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### **Title: Development and Wellbeing: maritime infrastructure and ocean grabbing in the Colombian Pacific Coast**

Franz, Tobias (*corresponding author*)

Lecturer in Economics

SOAS, University of London

10 Thornhaugh Street, Russell Square

London WC1H 0XG

+447428499082

[tf2@soas.ac.uk](mailto:tf2@soas.ac.uk)

Gómez, Diana

Assistant Professor in Development Studies

University of the Andes, Colombia

CIDER - Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre Desarrollo

Calle 18A No. 0-03Este

Bogotá, Colombia

[dm.gomezc@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:dm.gomezc@uniandes.edu.co)

Idrobo, C. Julián

Adjunct Professor in Development Studies

University of the Andes, Colombia

CIDER - Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre Desarrollo

Calle 18A No. 0-03Este

Bogotá, Colombia

[cjdrobo@gmail.com](mailto:cjdrobo@gmail.com)

Corzo, Olga

Research Assistant

University of the Andes, Colombia

CIDER - Centro Interdisciplinario de Estudios sobre Desarrollo

Calle 18A No. 0-03Este

Bogotá, Colombia

[ol.corzo@uniandes.edu.co](mailto:ol.corzo@uniandes.edu.co)

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## **Short Title: Between Development and Wellbeing**

### **Abstract**

Conventional growth models in Colombia are driven by accumulation strategies based on land dispossession and ocean grabbing, which reinforce existing inequalities. This threatens Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples' traditional territories and their access to marine and coastal resources on which their livelihoods rely and are the basis for their long-term planning processes. We argue that the proposal of the Tribugá Port was part of this wider development strategy that entailed the expansion of the national maritime infrastructure network into the northern Colombian Pacific, ignoring structural needs and visions of wellbeing of local communities. Using arguments from heterodox political economy, critical economic geography, and post-development literature and visualising the development and wellbeing perspectives coexisting in Nuquí, we contrast the dominant narrative underlying the proposed Tribugá Port project with local wellbeing perceptions. Such wellbeing perspectives that the Afro-Colombian community has consolidated in the territory through planning processes and instruments provide alternatives to the Global North's hegemonic views on development.

Keywords: Environment; infrastructure; wellbeing; development; Colombia; local

## 1. Introduction

Driven by increased foreign capital inflows during the 2000-2014 commodities price boom and following overall global economic recovery, Latin American countries witnessed a massive surge in infrastructure investments. In search of high returns and hoping to create backward and forward linkages to other sectors in national economies, private and public actors scaled up their efforts in physical infrastructure investments, including in infrastructure related to maritime transportation. From the perspective of policymakers, such investments will lead to prosperity and development. Geographically embedded in marginalized territories, infrastructure is seen as a panacea to achieving development. However, such mainstream approaches to understandings of development not only underpin what some call the ‘white gaze’ of development (see Pailey 2020), reinforcing ethnocentric and racialized understanding of modernity. They also fundamentally ignore Global South perspectives that provide alternatives to the Global North's hegemonic views on development.<sup>1</sup>

Wellbeing perspectives and long-term planning processes rooted in local livelihoods, identity, culture, organizational processes, and environmental stewardship can help to conceptualize radically different understandings of development and alternatives to it. This article aims to contribute to broader discussions about the tensions between wellbeing and development in the context of the incommensurability among global, national, and local marine and coastal development policies and planning processes.

To empirically explore these tensions and to conceptually expand on alternatives to mainstream views on development, we met with the Consejo Comunitario Los Riscales (LRCC – Los Riscales Community Council), the traditional authority of the Afro-Colombian population in the coastal municipality of Nuquí (Chocó Department, Colombia)

in July 2018. Together with LRCC representatives, we discussed a collaborative research project about local livelihoods and regional planning processes in the context of development and wellbeing perspectives. One of the outcomes of this meeting was a request from LRCC to convene local, regional, and national actors to discuss the plans of the Colombian government at the time for the Tribugá Port infrastructure project.

While the Tribugá Port project was suspended in early 2020 (see Portafolio, 2020), this article juxtaposes dominant visions of development and place-based, local, territorial long-term planning approaches. We contrast the dominant narrative behind the proposed Tribugá Port project with local wellbeing perceptions that the LRCC, the traditional Afro-Colombian authority in the territory, has consolidated through planning processes and instruments. Our analysis draws on a framework that bridges heterodox political economy, critical economic geography, and post-development literature with the development and wellbeing perspectives coexisting in Nuquí. The Tribugá Port proposal was part of a strategy to expand the national maritime infrastructure network into the northern Colombian Pacific that ignored structural needs and visions of wellbeing of local communities. Such growth models that drive accumulation strategies using land dispossession and ocean grabbing reinforce existing inequalities, which threaten Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples' traditional territories and their access to marine and coastal resources on which their livelihoods rely and are the basis for their long-term planning processes.

Following this introduction, section two provides the conceptual and theoretical discussion. Section three summarizes the methodological approach. Section four provides a brief context of the Nuquí municipality and the Chocó Department. Section five presents

findings on dominant and local development and wellbeing perspectives, which are discussed in section six. Section seven concludes.

## **2. Infrastructure from development and wellbeing perspectives**

Mainstream economics literature asserts that an increase in infrastructure investments positively correlates with development and poverty reduction in Latin America (Calderón and Servén, 2014; Easterly and Servén, 2003). During the 2000s commodity boom and following the overall financial recovery after the 2007/08 Global Financial Crisis (GFC), there has been a resurgent interest in infrastructure in the mainstream development discourse in many Latin American countries (Carranza Luis et al., 2014). Infrastructure investments have positive effects through increased market access, the reduction of trade costs, and positive agglomeration and employment effects (Breinlich et al., 2013; Redding and Turner, 2015).

Neoclassical theories and endogenous growth models (see Barro, 1990; Futagami et al., 1993) also support that infrastructure investments positively affect long-run growth rates (Minerva and Ottaviano, 2007). For Latin America, Calderón and Servén (2014: 2) resonate with the importance of infrastructure, arguing that it ‘facilitates poor's access to productive opportunities, raising the value of their assets’. Infrastructure's direct effects on increasing income levels and reducing inequality are powerful tools to reduce poverty and improve wellbeing (Calderón and Servén, 2014).

Conversely, arguments from critical economic geographers and heterodox political economists emphasize that infrastructure is crucial in furthering uneven power relations (see Brenner, 2003; Franz, 2019; MacKinnon et al., 2009; Ougaard, 2018; Pike et al., 2009; Smith, 2008). Harvey (2004) finds that state actors who privatize natural resources, such as

land and water, drive the concentration of wealth and power through land and wealth dispossession processes. Investments in physical infrastructure play a key role in this geographical expansion and spatial reorganization of capitalism (Franz, 2020). Everything from roads, railways, ports, and industrial free trade zones to communication systems function as means to achieve temporal and spatial fixes for capital, which serve as a basis for future capital accumulation at the expense of workers and the environment (Jessop, 2008).

In Latin America, particularly in Colombia, the search for new spaces that absorb surplus capital by infrastructure investments has driven land and ocean grabs by domestic and transnational elite groups<sup>2</sup>. Aside from land grabbing, which mainly aims to advance neoliberal growth models based on extractive accumulation and industrial agriculture, ocean grabbing has emerged as a concept to explain processes of enclosure of ocean and coastal spaces and resources (Bennett et al., 2015). The constant search for capitalism to expand into new territories has driven the inclusion of coastal and ocean areas and resources into capitalist forms of production and reproduction (see Arrighi, 2009).

The extension of maritime transportation networks plays a crucial role in this. Already noted by Marx and Engels in *The German Ideology*, '(m)anufacture and the movement of production in general received an enormous impetus through the extension of commerce which came with the discovery of America and the sea-route to the East Indies.' (Marx and Engels, 1970: 74). Circulation by ways of movement of production and commerce is central to capitalism's search to expand beyond spatial barriers. As Marx reflects in *Grundrisse*, the creation of infrastructure, defined as 'the physical conditions of exchange' is a necessary function of capitalism in furthering 'the annihilation of space by time' (Marx, 1973: 539).

The historical dynamics of capitalism to enclose and appropriate territories are playing out in the increasing commercialization of oceans. What is known under the banner of the blue economy has thus driven capitalist expansion into oceanic and coastal contexts (see Benjaminsen and Bryceson, 2012; Choi, 2017). Ocean grabs and subsequent reconfiguration of social relations have deepened uneven geographical development and exacerbated social, economic, and environmental inequalities around the access to and use of coastal resources (Mallin and Barbesgaard, 2020).

Neoliberal marine spatial planning processes that exclude resource users from coastal spaces and traditional territories that are key for harvesting activities and other cultural practices contributed to capitalist expansion and increasing inequalities in the Global South (Idrobo et al., 2016). For states and multinational corporations (MNCs), the increased infrastructural power resulting from the enclosure of coastal spaces associated with the construction of maritime infrastructure allows for the expansion of capitalist markets through the extraction, circulation, and accumulation of capital closely linked to oceanic activities (Vega et al., 2019; Acevedo Guerrero, 2020).

When infrastructure projects are built on indigenous, Afro-Colombian, and peasants' territories, they frequently circumvent collective titles or property rights. The exclusionary character of these developments advances neoliberal accumulation strategies of local, national, and transnational elites and exacerbates existing inequalities due to the uneven access to rents generated by infrastructure projects (see Franz, 2018, 2016; Mauro, 2009).

The changes in resource allocation regimes accompanying infrastructure developments lead to the de-facto privatization of common-pool resources (Pinkerton, 2017). Resource use regime shifts become another means of reallocation when resource use force transitions from subsistence to market-based commodities (Berkes, 2010). In the case

of ocean grabbing, such changes not only dispossess coastal peoples, threatening their livelihoods and the continuity of their ways of life but often lead to the destruction of the ecosystems on which they rely (Bavinck et al., 2017; Franco et al., 2014). As a part of the neoliberal development strategy in the Americas, maritime infrastructure investments accelerate ocean-grabbing processes as they reallocate coastal spaces that are part of ancestral territories of Indigenous and traditional peoples. In the case of the Colombian Pacific, coastal lands are the ancestral territories of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous peoples (Ng'weno 2000).

Post-development theory complements the arguments above by highlighting the need to focus on how local communities conceptualize their short- and long-term wellbeing. Afro-descendent, Indigenous, peasant, feminist, and social movements' epistemologies, practices and goals have been structural to conceive a post-development theory grounded in an understanding of how marginalized social actors struggle to access and plan the territories in which they live. By doing this, post-development theory criticizes the goals and core principles of development, such as economic growth, progress, modernization, rationalization, and individualism (Escobar, 2005; Gudynas, 2011).

Post-development theory acknowledges that modern development strategies seek a universal model of society and ignore context-specific realities of the regions in which growth strategies have been implemented, and the uneven geopolitical power relationships between the Global North and the Global South (see Escobar, 2005; Halvorsen, 2018; Smith, 2008). Furthermore, dominant development perspectives marginalize the contributions of 'feminized subjects' to wellbeing, economy, and society (Aguinaga et al., 2011; Pérez Orozco, 2014; Quiroga and Gómez, 2008; Zaragocin, 2019). As such, and particularly relevant for the Colombian Pacific, Afro-Colombians, Indigenous peoples and

peasants have been disproportionately and negatively affected by national, regional, and local policy processes (Asher and Ojeda, 2009; Rincón-Ruiz and Kallis, 2013).

Escobar (2011) argues that diverse alternatives to development in which people and community wellbeing becomes decoupled from economic growth are found in some Indigenous and Afro-descendent communities, scholarship, and social movements in the Global South. *Buen vivir* (living well) among the Quechua (Gudynas, 2011; Radcliffe, 2012) or *vivir sabroso* (joyful living) among some Afro-Colombians (Quiceno, 2017) are examples of wellbeing perspectives in tension with competing conceptions of development and their associated effects on traditional peoples and their ancestral territories (see Artaraz and Calestani, 2015). From these viewpoints, wellbeing is rooted in peoples' culture and identity, and their relations with territories and social groups, transcending what dominant approaches define as quality of life (Coulthard et al., 2011). These framings include self-determination, collective rights to territory, and rights of nature (Radcliffe, 2012).

Dominant development narratives often portray Afro-Colombians as poor people requiring infrastructural interventions to achieve 'development'. This short-term vision displaces people from the centre of analysis and obliterates their wellbeing perspectives. These selective development narratives based on infrastructure building 'hide from view communities that inconvenience or disturb the implied trajectory of unitary national ascent' (Nixon, 2011: 151). Dinerstein and Deneulin (2012: 598) further content that such narratives fail to grasp the relational understanding between humans and the natural environment and hence 'do not change the structural processes which marginalize people.' 'Hope movements', as the authors call them, collectively work towards another mode of being, not another way of doing (see Dinerstein and Deneulin, 2012)

### **3. Methods**

This article draws on a qualitative, transdisciplinary, and participatory-action research project in collaboration with LRCC in Nuquí. During six trips to Nuquí (between July 2018 and August 2019), we conducted semi-structured interviews (Creswell, 2014; Bernard, 2006) and ran focus groups (Morgan, 1998) with community members, local government officials, and other key stakeholders. We also participated in community meetings and agriculture, fishing, and tourism activities in the rural settlements outside of Nuquí's urban centre.

The results in this article include the analysis of the LRCC's ethno-development plan, the Colombian government's National Development Plan 2018-2022 and the National Investment Plan 2018-2022, documents from the Colombian Commission of the Oceans (Comisión Colombiana del Océano 2020), media articles, as well as findings from 42 interviews. Additionally, we include information from two public forums (Nuquí in November 2018 and Bogotá in May 2019) where community members, local authorities, government representatives, and investors presented their views on the Tribugá Port project (Idrobo et al. 2022). We followed qualitative data coding and analysis protocols (e.g., Auerbach and Silverstein 2003) to manually code the reviewed documents, interviews, and public forum transcriptions. We employed development and wellbeing perspectives as the central themes of our analysis, then organized them in terms of evidence and perspectives for and against the Tribugá Port proposal. These main categories were, in turn, unpacked according to their relation to local economic development, livelihoods, identity, culture and environmental conservation. These categories served to organize the presentation of results in Section 5. The quotes we use in this contribution represent the participants' views.

This research was conducted following an ethics protocol approved by the Universidad de Los Andes Research Ethics Board. Respondents were anonymized to protect their privacy, and their contributions are identified as *Nuquí Resident* in this document.

#### **4. Contextualising Nuquí and Chocó**

The Nuquí municipality, located in the Department of Chocó, has a population of around 9000 and is only accessible by air or sea (Figure 1). With roughly half of its population living in rural areas along the Pacific Coast, the local livelihoods rely on small-scale agriculture and fishing (41.09%) and tourism service provision, often related to community-based ecotourism projects (51.95%) (DANE, 2020a).

Situated in the Chocó, Nuquí's situation is similar to that of the entire Department. Historically abandoned by the central government, Chocó's poverty rate at 60% doubles the Colombian average. Chocó also has the highest unemployment, malnutrition, infant mortality, and illiteracy rates in Colombia (Gobernación del Chocó, 2016). Public services are structurally underfunded, leaving many without access to drinking water, electricity, education and healthcare. According to the Regional Government, '73% of the municipalities do not have any type of drinking water treatment system and in the remaining 27% disinfection is not carried out at all or inadequately' (Gobernación del Chocó, 2016: 63). Caught between Colombia's neoliberal development strategy depriving them of access to basic sanitary, health, and educational services and structural oppression during the 68 years of armed conflict, Nuquí has been particularly subjected to violence and material poverty. It is thus unsurprising that 72.9% of the population lives in multidimensional poverty and lacks aqueducts and sewage systems, electricity and primary healthcare (DANE, 2020b).

Despite this historic abandonment, the Colombian Government of Iván Duque proposed massive investments in the Tribugá Port project. The proposed Tribugá Port was supposed to be located 9 kilometres north of Nuquí's urban centre and 15 kilometres South of the Utría National Park, occupying an area of over 500 hectares in the Tribugá Gulf (Figure 1). With the proposed construction of several docks that extend 3.6 kilometres into the ocean to reach a docking depth of up to 20 meters, the Tribugá Port was set to receive large container ships (i.e. Neo-Panamax vessels) to reach a total capacity of 3.2 million tons per year (CCM, 2017).

(Figure 1 about here)

Figure 1: Map of Nuquí with the location of the Tribugá Port

The political economic contention between the mainstream narrative around the Tribugá Port and the regimes of territoriality and wellbeing emerging from the context of Nuquí play out in the daily lives of the local Afro-Colombian community. The next section contrasts these visions by analysing the narratives revolving the proposed Tribugá Port project.

## **5. From dominant development narratives to local wellbeing alternatives**

This section presents our research findings by situating the Tribugá Port project in contrasting development narratives and positioning the functions of wellbeing regimes in relation to the enclosure and dispossession of marine and coastal environments in Nuquí. The construction of the port generally received a mixed reaction from the local population. Our research, however, mainly focuses on the territorial vision of the traditional authority

(the LRCC) and the articulation of their proposals in alternative ideas to achieve development and wellbeing. The following findings are also informed by our positionality and emphasize the LRCC's organizational perspective that opposes the construction of the port. However, as noted below, we also identified standpoints within the local population favouring the Tribugá Port. Of the 42 people we interviewed, three agreed with the construction of the port, 37 did not agree, and two mentioned that they needed more information to comment on whether or not they agreed with this mega project.

### *5.1 Dominant visions of development: "Nuquí needs a port!"*

Since the early 2000s, the Colombian State has implemented several reforms to enable the privatization and deregulation of land and water to incentivize infrastructure investments (e.g. Law 1508, 2012; Law 1682, 2013). This has facilitated private investments into infrastructure to expand from around 1% of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) in 2010 to over 4% in 2018 (see Rodríguez Porcel et al., 2018). Besides the increased efforts for private participation, public investment in infrastructure increased five-fold between 2010 and 2018, to US\$ 26 million (US\$ 22 million for road construction, US\$ 2 million for ports, US\$ 1.6 million to airport renovations, and US\$ 300.000 for railway construction) (DNP, 2018a). The growth of public investment into infrastructure from 1.6% of GDP in 2010 to almost 3% in 2018 (CCI, 2018) made Colombia the third most prominent Latin American spender on infrastructure development (Serebrisky et al., 2018). The policy changes have gone hand in hand with the transition to peace in Colombia. Peace and infrastructure are seen as materializations of development and progress (Gómez, 2016).

With the election of President Duque in 2018, these materializations became visible in the administration's National Investment Plan (DNP, 2018b) and the National Policy of the Ocean and Coastal Spaces (CCO, 2018). The plans have primarily been focused on the development of the Chocó, emphasising the need to fund infrastructure projects in the department, particularly in the Nuquí municipality. However, rather than expanding public investments to much needed health and education services, the plans focused on transportation infrastructure projects, such as the Tribugá Port, and a railroad and a highway to connect the Pacific Coast to the rest of the country (DNP, 2018b).

The National Development Plan stressed the importance of infrastructure development to 'reach the full development of our (country's) potential' (DNP, 2018c: 573). This emphasis on 'an infrastructure network that... will have the greatest impact on the national economy' (DNP, 2018: 600) was mainly concerned with the improvement of existing and the construction of new ports (see CCI, 2018).

The Tribugá Port was the most ambitious project in this context. The port's building and management were going to be conducted by the private-public organization called Sociedad Arquímedes. Arquímedes consisted of the Department Governments of Chocó, Caldas and Risaralda; department and municipality-level Chambers of Commerce (Caldas, Chocó, Risaralda, Cartago), a private university (Universidad Autónoma de Manizales), two public polytechnic Universities (Chocó and Pereira) and other enterprises and economic actors from the landlocked coffee growing region of Colombia (Arquímedes, 2018). Transnational capital also had interests in the shareholding group with the Chinese port-building company China Harbour Engineering Company Ltd. and unnamed U.S. investors as the main foreign MNCs involved. The aim of Arquímedes was not just the building of Colombia's second major port on the Pacific Coast and a rail and highway

connection but also to establish a free trade zone with an extensive industrial park (Arquímedes, 2018). Once the port, railway, and industrial park were built, Arquímedes would have overseen these infrastructures' operation, highlighting access problems for the local population and privatising access to common-pool resources.

The discourse of public officials and the Colombian elite focuses on the potential benefits the Tribugá Port project would bring to the region and the country. For example, the national and regional governments, Arquímedes, and investors promised output generation and employment creation. From their point of view, the project would 'benefit and impact the way of life of the inhabitants of the department of Chocó... and the inhabitants of the so-called Golden Triangle between the cities of Bogotá, Medellín and Cali.' (CCM, 2017: 12).

Personifying the interests of Colombian elites, the general manager of Arquímedes, William Naranjo, emphasized that:

'This project can really trigger positive social and economic changes for the Chocó region. For example, job opportunities created through the establishment of the free-trade zone will help Chocoanos find employment... and within the context of increasing competitiveness, it not only favours Chocó, but it also favours all of Colombia, it favours all entrepreneurs, producers, farmers and those engaged in primary activities' (Naranjo, cited in Semana, 2019).

The discourse that the Tribugá Port project would help to overcome the historical and structural marginalization of the Chocó department and its inhabitants is also embraced by the Chamber of Commerce of the Chocó:

‘a deep-water port in the Chocoano Pacific...would increase [Chocó's] international trade, directly generate employment, improve its competitiveness and, above all, boost the socio-economic development of the department of Chocó.’ (Cámara de Comercio del Chocó, 2019).

The Duque government estimated that the construction of the Tribugá Port would reduce freight transportation costs by up to 90%, boasting international competitiveness (Arquímedes, 2018). However, with the existing ports in Colombia running at 40.7% of their capacity (Hommes, 2019), the arguments for an increase in competitiveness and trade capacity seem rather far-fetched. As the House of Representatives member, Catalina Ortíz, pointed out during our public audience in the Senate: ‘with the high unemployment in Buenaventura and the port running below 50% of its capacity, it doesn't make sense to invest in the construction of a new port that would destroy much of the rainforest of the Chocó’ (Ortiz, 2019).

The arguments that the construction of the Tribugá Port would bring employment opportunities, decrease transportation costs, increase access to markets, and facilitate the provision of goods and services were also emphasized by people in the Nuquí who favour the project. One resident stressed that the construction of the port would overcome the lack of formal employment opportunities as it ‘would mean that things would get better here’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 1, March 2019). The lack of access to water and electricity was significant for some interviewees. One argued that the project would ‘bring better access to electricity... schools, aqueducts for potable water, and hospitals... and we would not have to run to (the department's capital) Quibdó when we're sick; there would be ambulances’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 1, August 2019).

Another resident of Nuquí mentioned that ‘[g]asoline here costs double or triple than in the rest of the country because it is difficult to bring here. So, I think that with a port and the road, gasoline will get cheaper, and that will be beneficial to us.’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 2, August 2019). From their perspective, facilitated access to better cold storage for the local fishery, decreased transportation costs of local products and reduced costs of intermediate goods would make local farmers and fishers more efficient and enhance competitiveness. We also heard that the project ‘would benefit [the community] because more [tourists] would arrive here, and that creates more commerce, more work, more jobs’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 3, March 2019).

During the interviews, we could identify a sense of hopelessness with the status quo, borne out of historical and structural abandonment. In many cases, this informed residents' views about the Tribugá Port project and promoted a coerced position around the construction of the port: ‘They have abandoned us, supremely abandoned, so we see that having a port here could bring development’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 2, March 2019). While these local perspectives are far from the LRCC's efforts to consolidate cultural, political, and economic autonomy and embrace community-based environmental conservation, they are present in parts of Nuquí's population.

### *5.2 Nuquí doesn't need a port for its wellbeing*

Although there are different positions within the community about the port, the majority (37 out of 42) of the interviewed inhabitants of Nuquí considered that it would not benefit them. Those with this position have continuously contributed to the LRCC's efforts to imagine and enact their vision of wellbeing.

Despite their precarious living conditions, the Afro-Colombian population of Nuquí have been at the forefront of building alternatives to the dominant discourse on economic development through their ethno-development plans. Many stressed that 'development' in their territory needs to resonate with their wellbeing perspectives and how they enact these from everyday life to long-term planning processes. In everyday life, wellbeing means living peacefully (*vivir tranquilamente*), which underlies an ethic of care for oneself and the social-ecological environment. These actions translate into long-term processes to create and perform autonomous, sustainable land use and coastal planning and healthy local economies operating beyond market-based exchange systems.

In this vein, a resident leading the promotion of a community-based vision of development that centres around Afro-Colombian and ancestral understanding of land and property mentioned:

‘We have a vision of development based on what the land provides to us. This is different from the highlands and main cities of the country. We, the ancestral people who have lived in and with the territory for centuries, see our wealth in what the water, the forest and the land provide to us.’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 4, March 2019).

Livelihoods of Nuquí’s residents depend on small-scale fishing, agriculture, and more recently, community-based ecotourism, all critical aspects of the community's income stream, identity, culture, and environmental ethic. Traditional institutions related to sharing fish catches and land-based food production have developed around the building and strengthening family and community relations while providing access to essential food items to those temporarily in need. Most people identify as fishers and are involved in some

stage of fish processing (i.e., capture, transformation, storage, transportation, and exchange). Having intimate knowledge of the marine and coastal environments and their resources, including culinary and gastronomic knowledge, is a source of pride.

‘Fishing is something I like. I like being in the water in a boat, having the sea by my side, working with it, and feeling that I belong to this habitat. Being able to navigate at night without lights, to go wherever I want, to understand the moon, to comprehend how much fish I am going to catch is part of who I am’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 5, August 2019).

Fishing activities intertwine an environmental stewardship ethic based on respecting the environment and ensuring the continuity of local livelihoods. Long-term efforts from local fishers to institutionalize the conservation of fish stocks and defence of local livelihoods led to the declaration of a 60,138 hectares marine protected area (MPA) (i.e., Golfo de Tribugá – Cabo Corrientes Integrated Regional Management District). The Tribugá Port was proposed in this MPA, whose central goal is to regulate the access of industrial shrimp trawlers to coastal waters and ensure that local small-scale fishers employ gear that does not destroy the local ecosystems and the resource base on which they rely (Velandia and Díaz, 2016).

Nuquí is a renowned tourism destination in Colombia because of the aesthetic value of its well-conserved ecosystems and whale-watching activities. This has enabled the emergence of community-based tourism, which has directly strengthened the local economy and supported other activities, such as fishing and agriculture. These local economic activities – tourism, agriculture, and fishing - work through cooperation and reciprocity.

‘We have always said that we do community tourism. For example, tourists arrive, and they stay with me. I do not only benefit myself. Many people benefit since I buy the coconut from one person, the other one does the guiding; one person helps me in the kitchen, and another with the cleaning. So many people benefit. I believe that in that way the quality of life is greatly improved’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 6, August 2019).

The increased noise pollution and the destruction of the mangrove ecosystem associated with the Tribugá Port would threaten community ecotourism based on whale watching and can potentially marginalize small-scale coastal fishers. In contrast, LRCC's ethno-development plan calls for economic practices and territorial planning towards protecting life, territory and culture while ensuring the persistence in the territory.

‘In [Afro-Colombian] people's worldview, the territory is linked to everyday tasks. In the network of the divine and the human, the territory and natural resources: plants, animals, water, elves, ghosts and spirits, are the cornerstone and influence the relations of respect, use and organization and distribution of resources within each community’ (Consejo Comunitario General Los Riscales, 2007).

A significant proportion of the population in Nuquí embrace the worldview mentioned above, do not equate their wellbeing with the dominant notion of progress, and do not understand poverty the same way the Colombian government does. Their wellbeing transcends the acquisition, possession and accumulation of capital and material goods. Instead, it is associated with satisfying basic needs and rights, living in peace and enjoying a healthy environment.

‘To live well is not to have money... To live well is to have what one needs. At least I have my boat, my motor, my fishing equipment... That I have what I need in my house... I do not dream of having money... I dream of having a normal life and not needing anything else’ (interview, Nuquí Resident 7, March 2019).

During fieldwork, we observed the existence of relational subjects rather than individualistic liberal subjects basing their actions on maximising their utility. The success and wellbeing of one person depend on healthy relations with others, the environment, and the territory. This relational subject is a fundamental part of other Afro-Colombian communitarian worldviews that share a communitarian vision of wellbeing and contradicts the dominant anthropocentric worldview (see Escobar, 2008; Quiceno, 2017). People are entities intimately linked with nature that recognize themselves as another element in the universe and not as the central one. From this perspective, historically and currently diverse Afro-Colombian communities struggle for cultural and territorial autonomy, including the conservation of the ecosystems they inhabit and depend on (see Figure 2).

(Figure 2 about here)

Figure 2: Community-oriented map of Nuquí

Source: Más Arte más Acción

Fishing, agriculture and tourism are essential to food sovereignty and to a politics of relationality within the territory and constitute the base of a community economy rooted in traditional practices. A community-oriented economy contributes to people’s wellbeing

because it not only generates monetary income to individual households, but also feeds the community and enables the fulfilment of individual and community planning aspirations.

The LRCC's Ethno-development plan has a specific focus on strengthening the community's ability to resist exploitation and oppression and to be in charge of the political, economic, social, and environmental changes affecting their wellbeing.

“Our ethno-development plan proposes a logic for subsistence and not for exploitation. We want that the same level of supply of natural resources we have had as a community will continue for future generations. For that reason, we defined some rules for fishing. Our wellbeing is associated with a healthy relation between the ecosystem and the communities” (interview, LRCC representative, August 2019).

Small-scale fishing and agriculture, and community ecotourism in Nuquí's everyday life give people a sense of peace and tranquillity that they fear could be disrupted with the Tribugá Port project. People are aware that they not only risk losing the aforementioned dimensions of their lives, but also that they will not be the main beneficiaries of the economic progress that the port may bring.

Many in Nuquí are afraid that the Tribugá Port project epitomises dominant imaginaries of development and progress. Its construction would severely affect Afro-Colombian and indigenous wellbeing, traditional practices in the territory. As one community member mentioned, “the project would seriously threaten our ways of living and the livelihoods we get from fishing, agriculture and community-based tourism” (interview, Nuquí Resident 8, August 2019).

## 6. Discussion

From our research, we found that the imaginaries and practices of LRCC in Nuquí are much closer to the post-development and wellbeing reflections than to the dominant development visions. Our findings highlight the LRCC's ethno-development plan, organized based on Afro-descendants' ideas of living well, which provides context-specific alternatives to development. In that sense, the LRCC's plan is one of many possible expressions of imaginaries and practices rooted in a specific vision of wellbeing in Nuquí. LRCC's conception of wellbeing may have similarities with other post-development materializations, such as *Buen Vivir* or other Afro-descendants' experiences. Still, it is unique because it has emerged from a particular cosmovision and context. The richness of LRCC's know-how has to do with its particularities. The methodology that we employ involves paying attention to those particularities.

Leaning on Uribe's (2018: 900) argument that infrastructural power is 'securing territorial sovereignty or allowing the expansion of governmental control and capitalism over spaces and populations considered 'marginal', 'backwards' or 'lawless'', we argue that interests of domestic and transnational capital primarily drive the Tribugá Port project as it creates opportunities to geographically and temporally displace capitalist surpluses for future accumulation (see Harvey 2004, Arrighi 2009, Franz 2020). The resulting enclosure of marine and coastal spaces and the expansion of a neoliberal accumulation regime into Nuquí threatens the local population's access to coastal resources and reinforces existing inequalities. The associated land and ocean grabbing furthers an accumulation strategy based on exploiting natural and coastal resources. The Afro-Colombian and indigenous communities who inhabit this territory and depend on its resources see their livelihoods and visions of wellbeing negatively affected by the Tribugá Port project.

The Tribugá Port interweaves with the history of Nuquí. Building a second major port on the Pacific Coast has been a flagship infrastructural project for the Colombian elite, reducing Nuquí's *raison d'être* to providing a vector to accelerate the integration of the Colombian Pacific into global capitalism. While government plans for local development in the Chocó have mainly emphasized the need for development through scaling up investment efforts of public and private actors (see Arquímedes, 2018; DNP, 2018c), our findings on the Tribugá Port theoretically and empirically counter such proposals. We found viable alternatives that reject a dominant narrative centred around the spatial reorganization that capitalism needs to cater to industrial and commercial accumulation. Local alternatives from Nuquí directly respond to prevailing understandings of development that foster the exploitation of livelihoods and coastal landscapes and contrast Global North hegemonies and neoliberalism (Foley and Mather 2019). Local perspectives on planning the future of collective territories prioritize communal access to land and ocean resources to sustain the community's livelihoods and biological diversity (Artelle et al. 2019).

While plans for building the Tribugá Port have been suspended, the project portrays the juxtaposition between dominant visions of development and place-based, long-term planning approaches. Dominant visions include strategies to use ocean resources for economic growth (i.e. the blue economy) that follow the neoliberal logic of global ocean privatization (see Barbesgaard, 2018; Brent et al., 2020; Mallin and Barbesgaard, 2020). For Nuquí, where Afro-Colombian and Indigenous visions of wellbeing based on collective territorial rights persist, the human and environmental costs of infrastructure projects in collective territories continue to be a constitutive part of the national strategy of expanding capitalist economic organization. The coinciding dispossession of over 500 hectares of

coast and sea and the enclosure of new spaces into circuits of capital accumulation provide a valuable mechanism for advancing neoliberal development strategies and deepening state power. The territorial planning and conservation strategies we found in Nuquí's revolve around cultural, ecological, and economic alternatives that assert self-determination and resist neoliberal capitalist 'development'. Our findings resonate with Indigenous and community-based conservation processes worldwide in which self-determination and strengthening relations with the territory are mobilized in the struggle against the neoliberalization of coastal territories and oceans (Rist et al. 2019; Bennett et al. 2021). Wellbeing grounded in local planning and priorities provides a different understanding of development and is likely to lead to outcomes that foster inclusive processes with self-determination and autonomous resource management at the core.

Theoretically, we highlight how post-development literature supports place-based understandings of wellbeing that emphasize the needs of local communities. Applying this to the Nuquí context allows going beyond the limitations of mainstream arguments highlighting positive effects of maritime infrastructure investments. It also adds explanatory value to our empirical understanding of the LRCC's wellbeing perspectives and long-term planning processes. However, this article also emphasizes the importance of incorporating the analysis of power into a post-development analysis of local planning processes and wellbeing practices. The way the Colombian State historically wielded economic and political power in support of capitalism's violent penetration of Afro-Colombian and Indigenous territories suggests the need for a critical reflection on state power more generally and power asymmetries between the capitalist state and local communities. As state actors and MNCs investing in infrastructure projects drive processes of dispossession and play a vital role in the geographical expansion of capitalism at the

expense of local community and the environment, incorporating a critical analysis of (state) power can achieve greater commensurability between the core assumptions of post-development theory and the realities of Indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities in Colombia and beyond.

This is even more important now since the 2022 presidential election with the victory of the former guerrilla member Gustavo Petro and the Afro-Colombian environmental activist Francia Márquez. Being the country's first left-wing government Petro and Márquez have positioned collective wellbeing (*Vivir Sabroso*) as an essential element of their political program. However, despite both Petro and Márquez having a political agenda focused on environmental issues, Arquímedes – subsuming the interests of Colombia's elites and transnational capital – continues to organize around the issue of the Tribugá Port and are lobbying for the inclusion of the project into the national development plan. Thus, 2023 will be a crucial year for Nuquí's population since the priorities of the current national government will materialize in regional and local development plans where dominant visions of development and alternative approaches to territorial planning will likely be in contention.

## **7. Conclusion**

Part of modern capitalist development, maritime infrastructure expansion in Colombia entails deepening neoliberal accumulation strategies to which the dispossession and undermining of access to coastal lands are inherent.

The dominant narrative of the Tribugá Port project connecting Nuquí to the landlocked highlands and global markets promised that it would positively affect the local

community. The overall macroeconomic effects of this maritime infrastructure project through incentivising trade and investments were seen as beneficial for the entire country. The previous Colombian government and private investors mobilized around this overly optimistic vision to justify potential negative externalities on the affected areas' social, economic, and environmental conditions.

This dominant narrative in which infrastructure paves a path to achieving development in marginalized territories neglects local initiatives and ignores alternative perspectives on wellbeing. This partial view on development has often obfuscated local communities' relations with their territories. The mainstream development discourse presents the poor as a homogenous group that lack basic needs and require development interventions bringing them benefits of infrastructure, such as market access and the provision of goods and services.

Using theoretical arguments from heterodox political economy, critical economic geography, post-development literature and empirical findings from research in Nuquí, this article provides conceptual alternatives that can add analytical value to our understanding of 'development'. Additionally, our research empirically demonstrates that the LRCC and other people from Nuquí are primarily opposed to the Tribugá Port as they see its construction as a direct threat to their vision of wellbeing and permanence in their territory.

The proposal of the Tribugá Port in Afro-Colombian and Indigenous territories highlights several infrastructure policy contradictions ingrained in the dominant development logic. While maritime transport is supposed to increase economic activity in adherence to the sustainable use of land and sea, the demands for land and coastal resources put at risk the local community's ways of life. It threatens long-term territorial planning rooted in local economic practices, identity, culture, and deep understandings and relations

with the environment. Policies that are genuinely concerned with people's wellbeing need to take practices and visions of local populations, especially those that are organized and represented by the political structures of ethnic communities, into account for intervention to be most sustainable for those inhabiting the affected territories. It remains to be seen if the new government in Colombia will support local territorial planning strategies or if it will revert to growth strategies that replicate dominant visions of development.

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<sup>1</sup> In line with Thérien (1999), we understand the division between the Global North and Global South as socio-economic and political. The Global North generally represents

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advanced capitalist countries located in Europe and North America, as well as Australia, Israel, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea, and Taiwan.

<sup>2</sup> We follow Robinson's (2012) understanding of elite as the dominant economic and political group in a society. Broadly, we can differentiate between capitalists who own and manage the means of production and not capitalists proper, such as landed oligarchs, leaders occupying strategic leadership roles in public and private organisations, and political leaders more generally. With the increased importance of financialised global capitalism, we can also distinguish between an emerging transnational capitalist class and an elite faction that focuses on nationally oriented accumulation strategies.