrollar.”
- 34 Original quote: “Mejora de conocimiento en nuevas tecnologías, porque con el cambio generacional con el cual chocamos, las comunidades periféricas pierden.”
- 35 Original quote: “Para mí, desarrollo es que se pongan empresas, maquila, para que la gente pueda ganar su dinero dignamente y no que se ponga a vender drogas. Y aquí no hay nada, ves solo cosas malas.”
- 36 Original quote: “[Desarrollo es] que avance, que no se estanque en una sola cosa, pues sí, como si hoy se siembra esta semilla ya mañana tiene que ser un arbolito.”
- 37 Original quote: “La buena vida es un estado de ser y el desarrollo es un proceso de cambio.”
- 38 Original quote: “El desarrollo sería, vuelvo y lo repito, ver que [cuando] caigan aguas fuertes y ... una cosa de que arreglen esos caminos que estén, que aquí no haya mayor frente de agua, o sea que no tengamos que ... Que no haya inundaciones.”
- 39 Original quote: “Para mí el desarrollo ha sido todo lo positivo que se ha hecho por la comunidad. Qué se yo, la restauración de la escuela, (...). Ahora se hicieron instalaciones más modernas, entonces eso para mí es un gran desarrollo. (...) Un proyecto que todavía no se puede ver, es que van a pavimentar todo este sector ..., es un proyecto que va a desarrollar a la comunidad.”
- 40 Original quote: “Bueno, en cuanto a los gobiernos municipales se hacen obras, pavimentación de calles pequeñas, proyectos, entonces se nota el desarrollo.”
- 41 Original quote: “El desarrollo perjudica la buena vida. La buena vida es tranquilidad y el desarrollo es infraestructura, crecimiento de la infraestructura urbana, edificios altos.”
- 42 Original quote: “Yo lo entiendo desde una perspectiva académica, como un proceso de cambio, cambio positivo para un país, en el cual se van generando cambios estructurales, no cosméticos, que van nivelando las desigualdades en una sociedad.”
- 43 Original quote: “Nunca nos han enseñado a pescar, solo nos daban el pescado. (...) Si el cruceño se empodera de la Cruz, sabe lo que tiene, lo valora y sabe defender lo que tiene, este pueblo ... será un ejemplo a nivel mundial. Vamos a contaminar con el desarrollo, pero de la mejor manera.”
- 44 Original quote: “Ayudar compartir con las demás personas eso es desarrollo. Pero muchas veces cuando tenemos mucho no tomamos en cuenta al prójimo, y eso no es desarrollo.”
- 45 Original quote: “El desarrollo para una comunidad debería ser algo integral, incluyendo lo social, lo económico, la infraestructura, consumo, servicios públicos. El desarrollo debería implicar que se beneficien todos o la mayoría. El desarrollo implica la parte cultural, de interacción social, todo amarrado con los bienes que disponemos para tener una plenitud de ciudadanos que somos.”
- 46 Original quote: “Ahora la cabalgata trasciende a nivel nacional, inclusive ya se ha documentado en noticieros: (...) Y las fiestas como tal, eso también ha sido parte del desarrollo: el querer popularizar el pueblo hasta tal punto, de poder mejorarlo no solo en estructuras, sino en las personas y querer sobresalir, ante otros pueblos.”
- 47 Original quote: “El desarrollo es infraestructura, caminos. Buena vida es la comunidad, significa estar con los suyos, pero también educación, conocimiento.”

- 48 Original quote: “La mitad del cantón es reserva. Toda esta parte que hemos sacrificado como pueblo [de preservar la naturaleza] y le hemos dicho ‘no’ al desarrollo, nos ha costado mucho, hizo que la vida acá sea muy dura y esto hace que la gente emigre por la falta de trabajo.”
- 49 Original quote: “O sea, el hecho no está en que nosotros obviamente seamos 100% naturales, porque es imposible, porque obviamente yo fui por una casa, yo fui por ropa, ¿verdad? No voy a andar al desnudo, ¿verdad? Ocupo dinero, ocupo ir al banco, ocupo medicinas, medicamentos y ese tipo de cosas.”
- 50 Original quote: “Entonces, cuando acompañamos el tema de desarrollo sostenible, le tratamos de ir calificando ese desarrollo con que sea un desarrollo que se llegue a una comunidad a llevarle toda esta infraestructura que se requiere, pero que no afecte al medioambiente. Es complicado porque siempre va a afectar al medioambiente.”
- 51 Original quote: “El gran problema es que cuando somos jóvenes vivimos el presente y dejamos el pasado y nuestras raíces. Todo lo que es la globalización permite un desarrollo ineficaz y manda al subdesarrollo. ¿Por qué? Porque vas a copiar todo lo que te viene y olvidarte de tu propia cultura. Nosotros tenemos muy cerca a Estados Unidos, y copias el materialismo y mercantilismo.”
- 52 Original quote: “Yo siempre me he imaginado una comunidad donde haya desarrollo, pero un desarrollo bien diseñado. (...) Entonces me imagino mi comunidad con mucha naturaleza, gente con una conciencia grande y que trabaje conjuntamente y que recupere las costumbres y tradiciones y las valore. Porque las diferencias son la riqueza.”
- 53 Original quote: “La Ley Orgánica de la ZEDE en el 2007, y las decisiones del poder ejecutivo del país generan una campaña muy fuerte que se la denomina ‘La hora del sur’. Se generó una campaña bastante mediática. (...) Hablaban del desarrollo de la zona sur del país, en referencia al norte del país que era considerado como desarrollado y la zona sur no.”
- 54 Original quote: “Somos pobres en desarrollo. Nicaragua es un país pobre, pero se está desarrollando y hay avances.”
- 55 Original quote: “La gente quiere un cambio de sistema, demanda que quiere un desarrollo más justo, sostenible. (...) Entonces, yo creo que el desarrollo tiene que ser debatido desde otra óptica, y los pueblos tienen derecho a decidir sobre su propio desarrollo, y construirlo ellos. (...) Nadie puede juzgar si uno es desarrollado o no, porque la riqueza no se debería medir por lo material, al menos no exclusivamente.”
- 56 Original quote: “Ahora el desarrollo viene desde arriba porque viene el dinero desde afuera, pero en realidad esto no es desarrollo, el desarrollo debería generarse desde adentro.”
- 57 Original quote: “Yo creo que mi comunidad ... necesita más desarrollo. Quiero que ellos lo que busquen es el mayor desarrollo, ser más sobresalientes. Que las personas tengan las mismas oportunidades: tanto los que están ahí como los que están afuera.”
- 58 Original quote: “El comercio que se desarrolla crea beneficio para empresas que no son locales, son extranjeras, no hay un beneficio duradero para la comunidad.”
- 59 Original quote: “Una pregunta que le hicimos a un niño era: que era para él el desarrollo Y él decía ... ‘Yo quisiera seguir viviendo acá, con las mismas cosas que tiene mi comunidad, pero yo sabiendo más para poder aportar.’ (...) Y el desarrollo a veces lo entendemos como que es llegar y hacer cambio. Esto que está acá no le va a permitir desarrollarse, sino que lo nuevo que traemos nosotros sí, o que nos puedan traer.”
- 60 Original quote: “El desarrollo lo veo como un proceso positivo. Pero ... la realidad y la visión son dos cosas diferentes, porque no tomamos en cuenta los costos de esta

visión. (...) Te *venden* el bienestar pero lo que obtienes es miseria. Tienen la gente sumida al consumismo.”

- 61 Original quote: “Se *venden* los proyectos carreteros en la comarca como de desarrollo para la comarca y beneficios para el pueblo Ngäbe. Pero si uno lo puede ver desde fuera, intuye que estos proyectos [de carretera] son simplemente carreteras de comunicación para los proyectos de explotación minera, turismo, en el área del Caribe.”
- 62 Original quote: “Es el gran problema que existe en ese momento que no se entiende: que los proyectos del desarrollo tienen que ser posesionados por la cuna que lo acoge, por las comunidades locales. Porque, si no, no vive.”
- 63 Original quote: “Creo que los países centroamericanos tienen muchas alternativas para desarrollarse con el apoyo o sin de los países grandes. Y ahora lo hacen de una forma para meterse acá para tener poder económico y militar. Pero eso limita a las sociedades de acá y lo paga la gente pobre, ignorante, sin educación. (...) Yo no estoy en contra del desarrollo, estoy en contra de la dominación que se da por medio del desarrollo.”
- 64 Original quote: “La construcción de un canal sería buena porque atraería mucho tráfico de turistas, por ejemplo de cruceros. ¿El lado malo del canal? Habría menos peces, entrarían especies de peces equivocadas. Pero en general, los beneficios superarían con creces las pérdidas, tendríamos peregrinaciones turísticas aquí.”
- 65 Original quote: “El canal no puede dejar de funcionar según la política nacional ..., en una circunstancia de sequía, entiendo eso como que se muera la gente mientras los barcos pasan. Es agua para el canal.”
- 66 Original quote: “Bueno, van a construir carreteras, van a construir algunos colegios, en la ciudad capital de la Comarca Ngäbe, etcétera. Entonces, en términos de infraestructura estuvieron visualizando el traer desarrollo a la comarca. En términos de ‘bueno vamos a perder el río’ de todas maneras, porque yo creo que era que lo iban a poner de todas maneras. Si lo vamos a perder de todas maneras, vamos a ganar algo. Pero la pérdida se dio, pérdida de varias cosas: no solamente la pérdida ecológica del río, la pérdida de la credibilidad en la fortaleza del pueblo, no de la del liderazgo que muchos tenían También se perdió un poco la unidad que mostraban.”
- 67 Original quote: “Cuando apareció la empresa, la gente estaba dividida: la mitad estaba a favor y la otra mitad en contra.”
- 68 Original quote: “El pueblo Garífuna en esta lucha es fundamental, porque somos unidos en lucha, aunque tenemos muchos desacuerdos internos.”
- 69 Original quote: “En efecto, hubo algún tipo de negociación, de acuerdos entre partes. Pero el conflicto es muy complejo, con muchas partes que se alimentan de la complejidad misma, no solo del país pero respecto a la comarca de los indígenas, sino es lo mismo al nivel interno del pueblo Ngäbe.”
- 70 Original quote: “Estos proyectos se programa desde el gobierno con el objetivo de desarrollo, sin la participación de las comunidades, de la gente de estas comunidades. Y la gente percibe esto como una amenaza porque serán desalojados de sus tierras. Y para un campesino lo más importante es la tierra. Y la propuesta del megaproyecto sin consulta previa, viene normalmente en período electoral, y se les ofrece a cambio una escuela, construir centro de salud o carretera para que acepten el proyecto.”
- 71 Original quote: “Esto trae una serie de conflictividad y hay zonas que estan completamente militarizadas que la comunidad no puede entrar aunque estan dentro del territorio de la comunidad.”
- 72 Original quote: “Cuando la empresa privada pone una demanda ante las instituciones estatales porque las comunidades le impiden desarrollar su negocio el Estado inmediatamente militariza la zona, pero cuando las comunidades ponen una

- demanda sobre el abuso de los inversionistas sobre las comunidades, entonces no hay respuesta.”
- 73 Original quote: “Yo siento que Barro Blanco ha sido un proceso simbólico para nuestro país ... es un ejemplo de que la fragmentación o las divisiones se pueden generar cuando hay la habilidad de un gobierno de llevar a los líderes a pensar en términos de que es mejor perder algo y ganar algo que perderlo todo. Creo que por ahí fue un poco la cuestión en la que se empezaron a dividir.”
- 74 Original quote: “¿Si el turismo es atractivo para que venga la gente a turistar dentro de nuestras comunidades, entonces nos preguntamos por qué no nos apoyan en eso? Un turismo más ambiental, más comunitario, y no traer grandes complejos dentro de nuestras comunidades. Me imagino que al turista le gustaría estar alojado en una cabaña tradicional (un poco más económico) y comer lo que nosotros comemos y producimos. Ese es el verdadero turismo que podemos desarrollar dentro de nuestras comunidades, un turismo más compenetrado a la naturaleza, a la convivencia que nosotros como Garífunas tenemos con la naturaleza. Sin embargo, ellos, una señora ministra, dijo que su sueño era ver Honduras hecho un Cancún. Eso significa destruir todo y hacer que las comunidades vayan a las montañas y desde allí vean el desarrollo de este proceso. Para el municipio, las comunidades Garífuna son el obstáculo para el desarrollo.”
- 75 Original quote: “¡Gracias al turismo! Nosotros limpiamos las playas, hacemos la comida, cuidamos la gente que nos viene a visitar porque nosotros comemos de ellos.”
- 76 Original quote: “Aquí el turismo se ha desarrollado, hay más inversiones. Antes estaba bajo el desarrollo, pero el turismo le ha dado el toque, entonces se ha desarrollado lo que es en comida, bebida y, como dice usted, en inversión.”
- 77 Original quote: “El cambio está en la educación, aumentar el conocimiento y desarrollar conocimiento sobre turismo, aprender inglés – administración de hoteles, guías turísticos, y el 80% del personal contratado debería ser cruceño.”
- 78 Original quote: “Investigadora: ¿Y no les molesta que crezca el turismo a ustedes? Interlocutora: No, porque ese es un medio para que las personas también puedan sobrevivir.”
- 79 Original quote: “El turismo trae buenas inversiones, la generación de empleo para mucha gente, por eso digo no podemos satanizarlo porque no es del todo malo. Sin embargo, creo que la pandemia nos tiene que dar una lección importantísima en este momento y es qué pasó cuando el turismo se vio estancado.”

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4 Development

The invisible frontiers of (mis)understanding

So far, the focus has been on exploring the experiences and stories of Central American communities directly or indirectly confronted with the impacts of large infrastructure projects. The results show how development is understood in these communities and what needs and visions for the future they express. Our analysis identifies clear divisions and competing, opposing visions of the world. These can lead to polarization and sometimes even conflict.

These divides stem from the dilemmas surrounding the development paths to be chosen and the counterparts involved. In our reflections on these situations, we have assumed that there are invisible “boundaries” between different ideas and visions that hinder communication and dialogue in conflict situations around an economic investment, such as a megaproject or development scenarios. As MacLeod reminded (1996, p. 92), “Heidegger once said that boundaries are not places at which something stops, but places from which something else begins.” We will now describe the spaces that emerge in the dialectic of knowledge based on the collected local narratives. Delineating these spaces will help us recognize the mental boundaries that are culturally, economically and socially conditioned. Such an approach is driven by the observation that:

- There is a growing need to incorporate the ideas and perceptions of social actors from different sectors in the study of development, good living and megaprojects.
- In an inhabited and demarcated territory, there are blurred boundaries resulting from the dissimilarities between different social groups, the local population and the external actors (with their norms and values) that try to act in the area and influence the local population. The lack of knowledge and misunderstanding between the two groups that identify themselves as “us” and “them” leads to mistrust, different emotional positions and hostility, and to the drawing of a geography of rejection (Massey & Jess, 1995, p. 67).
- Social interaction within a demarcated territory gives individuals a sense of familiarity, security and identity. Therefore, borders not only separate different territories but also different socialization systems, identities and

nations. These latter elements are created by collective ideas (Bauman, 1990; Rizo García & Romeu Aldaya, 2006, 2009).

We therefore pose the following questions:

- What issues hinder the dialogue on development (or are the subject of misunderstandings) and make it difficult to reach a social agreement or pact?
- Are there premises that can form a common denominator in resolving conflicts over development directions and policies?
- Can certain issues and convictions related to development be assigned to specific social groups?

Before answering these questions, we would like to clarify some concepts and terms used and emphasize that the complexity of the analytical process must involve interdisciplinarity and pluralism of thought.

The megaprojects in Central America are enclaves that emphasize territorial, economic, social, cultural and ethno-national differences and create physical barriers that separate the territory belonging to the investment from the outside world. The Panama Canal was an example of this in the past and still is today. Until the end of the 20th century, it was a US enclave in Panama. It not only divided the physical space but also created social differences between *Zoneitas* and Panamanians, as well as economic, political and psychological divisions. Today, the canal is an economic zone that influences territorial inequalities in the country's economic development. Currently, it is the character of special economic zones, which include logistics centers, processing plants and also airports, hydroelectric power plants and their reservoirs or hotel complexes, that deny unauthorized outsiders access to the territory they occupy. While access restrictions are sometimes justified for security reasons or in protected areas of special natural value, this is not the case for public spaces such as coastal areas, beaches, mangroves, rivers or lakes. Here, the only criterion is often social and economic status. Such investments in geographic space can deepen divisions by pitting existing positions against each other, leading to various forms of apartheid, such as class-based, ethnic or ecological-based apartheid. At the same time, they highlight and exacerbate inequalities in the understanding of development.

Both concepts – that of the megaproject and that of development – contain two important variables for defining the boundary: Space and the process of social and economic change. Within the second factor, time plays an important role, and people often visualize it as the present, past and future. As Nandy (Nandy & Sengupta, 2012; Nandy, 2002) emphasizes, the linear construction of time that Western thought imposes limits our thinking about possible alternatives in the past and the future. Nandy and Sengupta (2012) criticize the way in which official history distorts or ignores the experiences and narratives of certain non-Western groups and cultures (they propose the notion of open pasts) and highlight that the present is a time for critique and reflection. They

argue that the present must be used to question and challenge the dominant structures and narratives inherited from the past, and the present cannot limit the imagination of alternatives and possibilities for the future (they propose the notion of plural futures). These plural futures are shaped, among other things, by elements of cultures that create their own spaces. These can be physical, social or imaginary (Nandy & Sengupta, 2012). Although we live in an era of globalization and world trade, the notion of space prevails at the micro level, which can be reduced to the following sentence: I and my surroundings (including neighbors) and the relationship to it.

In the social construction of space, identity and the connection with our surroundings are the most important elements. Social identity is constructed in distinction to the Other, and the attitude toward the Other may be of a different nature: Curiosity, differences, ignorance and antagonism. This can give rise to various emotions toward the Other, from fear and rejection, hostility and aggression, to respect for the Other and acceptance of the Other's existence, perhaps even acceptance of some elements of the Other's identity. These emotions lead to superstitions, feeding the same emotions (Bauman, 1990; Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

People construct boundaries that demarcate occupied space not only physically, but also socially, culturally or economically (Massey & Jess, 1995). The demarcated territories are organized and managed differently from those outside the border. Lamont and Molnár (2002, p. 168) introduce the concept of social boundaries and define them as "objectified forms of social differences manifested in unequal access to and unequal distribution of resources (material and nonmaterial) and social opportunities." They also manifest themselves in stable patterns of associational behavior, as expressed in connubiality and commensality. Social boundaries are co-created by symbolic boundaries that arise from categorization by social actors: Objects, people, practices and even time and space. They are tools with which individuals and social groups struggle to define reality and reach agreement (Lamont & Molnár, 2002).

In a dialectical sense, the border can be a frontier zone or a zone of change, dialogue and intercultural communication. As Rizo García and Romeu Aldaya mention:

The concept of boundary is therefore proposed as a starting point for examining both the areas and the elements that can form the core of conflict and/or integration in intercultural communication. This is reflected in the definition of two conceptual categories of the border: the border as a boundary or demarcation that hinders communication in that it represents a zone of resistance in which the inalienable is defended; and the border as a zone of rupture, surrender and negotiation of social and cultural identities, that is, as a contaminated, hybrid, permeable and 'open' physical and mental space for integration.

(Rizo García and Romeu Aldaya, 2006, p. 37)¹

Furthermore, Rizo García and Romeu Aldaya (2006) use the term “cultural front,” which on the one hand is a battle front, a place where interests clash, a place of struggle between actors who are not only different but also have relations of hegemony and inequality among them. On the other hand, it can be a permeable, movable boundary that separates different but equal groups from one another. They refer to González (1987) explaining, that fronts do not describe static situations but, on the contrary, bundles of social relations in which the forms of the obvious, the necessary, values and plural identities are elaborated from the point of view of the daily construction of the meanings of life and the world (Rizo García & Romeu Aldaya 2006, p. 44).

What we discuss later in this chapter goes beyond what a border is in the strict sense. We are more interested in the areas, the physical and mental spaces created by imaginaries, in relation to how development is understood. In our research, we also rely on the concept of cultural barrier, defined according to Hans Vermeer as a difference or set of differences between two cultures that is seen as an obstacle to communication (Martín De León, 2003). However, the spaces and societies we study are mostly in conflict, in which there is a relationship of hegemony and confrontation between the investor, who represents Western, mercantile principles and the local communities, who struggle to preserve their traditions and values.

Those key and fundamental visions of development that the investors and local societies have, which emerge in the specific geographical areas under the influence of the megaprojects, are at the heart of the analysis. These visions contain elements that we consider to be obstacles to communication. In order to define these spaces, we will look at the collective perception of development that emerges and manifests from the positions on:

- Megaprojects and infrastructure investments;
- Nature and natural resources;
- The role of power, agency and opinions in decision-making and who decides;
- Individualism, community and collectivism, a solidarity economy;
- Territory and place;
- Different social groups interact in a space of common interest.

Mutual perception of groups

In the course of the study, we have diagnosed profound differences, which we refer to as social boundaries and which may or may not lead to conflict. These conceptions differ among representatives of different groups and social classes.

One of the barriers that can hinder or prevent dialogue is the mutual perception of social groups in a given area. The most common social actors in spatial conflicts and in relation to the localization of megaprojects are the local

community, the investor and the state/local government. The fieldwork has highlighted the great diversity of the social sector. The main groups representing the social side in conflicts over megaprojects are indigenous peoples and peasants (Métis), their leaders and NGO activists. How these groups are perceived has a major impact on the evaluation of the megaproject and the vision of development. The prevailing discourse claims that a megaproject emerges in a vacuum and creates a new quality in a place where nothing existed. Often these are precisely the marginalized rural and indigenous populations that live in this “vacuum.”

Indigenous peoples are represented at the sites we investigated by the Panamanian community of the Ngäbe Bugle, Chorotegas in the Matambú reserve in Costa Rica and the people of African and Arawak descent – the Garifuna in Honduras. However, in the case of the Barro Blanco hydro-power plant, which affects the Ngäbe Bugle, and with regard to the planned tourism megaprojects in Bahia de Tela, which is inhabited by the Garifuna, we are also dealing with peasants. This is a population that lives in the countryside and works mainly in agriculture, but does not have as strong and distinct identity as the indigenous population. Due to the deep-rooted ethnic and socioeconomic divisions in Central America, these are the groups with the lowest social status, whose fate is very often decided by an oligarchy linked to the agricultural export economy. Indigenous peoples, people of African descent and peasants are among the least privileged groups with low incomes and low levels of formal education. This inequality also extends to the perception of these groups by external actors linked to investors, state authorities or city dwellers.

We have identified elements of how indigenous peoples are perceived, such as accusations that they hinder development plans and pursue their own interests at the expense of other groups. Entrepreneurs in Bahia de Tela view the protests against land grabbing as an additional hurdle to developing investments in the tourism industry and achieving positive change toward Western modernity.

Interlocutor: The tourism sector has been and will be affected by the issue of the International Court of Justice rulings brought in favor of the Garifuna communities. It will have a domino effect The judgment does not fit. It creates confusion. The fact that these communities exist will create mistrust towards the investor This is incredibly damaging for development today and for the future. The investor will not want to come here.

Investigator: Are there any channels to have a dialogue on this matter?

Interlocutor: No. That is not possible because they insist on their autonomy. Most of them do not want the good of the community, improvements. (Chamber of Commerce of Tela, Honduras)²

It also illustrates the different values associated with the good future of a community. The Garifunas are also perceived negatively by their neighbors who live nearby but are not part of the indigenous community because a large portion of the Garifuna diaspora (mainly migrants in the United States of America) provides a source of income with their remittances to their families in Honduras.

I think that they [the Garifunas] only like to collect [money]. They are [focused] on their remittances. A big part of them live off the remittances. At Christmas, you see the lines to the bank to collect remittances. This helps the families but hurts the community. They just want their remittances, they do not work.

(44-year-old woman, Tela, Honduras)³

Blaser (2013) uses the term “all-encompassing modernity” to refer to the way in which modernity places itself above other visions of the world, invalidating non-Western ontologies. In our study, we had the opportunity to experience this directly, particularly in relation to the Panamanian Ngäbe Bugle people, who are – sometimes scornfully – ascribed a certain “mythicness” and “primitiveness.” Even highly educated people have great difficulty in seeing the values of indigenous peoples as equal to their own.

And in this mythical world, the river has a very great value for several reasons, one of which is that Tabasará – the cacique – dies in the river Tabasará [laugh] So, they [the investors] had a problem that went beyond the issue of land and property. The magical, mythical, cultural problem of tradition, of identity Of course, the demand of the natives in this primitive world, without looking beyond the demand of the natives, especially those who were there, those bordering [their land], in this primitive vision that they had full of mythological problems, was NO! to the project.

(50-year-old man, engineer, Panama)⁴

The peasants (primarily Métis people) are much more likely to accept the values of Western modernity and the principles of the market economy and are also perceived as such, but the higher social classes or city dwellers often attribute to them characteristics such as traditionalism and conservatism, learned helplessness and an unwillingness to take matters into their own hands.

The two groups mentioned here (indigenous peoples and peasants) join forces and cooperate when the emerging megaproject threatens their livelihoods. However, international legislation privileges indigenous peoples, who, according to ILO Convention 169, adopted in 1989 and ratified by the Central American countries, have the right to self-determination and to the land and resources they inhabit, the protection of their identity, participation

in decision-making processes that affect them and protection against discrimination (ILO, 1989). In this situation, it is the indigenous communities who can turn to international bodies in the hope of receiving support in the fight for their rights, while non-indigenous villagers have no such possibility. Despite their different motivations, about which more will be said below, indigenous peoples and peasants work together to defend their interests.

So we tried to find something similar that would protect us as non-indigenous communities. It was important for us to make a complaint that our rights were being violated and we were told, “No, you cannot do that because it's not meant for communities like yours.” What we did. We tried to connect with the indigenous peoples who work in the areas affected by the dams because they live and depend on the economic activities in that area. It is important for them to raise money in order to be able to live in the region. And even that is not binding, it has nothing to do with the fact that it is not in the territory of the comarca. So, what I always wonder is to what extent the agricultural communities that are not indigenous have no mechanism to defend their rights. And here in the Chiriqui Viejo River, ten or twelve hydroelectric plants were imposed on us in purely agricultural communities. And there was no mechanism that we could fall back on to defend ourselves.

(40-year-old woman, working in an NGO,
Panama)⁵

Despite the different legal statuses and worldviews, the above-mentioned cooperation, peaceful coexistence and even mutual learning occur just as frequently as conflict and competition. Suffice it to mention the experiences of the coastal areas of Bahía de Tela and other places we have not studied. In the case of Central America, in the 20th and 21st centuries, the struggle for agricultural and pastoral land has led to the dispossession of the indigenous population by large landowners and peasants. As is the case in the Atlantic regions of Nicaragua, where the Miskito and Mayangna were displaced by mestizo settlers seeking land for agriculture and livestock (Anaya, 2007; Debates Indígenas, 2024). These factors mean that the visible boundaries between “us” and “them” do not diminish despite harmonious coexistence, as our interlocutors emphasize.

They share their traditions, they are very kind to us, we are all united, there is no racism. My son is dating a Garifuna girl. They have never given up their culture! They live with us.

(man, Honduras)⁶

Both communities are located on the banks of the Tabasará River, where the Barro Blanco dam is located. Some are indigenous communities and

the others are peasants who have migrated in search of better living conditions, some from the province of Chiriquí, others from Veragua. Both groups have been living together quite harmoniously for a long time. There is no conflict between the indigenous communities and the peasants in this area. On the contrary, they have developed a dynamic of cooperation on organizational matters and the peasants have adopted the Ngäbe forms of government, as they are in an area that is considered indigenous. And they have learned the regional laws and respect and tolerate them.

(man, academic, Panama)⁷

Another important factor for the Central American region that shapes social relations and collective perception is the traumatic past associated with civil wars and military-civilian dictatorships.⁸ It also affects the way in which social conflicts are resolved and the willingness to engage in dialogue. It is important to mention that Central America is one of the most dangerous regions, with a very high murder rate. Still, eco-activism is also subject to persecution, violence and harassment. In 2023 alone, thirty six eco-activists were murdered in this region, out of a total of 166 in Latin America (Ecoticias, 2024).

The location of an investment raises hopes and emotions in each of the parties who are directly or indirectly involved in the project and whose paths cross in the space where the investment is located. These emotions are related to the investment risk and the profit expectations of investors and shareholders, the implementation of development plans and political objectives of the state administration, as well as the hopes of the local population for an improvement in social and economic living conditions. In the cases examined, the greater the differences in the expectations of the respective social groups with regard to the megaproject and the development goals, the greater the conflicts. These correlate with the existence of hostility between the counterparts.

This situation favors the creation of barriers that prevent dialogue and the achievement of a compromise. In societies with a long tradition of building lasting peace and dialogue, these antagonisms are not as noticeable. Among Central American societies, Costa Rica is an example. Since the civil war of 1948, this country has pursued a pacifist policy, the cornerstones of which are demilitarization of the state, society and political discourse; strengthening state institutions and the pension, education and health systems; peace education; and building the brand of a peaceful, secure and ecological country. These conditions are reflected in everyday social life, as we heard in the interviews, where the general perception of another social group, the “other,” the opponent, was not characterized by antagonism. Even though the investments studied (in tourism and hydropower) had an impact on their lives, even in a negative way. Although there were differences in the perception of other social groups, they were characterized by resolving the differences through awareness-raising and education, as the testimony of a member of the Matambú community in Costa Rica shows:

There are people who have a different idea of Matambú, which is an indigenous reserve. They think when they hear about an indigenous reserve that they will find people wearing loincloths and all these things, right? So they have kind of a misconception of what a reserve is, and that affects us There's a stereotype and it's hard to change that, right? Everyone has their own thoughts. But it would be good to give the community things to grow or evolve, because nowadays everything is changing and you have to keep up because otherwise you stay with what you know. You have been left behind, right? The train has left you behind. So it's important to do things that evolve because the population will always continue to grow and it would be great to have a school here, which I think would be a project at the moment, let us say. Very good, is it not?

(32-year-old man, Costa Rica)⁹

We believe it is also worth mentioning here an important social group that often came up spontaneously in our conversations, namely, young people. Perceptions of this social group and expectations of them show many similarities between the countries studied and may also point to much broader trends outside our field of research. However, the differences between generations also highlight potential social boundaries and communication barriers that may grow as people enter adulthood at a time of increasing political and economic importance.

In narratives about young people, we see a great tension between the hope and confidence that youth will be able to change the future for the better, and a great fear that the world they are entering is hostile and threatening to them. In countries that are particularly prone to crime, including organized crime, this fear is justified. Young people in particular, especially between the ages of twenty-six and thirty-five, are more likely to be victims of crime (Dunsizer, 2022).

Youth has energy, affinity, new thinking. Change should be brought about by organized youth. If someone stands up here, he will be killed, and only an organized youth with energy can bring about change.

(man, university lecturer, Honduras)¹⁰

Investigator: And who would have the power to bring about these positive changes?

Interlocutor: I think the youth themselves. They could be the ones to change reality, the young people who have a vision. Corruption comes from the top. (female member of Cooperative, Honduras)¹¹

Another frequently recurring observation is the alleged susceptibility of young people to the influence of globalization through modern technology.

According to adults (especially older adults), the young generation, influenced by mass culture, focuses its dreams and desires on possessions and individual development and, unlike older generations, loses interest in its past.

Today's generations easily mess things up because they are not aware of their past. They are only interested in the present through technological systems.

(70-year-old man, folklorist, Costa Rica)¹²

It can be concluded that there is a generation gap that can be an obstacle to dialogue. What is more, young people are far more likely to emigrate to study or work. This results in a lack of workforce in the countryside. Furthermore, the young members of communities tend to lose their local identity and their attachment to the place.

As older members of local communities told us, younger people are far less attached to the past, especially when it comes to the history and stories of their community; the present and the future are more important to them. On the one hand, this is a process that is taking place in many places around the world, and on the other hand, it is accelerated by modern technology.

Our study was mainly concerned with compact communities with high social capital that have long preserved their own traditions and are slower to succumb to the promises of modernity. As a result, the gap between the dreams and hopes of younger and older generations may be wider. The aspirations and values of young people are expressed and strengthened by modern education. While the desire for education is seen as something very positive by the generation of parents or grandparents, it is often associated with the need to emigrate, weakening the community. This raises the question of the possible contradiction between the social capital in their communities and the human capital fostered by education. We will return to this question below. The young people we interviewed tended to be more receptive to megaprojects, valuing the promise of development, infrastructure, economic development and financial gain. The divisions and value differences highlighted and reinforced by megaprojects thus overlap with other divisions, including those between generations and ethnicities.

Conflicting values in the perception of development

In the previous chapter, we discussed the concepts of development and, partly synonymously, the idea of megaprojects. Megaprojects have an enormous impact on people's lives, as they change physical living conditions and social relations within and between different social groups. They embody the Western idea of development through building infrastructure and boosting economic growth (Flyvbjerg, 2017). Indirectly, they are a vehicle for individual and consumerist behavior, which is at odds with the traditions of rural and indigenous populations for whom community is an important part of identity

and daily socioeconomic life. The traditional ways of life of these populations are devalued, but above all, they are marginalized and the natural resources that form their livelihoods are exploited, so they very often fall into the trap of promises and expectations of gainful employment and improved living conditions. Such an idea of development is also associated with many dilemmas and contradictory desires of the people who live near such investments. Mental barriers can also thwart a person's worldview and put them in a dramatic situation where they have to choose between values that are important to them. Let us take a closer look at these competing values that people have to choose between when a megaproject is being built nearby.

One of the main dilemmas that such conventional development entails is *the promotion of the aforementioned individualism at the expense of collective attitudes*. Many indigenous communities' traditional way of life differs from the world's prevailing legal and economic systems, in which individual growth, private property and state ownership are protected. In general, the property system of indigenous peoples is collective, but it can be diversified. In the Chorotega, Garifuna and Ngäbe cases studied, the property system is mainly communal. The land is collectively owned by the community and is given to the heads of the families in individual plots for their use, which can be inherited by their descendants (Barboza, 2018; CIDH, 2017). This means that the land is owned and managed by a large group of people (rather than individuals) who share the fruits of their labor. This communal approach is deeply rooted in their cultural values and emphasizes the importance of land not only as an economic resource but as an important part of their identity and cultural heritage.

The good life for them is life in a community. The house of a Ngäbe family is large, it is like an inner core in which there is more than one nucleus, there can be up to four or five cores, namely the father who lives with his children and his children, with their wives and their children. In houses, there can be between 8 and 15 people living in a single house. And they all come together to work the land, they share what they produce, that is, they are societies of family and solidarity economy, of fair economy and they do not produce to store, but to eat for all.

(28-year-old man, anthropologist, Panamá)¹³

However, it is worth noting that collectivism, or simply living in a community, is a value not only for indigenous peoples but also for many Central American local societies. In Costa Rica, this is reflected in the popularity of cooperativism as a form of economic activity and organization of entrepreneurs. In a country of just over 5 million inhabitants, there were more than 600 registered cooperatives in 2023, and more than 900,000 people belonged to the cooperative movement (Li Bonilla, 2013; La República, 2023). These cooperatives cover various sectors, such as savings and credit, self-management, agriculture,

industry, electricity generation, artisanal mining, marketing and various services (including tourism). However, collectivism is also changing, especially from the perspective of young people who feel a sense of belonging to the community, but in a functional, practical dimension rather than a traditional and organic one.

Well, in this case, I believe that as such we must first act individually. First, by changing our habits, our individual social aspects. To then be able to form a group to make the changes. Because in the end, we live by ourselves. We can make the change, yes, that's true, we can change our perspective, our critical thinking, of course we can. But if we acted as a group, cooperatively, the change would be greater and the effectiveness in decision making or in the future would be greater.

(21-year-old man, student, Tamarindo, Costa Rica)¹⁴

This change is reminiscent of Tönnies' (2001) classic distinction between community and society. However, it is worth considering these two forms, not as successive stages of development, but as different modes of functioning of social groups, in which sometimes elements of strong, almost familial bonds prevail, and sometimes common interests and the pursuit of effective action within the framework of the modern state. The value that strengthens the collective approach is the local tradition, culture and sense of identity. Our interlocutors are often accompanied by concerns about the loss caused by modernization and the life choices of young people in their communities.

Culture is very important to me. And that's something that's being lost more and more, because I can play the marimba, for example. I have invited many people to come and play the marimba, but they are not interested. And I do not charge them anything. So, what happens? Something that was perhaps quite normal in the past, was not it? In the present, it no longer has the meaning it had in the past. What will happen in the future? It will disappear.

(32-year-old man, Costa Rica)¹⁵

Meanwhile, the promises of localization of megaprojects, including especially employment, are clearly based on individual contracts, performance and individual salary. Young people, who often derive their values from global messages, know above all individual success and achievement, even though, as mentioned earlier, this is often at odds with the values of their parents and grandparents.

In Chapter 3, it was pointed out that a secure existence and guaranteed livelihood are fundamental elements of a good life, the first and basic prerequisite for the pursuit of happiness. This condition is shared by almost all

interviewees. However, while a secure existence in traditional and close-knit communities is ensured through cooperation, solidarity and a sense of unity, under modern conditions, it can only be ensured through employment and a regular income of a reasonable amount. The solidarity economy in the agriculture of the Ngäbe or Garifuna group has already been mentioned. It is based on a deep trust in the members of the community, which nowadays is being replaced by work geared toward individual economic benefits in favor of a private entrepreneur and the accumulation of resources. It seems, however, that the loss of this trust and expulsion from the “paradise” of such a community irrevocably condemns its members to individually search for ways to secure their livelihoods, that is, to look for employment. This, in turn, is one of the greatest desires of the people we interviewed. Such a promise of independence given by a megaproject, which is often not fulfilled in reality, leads to irreversible changes and disruption in local communities. In addition, large-scale foreign investment also brings with it immediate risks for which these communities are not prepared.

Development is when new things come to the community, for example, the construction of hotels and buildings, sources of work. But the negative thing is that through development, for example, the little that has been given here, firstly, has not created employment opportunities for members of the community and secondly, brings negative things like drug addiction and prostitution. When we talk about the main economic sector here, which is tourism, it brings all these bad things. Maybe the development here should be managed by the community members, by the boards of trustees that we have, and by the leaders that need to be formed.

(40-year-old man, teacher, Honduras)¹⁶

The megaproject is a “foreign body” in the community. It implements the idea of top-down development, offering the inhabitants of the affected areas no opportunities for participation and self-determination. Often, it also breaks down their resistance. The conflict over the Barro Blanco hydropower plant in Panama and the investments in tourism in Bahia de Tela, Honduras, are examples of this. In both cases, people lost their lives because they tried to oppose it.

These projects are planned by the government with the aim of development, without the participation of the communities, the people in these communities. And the people perceive this as a threat, because they are to be driven off their land. And for a peasant, the most important thing is his land.

(man, employee of charitable institutions,
Panama)¹⁷

At this point, however, it should be noted that even those who are aware of the risks associated with the siting of megaprojects do not definitively reject change and are not necessarily opposed to development. Most of our interviewees pointed out the need for public services, which they want at a good level. They want to live in nice and tidy towns with good infrastructure. They know that change is inevitable, but they want to influence it and not have it counter to their values. Meanwhile, megaprojects are presented as a prerequisite for the expansion of basic infrastructure (such as roads, sewers) or access to services.

Money does not make us better people, nor does economic prosperity make us better, necessarily better human beings. However, the material basis is necessary. People need to eat, they need to be clothed. But not only that. This understanding of development is completely wrong.

(59-year-old man, university professor, Costa Rica)¹⁸

Furthermore, many representatives of the local community believe in the power of their own actions and in their ability to impart knowledge about the community and to show newcomers and tourists a different way of life than in the West.

Well, we consider the development as presented by the authorities to be a dishonest system. Because in our cosmogony we have our own vision of development or how we would like it to be. If tourism is attractive for people to visit our communities, then we wonder why they do not support us in this more environmental tourism, more community-based tourism and no large complexes hotels in our communities. I imagine the visitor would like to stay in a traditional hut (a bit cheaper) and eat what we eat and produce. This is the real tourism that we can develop in our communities, a tourism that is more in harmony with nature, with the coexistence that we have as Garifunas with nature.

(man, Honduras)¹⁹

In the shadow of megaprojects: Environmental dilemmas and the struggle for territory

Finally, as pointed out in the previous chapter, an important mental barrier is *the categorization of nature* among the most important values.

Nature, as a value, was present in almost all conversations, and the majority of the opinions expressed by our interlocutors led us to the conviction that, in the case of Central America, it is still considered a battlefield, as Keucheyan (2016) describes in his book. The dispute over nature has different dimensions, but in the case of Central America, it is undoubtedly due to the historical legacy, where it was considered by the colonists as a source of livelihood,

wealth and a commodity. In all these cases, history is repeating itself today. The new “colonists,” that is, investors, companies, tourists and immigrants, occupy the land and natural resources of others. In our case studies, these are the megaprojects that threaten the environment and often create the false belief that one must choose between nature and development.

The objectification of nature is an important “achievement” of Western culture and capitalist management. It is considered to be one of the most important resources, and in the form of raw materials, energy or tourism revenues, it is possible to trade it if the profit is significant. Marx describes this as “alienation from nature.” Nature has become an object of property and market exchange that is guaranteed and overseen by the modern state (Terzakis, 2018). Mignolo (2023, p. 160) points out that “there is no ‘nature’ beyond Western vocabulary. Nature is not an entity semiotically *represented*, but it is an invention of specific semiotic world-making coded in specific languages and cosmology.” Escobar (2020a, p. 75) in the same vein reminds us that:

The most central feature of the single-world doctrine has been a twofold ontological divide: a particular way of separating humans from nature (the nature-culture divide); and the distinction and boundary policing between “us” (civilized, modern, developed) and “them” (uncivilized, underdeveloped), those who practice other ways of worlding (the colonial divide).

(2020a, p. 75)

Such a view is indicative of the epistemologies prevalent in the Global South, which emphasize the values of social solidarity and justice, as well as “living places” rather than merely occupying them. According to the modern understanding, also held by investors and institutions outside local communities, nature consists of the physical world and everything in it that is not man-made – elements such as plants, animals, rocks, water and so on, each of which has its own monetary value. Water generates energy, investment in tourism brings multiple returns and gold, in addition to its important role in the new technology industry, is itself a wealth that serves the unlimited accumulation of capital. As noted by Gudynas (2018), it makes little sense to continue gold mining today, as only 10% of it is used for industrial purposes on the international market, which highlights man’s irrationality toward the environment. In any case, a certain amount of land must be claimed, and permanent damage such as the destruction of the landscape, the pollution of water, air and soil, the death of entire ecosystems or the extinction of species is a certain cost that can be estimated and included in the calculation.

In the studied cases, the analysis of environmental costs and risks is also a legal requirement, and at the same time, the phase in the development of the megaproject to which internal and international experts usually have many objections. In modern terms, one area can be exchanged for another with

similar characteristics, and the decision on the location is made after analyzing the potential for energy production, the possible scale of ore extraction or the degree of attractiveness for tourists and the possibility of reaching them.

If we want to exploit nature, this natural resource, the natural potential of the Caribbean Sea, of the natural reserves, to the east and west and south, we have to improve and develop the infrastructure. The Indura project integrated several factors: sun and beach, bird watching – the mangrove, the biological reserve and involves the ethnic groups. The Garifuna community of Tornabé participates 4% in the benefits, they were paved, sewage and drinking water was provided. If you go to Tornabé and Triunfo de la Cruz, you can see the difference, Tornabé is developed and Triunfo de la Cruz is very underdeveloped. So the Indura project had a positive impact on this village.

(Member of Chamber of Commerce of Tela,
Honduras)²⁰

For the local rural or semi-rural population, the territory is of great importance for their livelihood as a source of food and material for construction and household activities, and is also an indispensable part of their cultural identity and cosmovision. For these people, nature is the guarantee of their existence and their continued existence as a community.

It should also be noted that small-scale agriculture, that is, family or communal farming as a way of life and livelihood, must compete with other economic sectors in Central America, especially agribusiness for export, mining and the service sector. These highly competitive sectors usually offer the prospect of economic stability through a fixed salary and independence, thanks to individual labor. This way, they eliminate the risk of instability in sales and price markets and the impacts of climate change on traditional agriculture. At the same time, however, this type of labor (mostly in the private sector with the presence of foreign capital) is dependent on its employees in the long term and increases the presence of money in economies where barter and subsistence existed alongside the money market (Polanyi, 1944; Rodríguez, 2024). The experience of the pandemic has led many workers in the service sector to take a critical view of this way of earning a living, highlighting the great dependence that has arisen in Central America on foreign investment. We have seen this in Guanacaste, Costa Rica, where more than 50% of the population depends on tourism, which is dominated by foreign direct investment. The global health situation and the closure of economies have led to a labor dilemma and a duality of employment, where people resort to sustaining themselves through their own activities linked to the local traditional economy (agriculture, local food production, traditional repair services) on the one hand, and maintaining the link with tourism on the other hand (Dembicz & Carrillo 2021).

Since land is of great value, it becomes an object of defense in situations of threat and unites various local actors in this action, protesting together when the rights of local and indigenous peoples to their land are violated.

The academy, the non-governmental organizations and I myself have recognized that this is a conflict over nature, because it is a conflict of nature over the defense of nature due to the relationships of those who control nature Undoubtedly, “environmental conflict” is a name that is added to the academy and activists. Indigenous peoples, farmers are fighting for their territory.

(man, academic, Panamá City, Panamá)²¹

Despite the solidarity and the increasing international importance of the environmental protection and defense movements, it should be kept in mind that *the value of territory is very different for the local rural population and for indigenous peoples*. For the latter, territory is more than a source of livelihood and a center for social and political life, or the cultivation of traditions. In many indigenous ontologies, territory is a subject, an inseparable part of the community, just like a hill, a river or plants and animals. Mignolo (2023, p. 180) points out: “in Indigenous cosmologies, *land* means life and spirituality.” Territory is at the core of the struggle, not so much between different social actors, but between ontologies, entire worlds in the material and immaterial sense. Escobar (2020a) explains that the knowledge produced in the struggle for territory and against extractivist practices is much more valuable and relevant today than knowledge from science, because “those who produce them [these knowledges] *sentipiensan con la Tierra* (they feel-think with the Earth); they orient themselves toward the moment when humans and the planet can finally come to coexist in mutually enhancing manners” (Escobar, 2020a, p. 69). *Sentipensar* is an act of feeling and thinking simultaneously (which breaks with the common cliché of separating these two realms). It is an act rooted in a specific territory to which life is inextricably linked and in the knowledge embedded in that territory, as opposed to a “universal” and context-free knowledge (Escobar, 2020b).

The Ngäbe population has lived in its current place for 1,300 to 10,000 years (Joly Adames, 2018). This difference between modern environmentalist NGOs and indigenous peoples, while fundamental, is not an obstacle to forming alliances and fighting together to preserve the land. It must be kept in mind, however, that the extent of the loss in the event of failure is radically different.

The Ngäbes were furious that was in 2012 I think that must be the most painful thing, to see the dammed river, to see the river piled up like a dirty lagoon that smells bad, that is no longer what it was, that will be that loss. This relationship that they tried to take care of for so long,

that is a sacred place, a place where they have upheld the culture of the people These are things that are like losing a family member. No ... he died, he died, you can miss him, you will miss him painfully all your life, you will carry him in your heart, but he is no longer there Well, maybe society has made itself feel good about having things, and it's the same education that made us that way. People are educating children to tell them that you have to have things.

(woman, educator in NGO, Cerro Punta, Panama)²²

Another important and frequently mentioned topic of education is also echoed in the above statement. For many people, this is a prerequisite for a good and better life and an integral part of development.

As far as *education* is concerned, Central America is a heterogeneous region. Although education is free in all countries in the region, from pre-school to high school, and there are public universities in all countries, access is not the same. The country with the longest experience in providing modern free schooling and with the greatest progress, also in terms of the quality of teaching, is Costa Rica, followed by Panama (which is also due to its peaceful trajectory). This is reflected in literacy and schooling levels. Costa Rica and Panama have the highest literacy rates in the region at 98.1% and 95.5%, respectively (World Bank, n.d.). The average length of schooling in these two countries is more than nine years, compared to six years in Guatemala and Honduras (World Bank, n.d.).

With the democratization process that began in the 1990s, education systems were subjected to reforms in which the state was forced to promote inclusive education and vocational training, especially for women, older adults and indigenous peoples. The topic of education has been strongly present in our conversations and is considered an indispensable condition of development, an expectation and goal of change, a tool to improve living conditions, a reason to stay or emigrate, a source of income and, at the same time, a means of knowledge sharing and dialogue. The construction of schools is the wish of many communities whose children often have to travel far to receive an education. Education is often one of the promised benefits associated with the megaproject. In the community of Cruz de la India in Nicaragua, the company that owns the gold mines has offered numerous courses to residents of all ages, many of whom have been very satisfied. However, experts and activists are sometimes critical of what education is, what values it teaches and how it affects local communities.

The education plans are not created by the indigenous peoples, it is an imposed western model that promotes this market-driven concept of development. And the market determines the supply of labor and the supply of labor determines the jobs. So, education is the vehicle and

the education that these people receive is that of the free market, of cheap labor for call centers, for McDonald's, for ministries or for private companies. Education sells this concept: let us educate ourselves to have better things That's where the vision they receive at home changes, because many of these kids know what a good life is, even if they do not define it Then when the young people come to the universities, a very high percentage of these young people do not return to the territories. Their minds will be transformed at the universities.

(man, researcher, Panama)²³

The modern education offered in general in Central America and other parts of the world is based on European and North American educational experiences and models, which promote Western values.²⁴ These values differ from those of indigenous communities and are often completely at odds with them. In most cases, an attitude based on modern and individualistic values is taught in schools, promoting personal responsibility and development focused on competition, individual and economic growth, based on a linear understanding of time (Stavenhagen, 1986). Mignolo (2023, p. 180) explains that in the indigenous understanding, “*knowledge* and *education* are the necessary component of spirituality, to secure the correlation of life with the cosmos.” However, as Mignolo points out, education is supposed to teach people who they are, and this is inextricably linked to their identity and historical awareness, including colonial injustice. Meanwhile, due to the systemic nature of education and the support of global media, modern values are also spreading to local rural communities and, to a lesser extent, indigenous communities. Kato et al. (2023, p. 219) point out that “mainstream science education is contaminated by neoliberal values, which work against possibilities for a socio-critical scientific thinking community.” The universalizing approach of modern science and education leaves no room for epistemic diversity. What is more, the link between modern education and employment, that is, livelihood and prosperity, makes it even more desirable.

During the interviews and discussions, we tried to collect and name the most important values around which the conflict caused or exacerbated by the emergence of megaprojects revolves. We have simplified them into modern and local values (Figure 4.1). By modern values, we mean those associated with conventional development and a universalizing, Western worldview in which capitalist management is the only conceivable form of economic organization. This division is not symmetrical in many respects. While modernity does not allow for diversity and different ways of seeing the world, locality enables and reinforces the pluriverse, as knowledge and practice are inextricably linked to place. The perspective of epistemologies of the South encourages the creative combination of different perspectives. Local values are not in conflict with the use of technology or the development of infrastructure. This relationship is also not symmetrical due to the obvious power relations and the

dominance of modern values. Finally, it must be said that this divide does not necessarily reflect the divide between groups; it can occur within communities but can also become the experience of an individual person.

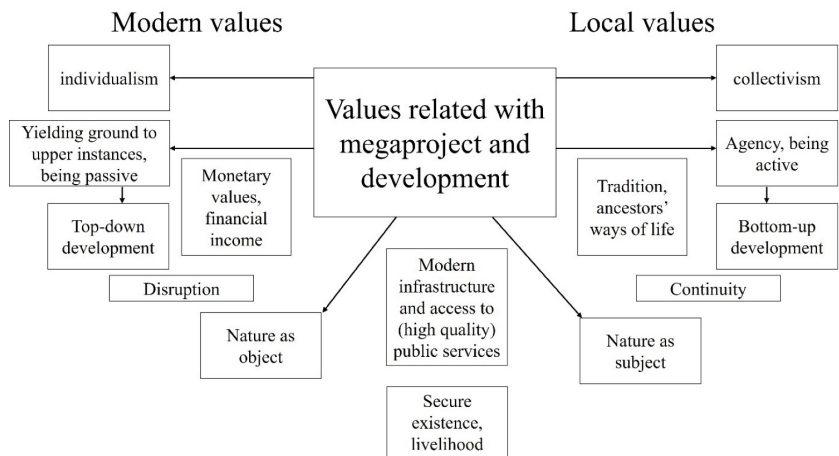


Figure 4.1 Values related to megaprojects and development. Own elaboration based on interviews.

Sources: Own elaboration.

Notes

- 1 Original quote: “El concepto de frontera se propone, entonces, como punto de partida para indagar tanto en los ámbitos como en los elementos que pueden constituir el núcleo de conflictividad y/o integración en la comunicación intercultural. Da cuenta de lo anterior la definición de dos categorías conceptuales de frontera: la frontera como límite o demarcación, que obstaculiza la comunicación en tanto constituye la zona de resistencia donde lo irrenunciable se defiende; y la frontera como zona de ruptura, rendición y negociación de las identidades sociales y culturales, o sea, como espacio físico y mental contaminado, híbrido, permeable y ‘dispuesto’ a la integración” (Rizo García & Romeu Aldaya, 2006, p. 37).
- 2 Original quote: “Interlocutor: La parte turística se vio y se va a ver afectada por el tema de las sentencias de la Corte Internacional de Justicia llevada por las comunidades Garífunas. Va a tener un efecto domino ... La sentencia no ajusta. Genera una confusión. Tela por tener estas comunidades va a generar desconfianza para el inversionista. Esto es un daño al desarrollo increíble de ahora y para el futuro. El inversionista no va a querer llegar aquí.” Investigador: “¿Existen canales para ir generando dialogo sobre este asunto?” Interlocutor: “No. No se puede, porque subrayan su autonomía. La mayoría de ellos no quieren el bien de la comunidad, mejoras.”
- 3 Original quote: “Yo pienso que a ellos [los Garífunas] les gusta sólo recoger [dinero]. Ellos están con sus remesas. Una buena parte vive de remesas. En Navidad usted viera las colas al banco para recoger las remesas. Eso ayuda a las familias pero perjudica la comunidad, ellos quieren sólo sus remesas, no trabajan.”

- 4 Original quote: “Y en ese mundo mítico el río tiene un valor muy grande por varias razones, entre otras porque en el río Tabasará muere Tabasará – el cacique [risas] Entonces les tocaba [a los inversores] un problema que iba más allá del problema simplemente de tierras y de las propiedades. El problema mágico, mítico, cultural de la tradición, identidad Por supuesto que la solicitud indígena en ese mundo primitivo, sin ver más allá de la solicitud indígena sobre todo de los que estaban ahí, de los colindantes, en esa visión primitiva que tenían llena de problemas mitológicos, era: NO! al proyecto”
- 5 Original quote: “Entonces, nosotros tratamos de buscar algo similar que nos amparara a nosotros como comunidades no indígenas. Para nosotros presentar una denuncia que se están violando derechos era importante y nos decían ‘no, ustedes no pueden recurrir a eso, porque eso no está dedicado a comunidades como las suyas.’ Qué hicimos. Tratamos de vincular en estas áreas que están afectadas por estas represas, hay indígenas trabajando, porque viven y dependen de las actividades económicas de esta zona. Para ellos es importante recaudar fondos para vivir en la comarca. Y también eso no es vinculante, no tiene nada que ver con que no es en el territorio de la comarca. Entonces allí lo que yo siempre me planteo es hasta donde las comunidades agrícolas, que no somos indígenas, no tenemos un mecanismo de defensa de derechos. Y aquí se nos impusieron diez o doce hidroeléctricas en el río Chiriquí Viejo, en puras comunidades agrícolas. Y no hubo un mecanismo al que pudiéramos recurrir para defendernos.”
- 6 Original quote: “Ellos comparten su tradición, son bastante amistoso con nosotros, somos unidos todos, no hay racismo. Mi hijo sale con una Garífuna. ¡Ellos no han dejado nunca su cultura! Ellos conviven con nosotros.”
- 7 Original quote: “Ambos pueblos están en las riberas del río Tabasará donde se localiza la Represa Barro Blanco. Unos son pueblos indígenas y los otros son campesinos que migraron, algunos de la provincia de Chiriquí otros de Veragua, en busca de mejores condiciones de vida. Ambos grupos durante mucho tiempo han vivido de una forma bastante armónica. En ese espacio no hay conflictividad entre los pueblos indígenas y los campesinos. Al contrario, han construido una dinámica de trabajo en conjunto, en cuestiones organizativas, y los campesinos han asimilado las formas de gobierno del pueblo indígena Ngäbe, ya que se encuentran en territorio considerado indígena. Y han aprendido y han respetado y tolerado las leyes comarcales.”
- 8 From 1950 to 2000, every Central American country except Costa Rica experienced a dictatorship or authoritarian regime. In 1954, Guatemala experienced a coup d'état supported by the US. against President Jacobo Árbenz. A series of military governments then ruled the country until the mid-1980s. El Salvador has had military governments since the 1930s, and the country experienced a civil war from 1979 to 1992. Honduras had a series of military governments from the 1950s until 1982, when a civilian government was restored. The Somoza family ruled Nicaragua from 1936 to 1979. After the Sandinista Front overthrew Somoza and ruled until 1990, the country experienced a civil war due to the activities of the “Contra” military groups, which were financed by the United States. Panama was de facto controlled by the military, especially under Omar Torrijos (1968–1981) and Manuel Noriega (1983–1989), until the US invasion in 1989 (Dobrzycki, 2000). Over 300,000 lives were claimed by conflicts in Central America in the second half of the 20th century (Cano, 2022).
- 9 Original quote: “Hay personas que tienen un concepto diferente de Matambú, lo que es reserva indígena. Piensan que, cuando escuchan reserva indígena, van a encontrar gente con taparrabos y todas esas cosas, ¿verdad? Entonces, tienen un concepto erróneo, por decirlo así, de lo que es reserva, y eso nos afecta Hay un estereotipo, y entonces eso es complicado cambiar, ¿verdad? Cada quien tiene sus

- pensamientos. Pero sería bueno darle cosas a la comunidad, que la hagan crecer o evolucionar, porque ahora todo va evolucionando y uno tiene que ir actualizándose, porque si no, uno se queda en lo que sabe. ¿Se queda atrás, verdad? Lo dejó el tren. Entonces, es importante ir haciendo cosas que vayan evolucionando, porque la población siempre va a ir creciendo, y sería algo genial tener un colegio acá, que pienso que es ahorita lo que sería un proyecto, digamos.... ¿Muy bueno, verdad?”
- 10 Original quote: “La juventud tiene energía, afinidad, nuevo pensamiento. A través de la juventud organizada debería hacerse el cambio. Aquí, si uno se levanta lo matan, y sólo el joven organizado con energía puede crear cambios.”
 - 11 Original quote: Investigador: “¿Y quién tendría la potestad de realizar estos cambios positivos? Interlocutor: “Creo que la propia juventud. Podrían ser ellos mismos de cambiar la realidad, los jóvenes que tienen una visión. La corrupción viene de arriba.”
 - 12 Original quote: “Las generaciones de ahora todo lo confunden facilmente porque desconocen su pasado. Le interesa solo el hoy, por medio de los sistemas tecnológicos.”
 - 13 Original quote: “La buena vida para ellos es vivir en comunidad. La casa de una familia Ngäbe es grande, es como núcleo interno donde va a haber más de un núcleo; pueden haber hasta cuatro o cinco núcleos, o sea, su papá, viviendo con sus hijos y sus hijos, con sus mujeres, y sus hijos también. En casas pueden haber de 8 a 15 personas, dentro de una sola casa. Y se juntan todos para trabajar la tierra, comparten lo que producen, o sea, son sociedades de economía familiar y solidaria, de economía justa, y se produce no para almacenar sino para comer, para todos.”
 - 14 Original quote: “Bueno, en mi caso yo considero que nosotros como tal debemos actuar primero individualmente. Primero cambiando nuestras costumbres, nuestros aspectos sociales individuales, para luego poder formar un grupo que efectúe los cambios. Porque al final, nosotros vivimos por sí, por sí solos. Podemos hacer el cambio, sí, es verdad, podemos cambiar nuestra perspectiva, nuestro pensamiento crítico, claro que sí. Pero si nosotros actuáramos de forma grupal, cooperativamente el cambio sería mayor y habría una mayor eficacia a la hora de tomar una decisión o el futuro.”
 - 15 Original quote: “Lo cultural para mí es algo muy importante. Y eso es algo que se está perdiendo mucho, porque, por ejemplo, yo sé tocar marimba. He invitado a muchas personas a que vengan a tocar marimba, y no les interesa. Y yo no les cobro. Entonces, ¿qué pasa? Algo que tal vez era en el pasado muy normal, ¿verdad? En el presente, ahorita eso ya no tiene la importancia que se daba en el pasado. ¿Qué pasa en el futuro? Se va a desaparecer.”
 - 16 Original quote: “Desarrollo es cuando vienen cosas nuevas a la comunidad, por ejemplo, construcción de hoteles y edificios, fuentes de trabajo. Pero lo negativo que esto trae es que a través del desarrollo, por ejemplo, lo poco que se ha dado acá: número uno no ha generado fuentes de empleo para los miembros de la comunidad, y lo otro trae cosas negativas como drogadicción, prostitución. Cuando hablamos del principal rubro que hay acá que es el turismo, trae todo eso lo malo. Para acá quizás el desarrollo, quizás debería ser manejado por los miembros de la comunidad, por los patronatos que tenemos y los líderes que hay que hacer.”
 - 17 Original quote: “Estos proyectos se programa desde el gobierno con el objetivo de desarrollo, sin la participación de las comunidades, de la gente de estas comunidades. Y la gente percibe esto como una amenaza porque serán desalojados de sus tierras. Y para un campesino lo mas importante es la tierra.”
 - 18 Original quote: “El dinero no nos hace mejores seres humanos, ni la prosperidad económica hace mejores, necesariamente mejores seres humanos. Sin embargo, la base material es necesaria. La gente tiene que comer, tiene que vestirse. Pero no solamente eso. Ese sentido de desarrollo es completamente equivocado.”

- 19 Original quote: “Bueno, el desarrollo como lo presentan las autoridades lo percibimos como un sistema de engaño para nosotros. Porque nosotros, en nuestra cosmovisión, tenemos nuestra propia visión de desarrollo o cómo quisiéramos que sea el desarrollo. Una de las cosas que decimos: si el turismo es atractivo para que venga la gente a turistar dentro de nuestras comunidades, entonces nos preguntamos: ¿por qué no nos apoyan en eso? Un turismo más ambiental, más comunitario, y no traer grandes complejos dentro de nuestras comunidades. Me imagino que al turista le gustaría estar alojado en una cabaña tradicional (un poco más económico) y comer lo que nosotros comemos y producimos. Ese es el verdadero turismo que podemos desarrollar dentro de nuestras comunidades, un turismo más compenetrado con la naturaleza, con la convivencia que nosotros como Garífunas tenemos con la naturaleza.”
- 20 Original quote: “Si nosotros queremos explotar la naturaleza, este recurso natural, el potencial natural del Mar Caribe, de las reservas naturales, al este y oeste y al sur, tenemos que mejorar y desarrollar la infraestructura. El proyecto Indura integró varios factores: el de sol y playa, el avistamiento de aves – el manglar, la reserva biológica e involucra el tema de las etnias. La comunidad Garífuna de Tornabé participa un 4% en los beneficios, se les pavimentó, tienen alcantarillado y les garantizó agua potable. Si usted va a Tornabé y a Triunfo de la Cruz, ve la diferencia, Tornabé está desarrollado y Triunfo de la Cruz está bien subdesarrollado. Entonces el proyecto Indura afectó positivamente esta aldea.”
- 21 Original quote: “Entonces la academia, las ONGs, yo incluido personalmente identificamos que eso se convierte en un conflicto por la naturaleza, porque es un conflicto de la naturaleza por la defensa de la naturaleza por las relaciones de quienes controlan la naturaleza. (...) Sin duda, ‘conflicto ambiental’ ese nombre se lo agrega a la academia y se lo agrega a los activistas. Los pueblos indígenas, los campesinos luchan por el territorio.”
- 22 Original quote: “Los Ngäbes se enfurecieron. Eso fue una cosa ... fue en 2012. (...) Yo creo que eso debe ser lo más doloroso, ver el río represado, ver el río ahí amontonado como una laguna sucia, que huele feo, que ya no es lo que era, va a ser esa pérdida. De esa relación que ellos trataron de cuidar por tanto tiempo, que es un sitio sagrado que era un sitio donde mantenían la cultura del pueblo. (...) Esas son cosas que es como la pérdida de un familiar. No, ... se murió, se murió, tu lo puedes añorar lo vas a doler toda la vida, lo vas a llevar en el corazón pero ya no esta. (...) Bueno, tal vez la misma sociedad se ha ido dejando sentir bien por tener cosas y es la misma educación que nos ha ido llevando a eso. La gente está formando a los niños para decirles que tienes que tener cosas.”
- 23 Original quote: “Los planes educativos curriculares no los construyen los pueblos originarios, es un modelo impuesto occidental que promueve ese concepto de desarrollo determinado por el mercado. Y el mercado determina la oferta laboral, y la oferta laboral determina los oficios. Entonces la educación es el vehículo, y la educación que reciben estos pueblos es la del mercado libre, de mano de obra barata para los *call center*, para los McDonald, para los ministerios o para la empresa privada. La educación vende ese concepto: eduquémonos para tener mejores cosas. (...) Allí se les cambia la visión que reciben en casa, porque muchos de estos niños sí saben qué es el buen vivir, aunque no lo definan.... Luego, cuando los jóvenes vienen a las universidades, un porcentaje muy alto de esos jóvenes no están regresando a los territorios. Van a ser transformados sus pensamientos en las universidades.”
- 24 However, there are exceptions. For example, in Guatemala, there are indigenous universities that seek to preserve and promote the culture and ancestral knowledge of indigenous peoples. Examples include the Ixil University, the Maya Kaqchikel University and the Intercultural Indigenous University (UII). These universities are characterized by their community focus, indigenous participation in management, and transmission of traditional knowledge.

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5 The discussion surrounding development and megaprojects in the National Press of Central America¹

Public debate is an important element in the creation of collective visions. The press plays an important role in this process as it reflects the opinions of different social sectors and groups, and at the same time influences their way of thinking. As Fishman (1983, p. 20) states, “To think that the news distorts or reflects reality is not useful, since ‘realities’ are constructed, and the news is part of the system that constructs them.” Language is never completely transparent or “innocent,” as it might appear from de Saussure’s classical semiology perspective. According to de Saussure, language is a series of codes transmitted and received via a fixed key (Santander, 2011, p. 208). Interpersonal communication, whether verbal, direct or mediated (for example, written), is always a social act characterized by the relationships between social actors, including power relations. News articles and journalism are no exception to this rule unless their influence and outcomes extend beyond a small social group. In other words, the media has the power to shape the consciousness of its audience and how they perceive reality (Sasińska-Klas, 2014, pp. 423–424).

The significance of this influence on society becomes apparent when considering that content analysis was first used in politics, not science (Sasińska-Klas, 2014, p. 424). Originally, content analysis was purely quantitative. Eventually, researchers chose to analyze content within a context that would allow them to understand the obtained results (Sasińska-Klas, 2014, p. 425). In critical discourse analysis, the researcher interprets the results within a specific social context. It is an increasingly popular tool among social researchers, even though it originally comes from linguistic studies.

The importance of discourse analysis may not be obvious at first; after all, we are talking about searching for “hidden” or submerged structures among manifest, accessible content. Why should it be subjected to further systematic analysis? The answer is that discourse reproduces and reinforces power relations in society. Its analysis can capture and reveal these relations, which is the first step in shaping them. In this sense, discourse analysis is not necessarily morally neutral. In fact, it often defends weaker and disempowered groups (Van Dijk, 2002, pp. 2–3), which is also a reason for criticism. Discourse analysis allows us to determine whether discourse is plural or slips into the “danger of the single story,” as Nigerian writer Adichie (2016) put it. She highlights the powerful

influence of dominant narratives emanating from the Global North that eliminate or replace our personal, community and indigenous stories.

Discourse analysis is not based on a single, recognized research procedure. What matters are the categories researchers look for in articles, images or videos, and the hypotheses they propose, as well as the consistency and internal coherence between theoretical and analytical categories (Santander, 2011, p. 217). Despite these difficulties, discourse analysis is becoming more popular (Sasińska-Klas, 2014), as is awareness of its influence on society. For this reason, discourse analysis of press articles was included in this study.

Method

When searching for texts on this topic, the keyword used to select articles was the exact name of a specific megaproject (for example, PH Reventazón or Mina La India), as megaprojects are associated with enormous resources (financial, human and natural) and raise high expectations. They have frequently been included in national or regional development plans, especially in the difficult economic and political conditions that have characterized Central America for decades (Aupi & Mantxo, 2019; Bulmer-Thomas, 1987; Flyvbjerg et al., 2003; Gorostiaga, 1975; Hirschman, 2015). As mentioned in Chapter 2, megaprojects are considered synonymous with development. However, they are much more often referred to in the press as something tangible, current and important. The word “development” itself does not necessarily appear in the analyzed articles; thus, the name of the specific megaproject can serve as a substitute.

The path toward conventional development has caused many Central American countries to avoid open debate on development, particularly regarding the development models that different social groups aspire to. There has been tacit acceptance that development is achieved through large-scale infrastructure investments, though the emergence of new megaprojects has repeatedly sparked debates and contradictions, generating different points of view and conflicts (for example, Ali, 2012; Quintana, 2014; Luna-Nemecio, 2019; Di Maddaloni et al., 2025). These debates occur at various levels, and the mass media is an important tool for presenting one’s views and convincing others through narrative. This can be even more effective when carried out by national newspapers. For this reason, we have focused on analyzing national newspapers’ coverage of megaprojects to examine the development discourse that arises in the context of constructing or operating a megainfrastructure.

As mentioned in Chapter 2, we selected six national newspapers with different historical origins for analysis. The digital versions of these newspapers are *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* in Nicaragua, *CRHoy* and *La Nación* in Costa Rica, and *La Prensa* and *Panamá América* in Panama. We chose these sources to maintain a balance between those representing different political sides or wings. Some are linked to the popular or leftist sector, while others are linked to conservative factions of society. To make the analysis more coherent, we

focused on four of the six selected megaprojects: The Barro Blanco hydroelectric plant in Panama, the Reventazón hydroelectric plant in Costa Rica, the La India mine in Nicaragua and the La Libertad mine in Nicaragua. We left the two tourism megaprojects aside because it is difficult to compare them with energy and mining projects, which have much more compact architectural structures and occupy less space. This selection and the inclusion of two sources from each country will provide a broad and comparative perspective of the problem. Of the 657 articles collected, 124 were selected for analysis. Twenty-seven of these articles were about Mina La India, twenty-three were about Mina La Libertad, thirty-four were about PH Reventazón and forty were about PH Barro Blanco (see Table 2.4 in Chapter 2).

Characteristics of selected newspapers

Nicaragua

In the case of Nicaragua, we have selected two newspapers: *La Prensa*, the country's oldest daily newspaper, and *El Diario*, which was founded in 1980.

Established in 1926, *La Prensa* is considered one of the newspapers in Central America with the longest editorial tradition. The most dramatic event in its history was the 1978 assassination of its director, Pedro Joaquín Chamorro, ordered by the dictator Anastasio Somoza (Salinas Maldonado, 2021). After this event, the newspaper was run by Chamorro's widow, Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. Barrios de Chamorro was elected president in 1990, becoming the first woman to hold this office in Nicaragua (Tulane University Libraries, 2020). Representing the views of Nicaragua's old political elites, *La Prensa* adopted a neoliberal discourse in the 1990s. Additionally, *La Prensa* has suffered numerous acts of repression by the Sandinista and Ortega governments, including repeated closures. After the government confiscated the publisher's assets in 2022, the editorial team fled to Costa Rica, where they continue to publish news online.

El Nuevo Diario occupies a special position in our data collection, as it has ceased publication. The closure of the magazine took place on September 27, 2019, and its articles are included in the analysis as it was an important source of information at the national level for many years, that is, since the 1980s. The daily was founded by a group of journalists who disagreed with the editorial line of the newspaper *La Prensa* (presented above), for which they had worked. They supported the Sandinista revolution of 1978–1979, and their vision of *El Nuevo Diario* was based on the principle of “creating a new journalism for the new man” (Medrano & Silva, 2019). Its main objective was “to be the voice of the voiceless,” which is why it was accused of advocating a sensationalist style (Salinas Maldonado, 2019). For years, the newspaper was considered left-leaning until it changed hands, but also critical of the Ortega government. In 2011, it was sold to a Nicaraguan financial group led by Ramiro Ortiz Mayorga, president of the Banco de la Producción

(Banpro) (Estepa, 2011; Salinas Maldonado, 2019). The new owner was interested in removing the bad image of Daniel Ortega's government from the pages of the newspaper. This situation continued until 2018, when Ortega bloodily repressed protests against the government, and the press in general was affected by repression and censorship, including *El Nuevo Diario* and *La Prensa* (Salinas Maldonado, 2019). For years, *El Nuevo Diario* had been published in print and online, but political repression and the severe economic crisis led to the decision to close the paper (Salinas Maldonado, 2019). In the last print edition, the editors declared:

We thank the Nicaraguan society for recognizing *El Nuevo Diario's* commitment to the truth and the development of the country.

(Salinas Maldonado, September 27, 2019,
Paragraph 31)²

Costa Rica

We have selected two important, but very different, sources of information for Costa Rican newspapers. *La Nación* and *CRHoy.com* are two of the most influential media outlets. Although both cover a wide range of topics, their approaches and political positions differ. *La Nación* is characterized by its conservatism and traditionalism, while *CRHoy.com* takes a digital, critical and accusatory approach.

Founded in 2012 by banker Leonel Baruch, *CRHoy.com* is a purely journalistic online medium. According to *CRHoy's* director, Silvia Ulloa, Baruch does not interfere in issues related to the newspaper's activities. *CRHoy.com* was the first national news site with a wide scope that was only online. The *CRHoy.com* portal subsists entirely on advertising and does not charge its users. The portal's motto is "What happens when it happens" (Estarque, 2021). In addition to providing quick access to information, *CRHoy.com* is committed to reporting and investigative journalism. In 2017, the newspaper won the Pío Viquez National Journalism Award for its report "El Cementazo," which addressed irregularities in cement imports from China (Salinas Maldonado, 2021). Regarding the newspaper's approach, Director Silvia Ulloa said:

It is an independent and inclusive editorial line that supports small and medium-sized entrepreneurs, strengthens private entrepreneurship, and, above all, takes a combative stance. For example, if the editorial staff believes that something should be denounced, they denounce it. Even if the President of the Republic calls to complain to the owner, the owner says, "I have nothing to do with that. Talk to Silvia."

(Estarque, May 12, 2021)³

Founded in 1946, *La Nación* represents the old elites of the country. Initially, it was financed by 188 investors from the agricultural and industrial sectors,

most of whom were lawyers. Each person could only purchase one share because independence was a core value for them (Céspedes & Mayorga, 2020). On the eve of the 1948 Civil War, *La Nación* found it difficult not to take a position, pretending to be anti-communist. In practice, however, the newspaper defended communist activists who had received harsh sentences and advocated for the legalization of the Communist Party in 1975 (Céspedes & Mayorga, 2020). In 1995, *La Nación* launched its online version. Currently, the newspaper is owned by Grupo Nación, whose main shareholders are members of the Jiménez family. The family also owns shares in the industrial, service and real estate sectors (Ramírez, 2019). Grupo Nación also owns *La Teja* magazine. While *La Teja* does not cover political issues, *La Nación* claims to be the voice of the Costa Rican people, including national and transnational corporations (Ramírez, 2019).

Panama

In the case of Panama, we have chosen two of the country's most important newspapers, *Panama America* and *La Prensa*, which differ significantly in their approach and political stance. *La Prensa* is younger, and its editorial line stands for liberal and critical thinking, in contrast to *Panama America*, which is much more conservative and represents the country's political elites.

Panama America belongs to the EPASA Group (La Editora Panamá América S.A.), a company that also owns other newspapers in Panama. The group was owned by the Arias family until 2010, when it was sold to Panamanian businessmen Alberto Eskenazi and Henry Mizrachi (Telemetro, 2010). In 2012, President Ricardo Martinelli and his family acquired a 30% stake in the EPASA Group (Rodríguez, 2021). The history of the newspaper dates back to 1925, when it began to be published as *The Panama American*, directed at the *zoneítas* (US citizens residing in the Canal Zone). In 1929, it began to be published in Spanish. Shortly after the coup d'état of 1968, *Panama America* suspended its operations to resume them in 1990, after the military intervention of the United States in the country the previous year. Since 1995, it has been available as an internet portal (Top-brands, pp. 56–57). *Panama America* reaches 60,000 daily readers in its printed version and 133,000 monthly digital users. According to its premises, it is based on freedom of expression and independence (Rodríguez, 2021).

On the other hand, *La Prensa* began publishing in 1980, founded by Roberto Eisenmann Jr., who had returned to the country a year earlier after a forced exile in the United States (corprensa.com; Araúz & Pizzurno, 1996, p. 581). The harassment continued, however, and the newspaper and its staff “were subjected to intimidation and vandalism during both the Torrijos and Noriega regimes” (Buckman, 1996, p. 12), leading to its temporary suspension in 1984. In 1986, Roberto Eisenmann Jr. became the victim of a smear campaign and was declared a “traitor to the nation” by the Noriega government, which led to the closure of *La Prensa* in 1987 (corprensa.com). The

newspaper resumed its activities in 1990. Since then, one of its main areas of work has been journalistic investigations uncovering cases of corruption among politicians. This stance provoked numerous lawsuits against it, mainly for defamation (Buckman, 1996, pp. 19–20; Nalvarte, 2020). *La Prensa* has more than 1,200 shareholders (employees of the newspaper), and each can own a maximum of 0.5% of the shares. The members of the board of directors are not allowed to hold public office, and the income comes exclusively from the sale of the newspaper in printed form, its consumption on the internet and advertising in order to maintain its independence (corprensa.com).

Megaprojects as a topic of debate in the national press

To obtain information about the vision of development, it was essential to analyze the discourse on megaprojects. First and foremost, the focus was placed on the informational context of megaprojects because it can shape the perception of these investments. The news topics in which the analyzed megaprojects appear demonstrate significant diversity. In each case, the various social groups' different positions came to light. In terms of frequency, protests against the investment were mentioned most often (18%) in the analyzed articles, followed by the progress of the investment (13%), financial aspects of

Table 5.1 Topics of selected informative articles

<i>What is the subject of the article regarding megaprojects?</i>	<i>% of total articles analyzed</i>
Demonstrations/protests	18
Investment progress	13
Financial aspects of the project	10
Conflicts	8
Development of the mining/export sector	7
Important meetings	6
Work stoppage	6
Expert opinions	6
The builder/company and its achievements (praise)	6
Poverty/child labor	4
Energy/prices/sources	3
The builder/entrepreneur (neutral opinion)	3
Accidents	2
Agreements	2
Socioeconomic research/analysis	2
Damage caused by the work	2
Situation of the mining sector in Nicaragua	1
Other topics	2
Total number of articles analyzed (base)	124

Source: Own elaboration.

the project (10%), the context of the conflict (8%) and other issues, as shown in Table 5.1.

In general, the identified themes relate to the following general categories:

- Construction progress and its impact, including project progress and set-backs (successive phases, financial details, interruption and resumption of work, meetings and agreements);
- Social issues related to the construction works, such as protests and conflicts, poverty and damage caused;
- Rationale and justification for the construction of the works and general considerations (development of a particular economic sector in the country, energy sources and so on).

As we explained in Chapter 1, the crisis is the driving force of the debate on development paths. For this reason, protests and conflicts are the most common theme, especially in the case of the La India mine and the Barro Blanco hydroelectric plant cases. For the latter, this is especially evident in articles from 2016 to 17, when social struggles in Panama against the construction were at their peak. These articles address different manifestations of the conflicts and protests. Thus, readers can imagine the megaproject as a source of problems and tensions.

Isabel de Saint Malo de Alvarado, the vice president and head of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, has been appointed by the Cabinet Council to lead a committee traveling to the Ngöbe Buglé region next week. The committee will attempt to resolve the conflict sparked by the construction of the Barro Blanco hydroelectric project.

*(La Prensa, Panama, January 20, 2015)*⁴

The Panamanian press informs readers about the ongoing debate between supporters and opponents of the Barro Blanco hydropower project, which takes various forms, from roundtable discussions to violent demonstrations. An analysis of the actors involved in this conflict will shed further light on the dynamics of the issue.

In the case of the Nicaraguan press, the La India mine conflict is covered almost exclusively when it is accompanied by violent protests.

They [the protesters] are meeting today with representatives of the mining company Condor Gold to discuss the current situation on the ground, the company announced in a communiqué. With this initiative ... they want to break the punctual blockade of the company's work activities by a group of residents of the communities surrounding the areas where the projects are being carried out.

*(El Nuevo Diario, August 15, 2017)*⁵

Journalistic coverage of the Mina La Libertad mining project in Nicaragua paints a positive picture of the project's development and that of the mining sector as a whole. Countless warm words are expressed about the project's contractor. This is due to several conditions: the low level of opposition to the investment and a community that has linked its economic activity to mining, including artisanal mining, for many decades; government policies that take advantage of this low-conflict project to promote foreign investment and the extractive model. This view appears mainly in *El Nuevo Diario*:

This program has been developed since 2010 by the mining company in collaboration with Inatec and the mayor's office, with the aim of promoting entrepreneurship through the development of skills with formal training.

(*El Nuevo Diario*, February 4, 2014)⁶

In this way, it is reported that the project developer works in harmony with the environment and also assumes the role of service provider for the residents of the area.

The Costa Rican case, the Reventazón hydroelectric plant, is presented mainly from a technical and financial point of view. To learn about the project's financial aspects, we will find factual articles written by experts, as well as more general considerations about the energy sources Costa Rica should use and their respective prices. The following quote is quite representative in this regard:

For example, the storm Alma in 2018 had to do with a part of the cost overrun that Pirrís meant, the same as the weather problems with Reventazón. In both cases; however, there are also overpricing associated with mismanagement.

(*CRHoy*, April 3, 2019)⁷

In the case of the Reventazón hydropower plant, there has been an attempt to frame the project within a broader scope, particularly with regard to national energy development. However, discussions about it usually consist of detailed analyses of the project's shortcomings and deficiencies during construction and implementation. The technical nature of the debate is also due to Costa Rica's policy of building a green identity for the country since the 1990s (Granados Solís & Madrigal Ramírez, 2014, p. 6).

Clearly, most of the debate is characterized by a dichotomy in which the megaproject is either accepted or rejected as a development proposal and vision. While not directly related to the concept of development, we believe this duality stems from the contrasting visions of development within Central American societies. These societies coexist with both environmentally friendly proposals, exemplified by Costa Rica, and extractive practices, as seen in the

Table 5.2 Topics that appear in the articles on megaprojects – breakdown by project

What is the subject of the article?	Megaproject			
	<i>La India Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>La Libertad Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>PH Reventazón, Costa Rica (%)</i>	<i>PH Barro Blanco, Panama (%)</i>
Demonstrations/protests	43	4	0	23
Investment progress	7	30	9	10
Financial aspects of the project	0	4	35	0
Conflicts	0	0	0	26
Development of the mining/export sector	10	26	0	0
Important meetings	10	4	0	10
Work stoppage	3	0	0	18
Expert opinions	0	0	15	5
The builder/company and its achievements (praise)	0	26	3	0
Poverty/child labor	13	4	0	0
Energy/prices/sources	0	0	12	0
The builder/entrepreneur (neutral opinion)	3	0	9	0
Accidents	0	0	6	0
Agreements	0	0	0	5
Socioeconomic research/analysis	7	0	0	0
Damage caused by the work	0	0	3	3
Situation of the mining sector in Nicaragua	3	0	0	0
Other topics	0	0	9	0
Total number of items (base)	30	23	34	39

Source: Own elaboration.

Nicaraguan economic project. The diversity and heterogeneity of the issues raised in relation to the different megaprojects are striking (see Table 5.2).

In this way, the dominance of the economic, business and quantitative approach, as well as the social approach focused on sensationalism and conflict, becomes apparent. These differences are reflected among different newspapers, even at the national level.

- Compared to *El Nuevo Diario*, *La Prensa* (Nicaragua) focuses more on conflicts and social problems (poverty, child labor) and less on the mining sector. In contrast to *El Nuevo Diario*, the language used toward companies, contractors and investors is far less friendly;

- *CRHoy* (Costa Rica) deals mostly with financial issues related to the investments in the Reventazón PH. It is not common to find articles by experts dealing directly with issues related to the megaproject, unlike *La Nación*, which presents the issues with more complexity and in-depth analysis;
- With regard to the Panamanian Barro Blanco project, *La Prensa* (Panama) takes a sociopolitical approach and focuses on conflicts and agreements, while *Panamá América* takes a more technocratic view and reports extensively on issues relating to the interruption and resumption of the construction of the hydroelectric plant.

The selected megaprojects in the journals are characterized by one-sided opinions or presentations of various perspectives and voices on the subject. Thus, we are dealing with more or less pluralistic media. The type of narrative varies considerably depending on the newspaper and the megaproject. In the case of the La India and La Libertad mines in Nicaragua, for example, the articles are generally biased and present a single point of view, especially in *El Nuevo Diario*, which aligns with the Nicaraguan authorities. This is due to restrictions on freedom of expression in Nicaragua. Progress on the projects, development of the mining sector and foreign investment are usually presented in a favorable light.

Information about the other megaprojects differs among the newspapers. Regarding the PH Reventazón, a certain balance is evident: the straightforward articles criticize the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), while the discursive articles feature the ICE defending itself.

The information dedicated to PH Barro Blanco is characterized by the dominance of a polyphony. This is due not only to the democratic environment in which the Panamanian media operate, but also to the topics they cover. While the conflict is the dominant theme in news about PH Barro Blanco, the voices of all social actors are taken into account in the information that presents the origin and evolution of the situation.

The tone of the news is a critical component of the message content, and its nature can be classified as either negative, positive or neutral. In an effort to assess the tone and nature of the articles relating to the author's *opinion on megaprojects*, a coding system was devised. This system employed a scale ranging from one to five, with three denoting a neutral stance toward the project under discussion, one signifying a distinctly negative evaluation and five indicating a distinctly positive one.⁸ The distribution of grades, taking into account all texts, is normal; that is, middle grades are the most common, while extreme grades are the rarest. According to our assumptions and the newspapers' profiles, the most favorable source for the mining megaprojects is *El Nuevo Diario* from Nicaragua. The other newspapers take a balanced position toward the megaprojects, with the exception of the Costa Rican case, where *CRHoy* and *La Nación* present PH Reventazón in different ways. This is probably due to the greater presence of experts in the second case. Finally, for

both Reventazón and Barro Blanco, the average ratings of these projects are neutral, despite the fact that the themes of the narrative on PH Reventazón are mainly based on the criticism of ICE (Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad) as a contractor, while in the case of PH Barro Blanco the theme of social and political conflict dominates. This suggests that infrastructure projects are frequently “lost sight of,” as the narrative focuses on the conflict surrounding the project or one of the actors involved in the events. This implies that the project is less likely to be evaluated based on the reasons for its existence and its importance to society.

However, it is crucial to acknowledge that the conflict and the social actors presented in the media may also contain an important message about the causes and consequences of the megaproject, including the vision for the future and development. Consequently, the present analysis also examines the extent to which diverse perspectives, particularly those from underrepresented groups, are incorporated into news media content. Ngozi Adichie (2016) instructs readers of cultural texts (a category that can also include press releases) on the risks associated with the predominance of a “single story” (representing a single point of view) in discourse. If news articles were to fulfill the mandate of providing a more diverse representation of voices and opinions, they would include multiple points of view on the topic under discussion without commenting on the validity of any of these points of view (Table 5.3).

The texts about megaprojects differ in terms of the main subject, pluralism of voices and the evaluation of the project. Interestingly, however, it is possible to identify a fairly narrow group of social actors who appear in all the texts and have different relationships with one another. These actors are:

- Community/society;
- Government/public institutions;
- Entities (public or private) responsible for the construction of the megaproject.

Table 5.3 Perspectives of the various social actors

Whose perspective is presented in the article (all stakeholders)?	
Government/public institutions (%)	71
The community (%)	52
The builder/entrepreneur (%)	45
Journalist/comment (%)	27
Experts (%)	12
NGO (%)	6
International organizations (%)	6
Total number (base)	124

Source: Own elaboration.

They represent the most important socioeconomic forces: Political power, economic power (entrepreneurs, private and state-owned companies, multinational corporations) and society. Experts, international organizations and NGOs also appear repeatedly in the articles analyzed. It is worth noting that the three main social actors mentioned above are the most frequently present stakeholders in the case of spatial conflicts (see Kurniaty, 2014; Furmankiewicz et al., 2019; Hendra et al., 2023).

As demonstrated in Table 5.4, the data indicates a preponderance of the public sector perspective in the Reventazón project, with other actors being negligible. This discrepancy may be attributed to the fact that in Costa Rica, the public sector also functions as the primary developer of projects, with strategic national sectors, such as energy, being under state control. Notably, in PH Barro Blanco's news coverage, the voices of the government and the community are similarly prominent. In the case of Nicaraguan projects, the investor is the most outstanding figure in the articles, particularly in the narrative concerning Mina La Libertad, as evidenced by its predominant presence in *El Nuevo Diario*. This positioning of the private investor may come as a surprise, because in a country where the government controls the media, one would expect a stronger explicit presence of the political (state) authorities in the discourse. However, this is not the case here, and the analysis of their image and perception will shed more light on the mutual relations between the social actors.

Table 5.4 Social actors whose perspectives appear in the articles – breakdown by megaproject

Type of stakeholder	Megaproject			
	<i>La India Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>La Libertad Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>PH Reventazón, Costa Rica (%)</i>	<i>PH Barro Blanco, Panama (%)</i>
Government/public sector	43	61	85	85
The community	54	39	15	90
The builder/entrepreneur	46	91	30	30
Journalist/commentary	18	57	36	8
Experts	14	0	30	3
NGO	21	0	0	3
International organizations	11	4	3	5
Total number of items (base)	28	23	33	40

Source: Own elaboration.

Government and public sector image

The public sector, which is usually represented by the government and public administration, has different relationships with the companies and enterprises responsible for the construction of megaprojects. In all the articles analyzed, the public sector generally takes an active stance by becoming involved as a facilitator or promoter of the project. It also often becomes the object of criticism regarding the investments. However, there are exceptions to this rule.

In the case of the PH Reventazón project, the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE), the construction company responsible for the project and a public entity, is mainly portrayed as being criticized for the project's lack of transparency. This perspective is evident primarily in the newspaper *CRHoy*. In contrast, the Costa Rican newspaper *La Nación* perceives ICE as an institution that promotes the project and seeks dialogue with the local community (Table 5.5).

A report was released this week by the Controller's Office on the entity's mismanagement of the Reventazón hydroelectric project. 'ICE's decision-making process, which lacks the necessary studies and foresight, confirms that it prioritizes its own interests over the country's reality and strategy,' said the deputy.

(*CRHoy*, January 10, 2020)⁹

ICE does its job and fulfills its duty. It does not stand still or hold back. It adapts, becomes more efficient and grows stronger. It has a clear vision and has been able to overcome difficult times and storms, whether real or imagined. It is constructing several projects, including the Reventazón Hydroelectric Project, which will have more than 300 MW of power and a new regulating reservoir that will begin operating in 2016.

(*La Nación*, Costa Rica, October 6, 2014)¹⁰

Media coverage of the Reventazón project was dominated by the debate about ICE's modus operandi. The fact that a public institution was entrusted with implementing the project allowed the political discourse on the hydropower project to continue. This project had the potential to become a tool for political struggle, as many social groups pointed out. However, there was also room for a broad debate under the conditions of democracy and freedom of expression that Costa Rica guarantees. The most apparent problem was the details of the project's implementation and its legitimacy.

The image of the Panamanian government in news about the Barro Blanco hydropower project is characterized by constant controversy and the search for dialogue. Three main actors are involved in the journalistic debate: Local society, the government and the contractor. *La Prensa* and *Panamá América* portray the government as a mediator and consensus builder, only characterizing it differently in a few cases.

Table 5.5 The image of the government and the public sector, depending on the megaprojects implemented

<i>What is the image of the government presented in the newspapers?</i>	<i>Megaproject</i>			
	<i>La India Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>La Libertad Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>PH Reventazón, Costa Rica (%)</i>	<i>PH Barro Blanco, Panama (%)</i>
Wants to negotiate, dialogue, seeks dialogue	6	8	15	47
It is criticized	0	0	56	11
It is in favor of the work, promotes it, supports the company	47	50	9	13
Seeks development, reports economic growth	47	50	9	0
Not transparent	6	0	27	0
Neutral, only mentioned	6	17	15	5
Disagree with the community	0	0	0	24
It is harming the community	0	0	6	11
Fight against communities, prevents protests	18	0	0	3
Behaves well, helps	0	0	6	0
Indifferent to poverty	6	0	0	0
Total number of articles analyzed (base)	17	12	34	38

Source: Own elaboration.

The Cabinet also announced that the United Nations Development Program and several churches will be invited to participate in the dialogue to resolve this conflict, which has caused the mobilization of thousands of Panamanians to the banks of the Tabasará River, which will be dammed for the operation of the project.

(*La Prensa*, Panama, January 20, 2015)¹¹

The journalist Pastor E. Durán Espino criticized the government's actions. The following quote is from a journalistic commentary – it is worth quoting,

but it should be emphasized that this position only appeared once in all the texts analyzed.

According to President Juan Carlos Varela, there is a “permanent” dialogue with the technical committee and the plant will not start operating until the dialogue is concluded and a consensus is reached. This reminds us of the tactic used during the military dictatorship to build the hydro-electric plant on the Bayano River. This tactic consisted of holding meetings with the leaders of the communities, in order to close the floodgates so that the reservoir would begin to fill. Thus, peasants and indigenous people had to leave their places to avoid drowning. This tactic worked well for the military, because the dam was finished in 1976, and seven communities disappeared.

(*Panama America*, June 12, 2016)¹²

Regarding the La India and La Libertad mining projects in Nicaragua, the reader is presented with an opinion that differs from previous cases and portrays the government positively. The government supported these two projects and the companies involved to promote the country’s economic development and export growth. According to the analyzed articles, the relationship between the government and the contractors is characterized by perfect harmony. However, it can be observed that the foreign investor dominates in journalistic discourse, which is part of the public sphere. The government’s presence is blurred, and its activities are not emphasized. The analysis of texts reveals that the government is an “invisible” actor, so readers are unaware of its activities. In general, the articles focus on general considerations regarding the country’s national economic development and mining sector.

The mining industry, managed responsibly and sustainably, is necessary for Nicaragua’s economic advancement because it attracts foreign direct investment, generates well-paid employment and promotes the development of municipalities that benefit from taxes and social investment. However, some environmental organizations have been determined to prevent the work of mining companies, as has happened to Condor Gold in the La India mine area.

(*El Nuevo Diario*, August 14, 2017)¹³

It is important to note that the government is rarely mentioned by name. This may be due to the newspapers’ caution and the fact that the entire narrative was written from the government’s perspective. Therefore, the government is not only “invisible,” but also a “hidden narrator” expressing itself through the press. This creates a risky situation, as its position is presented as “objective truth.” The image of the government that emerges from *La Prensa* articles

is nuanced and portrayed in a neutral or critical manner. The newspaper also reports on conflicts and social protests that the government does not support.

Once again, the Government used the National Police to prevent expressions of social claims, as happened yesterday in some departments of the country to prevent the mobilization to Managua of people who intended to attend the march promoted by the so-called National Environmentalist Movement against Industrial Mining.

(*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, December 17, 2017)¹⁴

Image of the local society

Local society is a collective actor, but we often oversimplify its image due to its immense diversity. In the cases studied, the inhabitants of the areas directly affected by the megaprojects were active social actors, as they are generally portrayed in the press. Descriptions of their passivity or approval of the investments are less common. One example of an exception is the articles on Mina La Libertad, in which the community is portrayed as small, passive, poor and grateful for the project's benefits.

Víctor Martínez, head of the Community Relations area of the mining company B2Gold, highlighted: "We are creating new spaces and development opportunities for the communities. Today we are benefiting the people of El Castillo, but we have already taken this program and its benefits to other rural areas of La Libertad, such as Betulia, Timulí, Las Praderas, Arenas I and others."

(*El Nuevo Diario*, February 4, 2014)¹⁵

At the same time, the community protest is presented as an act of ingratitude while stigmatizing groups that do not appreciate the "benefits of mining."

Martínez adds that since the conflict began, they have been making house to house visits with the inhabitants of the village and added that the demonstrations not only limit the company, but have also interrupted daily work of artisanal miners (*guiriseros*), transporters and the villagers themselves who cannot circulate normally, in addition to affecting the health of children with the burning of tires and behavior that puts the safety of other inhabitants at risk.

(*El Nuevo Diario*, August 11, 2017)¹⁶

The narrative is different in the case of Mina La India. Here, the community is portrayed as an active actor that claims its rights. The Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa* highlights the community's suffering in the face of the project, their poor living conditions and probable threats. However, the newspaper avoids openly supporting the local society.

The Movimiento Nacional Ambientalista Frente a la Minería (Monafmi) celebrated that the International Finance Corporation (IFC) will withdraw as an investor in a mining project promoted by Condor Gold, which according to advocates has generated intense conflict and violence in the Santa Cruz de la India community, in León.

(*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, January 2, 2020)¹⁷

Urrutia and the other three minors usually gather in the cool of the early morning in their community, walk for about two hours to enter the heat of the mine's interior, only to return exhausted with their loads of stones at dusk.

(*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, November 21, 2004)¹⁸

It should be noted that both dailies address the problems of the local community. They are also concerned with this social actor while taking a different stance on the megaproject (Table 5.6).

In the case of the Barro Blanco, a similar discrepancy cannot be observed. The local community – in this case, representatives of the Ngäbe Bugle¹⁹ people – is portrayed as an active actor who protests and fights. Sometimes these attitudes are evaluated negatively (especially in *Panama America*), or it is

Table 5.6 Image of the local community according to the analyzed megaprojects^a

<i>How do the newspapers present the local community?</i>	<i>Megaproject</i>		
	<i>La India Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>La Libertad Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>PH Barro Blanco, Panama (%)</i>
Protest/struggle	38	0	43
Opposes the work	5	0	43
Suffering from the work	19	0	25
Benefits from the work	10	72	3
Dialogue, negotiate	10	0	23
Passive, not an active player	0	11	5
It is poor	24	6	0
Not internally bonded	5	6	10
He behaved badly, "ungrateful"	14	0	5
There are several points of view	14	6	0
It has its dignity	0	0	8
Support the work	5	0	0
Total number of articles analyzed (base)	21	18	40

^aDue to insufficient data on PH Reventazón, this case was omitted.

Source: Own elaboration.

claimed that it is not a cohesive community, but that it is riddled with internal conflicts (especially in *La Prensa*):

For two consecutive days, the Ngöbe-Buglé natives have clashed with riot police officers of the National Police (PN) at the Barro Blanco project site. They warned that they could call for new protest actions against the construction of the hydroelectric power plant this Sunday. After a new confrontation last night between the indigenous people and police, the natives decided to retreat to the mountainous areas surrounding the project. They had tried to enter the area by force to set up a camp on the banks of the Tabasará River.

(*La Prensa*, Panamá, May 20, 2012)²⁰

According to Arias, the act was carried out by natives who accessed on foot through the left bank of the Tabasará River, and entered the area of the hydroelectric plant through an “inhospitable” road where there are no police or surveillance agents, where they managed to burn a tractor belonging to the contractor Cobra “They must know it perfectly well to be able to transit at that hour. That is a very inhospitable area and it is practically hills,” detailed the representative.

(*Panama America*, March 16, 2012)²¹

It is worth revisiting the subject of the Reventazón hydroelectric power plant and asking the following question: Why is the community, an important stakeholder, so underrepresented in articles about the plant compared to other cases, such as Barro Blanco? This situation is due to various factors, one of which is the low level of social opposition to the project. Another factor is the state’s strong presence, as it presents the project as an indispensable element of its policy to build a just, solidary and ecologically committed society. This is also reflected in the media’s narrative, which aligns with the state’s policy. A third factor relates to hopes of economic development that the Reventazón hydropower plant has raised in the local community. The project was built between the cities of San José and Siquirres, where the closure of the railroad line to the Caribbean had created an economic deficit. It was hoped that the plant would replace the economic activity that the railroad had generated in the urban peripheries with a new, environmentally sustainable activity. A situation much closer to that of Barro Blanco occurred in Costa Rica with the construction of the Diquis hydroelectric plant,²² which was planned to be the largest in Central America. However, this project was suspended due to strong opposition from indigenous peoples and the environmental movement. Today (2025), during Rodrigo Chaves Robles’ presidential term, the project is being revived.

Image of the project investor/contractor

The origin, legal nature and status of the investor (entrepreneur) or contractor vary significantly among the megaprojects studied in each Central American country. As mentioned above, the Nicaraguan press portrays investors and construction companies as positive actors contributing to national development and the mining sector. These entities' obedience to the rules, responsibility and high-quality operations are highlighted. In the municipality of La Cruz de La India, where the mine is located, the investor and entrepreneur at the time of the study was Condor Gold, a British company that specializes in exploiting gold deposits in Central America. In its reports, the company emphasizes that it operates with all necessary authorizations and in a transparent manner (Condor Gold, 2022). The La Libertad mine, located in the Chontales department, has been managed by the Canadian company Calibre Mining. Calibre Mining emphasizes that it is a responsible partner focused on sustainability (Calibre Mining, 2022). *El Nuevo Diario* promoted a positive image of both companies:

[about the Mina La India] One case that emerged from the search for suppliers is that of nine entrepreneurs who have been working in a sewing workshop since 2012. We created a sewing workshop, at that time we had no one to create bags to send the samples to the laboratory. We gave them the seed capital and today we have a team of nine business women from the area who work to supply us. In addition to the jobs, the company has involved community members through three areas of support: education, health, water and sanitation. In addition to the requirements of national legislation, the company complies with international standards that promote closer ties with the community.

(*El Nuevo Diario*, July 21, 2017)²³

[about Mina La Libertad] B2Gold's president and chief executive officer, Clive Johnson, noted that this effort will strengthen the company's 10 years of responsible gold exploration, development and production work in Nicaragua: "We are excited to become a significant shareholder in Calibre and, through our participation on its advisory board and board of directors, we look forward to assisting Calibre's experienced executive team and the combined B2Gold and Calibre management team in Nicaragua," Johnson said.

(*El Nuevo Diario*, July 2, 2019)²⁴

These quotes emphasize the role of foreign investment, considering that companies from Western countries guarantee high-quality standards and social responsibility. The reader can therefore interpret that it is the nature of these companies to work for the social benefit. *La Prensa* gives more varied assessments of the project promoters. It often reports neutrally on the progress of

the construction without going into the conflicts between the foreign investors and the local population. It also does not attack the project's contractors but limits itself to pointing this out:

Víctor Martínez, head of community relations of Condor Gold, explained that the blockade made by the members of the Santa Cruz de la India Community Movement to prevent the passage of the company's machinery for exploration processes, not only generates delays in the company's activity plan, but also puts the jobs of 141 people at risk. However, the protest in rejection of the company will continue, assured community leader Olman Salazar, who requests that the company withdraw from the territory.

(*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, August 10, 2017)²⁵

In the case of the PH Barro Blanco contractor, Genisa (Generadora del Istmo S.A),²⁶ the situation is different. This company does not appear very often in the articles. Despite the strong conflict generated, for which Genisa was responsible, information about the local community's struggle against the government appears more frequently. We can deduce that Genisa is invisibilized by the press in order to be able to continue with its work, despite the unfavorable circumstances. However, if the company was mentioned, the most common thing was to present it as an undesirable actor, which does not respect the rules (for example, environmental ones), and that the authorities want to "get it out of the way," compensate it and hand the work over to a new entrepreneur. Obviously, investors and contractors objected to these accusations and pointed out that stopping work was illegal:

The company Generadora del Istmo, S.A. (Genisa), informs the public that the Government's decision to suspend the work of filling the reservoir and completion of the Barro Blanco Hydroelectric Project, 99.9% completed, by order of the National Authority of Public Services (ASEP) on June 9, is against the company's recommendations and good judgment; it also goes against the legal security in the country. Genisa also informs the citizens and nearby communities of the enormous risks incurred by the National Government in keeping the project unfinished. The risks increase as of this month, with the beginning of the rainy season, when there are maximum flash floods of the Tabasará River, as a result of the incessant rains.

(*Panamá América*, May 20, 2016)²⁷

We can also note that a slightly positive image of the company can be derived from the information provided by *Panama America*. This is probably due to the characteristics of the newspaper, which, as we mentioned at the beginning of this chapter, is linked to the liberal economy in its political approach and represents the country's political elites (Table 5.7).

Table 5.7 Image of the project contractor – breakdown by newspaper

<i>How is the investor presented?</i>	<i>The newspaper</i>					
	<i>El Nuevo Diario, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>La Prensa, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>CRHoy, Costa Rica (%)</i>	<i>La Nación, Costa Rica (%)</i>	<i>La Prensa, Panama (%)</i>	<i>Panamá América, Panama (%)</i>
Construction company = public entity	0	0	89	94	0	0
It does very good work, contributes to the development	46	29	0	0	0	8
Operates with high-quality standards	36	14	0	0	10	31
It is good for the community	43	14	0	0	10	8
Neutral	11	21	0	0	10	23
Is not well regarded/wanted to be dismissed	0	0	0	0	30	31
Continues with the work	4	14	0	0	10	15
Is in conflict with the community	0	29	0	0	0	8
Does not operate according to the law/does not comply	0	0	0	0	40	8
Seeks dialogue/ seeks dialogue with the community	11	0	0	0	10	0
Threatens the community, harms it	4	7	0	0	0	0
Others	0	0	11	6	0	0
Total number of articles analyzed (base)	28	14	9	18	10	13

Source: Own elaboration.

Interrelation of the main actors in the narrative on megaprojects

The three main actors – the public sector (government), the corporate sector (promoters and entrepreneurs) and society – are represented by the actions and messages they send out. The interactions between these actors, as presented by the examined newspapers, are also interesting to analyze.

The most complex model of these relationships can be observed in Barro Blanco. In this case, all actors are active, particularly the government and the local community. Representatives of the Ngäbe Bugle people have shown more determination by driving protest actions and calling on the government to stop the project. The government, for its part, is trying to defuse the situation but is not doing more than that. The relationship between the government and the project contractor is not discussed in the articles. Rather, the contractor is seen denying the allegations and barely interacting with the local community and the government. One could say that the contractor is shying away from dialogue and negotiations.

Of the cases examined, the situation of the PH Reventazón is unique. The national press almost exclusively emphasizes the public sector, represented by ICE and other political actors linked to Parliament and various democratic institutions. ICE has been openly criticized in the media, and the institution has regularly spoken out in its own defense. The most important and frequent objection concerns the project's financial feasibility and profitability risks. The extensive discussion about the realization of the project, energy prices, the quantity and conditions of energy production and its sources is due to Costa Ricans' great interest in green energy. Technical, financial and procedural issues, as well as the social context and the voice of the surrounding communities, were relegated to the background.

The relationship between the social actors associated with the Mina La Libertad project is quite asymmetrical: According to the information presented in the press, the project contractor stimulates the mining sector and contributes to the development of the Nicaraguan economy. On the other hand, the texts report that the government supports these activities, even if the narrative has a hidden character. At the same time, the local community is portrayed as a passive beneficiary of the social and economic development programs. Similar relationships between the foreign investor and the government can also be observed in the journalistic discourse on Mina La India. However, in this case, the picture of the local community is richer and more diverse. Thanks to the information, the reader also obtains an image of the antagonistic relationship between the community and the entrepreneur supported by the government. *El Nuevo Diario*, favorable to the government, believes that the communities have shown themselves to be irresponsible and ungrateful through their protests. *La Prensa*, which is more impartial, took the view that it was a conflict situation and that the community was the injured party.

Development in the media discourse on megaprojects

The occurrence of development in press narratives mentioning megaprojects is not obvious. In our case, we are interested not only in analyzing the definition of development, but also in its goals and how it is used. One example is its propagandistic use to mobilize citizens for the ideas of the ruling party or government, or to achieve the goals of investors. “Development” as a general objective of a nation or region can justify government actions in the political and economic spheres and even restrictions on rights and freedoms. Development is often equated with the path to greater economic and technological progress. Improving the quality of life is presented as a development objective.

Although megaprojects generate significant discussion, there is no direct reference to what development is, except in the case of Nicaragua. This confirms the validity of using megaprojects as the physical and discursive proxy of development. Anchoring the theme of development with that of megaprojects facilitates studying it in the selected cases. This is especially true given that territorial and regional development plans have little historical trajectory in Central America, and a national political debate on the subject only began in the 1980s and 1990s (Czerny & Dembicz, 2023). Under these circumstances, most projects were based on the assumption that foreign direct investment and major infrastructure projects were synonymous with and the driving force of social and economic development. To proceed with the analysis, “development” was coded whenever it had a relevant meaning. It was excluded from the coding if “development” referred to the course of events or the performance of a particular action (Tables 5.8 and 5.9).²⁸

The results of the quantitative analysis show that the word development was used most frequently in Nicaraguan news articles dealing with mining projects,

Table 5.8 Mention of the term “development” in the articles – breakdown by newspaper

*Multiple use of the word
development*

<i>Source – name of newspaper</i>	<i>Media</i>	<i>Basis (number of items)</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
El Nuevo Diario, Nicaragua	0.9	28	1.3
La Prensa, Nicaragua	0.5	22	0.9
CRHoy, Costa Rica	0.1	14	0.3
La Nación, Costa Rica	0.2	20	0.5
La Prensa, Panama	0.3	20	0.8
Panama America	0.1	20	0.2
In total	0.4	124	0.8

Source: Own elaboration.

Table 5.9 Mention of the term “development” in the articles – breakdown by megaproject

<i>Multiple use of the word development</i>			
<i>Name of megaproject</i>	<i>Media</i>	<i>Basis (number of items)</i>	<i>Standard deviation</i>
La India mine, Nicaragua	0.6	30	1.0
La Libertad mine, Nicaragua	0.7	23	1.2
PH Reventazón, Costa Rica	0.1	34	0.4
PH Barro Blanco, Panama	0.2	40	0.6
In total	0.4	127	0.8

Source: Own elaboration.

especially the La Libertad mine, and most frequently in *El Nuevo Diario*. It should also be noted that in the case of the Barro Blanco or Reventazón megaprojects, the topic of development is unusual, as there are not many direct references to this process. Therefore, the following questions arise: What indicates a greater intensity of developmental discourse in Nicaragua, a country with limited freedom? How should the low intensity or absence of developmental discourse in Panama and Costa Rica be interpreted? We assume that this could be related to the level of development of these countries, which is reflected in economic and social indicators,²⁹ and the self-assessment of a particular country as underdeveloped. However, let us look at the specific associations of the word “development” that appear in the analyzed press.

In all the articles analyzed, a small proportion contained direct reflections on development, which is more common in Nicaraguan newspapers. Nicaragua, a country with worse development indicators than Panama and Costa Rica, is striving for better results, which can be reflected in more vivid development discourse.

In general, the mention of the term “development” appears in a positive and quantitative context: New jobs, economic development, social and cultural development, education and prosperity (Table 5.10). It also appears, albeit to a much lesser extent, as a synonym for modernity. These types of associations were also the most frequent in the case of Nicaraguan mines (Table 5.11).

If we break this narrative down to individual megaprojects, the differences become clearly visible and development issues are discussed in relation to economically weaker areas and the socially disadvantaged. The following quote from *El Nuevo Diario* by the president of CAMINIC (Cámara Minera de Nicaragua) on the occasion of an international congress comprehensively reflects the approach to development in the Nicaraguan press:

Table 5.10 Associations and contexts of the word “development” (based on selected articles)

<i>What is development associated with?</i>	<i>%</i>
Not applicable	58
Jobs	16
Economic development	14
Welfare	13
Social and cultural development	8
Infrastructure	8
Education	3
Energy sector	3
Security	3
Environmental damage	3
Modernity, technology	3
Mining	3
Damage to property, conflict, lack of freedom	3
Environmental care	2
Rationality	1
Displacement	1
Unemployment	1
Total number of items (base)	120

Source: Own elaboration.

Our employees and the communities in which they live are the primary stakeholders in mining. Under our vision of mining for all, the people and communities involved must clearly benefit from mining’s presence. Our efforts to promote social welfare and economic development in mining districts are the focus of this year’s congress. Entrepreneurs from mining communities will play an active role, said Ríos.

(*El Nuevo Diario*, April 5, 2018)³⁰

The Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*, being more independent, published texts on development with a similar tone, although mentioning it less frequently:

[regarding Mina La Libertad] Esparza says they are currently informing the community and local authorities about the details of the project, the employment benefits, and the social development programs they would implement.

(*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, March 24, 2012)³¹

Table 5.11 Associations and contexts of the word “development” – breakdown by megaproject

<i>What is development associated with?</i>	<i>Megaproject</i>			
	<i>La India Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>La Libertad Mine, Nicaragua (%)</i>	<i>PH Reventazón, Costa Rica (%)</i>	<i>PH Barro Blanco, Panama (%)</i>
Not applicable	22	9	79	88
Jobs	26	39	6	5
Economic development	39	26	3	3
Welfare	17	43	3	3
Social and cultural development	17	13	0	8
Infrastructure	13	1	6	3
Education	4	9	0	3
Energy sector	0	0	12	0
Security	0	13	0	3
Environmental damage	9	0	3	0
Modernity, technology	0	13	0	0
Mining	13	0	0	0
Damage to property, conflict, lack of freedom	9	0	3	0
Environmental care	0	4	0	3
Rationality	0	0	3	0
Displacement	4	0	0	0
Unemployment	4	0	0	0
Total number of items (base)	23	23	34	40

Source: Own elaboration.

La Prensa also tends to omit the issue of development, unlike *El Nuevo Diario*, which emphasizes it in all its articles. The latter also offers a much more detailed description of the positive effects of development. Nonetheless, the nature of the development process is explained in a very similar way in both newspapers, indicating its almost exclusively economic and material dimension and its direct and explicit relationship with the mining sector.

In the case of the other two projects, the issue of development was raised sparingly and in different contexts. In the articles on the Reventazón hydro-power project, the issue of development rarely appears and refers exclusively to the quantitative energy aspect. In the following example, the rejection of non-technical considerations is explicitly mentioned:

The success of our electricity development model is based on statistics and data, not speculation or ideologies. The country's achievements in this area, in 60 years of hard work by ICE and the distribution companies, are undeniable: 99.2% coverage, fourth place worldwide in generation with renewable sources, 92%, low losses in the networks, and low tariffs.

(*La Nación*, Costa Rica, July 8, 2011)³²

This way of conceiving development is, at the same time, the most “modern”:

The Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) is a key company to continue providing connectivity in the digital era and for decarbonization with clean and renewable energies. I believe in a public and modern ICE in a competitive environment. But more than that, I believe in a well-managed ICE. This administration's effort with ICE has been to restore its solvency and development capacity for the country.

(*CRHoy*, May 4, 2021)³³

The above excerpt shows how development is identified with quantitative changes and with the path the country is taking in terms of energy and digital transformation.

In the case of information about the Barro Blanco project, the topic of development was mentioned the least. When mentioned, it was by the main actors of the events – the indigenous community – and was more often related to social and cultural issues than economic development.

The members of the agreement table informed the Secretariat of State Communication that they also structured the work agenda around four topics that “seek to reveal the compatibilities and incompatibilities of the project” [Barro Blanco]. The points are environmental system, social development, economic development, and cultural development.

(*La Prensa*, Panama, February 28, 2015)³⁴

Finally, it should be noted that the perspective of indigenous peoples is rarely expressed in national-level journalistic discourse, nor are environmental issues that do not accompany the development debate. Against the backdrop of the megaproject narrative, it is clear that “development” is primarily understood in economic terms: The growth of a sector (for example, mining), which creates new jobs and brings modernity and prosperity. This definition inevitably links development with economic activity, including extractivism, and associates it with prosperity, or a positive vision. However, it also confirms the conventional, modernist and Western understanding of development.

The findings of this study underscore the imperative for the popularization and dissemination of the development issue, as well as the democratization of

this form of discourse to ensure inclusivity. In contemporary times, the development discourse is frequently appropriated and utilized for personal gain by the ruling elites who oversee the analyzed media (a phenomenon that is observable on a global scale). While such a discourse may be appealing and informative, it is important to acknowledge its potential as exclusionary and indoctrinating.

Conversely, there is a risk that the development discourse will be silenced, omitted or disqualified by the press, either deliberately or because of its low media impact in an environment dominated by more topical issues closely linked to the free market economy. The political regime, predicated on a neoliberal economic framework, has the potential to present a neutral ideological facade, thereby impeding the discourse surrounding development. Consequently, it becomes evident that the discourse orchestrated by the national press is deficient in its failure to engage in a profound examination of development as such, the legitimacy of megaprojects and the appropriate scope they should occupy. The national press has neglected to consider the diversity of attitudes and expectations regarding development, as evidenced by the fieldwork discussed in the earlier chapters.

Notes

- 1 This chapter is a modified version of a text previously published in Spanish in the book: Dembicz, K. (Ed.). (2023). *Megaproyectos en Centroamérica: dilemas, discursos, debates*. WUW. DOI:10.31338/uw.9788323561002. Due to its importance for the development discourse, we are publishing the results of the text analysis here as well, in English, in a modified and revised version.
- 2 Original quote: “Gracias a toda la sociedad nicaragüense por haber sabido distinguir en *El Nuevo Diario* los valores y principios de un medio de comunicación comprometido con la verdad y el desarrollo del país” (Salinas Maldonado 2019, paragraph 31, online).
- 3 Original quote: “Es una línea independiente, inclusiva, que busca dar apoyo al pequeño y mediano empresario y fortalecer la empresa privada y sobre todo es una línea editorial combativa, que por ejemplo si se siente que hay algo que se debe denunciar ..., se denuncia, no importa si el presidente de la República se llama a quejar con el dueño, el dueño le dice: ‘yo no tengo nada que ver con eso, habla con Silvia’” (Estarque 2021, online).
- 4 Original quote: “La vicepresidente y titular del Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores, Isabel de Saint Malo de Alvarado, fue designada por el Consejo de Gabinete para dirigir un comité que viajará la próxima semana a la comarca Ngöbe Buglé para intentar resolver el conflicto producido por la construcción del proyecto hidroeléctrico de Barro Blanco” (*La Prensa*, Panama, January 20, 2015).
- 5 Original quote: “Se reúnen hoy [los protestantes] con representantes de la empresa minera Condor Gold para dialogar acerca de la situación actual de la localidad, informó la empresa a través de un comunicado. Con esta iniciativa ... se busca resolver el bloqueo puntual a las actividades laborales de la empresa que ha realizado un grupo de pobladores de las comunidades aledañas a las zonas donde se ejecutan los proyectos” (*El Nuevo Diario*, August 15, 2017).
- 6 Original quote: “Este programa es desarrollado por la empresa minera en conjunto con el Inatec y la alcaldía, desde el 2010, con el objetivo de fomentar iniciativas

- emprendedoras mediante el desarrollo de habilidades con la capacitación formal” (*El Nuevo Diario*, February 4, 2014).
- 7 Original quote: “Por ejemplo, la tormenta Alma en 2018 tuvo que ver con una parte del costo de más que significó Pirrís, lo mismo que los problemas climatológicos con Reventazón. En ambos casos; sin embargo, también hay sobreprecios asociados a mala gestión” (*CRHoy*, April 3, 2019).
 - 8 It should be added that when different evaluations of the same project, reported by different groups, were presented in the same article, it was also given three points in order to choose a balanced or neutral position.
 - 9 Original quote: “Esta semana incluso salió al paso un informe emitido por la Contraloría por malas gestiones de la entidad en el proyecto hidroeléctrico Reventazón. ‘El hecho de que el ICE tome decisiones sin estudios necesarios y sin las debidas previsiones, ratifica, una vez más, que está tomando decisiones por intereses propios y no necesariamente por una realidad o estrategia país,’ afirmó la diputada” (*CRHoy*, January 10, 2020).
 - 10 Original quote: “El ICE hace su tarea, cumple con su deber. No se paraliza ni se contiene. Se ajusta, se hace más eficiente y se fortalece. Tiene el norte claro y ha sabido remontar los malos tiempos y las tormentas, sean estas reales o supuestas. Construye varias obras y entre ellas destaca el Proyecto Hidroeléctrico Reventazón, que tendrá más de 300 MW de potencia y un nuevo embalse de regulación que operará en el año 2016” (*La Nación*, CR, October 6, 2014).
 - 11 Original quote: “El Gabinete anunció también que se invitará al Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo y a varias iglesias para participar en el diálogo para resolver este conflicto, que ha causado la movilización de miles de panameños hacia las orillas del río Tabasará, que será represado para el funcionamiento del proyecto” (*La Prensa*, Panamá, January 20, 2015).
 - 12 Original quote: “Según el presidente Juan Carlos Varela, se está en un diálogo ‘permanente’ con la mesa técnica y la planta no va a entrar en operación hasta que se concluya el diálogo y se llegue a un consenso. Esto nos hace recordar la táctica que se empleó en tiempos de la dictadura militar para hacer la hidroeléctrica en el río Bayano. Esta táctica consistió en realizar reuniones con los dirigentes de las comunidades, para ir cerrando las compuertas y que el embalse comenzara a llenarse. Así, campesinos e indígenas tuvieron que salir de sus lugares para no morir ahogados. Esta táctica les dio buen resultado a los militares, pues la represa se terminó de construir en 1976, con lo que desaparecieron siete comunidades” (*Panama América*, June 12, 2016).
 - 13 Original quote: “La industria minera, administrada con responsabilidad y sostenibilidad, es necesaria para el avance económico de Nicaragua porque atrae inversión extranjera directa, genera empleo bien remunerado y promueve el desarrollo de municipios que se benefician con impuestos e inversión social. Sin embargo, algunas organizaciones ambientalistas se han empeñado en impedir el trabajo de empresas mineras, como le ha sucedido a Condor Gold en la zona de mina La India” (*El Nuevo Diario*, August 14, 2017).
 - 14 Original quote: “Una vez más el Gobierno utilizó a la Policía Nacional para impedir expresiones de reclamos sociales, como ocurrió ayer en algunos departamentos del país para impedir la movilización a Managua de personas que pretendían asistir a la marcha promovida por el llamado Movimiento Nacional Ambientalista frente a la Minería Industrial” (*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, December 17, 2017).
 - 15 Original quote: “Víctor Martínez, jefe del área de Relaciones Comunitarias de la empresa minera B2Gold, destacó: ‘Estamos creando nuevos espacios y oportunidades de desarrollo para las comunidades. Hoy se está beneficiando a la gente de El Castillo, pero ya se ha llevado este programa y sus beneficios a otras comarcas

- rurales de La Libertad, como Betulia, Timulí, Las Praderas, Arenas I y otras más” (*El Nuevo Diario*, February 4, 2014).
- 16 Original quote: “Martínez agrega que desde que el conflicto inició han estado realizando visitas casa a casa con los habitantes del poblado y agregó que las manifestaciones no solo limitan a la empresa, sino que también han interrumpido labores diarias de mineros artesanales (güiriseros), transportistas y a los mismos pobladores que no pueden circular con normalidad, además de afectar la salud de niños con la quema de llantas y actitudes que ponen en riesgo la seguridad de otros habitantes” (*El Nuevo Diario*, August 11, 2017).
 - 17 Original quote: “El Movimiento Nacional Ambientalista Frente a la Minería (Monafmi) celebró que la Corporación Financiera Internacional (IFC) se retirará como inversor de un proyecto minero impulsado por la empresa Condor Gold, que según los defensores ha generado conflicto intenso y violencia en la comunidad Santa Cruz de la India, en León” (*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, January 2, 2020).
 - 18 Original quote: “Urrutia y los otros tres menores suelen juntarse con el frescor de la madrugada en su comunidad, caminan unas dos horas para adentrarse al calor del interior de la mina, para regresar agotados con sus cargas de piedras recién al atardecer” (*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, November 21, 2004).
 - 19 In this work, we will use two spellings, Ngäbe and Ngöbe, which is due to the fact that the website of the Congress of this people uses these two spellings, and the Panamanian legislation uses the spelling without the letter “ö” <https://docs.panama.justia.com/federales/leyes/10-de-1997-mar-11-1997.pdf>
 - 20 Original quote: “Los indígenas Ngöbe-Buglé que por dos días consecutivos se han enfrentado con agentes antidisturbios de la Policía Nacional (PN) en los predios del proyecto Barro Blanco advirtieron que este domingo podrían convocar a nuevas acciones de protesta en contra de la construcción de esta hidroeléctrica. Anoche, tras un nuevo enfrentamiento entre indígenas y policías, los originarios decidieron replegarse hacia las zonas montañosas situadas en los alrededores del citado proyecto, al cual han intentado ingresar por la fuerza para instalar un campamento a orillas del río Tabasará” (*La Prensa*, Panamá, May 20, 2012).
 - 21 Original quote: “Según Arias, el hecho fue realizado por nativos que accedieron a pie por la margen izquierda del Río Tabasará, y penetraron en el área de la hidroeléctrica por un camino ‘inhóspito’ por el que no hay policías ni agentes de vigilancia, donde consiguieron quemar un tractor de la contratista Cobra ‘Deben conocerla perfectamente para poder transitar a esa hora. Esa es un área muy inhóspita y prácticamente son cerros’, detalló el representante” (*Panamá América*, March 16, 2012).
 - 22 The El Diquís Hydroelectric Project was an ambitious plan by the Costa Rican Electricity Institute (ICE) to build the largest hydroelectric dam in Central America. The project aimed to generate 631 MW of renewable electricity, enough to power over a million homes. The dam was to be located on the Térraba River in the Puntarenas Province. However, the project faced significant challenges, particularly from indigenous communities whose lands would have been affected. The Costa Rican Supreme Court ordered a halt to the project in 2016 until proper consultations with these communities were completed. Due to financial and social issues, ICE indefinitely suspended the project in 2018.
 - 23 Original quote: [sobre el proyecto Mina La India] “Un caso que surgió de la búsqueda de proveedores es el de nueve emprendedoras que laboran en un taller de costura, desde 2012. ‘Creamos un taller de costura, en ese entonces no teníamos quién creara unos saquitos para enviar las muestras al laboratorio. Se les dio el capital semilla y hoy tenemos un equipo de nueve señoras emprendedoras de la zona que trabajan para proveernos’, relató. Además de los puestos de trabajo, la compañía ha involucrado a los miembros de la comunidad por medio de tres ejes

- de apoyo: Educación, salud, agua y saneamiento. Complementario a las exigencias de la legislación nacional, la compañía cumple con estándares internacionales que promueven el acercamiento con la comunidad” (*El Nuevo Diario*, July 21, 2017).
- 24 Original quote: [sobre el proyecto Mina La Libertad] “El presidente y jefe ejecutivo de B2Gold, Clive Johnson, señaló que este esfuerzo fortalecerá el trabajo que la empresa viene desarrollando en Nicaragua desde hace 10 años en trabajos de exploración, desarrollo y producción ‘responsable’ de oro. ‘Nos entusiasma convertirnos en un accionista importante de Calibre y, a través de nuestra participación en su junta asesora y junta directiva, esperamos poder ayudar al experimentado equipo ejecutivo de Calibre y al equipo gerencial combinado de B2Gold y Calibre en Nicaragua’, afirmó Johnson” (*El Nuevo Diario*, July 2, 2019).
 - 25 Original quote: “Victor Martínez, jefe de relaciones comunitarias de Condor Gold, explicó que el tranque que hacen los integrantes del Movimiento Comunal Santa Cruz de la India para evitar el paso de maquinaria de la empresa para procesos de exploración, no solo genera retrasos en el plan de actividades de la empresa, sino que pone en riesgo los trabajos de 141 personas. Sin embargo, la protesta en rechazo a la empresa la mantendrán, aseguró el líder de la comunidad Olman Salazar, quien solicita que la empresa se retire del territorio” (*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, August 10, 2017).
 - 26 Controlled by a group of Honduran businessmen.
 - 27 Original quote: “La empresa Generadora del Istmo, S.A. (Genisa), hace del conocimiento público que la decisión del Gobierno de suspender los trabajos de llenado del embalse y finalización del Proyecto Hidroeléctrico Barro Blanco, culminado al 99.9%, mediante orden de la Autoridad Nacional de los Servicios Públicos (ASEP), el 9 de junio pasado; se da en contra de las recomendaciones de la empresa y del buen juicio; además, atenta contra la seguridad jurídica en el País. Genisa igualmente informa a la ciudadanía y a las comunidades cercanas de los enormes riesgos en que incurre el Gobierno Nacional al mantener el proyecto inconcluso. Los riesgos aumentan a partir de este mes, con el inicio de la época lluviosa en donde se dan máximas crecidas repentinas del Río Tabasará, producto de las incesantes lluvias” (*Panamá América*, May 20, 2016).
 - 28 The Spanish verb “desarrollar” also means “to carry out, realize an idea, project, etc.” (source: Wordreference.com). Such cases were not included in the analysis.
 - 29 In 2021, the level of the Human Development Index (HDI) for Costa Rica was 0.801, for Nicaragua 0.669 and for Panama 0.820 (Human Development Reports, 2021).
 - 30 Original quote: “Nuestros colaboradores y las comunidades son los principales actores en la minería. Bajo nuestra visión de minería para todos, nuestra gente y sus comunidades deben verse claramente beneficiadas por la presencia de la minería. Los esfuerzos que hacemos por garantizar bienestar social y desarrollo económico para los distritos mineros, es la esencia del congreso de este año y los emprendedores de las comunidades mineras contarán con una participación activa, dijo Ríos” (*El Nuevo Diario*, April 5, 2018, “Más de 300 personas participarán en Congreso Internacional de Minería”).
 - 31 Original quote: [sobre Mina La Libertad] “Esparza refiere que actualmente están informando a la comunidad y a las autoridades locales el detalle del proyecto, el beneficio en empleo y los programas de desarrollo social que ejecutarían” (*La Prensa*, Nicaragua, March 24, 2012).
 - 32 Original quote: “El éxito de nuestro modelo de desarrollo eléctrico está sustentado en estadísticas y datos, no en especulaciones o ideologías. Los logros del país en esta materia, en 60 años de arduo trabajo del ICE y las empresas distribuidoras son innegables: cobertura del 99,2%, cuarto lugar a nivel mundial en generación con

- fuentes renovables, 92%, bajas pérdidas en las redes y bajas tarifas.” (*La Nación*, Costa Rica, July 8, 2011)
- 33 Original quote: “El Instituto Costarricense de Electricidad (ICE) es empresa clave para seguir llevando conectividad en la era digital y para la descarbonización con energías limpias y renovables. Creo en un ICE público y moderno en un ámbito de competencia. Pero más aún, creo en un ICE bien manejado. El esfuerzo de esta administración con el ICE ha sido devolverle su solvencia y capacidad de desarrollo para el país.” (*CRHoy*, Costa Rica, May 4, 2021).
- 34 Original quote: “Los integrantes de la mesa, de acuerdo informó la Secretaría de Comunicación del Estado, también estructuró la agenda de trabajo en torno a cuatro temas que ‘buscan revelar las compatibilidades e incompatibilidades del proyecto’ [Barro Blanco]. Los puntos son: sistema ambiental, desarrollo social, desarrollo económico y desarrollo cultural” (*La Prensa*, Panama, February 28, 2015).

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6 Turning ideas into impact

Workshop proposal and key takeaways

This last chapter of the book differs somewhat from traditional conclusions, as it consists of two sections. In the first section, we attempt to summarize and explain the conclusions that emerge from our analyzes. Then we present the premises of the workshop and the proposed workshop structure with examples of questions. Therefore, this chapter incorporates a praxis component, which falls within the so-called applied studies.

This work aimed to show how development is understood from a local perspective, using Central American communities (from Costa Rica, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama) threatened and affected by megaprojects in three sectors – mining, energy and tourism – as a case study. The central hypothesis of this study is that local communities are exposed to a Westernization of their way of life through the localization of infrastructure projects. This leads to a conflict between the values of Western civilization and the traditions and values of local cultures. This phenomenon is illustrated by the development dilemmas and discourses that characterize the field.

Based on our research in selected communities in Central America, we could define development as a phenomenon that is closely linked to change and oriented toward the future. It encompasses and influences different aspects of human life, bringing positive results but also risks. Change is primarily linked to the economic sphere, but also to infrastructure and public services. Development is seen either as a process that arises within a community or as a process that is driven by external forces. This distinction is also related to the pace, scale and agency of communities.

To better understand the diversity and complexity of development perspectives, the first chapter presented our own classification of the stages in the evolution of how development has been conceptualized and defined in both science and politics. Historically, development proposals have shifted from a universalist, Western-centric and anthropocentric focus on economic growth toward more inclusive approaches that integrate environmental concerns, sustainable development and the local and community knowledge of indigenous peoples. Contemporary development paradigms are increasingly eclectic, emphasizing the need for dialogue and critical reflection on the concept of development.

Despite this, in Latin America, conventional Western modern development comes from the outside and is strongly associated with megaprojects, where the benefits are disconnected from the costs and risks. The spaces occupied by megaprojects and those inhabited by communities do not, for the most part, complement each other; rather, they clash due to a profound misunderstanding, creating tension and violence. Chapters 3 and 4 described the perspectives of the different actors who comprise both “worlds,” based on the study. When implementing megaprojects, the potential benefits – particularly in relation to economic growth and national interests – are often emphasized at the expense of meaningful local improvements. As a result, the costs borne by local communities, including environmental impacts and social risks, are deferred or marginalized. As discussed in Chapter 5, both the media discourse and the education system tend to reflect and promote the values of Western-style modernization, which are closely linked to the logic of megaproject development.

Local communities in Central America accept these values to varying degrees. However, it is not like they have a choice; resistance is broken by force, quid pro quo or persuasion. In any case, megaprojects cast a shadow of epistemicide over local communities, threatening their existence and livability, as well as their lifestyle and worldview.

For example, the national press predominantly presents the elites’ position. These elites mostly represent a Western lifestyle, and their goal is to promote in their country a type of development that is similar to that in Europe and the United States. The press discourse presents a vision of development that promotes a linear, quantitative, ascending and universalizing process aimed at standardizing expectations and values. In this vision, nature is subordinated to the will of human beings. This is a totalitarian vision of development that rejects all alternatives.

An analysis of the discourse on megaprojects in Central America in the national press points to the Westernization of development vision. Although we might expect substantial differences between countries in this region due to their different environmental policies, these discourses are similar in adopting one vision of the desired future. For example, in the Costa Rican press, there are no in-depth reflections on development; rather, the issue is omitted. This may be because social awareness of environmental issues is already high, so further development is unnecessary. Alternatively, it may be because it is “better not to touch” difficult and controversial subjects. In a democratic country like Costa Rica, with high levels of environmental awareness and social mobilization potential, it is preferable to avoid openly debating the dilemmas and consequences of difficult issues, such as megaprojects, in the press, as this could affect the image of a “green” country. In the Nicaraguan press, in a country that differs from Costa Rica in many respects, the topic of development is widely discussed. However, the vision of this development is also not subject to debate: It is quantitative, economic development based on growth.

Two trends characterize Central America's current economic development. On the one hand, major international investments drive this economy, characterized by extractivism, toward the construction of megaprojects in transport, hydropower, tourism, agriculture or mining. Nevertheless, simultaneously, alternatives to this conventional development arise at the local level, and new proposals inspired by regional community praxis emerge.

The cases of megaprojects in the study may not fully align with the definition of extractivism, which, according to Gudynas is:

defined in terms of a high-volume and high-intensity modality of natural resources appropriation, where resources are exported in primary commodity form with little to no processing. As working guideline, this applies when 50 percent or more of the removed resources are exported.
(Gudynas, 2020, p. 6)

Yet, these enterprises have certain characteristics of megaprojects. It is important to note that in the case of the La India and La Libertad mines in Nicaragua, the vast majority of the gold extracted is exported to countries in the Global North. A comprehensive review of megaprojects indicates that they have consistently led to irreversible environmental degradation, accompanied by instances of human rights violations during their execution, with the notable exception of the Costa Rican case. As previously stated, extractivism modifies social relations by imposing external economic logic on local communities, thereby weakening their traditional ways of life.

The affected communities, in their reflections on the good life and development, are inclined to opt for what we could call post-extractivist solutions. According to Gudynas and Alayza (2012), these solutions have the following characteristics: Decommodification of nature and reduction of the economy's dependence on natural resource extraction; respect for ecological limits accompanied by environmental and social justice; citizen participation and environmental democracy; the Ethics of Good Living (Sumak Kawsay); and finally, a transition toward diversified and sustainable economies. In the communities visited within this study, a variety of measures that align with the post-extractivist model were identified. In the case of the Garifuna population, this is exemplified by the utilization of communal lands for the purpose of ensuring food security for the community. A similar phenomenon has been observed in the Chorotega community in Matambú. These solutions are also well-known outside of Central America, as evidenced by their presence in countries such as Mexico, Brazil, Peru and other regions within the Andes. Urban agriculture in Cuba can also serve as an example. These have been efficiently developed on the island since the "special period" and are managed by cooperatives (see Góna, 2024).

The functioning of cooperatives remains an example of such creative and alternative social practices. Indeed, the idea of cooperatives and other

similar forms of economic and social organizations that work for the benefit of their members and have a strong environmental legacy is very popular in Central American countries. Li Bonilla (2013, p. 69), in the book *El modelo cooperativo costarricense (The Costa Rican Cooperative Model)*, emphasizes that the Costa Rican cooperative idea favors the development of the community in which the company is located, which is in line with the findings of our study.

Thus, alongside an exclusionary duality of conventional development, local approaches are far more inclusive; that is, they represent a mixture of ideas in which the complementarity of these dualisms can be observed, as in the case of Andean indigenous peoples' perspective (Mignolo, 2005). Similarly, as the Andean poet and thinker Kowii (2000) points out, in his book of poems *Tsaitsik: poemas para construir el futuro (Tsaitsik: Poems to Build the Future)*, in the cultures of indigenous peoples, opposites are not mutually exclusive but rather complement each other and coexist (Viñamagua, 2017). Today, new generations of inhabitants of the Global South are turning to their origins in search of solutions to multiple crises.

Yet, these efforts are hardly recognized at the state level. As Stavenhagen (1986) explains, Latin American identity arises from the tension between modernity and tradition. Modern Central American states were built according to the European nation-state model. This model is an artificial construct unsuited to plurinational societies with indigenous peoples and a plurality of worldviews. Yet, there is indeed a growing tendency in Latin America, including Central America, to “look inward” (Stavenhagen, 1986, p. 446) and search for cultural roots within their societies, embracing their ethnic, historical and social diversity. This implies a critique of the Anglo-Saxon cultural model and a reevaluation of indigenous, Afro-descendant and mestizo cultures.

Following this line of thought, we created a workshop proposal. This workshop is grounded in the epistemological and axiological approaches (as explained in Chapter 1), in which the dialectic between theory and practice is important alongside local perspectives and visions from the Global South. This workshop can help local societies interact with each other and deepen their relationships and knowledge. It can serve as a kind of support in the construction of common positions and shared proposals regarding the visions for the development of their place, the search for original and bottom-up definitions of development and good living but above all, it may help to face possible misunderstandings in the planning of community paths.

The workshop encourages an approach to reality from an endogenous perspective, constantly comparing ideas and theories with local and regional realities, and juxtaposing thought with action, which implies a constant transformation of our thinking on the basis of the changes that occur. The definition of development proposed by Boisier reflects this theoretical-methodological framework:

Let us agree that development is far from being exclusively related to material, social, and individual achievements, as important as they may be in themselves. As is increasingly recognized in the literature, the concept of development tends to be more and more interpreted as the achievement of cultural, institutional, ethical, political, and certainly economic conditions, environmental conditions that enhance the transformation of the human beings into a true human persons endowed with dignity, subjectivity, sociability, transcendence, dialogical entities in which their biological and spiritual characteristics coexist, the latter being producers of knowledge, wisdom and love.

(Boisier, 2006, p. 146)¹

We acknowledge Boisier's proposal, even though it bears traits of Western thought and can be understood as individualizing and separating the human being from the world around him. However, we emphasize the aforementioned components and conditions of development, for they also became visible in the interviews we conducted. They are of central importance for our study and the following workshop proposal.

Workshops, in their various forms, are now extremely popular tools for learning, developing solutions or building understanding and design in many institutions, from companies to international organizations and NGOs. In this project, we also used the workshop as a research tool.

The inspiration for this workshop proposal came from both sides of the Atlantic – from Poland (the location of the project coordinators) and Central America (the location of our fieldwork). When conducting in-depth interviews, we had the opportunity to organize collective conversations and ad hoc workshops with groups of college staff, members of various associations, cooperatives and chambers of commerce in Costa Rica, Nicaragua and Honduras.

The workshop proposal was inspired by the experiences of NGOs and international organizations that conducted workshops and awareness-raising activities aimed at increasing community participation in development planning. Notably, we were inspired by the contributions of USAID and Catholic Relief Services (CRS), which were instrumental in shaping a participatory methodology for Guatemalan communities, focusing on the creation of community development plans (USAID, n.d.). Drawing on detailed geographic analysis and input from households, families and communities, these initiatives identified local priorities in areas such as quality of life, economic development, natural resources, organization, participation and conflict management. These practices, which engaged 200 communities, are documented in the *Community Manual: Planning the Development of Our Community, with Participation and Inclusion* (USAID, n.d.).

In addition, the workshop proposal incorporates insights from researchers who utilize foresight tools to help non-Western communities envision and shape their futures. Examples include Bisht's (2017) *Decolonizing Futures:*

Exploring Storytelling as a Tool for Inclusion in Foresight; UN Global Pulse's (2023) "Shaping Inclusive Foresight: A Fun, Educational Approach" – a game that integrates indigenous perspectives and decolonial frameworks; and UNDP's (2022) *Reimagining Development in Asia and the Pacific: Foresight Brief*. These approaches shaped our workshop's participatory, inclusive and forward-looking orientation.

The future visions, opportunities and obstacles to development articulated by the communities we engaged with in the workshops revealed, both to the participants and to us, the presence of internal divisions and differences. Simultaneously, participants consistently emphasized the importance of maintaining ongoing dialogue of this nature, recognizing its value in formulating coherent, collective proposals. Such dialogue not only strengthens local society and consolidates its structures but also enhances its capacity to engage with external social actors, such as investors.

Workshop participants further highlighted that these meetings contributed significantly to improving mutual understanding among members of organizations or communities. By facilitating communication, they helped overcome mental barriers and break the silence that often characterizes contemporary societies. Notably, many members of cooperatives or associations, united by their companies and their objectives, were often unaware of each other's experiences. This mutual awareness is essential for building a collective identity, which in turn reinforces the effective functioning of local society.

In our experience, the workshop format has proven to be a highly effective means for exchanging ideas, views and dreams. While this approach is widely utilized globally – and often formalized within strict frameworks by Western institutions, including international corporations seeking market-oriented solutions – it also demonstrates deep respect for communities where oral culture and storytelling remain central (Eskell-Blokland, 2009; Carey Jr, 2017; Mahuika, 2019).

Experiences, concepts and assumptions in the design and implementation of the workshop

Pluriverse as an ontological basis

When conducting the workshop, we aimed to be attentive and responsible toward the communities that hosted us. As researchers, our presence among them was limited to short periods, and we were primarily concerned that any influence we might exert on community relationships should be positive. Feedback from our interlocutors indicated that such a workshop generally had value for them. It contributed to improved internal understanding, increased awareness of commonalities and provided a forum for the respectful exchange of ideas and views. We know that a workshop can also serve as a manipulation tool by external actors seeking to impose solutions or projects under the guise of participation and consensus. This is manipulation in the sense that

Arnstein describes in her “Ladder of Citizen Participation” (1969). Although the framework she proposes focuses on modern, Western and predominantly urban societies, the risks she emphasizes are also relevant here. At the heart of the problem is the power relationship between the inhabitants of a particular place and the authorities who exert influence over it. Officials may take steps that appear to involve residents. The crucial question, however, is whether these efforts reflect a genuine willingness to share power or whether they are merely superficial gestures. Arnstein (1969, p. 216) writes: “There is a critical difference between going through the empty ritual of participation and having the real power needed to affect the outcome of the process.” When actions are merely symbolic, she refers to them as forms of “manipulation” and “therapy,” which she describes as non-participation, pointing out that their “real objective is not to enable people to participate in planning or conducting programs, but to enable powerholders to ‘educate’ or ‘cure’ the participants” (Arnstein, 1969, p. 217). Drawing on our experience, participant feedback and various initiatives from researchers and international organizations, we created a workshop for Central American communities, or other local communities in Latin America, which aims to foster greater cohesion, diagnose emerging challenges, strengthen governance and capacity for action, identify internal strengths and prepare for potential future problems and threats, including manipulation attempts by representatives of political or economic authorities (e.g., international corporations). Our proposal can be modified as needed and can be used, for example, as a prelude to work on a specific project or task.

It may seem that *within* a community, the assumption of the possibility of multiple worlds is exaggerated. Is it really so? Local communities in Central America have, on the one hand, experienced the “implementation” of development through megaprojects, are exposed to education systems that promote modern values and are influenced by global mass media that present a model of the good life based on consumption and individualism. At the same time, these communities remain deeply connected to knowledge systems cultivated over generations and to collective, non-modern traditions and values. As a result, tensions between different value systems are observable within communities, particularly, as previously noted, between generations. The challenge of accommodating multiple value systems, worldviews and cosmovisions is complex (Kothari et al., 2019). As Kothari et al. (2019, p. xxxiii) note, “With their phrase ‘A world where many worlds fit,’ the Zapatistas give us the most succinct and apt definition of the pluriverse.” A promising tool for opening up the pluriverse is the concept of political ontology proposed by Blaser (2009, 2013). Political ontology offers a way to address the conflicts arising from modern universality and the vision of “one world.” It questions the imposed separation between nature and culture, focuses on actions and practices and extends beyond cultural relativism (Blaser, 2013). Within the pluriverse, true equality between human and non-human actors and a non-linear conception

of time are possible, and values do not – and need not – share a common conversion factor such as market value.

Deep listening, unlearning and non-violent communication

Listening is higher on our list of premises than talking. “Deep listening” is a term proposed by the composer and experimentalist Oliveros (Ernstberger, 2023), but it is used in many contexts that draw attention to the increasingly difficult and forgotten skill of listening. True listening requires much more than the sense of hearing and is disrupted not only by incoming messages, multitasking and external stimuli, but also by what we know and think we know. To enable true listening, Bisht (2017) suggests *unlearning*, which is “a deliberate process to refrain from your beliefs and habits – to make room for new things” (Razzetti, 2023). Unlearning is a process that is often used in personal development, change in an organization or in the arts. Unlearning becomes a necessity in the face of epistemic violence, of which education in the spirit of Western modern science is a part. This is a particularly important and difficult task for people who have been shaped by modern Western academia and values. As Spivak wrote in relation to overcoming the marginalization of the subaltern (1988, p. 287): “the historian must suspend (as far as possible) the clamor of his or her own consciousness.”

We are convinced that *unlearning* is also an important part of true listening, in which we not only refrain from criticism but also try to develop the ability to suspend our own beliefs and place them alongside, rather than above, the worldview of others. In our workshop proposal, there may also be echoes of the Nonviolent Communication proposed by Rosenberg (2003). Although this communication concept was born and developed in a Western and highly individualized world, one can see a longing for community and deep, mutual understanding in it.

Local and indigenous narratives

Although the proposed workshop has a linear structure and consists of questions and answers, we encourage the communities to explore their own means of expression as much as possible. Referring to local customs in an Indian community, Bisht (2017) suggests using the tradition of oral stories passed on by itinerant storytellers, the Kaavad, to narrate the future.

The traditional Kaavad imitates pilgrimage to facilitate the Darshan (act of seeing) of the deity by the devotee, I designed the Kaavad as a futures tool, to facilitate the Darshan of the vision of a desired future by the participating stakeholders.

(Bisht, 2017, p. 51)

This approach allows for the exploration of complex social, cultural and technological issues by creating detailed and immersive speculative worlds. Bisht's work is grounded in the idea that speculative design can provoke critical thinking and dialogue about possible futures, encouraging people to reflect on current assumptions and consider alternative possibilities. It includes case studies and practical applications of speculative design, demonstrating how this methodology can address real-world challenges and inspire innovative solutions.

The UNDP (United Nations Development Program) proposes “indigenous protocols” (2022) to support a truly inclusive future design in terms of (re)generative development. Indigenous protocols encompass a range of native practices, customs or behaviors, including in particular rituals related to decision-making and the maintenance of traditions. According to the guidelines, decision-making on issues important to the community, such as the implementation of various projects and programs or the construction of infrastructure, should follow the rules and procedures of the respective community (UNDP, 2022). Indeed, indigenous communities often have practices and customs that are deeply rooted and unique, which distinguish these communities from others. In such local and individual practices, a common basis for understanding, strengthening and authentic definitions and paths of development can be sought. Melo Almeida and Loschiavo dos Santos (2022) report on the experiences of women embroiderers in Passira, a town in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco. The embroiderers are members of the Association of Women Artisans of Passira (AMAP), an association whose aim is to promote handicrafts and fundraise. Handicrafts have become a subject of collaboration between the embroiderers of Passira and the artisans of the Chã dos Negros community, which has its roots in a quilombo. The encounters and exchange of knowledge also lead to a strengthening of the cohesion of this community and allow individuals to express their individuality in collectively shared patterns and traditional techniques. The authors point out that the embroiderers are not a homogeneous group, but their shared knowledge and practice, as well as the common context of a particular place, are a platform for understanding and enable mutual learning and the emergence of new qualities.

Our experience suggests that mestizo communities also have unique traditions, histories and social capital that can help them achieve greater equality in their relationship with the state or the investor.

Workshop proposal

The workshop takes the form of a facilitated discussion, addressing both everyday questions and issues that are frequently raised, as well as topics that require deeper reflection and may not usually be discussed on a daily basis. We start with the former. Such a sequence helps participants to gradually immerse

themselves in the topic, feel comfortable talking about it and find common ground more easily. Our suggestion refers to a workshop that is conducted in a stationary setting but which can be modified as desired, including an online version.

Before the workshop begins

Let us define the purpose of the workshop. Even if the aim is simply to foster better mutual understanding rather than to resolve a specific issue, the workshop must have a clear purpose so that participants feel their time is well spent. The purpose may be to identify key strengths and major challenges, to formulate priority actions for the near future or to prepare for organizing a significant community event or celebration. We recognize that workshops are most often employed as tools to address problems, such as external threats or internal conflicts.

To organize the workshop with fairness and impact, ensure representation from as many segments of the community as possible, considering gender, age, life experience, place of residence, functions, wealth, education and level of involvement in community affairs. If the workshop includes a large number of participants, divide them into smaller groups based on internal differentiation, so that they can share the results and solutions developed at the end. Ideally, each group should consist of six to fifteen people.

If the workshop is facilitated by someone from outside the community, they should use language that is appropriate to the local context. For example, in Costa Rica, it is customary to address others using *usted* or *vos* rather than *tutearse* (Spanish: you).

Beginning

At the start of the workshop, it is good practice to establish a code of conduct – a set of rules that everyone agrees to follow. These rules may include involvement, mutual respect, non-judgment, confidentiality and guidelines for the use of electronic devices. It is recommended that participants themselves formulate and formally accept these rules.

Each participant should introduce themselves, with the moderator beginning the process and highlighting the type of information to share, such as family situation, work situation, place, role in the community and expectations for the workshop. An external moderator can encourage more detailed sharing, as participants may otherwise assume certain information is already known. The moderator can also use tools such as a community map for participants to mark their place, or invite each person to draw their silhouette and indicate important people, information about themselves and social roles around it.

Community

To explore how the daily lives of workshop participants are embedded in the community, as well as the community's characteristics, boundaries and history, the following questions can be used:

Daily life and community embedding:

- Describe your daily life in the community.
- How often do you spend time outside the community?
- Draw or map your daily life paths to observe how members enter and leave shared spaces.
- How connected are you to the community? Are you from here? Are you planning to leave?

The community's surroundings:

- Identify neighboring communities.
- Describe relationships with neighboring communities.
- Identify external people, institutions or phenomena influencing the community.
- Discuss whether the community wants these influences and what can be done about them.

Another element of the workshop is rewriting history. Perhaps such a story has already been written down, but it is worth thinking together about the most important events in local history.

- Who are the important people whose memory we want to preserve?

This may inspire the participants to carry out a larger project about the history of their own community. It is worth paying attention to such aspects as important people, holidays, the creation of essential infrastructure elements, new cultural institutions and possible difficult and sad events.

- Which people are particularly important to our community? Who could be described as a "leader"? It does not necessarily have to be one person.
- What does the place we live in look like? What kind of landscape is here? What kind of climate is present here?
- Who lives here apart from the people?
- What changes have taken place in our community in recent years? The perspective of individuals from different age groups is important in this context. How do we assess each of these changes? What benefits have they brought, and what have they taken away? Has our quality of life improved or declined as a result?

This is a moment in which participants can become aware of both the abrupt changes and the slow, elusive changes that happened in the community.

In the next exercise, participants are asked to reflect on what is most valuable in their community. It is worth thinking about this alone for a while; the ideas can be written down and compared.

- What is the “treasure” of our community?
- Which value do we want to protect the most?
- What are we proud of?
- When do we experience most that we are together in a community? What experiences unite us? Do we have common holidays?

Participants can also design an “ideal celebration” for the community, considering where it would take place, what activities it would include and what benefits it would bring.

Talking about the good life

Different people define the good life in very different ways. Age, wealth and experience greatly influence what we need for a good life. During the workshop, it is important to be sensitive to these differences and allow all participants to express themselves freely, regardless of differences.

- What is a good life for you? And what would a better life look like?
- What needs to change so you and your family can live a better life? What would you want for your community?
- What are the biggest threats to a good life for you, your family and your community?

At this stage of the workshop, we also suggest questions about existing power relations and the drivers of change. These questions may address conflicts and issues that are difficult for workshop participants, but are worth asking.

- Who do you think can or has the power to initiate change to achieve a good life and change for the better?
- Is your community free to make decisions concerning its future? If not, what are the limits?

Discussion about the development

This last part of the workshop depends mainly on what has been said and explained before. Perhaps the topic of development has already been covered. However, it is worth taking a moment to summarize and sum up. Here, the moderator can use projection techniques by presenting several graphics to illustrate development and asking the workshop participants to choose the

most appropriate one. Questions that accompany and encourage this part are the following:

- What are your associations with the word development?
- Does a better life also mean development? If not, what is the difference between a better life and development?
- Is development something positive or something negative for you?
- If development is something we want, what kind of development is it?

Talk about important investments, projects and programs

If the community organizing the workshop is facing a dilemma related to the construction of a megaproject or other major investment or program that could greatly impact their lives, this topic can also be discussed.

We suggest asking the following questions:

- What entities could you identify as stakeholders (parties/social actors) of this project?
- What are the relationships between these actors?
- What are the values behind this project?
- Who supports the implementation of this project, and who is against it? How can we deal with possible conflicts?
- How does this project relate to the “treasure” of our community we defined earlier?

“Transversal” questions

In addition to a series of questions that the participants can discuss when reflecting upon the characteristics of their community, they can also use the control questions at any point in the discussion. They are designed to help diagnose differences, tame diversity and turn it into a strength, prevent destructive conflicts and show attention.

- Are our opinions on this topic somewhat similar, or do we strongly disagree?
- Is there or can there be a conflict because of this? How do we deal with it? Can I empathize with a person who holds different views?
- Why do we think the way we do? What has shaped us?
- Can there also be people, views and values in our community that we do not represent here in the workshop? If so, what can we do about it?

Summary

Most likely, some of the visions presented in the workshops will complement each other, while others will contradict each other. However, this workshop aims to help identify these differences and avoid an open conflict that could

erupt with full force in the face of a planned megaproject, for example. The workshop concludes with a summary provided by the moderator, supplemented by the following questions:

- What do you think of the conclusions presented?
- What would you like to add?
- Can you derive any benefits from today's workshop, and if so, what are they?

Note

- 1 Original quote: “Convengamos en que el desarrollo dista de estar exclusivamente relacionado con logros materiales, sociales e individuales, por importantes que ellos sean en sí mismos. Como es crecientemente reconocido en la literatura, el concepto de desarrollo tiende a ser más y más interpretado como el logro de condiciones culturales, institucionales, éticas, políticas, y por cierto económicas, condiciones de entorno que potencien la transformación de los seres humanos en verdaderas personas humanas dotadas de dignidad, de subjetividad, de sociabilidad, de trascendencia, entes dialógicos en los cuales conviven sus características biológicas y espirituales, estas últimas productoras del conocer, del saber, y del amar” (Boisier, 2006, p. 146)

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