

The Environmentalist Discourse versus the Bureaucratic Discourse: The Cenagoso Bajo Sinú Wetland Complex, Colombia*

[English Version]

**El discurso ambientalista frente al discurso burocrático:
Humedal complejo cenagoso Bajo Sinú-Colombia**

**O discurso ambientalista frente ao discurso burocrático: o
complexo de Humedais *cenagoso Bajo Sinú*, Colômbia**

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Abstract

Objective: To analyze discursive practices on sustainable development (SD), understood as differentiated institutional and community genres, from the perspective of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), using the *Cenagoso del Bajo Sinú* Wetland Complex as a case study. **Methodology:** A qualitative approach was employed based on the three-dimensional CDA model, combining a systematic literature review with empirical analysis of a discursive corpus. Databases such as Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and SciELO were consulted, prioritizing studies on sustainability, environmental policies, and wetland governance. The corpus included environmental regulations, public policy documents, and semi-structured interviews with rural farmers. The analysis was organized along the textual, practice, and sociocultural dimensions of the model, allowing the identification of power relations and tensions surrounding the discursive production of sustainability. **Results:** The analysis revealed that discourse on SD operates as a hegemonic bureaucratic device that, once institutionalized, legitimizes territorial appropriation in the Wetland Complex and renders community knowledge invisible. Within N. Fairclough's framework, discursive asymmetries were identified that conceal processes of dispossession and environmental degradation beneath the rhetoric of sustainability. **Conclusions:** SD discourse imposes a bureaucratic logic that weakens its real implementation. This narrative obscures community knowledge.

Keywords: dissertation; ecosystem; environmental conservation; wetland; sustainable development (from the UNESCO thesaurus).

Resumen

Objetivo: analizar las prácticas discursivas sobre el desarrollo sostenible (DS), entendidas como géneros diferenciados institucionales y comunitarios, desde el enfoque del Análisis Crítico del Discurso (ACD) de Fairclough, tomando como caso de estudio el complejo cenagoso del Bajo Sinú (CCBS). **Metodología:** se empleó un enfoque cualitativo basado en el modelo tridimensional del ACD, combinando revisión bibliográfica sistemática y análisis empírico de un corpus discursivo. Se consultaron bases como Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar y SciELO, priorizando estudios sobre sostenibilidad, políticas ambientales y gobernanza de humedales. El corpus incluyó normativa ambiental, documentos de política pública y entrevistas semiestructuradas a campesinos. El análisis se estructuró en las dimensiones textual, práctica y sociocultural del modelo, permitiendo identificar relaciones de poder y tensiones en torno a la producción discursiva sobre sostenibilidad. **Resultados:** el análisis reveló que el discurso

sobre DS opera como un dispositivo burocrático hegemónico que, al institucionalizarse, legitima la apropiación territorial en el CCBS e invisibiliza saberes comunitarios. Desde el modelo de N. Fairclough, se identificaron asimetrías discursivas que encubren procesos de despojo y degradación ambiental bajo una retórica de sostenibilidad.

Conclusiones: el discurso del DS impone una lógica burocrática que debilita su aplicación real. Esta narrativa invisibiliza saberes comunitarios.

Palabras clave: disertación; ecosistema; conservación ambiental; ciénaga; desarrollo sostenible (obtenidos del tesoro UNESCO).

Resumo

Objetivo: analisar as práticas discursivas sobre desenvolvimento sustentável (DS), entendidas como gêneros institucionais e comunitários diferenciados, a partir do enfoque da Análise Crítica do Discurso (ACD) de Fairclough, tomando como estudo de caso o complexo de humedais *Cenagoso del Bajo Sinú*. **Metodologia:** utilizou-se uma abordagem qualitativa baseada no modelo tridimensional da ACD, combinando revisão bibliográfica sistemática e análise empírica de um corpus discursivo. Consultaram-se bases como Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar e SciELO, priorizando estudos sobre sustentabilidade, políticas ambientais e governança de áreas úmidas. O corpus incluiu normativa ambiental, documentos de políticas públicas e entrevistas semiestruturadas com agricultores locais. A análise foi estruturada nas dimensões textual, prática e sociocultural do modelo, permitindo identificar relações de poder e tensões em torno da produção discursiva sobre sustentabilidade. **Resultados:** a análise revelou que o discurso sobre DS opera como um dispositivo burocrático hegemônico que, ao institucionalizar-se, legitima a aprovação territorial no Complexo de Humedais e invisibiliza saberes comunitários. A partir do modelo de N. Fairclough, identificaram-se assimetrias discursivas que ocultam processos de desapropriação e degradação ambiental sob a retórica da sustentabilidade. **Conclusões:** o discurso do DS impõe uma lógica burocrática que enfraquece sua aplicação real. Essa narrativa invisibiliza conhecimentos comunitários.

Palavras-chave: dissertação; ecossistema; conservação ambiental; ciénaga; desenvolvimento sustentável (obtidos do tesoro UNESCO).

Introduction

Nowadays, talking about sustainability often implies preserving the established order. This perception responds to discursive practices that shape our view of the world, as suggested by Waismann (1968), by promoting new ways of seeing things. The term 'sustainable', used in various contexts, has lost conceptual depth. Enriquez (2020) warns that its mere mention activates the idea of a well-intentioned discourse. These practices not only shape our notion of 'sustainability', but also environmental institutions at different levels. They are often linked to neoliberal discourse, which promotes economic growth with apparent environmental concern, and operate as an empty signifier that reinforces the *status quo* (Morffe, 2024).

Fairclough *et al.* (2004) propose that discourse can be understood in several ways, sometimes as meaning-making within social structures, other times as language tied to specific practices, or as ways of seeing the world according to certain social frameworks. However, not all discourses coexist without tension: some are affirmed, others are weakened, and many are transformed from within (Kommandeur *et al.*, 2025). In this regard, the bureaucratic discourse on sustainability does not arise spontaneously. It began to take shape after the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which sparked global environmentalism. Later, with the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) and the report *Our Common Future*—or Brundtland Report—an idea of sustainability connected to economic growth with institutional support took hold.

In 1992, the second conference on Environment and Development was held in Rio de Janeiro, called the "Earth Summit". There, Agenda 21 was approved, which initially aimed to guide policies toward effective sustainability for the 21st century. Twenty years later, at the Rio+20 Summit, the declaration "The future we want" was signed. In this new scenario, terms associated with "green" began to circulate, presented as different alternatives to the SD discourse. However, this was reinforced with the adoption of the 2015-2030 Sustainable Development Goals [SDGs] and the Paris Agreement. This discursive evolution has generated very diverse debates: some more technical, others openly critical. Authors such as Hajian and Kashani (2021), or Ruggerio (2021), offer revealing readings on this conceptual tension.

This research draws on Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Munoz (2019), who understand "sustainability" as a set of guiding criteria for human action. It also adopts the notion of territorial SD as the point of convergence for economic and management actors interacting locally (Vikhoreva *et al.*, 2020). From this perspective, the discursive practice of the SD is analyzed through Fairclough's Critical Discourse

Analysis (CDA), using the BSWC in Colombia as a case study. Specifically, his three-dimensional model is applied, which links the textual, discursive-practice, and sociocultural dimensions of language, enabling a critical understanding of the power relations embedded in sustainability discourses.

From this methodological perspective, the analysis is organized into three interrelated axes that allow a deeper exploration of the critical dimension of the sustainability discourse. These axes include: CDA (Fairclough, 2023) regarding the concept of “sustainability”; the territory of wetlands, and the BSWC case, where agro-livestock practices typical of the capitalist mode of production unnecessarily drive ecosystem deterioration and the shrinking of water bodies. Within this framework, “discursive practice” is understood as an intermediate dimension between text and social structure, where discursive genres are produced, circulated, and contested (Fairclough, 1992, 2003, 2023). This notion allows the analysis of how institutional and community actors construct differentiated meanings of sustainability in contexts of asymmetric power.

Methodology

Following the CDA approach proposed by Fairclough (2023), this study examines the discursive practices associated with SD in the BSWC, Colombia. A qualitative perspective is adopted with a dual strategy: systematic literature review and empirical analysis of a corpus composed of regulations, public policies, and semi-structured interviews. Sources were selected through searches in Scopus, ScienceDirect, Google Scholar, and SciELO, prioritizing studies on sustainability, environmental governance, territory, and wetlands. The study analyzes only the institutional and community environmental discourse.

Using Fairclough's CDA framework (2023), discursive practices linked to SD were examined, using the BSWC as a case study. A qualitative perspective was adopted to unravel power relations, symbolic tensions, and legitimization processes present in institutional and community discourses on sustainability.

The BSWC, located in the northern part of the Córdoba department, comprises the lower area of a lacustrine-fluvial unit influenced by the Sinú River. It covers approximately 42,317 hectares under the jurisdiction of six municipalities (Resolution 202332008470566 of 2023). Its ecological and institutional configuration makes it a strategic territorial unit where official sustainability discourses converge with community resistance narratives, making it a suitable site for observing disputes over the meaning of territory.

This study uses Fairclough's three-dimensional CDA model (Alassiri, 2023), which distinguishes three levels: linguistic, discursive, and social. Thus, "discursive practice" is understood as social processes that mediate the production, circulation, and interpretation of texts. In contrast, "social practice" refers to institutional structures influencing these processes (Fairclough, 2003). This perspective is useful for exploring how meanings of sustainability are constructed and contested in contexts marked by inequality (Haider & Gujjar, 2021).

Three discursive genres were identified in the analyzed corpus. To address this dimension, the notion of 'gender' was used as a form of situated communicative action (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Devitt, 2004), allowing recognition of certain circulation patterns. For instance, institutional documents repeatedly include formulas such as "rational use of water resources" or "strategic environmental zoning", reflecting a technical rationality. These discursive choices reveal contradictory ways of building sustainability.

The bureaucratic discourse on sustainability, represented by the *Management and Environmental Planning Plan of the Bajo Sinú Wetlands Complex* (CVS, 2007), is analyzed. This institutional, technical, and normative approach configures the territory as an object of management, blurring local knowledge and reinforcing a hierarchical logic. Also included is the community discourse of peasant-fisher groups, collected through semi-structured interviews with *Cenagoso Bajo Sinú Wetland Complex* (BSWC) residents, conducted with informed consent and anonymity safeguards, who perceive the wetland as a space of life, memory, and livelihood.

Characterization of Community Discourse from the CDA Approach

A representative example of this discourse is captured in an interview with two elder fishermen from the village of San Sebastián, BSWC. It falls within the local-testimonial genre, characterized by spontaneous orality, territorial rootedness, and the centrality of the body as a locus of experience. Phrases like "we live off that", "it's nice to live here", or "my lungs get tired" construct the wetland as a collective, emotional, and economic subject, through colloquial expressions that embody a reciprocity-based economy and a bodily relationship with the environment. These practices, transmitted in domestic spaces, correspond to what Bhatia (1993) calls "genres linked to local communities" and reinforce the practical dimension of CDA by showcasing territorialized meanings from positions of normative exclusion.

Finally, the legal and environmental policy discourse is examined, as represented by Decree 2372 of 2010 and the Environmental Management

Plan 2020-2031 of the Regional Autonomous Corporation of the Sinú and San Jorge Valleys (CVS). This is framed within the normative-institutional genre, marked by impersonal structures (“must consider”), abstract nominalizations (“zoning process”), and technical vocabulary (“regional sustainability”, “ecological criteria”), characteristic of a regulatory rationality that conceives territory as a planning object. This logic contrasts with the peasant-fisher discourse, which conveys a situated and embodied experience. From the CDA perspective, this contrast reveals how territorial meanings are contested in scenarios of discursive asymmetry, and how institutional and community genres express divergent logics of sustainability.

The discourses were approached as differentiated genres according to their function and context: legal-normative (decrees, plans), technical-administrative (institutional documents), and local-testimonial (interviews). This typology strengthens the practical dimension of CDA by showing how each genre organizes the production and circulation of sustainability meanings.

Discursive Contrast Between Genders: Ways of Constructing Sustainability

From the CDA perspective and the notion of ‘genre’ as situated communicative action (Swales, 1990; Bhatia, 1993; Devitt, 2004), three discursive genres were identified in the corpus: normative-institutional, technical-administrative, and testimonial-community, each differentiated by their enunciation, function, and rationality.

- **Normative-institutional:** Evident in decrees and plans, this genre uses impersonal language, nominalizations, and prescriptive formulas. It reflects a regulatory rationality that plans the territory as an object.
- **Technical-administrative:** found in reports and diagnoses, it uses technical and neutral language, with standardized structures that reinforce a management logic based on scientific knowledge.
- **Testimonial-community:** present in interviews, it uses a spontaneous and affective language that builds the wetland as a lived territory, evidencing a relational logic grounded in care.

The contrast among these genres reveals structural asymmetries: institutional discourses objectify the territory, while the community discourse embodies and re-signifies it. This tension highlights power struggles in which some voices are legitimized while others are silenced. From the CDA perspective, language does not merely reflect the social world; it also contests and reproduces it.

Discursive Practices: Sustainable Development and Sustainability

This research focuses on the institutional environmental discourse, understood as a web of statements produced by state entities, multilateral organizations, and public standards that shape sustainability from technical, bureaucratic, and regulatory perspectives. Bureaucracy, far from being limited to the administrative sphere, operates as an organizational form of state rationality, supported by norms, means, and ends (Weber, 1985). This technical bias is not exclusive to the state; it also crosses modern discourses such as that of the SD (Casabone, 2017), proposing a balance between conservation and human needs. However, this approach does not completely dismantle the logics of exclusion and control. From the CDA lens, Fairclough (2005) addresses social reality through three key dynamics: stratification, relation, and transformation.

It is emphasized that social reality is organized in connected and dialectically mobilized strata, from general levels to more concrete ones. Thus, CDA conceives semiosis as a dialogical process essential to the reproduction and transformation of social relations (Fairclough, 2005). This analysis locates semiosis within capitalist dynamics, which reduce well-being and increase community suffering (Fairclough, 2013). By engaging with these dynamics, semiosis not only reproduces social bonds but configures hegemonic discourses that legitimize power structures.

The term “SD” functions as a discursive mechanism reinforcing the control of nature through a bureaucratic logic. It emerged in response to late 20th-century environmental degradation as a hegemonic notion legitimizing such control. For Fairclough (2013), bureaucratic discourse articulates a framework where power and language regulate social representations and shape cultural, political, gender, and hidden forms of power perspectives (Scott, 2023). Discursive practices enable institutional changes and reinforce ties with communities where certain institutions, such as those upholding sustainability discourse, are accepted as legitimate (Santamaría & Ruiz, 2021). In this discursive order, social relations operate through formalization and depersonalization, endorsed by a “technically based authority” (Brachet-Márquez & Godau, 1984), that is, the State. The global order imposes a single model for addressing environmental degradation without

considering each country's particularities. Vela (2005) refers to this as a legal equality among states, but not an economic one, hindering the design of public policies with a differentiated approach. This study analyzes the environmental discourse based on the policies implemented in the BSWC.

From constructivist theories, such as Latour's actor-network theory (2008), actors generate "language games" that shape new power-laden relationships. Action emerges from uncertainty, and through this, each actor incorporates others, weaving networks of cooperation and dominance that support multiple social practices. In line with this, Searle (2017) argues that social reality is built from practices rooted in community action. He introduces the concept of 'deontic power', inherent in human institutional frameworks, which encompasses duties, rights, authorizations, and privileges. This power, which is not limited to the legal realm, induces behavior without coercion by offering reasons for action that would not otherwise exist.

In response to the UN General Assembly's call to establish a global change agenda, the World Commission on Environment and Development published the report *Our Common Future*, which first proposed an economic growth model based on sustainability policies. However, Lander (2019) argues that this report failed to address the structural causes of the environmental crisis, uncritically embracing the logic of capitalist accumulation, thus consolidating a *technocratic vision*¹ of SD aligned with global market interests.

Far from being an instrument of structural transformation, environmental discourse has been absorbed by a technical-bureaucratic rationality that perpetuates the extractivist model and undermines its emancipatory power (Lander, 2019; Leff, 2022). This rationality acts as a pacification device in the face of ecological crisis, making institutional environmentalism a functional piece of the capitalist order. This symbolic co-optation is articulated with the rise of *soft law*, whose non-binding rules allow States to sustain environmental rhetoric without assuming legal commitments, while preserving a margin for extractive action (Noguera & Villota, 2020). In terms of regulations, at both local and international levels, legal frameworks still lack material conditions for environmental justice that would curb capital's accumulative appetite (Noguera, 2021).

According to Pérez-Marín (2016), this initiative was promoted under pressure from multilateral organizations such as the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean [ECLAC], the United Nations Development Program [UNDP], the World Bank, and the Inter-American Development Bank [IDB]. This vision of SD impacted not only research agendas but also Latin

¹ It is that approach that reduces environmental problems to technical and management solutions, omitting their political, ethical and territorial roots, which prevents profound structural transformations.

America's environmental history (Gallini, 2009). These actors applied what Searle (2017) calls "persuasive power": the ability to influence others to act differently than they otherwise would.

Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Muñoz (2019) identify a persistent ambiguity around the concept of "sustainability", which has hindered its rigorous application in research. In contrast, Escobar (2011) argues that this notion emerged from social movements as an integral defense of life and the environment. These resistances made visible the consequences of excessive capitalist growth and, from perspectives like ecological economics, denounced unequal economic and ecological exchanges stemming from extractive practices that devastate territories and communities (Gudynas, 2023).

The notion of 'sustainability', far from having a uniform meaning, has been appropriated by different discourses with different purposes and uses, which hinders its systematic treatment in research (Ruggerio, 2021). This ambiguity intensifies given the complexity of environmental problems, which are socially embedded. In response, a critical perspective like Fairclough's social analysis (2006, 2023) allows for the examination of both material practices and the meanings that sustain them. This approach enables a confrontation with notions like 'SD' (Biggs *et al.*, 2021), revealing its ambivalence and role in reproducing structured inequalities.

Critical social analysis, according to Fairclough (2023), allows us to address social realities as historical constructions subject to transformation, articulating material and semiotic dimensions that, in certain contexts, perpetuate human suffering. This perspective enables a critical reading of notions like 'SD' (Biggs *et al.*, 2021), by questioning their implications when naturalized in discourses grounded in technical knowledge. In this line, Merlinsky (2021) frames political ecology as a theoretical field that interprets socio-environmental conflicts as sources of transformative meanings that challenge the established order. These tensions, according to the author, can reconfigure institutional, legal, and territorial frameworks. Consistently, Garnero (2023) argues that the social and human sciences enrich this approach by incorporating the political, cultural, and economic dimensions underlying environmental problems.

These disciplines promote inclusive participation and governance, which are essential for understanding the complexity of environmental challenges and formulating more equitable solutions. Therefore, new approaches to environmental degradation must be fostered, approaches that deconstruct what Cubillos *et al.* (2022) refer to as the "coloniality of nature", operating through three mechanisms: (a) epistemic violence against traditional knowledge and practices of colonized peoples and nature; (b) a political project grounded in the degradation of life in

its multiple expressions; and (c) the imposition of a dualist philosophy privileging the human over the natural.

As a consequence, it is urgent to overcome the bureaucratic-colonial discourse that employs the modern notion of “natural resources”, by embodying a marked anthropocentrism and sustaining a functionalist vision of nature as a reserve available to capital (Tamayo-Álvarez, 2023), subordinated to the concept of “development”. Sachs (1992) warns about the arbitrary nature of the key words of the development discourse (market, planning, population, environment, production, equality, participation, needs, and poverty), highlighting their cultural and historical specificity, as well as the risks they entail in Global South contexts.

In this regard, Hatzisavvidou (2024) argues that the Anthropocene presents humans as the driving force behind all change on Earth, under a planetary vision of zero emissions aimed at mitigating environmental effects. However, Parsons (2024) questions this universalizing approach for its vagueness, lack of transparency, and even recklessness, and warns about the neocolonial nature of the proposed mechanisms to achieve a net-zero emissions future. This research is based on the recognition that all development work generates environmental impacts, so it must be minimized as much as possible.

Sakalasooriya (2021) argues that there is no universal definition of “sustainability”, as it is a changing, multifaceted, and situated concept. This article adopts the proposal of Salas-Zapata and Ortiz-Muñoz (2019), who define it as a set of criteria guiding human action. These actions relate to the interactions between humans and ecosystems that, when integrated, form socio-economic systems (Elster, 2010), from a perspective that recognizes action as the foundation of social life. In turn, these practices are possible thanks to language: through it we commit ourselves, regulate our behavior, and produce social facts that sustain institutions (Searle, 2017).

From a territorial approach, Vikhoreva *et al.* (2020) understand the “SD” as the link between the interests of management entities and economic actors that interact in the territories. This concept varies depending on the dominant industry and area of activity. They conclude that its implementation responds to functional, process-based, systems, and situational management approaches proposed by Ogloblin *et al.* (2019), depending on the methods and strategies used in each context.

In rural areas, the SD deserves a priority place within territorial strengthening strategies. It is no coincidence that notions like “alternatives” to development are gaining momentum and becoming focal points in contemporary debate. This is partly due to a crisis that affects us all: climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, species extinction, glacier retreat, and plastic pollution in oceans. All

are signs of an exhausted model whose promises of inclusion and collective well-being remain unfulfilled.

Finally, this research invites us to rethink the hegemonic model of “development”, forged in the Global North under a capitalist rationality, and its effects on territorialities. Within this framework, multiple statements about inclusion or well-being operate as institutional speech acts (Searle, 2017), legitimizing extractive practices and governance schemes that perpetuate the dominant order. In contrast, emerging alternatives from the Global South are rooted in an ecological-holistic paradigm that acknowledges plural universes of meaning, including rationalities, knowledge systems, and ways of life distinct from Western ones, such as those expressed by ethnic communities and various Eastern worldviews that propose alternative ways of inhabiting the world.

The Defense of Wetlands as Ancestral Territories

Wetlands are strategic ecosystems due to their capacity to support essential activities such as water supply, agriculture, industry, navigation, and ecotourism. They also hold profound cultural and spiritual value, transmitted across generations in many communities (*World Wide Fund for Nature* [WWF], 2025). Their relevance began to be recognized in the 1970s, especially for their key ecological functions: supporting biodiversity and regulating hydrology (Shiau & Chang, 2022). Currently, they are valued for their role in the provision of ecosystem services such as climate change mitigation, coastal protection and species conservation. All this makes them pillars for the food and economic sovereignty of those who depend on these territories (Arroyave, 2022).

Despite their strategic role, wetlands continue to disappear due to inadequate agricultural practices and industrial activities (Seifollahi-Aghmiuni *et al.*, 2022). From a CDA perspective, the drivers identified by Let and Pal (2023), such as agricultural expansion, urbanization, or development, are understood not only as economic or territorial processes, but also as discursive expressions that perpetuate the instrumentalization of nature. This materializes in public environmental policies that conceive wetlands as resources available for human progress, reproducing a utilitarian logic in which ecological, cultural, or spiritual values are subordinated to development interests.

These discourses are often embedded in land use planning and environmental policy documents, such as the *Environmental Management Plan for the BSWC* (CVS, 2007), where technical and seemingly neutral language tends to obscure the power relations that define which uses of nature are legitimized and which are excluded. To counter this, international strategies have been implemented,

treaties, conventions, laws, and regulations, aimed at wetland protection (Davies *et al.*, 2020).

The BSWC, located in the northern department of Córdoba on the right bank of the Sinú River, is a protected area within the National System of Protected Areas [SINAP]. It was designated as an Integrated Management District (DMI) by the CVS (Kerguelén-Durango *et al.*, 2021). In this wetland, the livelihood of fishing communities faces risks due to hydrological alterations in the Sinú River and its basin, which affect fish resources, and climate change-related phenomena such as sedimentation and drying of water bodies (Hoyos & Rojas, 2024). Added to this are the inappropriate use of agrochemicals, deforestation, private agricultural expansion, the construction of dikes, and the operation of the Urrá hydroelectric plant, identified by various studies as responsible for interrupting the hydraulic connectivity between the Sinú River and the BSWC via the Bugre stream (Clavijo-Bernal, 2021).

Paredes-Trejo *et al.* (2023) propose to review the way in which hydroelectric power plants operate, incorporating ecological criteria that guarantee both the conservation of river ecosystems and access to water to cover basic needs. Villalba *et al.* (2024) indicate that the Urrá operation could reduce the duration and impact of droughts in the region. This perspective is grounded in scientific evidence and international frameworks, such as the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Ramsar Convention, Agenda 21, and the SDGs, which promote integrated water and energy management with a holistic approach and intergenerational responsibility.

The regulatory framework that regulates wetlands in Colombia operates at different levels. At the national level, it includes the *National Policy for Inland Wetlands*, Resolutions 157 of 2004 and 196 of 2006 on their conservation and sustainable use, Decree 2372 of 2010 regulating the National System of Protected Areas, and the *National Development Plan 2022-2026*. At the territorial level, it includes the *Watershed Management and Zoning Plan for the Sinú River* [POMCA], the *Departmental Development Plan*, and the *CVS Regional Environmental Management Plan 2020-2031*. At the local level, it includes the diagnosis of the Bajo Sinú lagoon complex, the BSWC environmental management plan, its DMI designation, and municipal plans related to the area.

All these administrative acts aim to protect wetlands, yet a reduction in water body areas, inappropriate land use, sedimentation, dike construction, and, recently, the clearing of the last forest remnants by landowners continue to be observed. These remnants served as nesting sites for local and migratory birds such as the *Ardea cinerea* and *Ardea alba*, whose eggs, during economic hardship, were used as a food source by some peasant communities. Pérez-Marín (2016) argues that discursive and normative frameworks in Colombia, applied to protected natural

areas, are anchored in a conservationist logic that legitimizes the control of nature by transnational interests. Although there has been a shift toward an SD discourse aimed at justifying the exploitation of nature, it continues to reproduce exclusionary structures and forms of territorial control.

The National Land Agency [ANT], through *Resolution 202332008470566 of 2023*, established the delimitation of the vacant lands comprising the BSWC. The issuance of this administrative act has been one of the formal state attempts to clarify the situation of the properties that constitute this territory, as a result of the constant socio-environmental disputes over land throughout the wetland. The act reveals that the area making up this habitat is considered public land, meaning it falls within those lands which, according to the *Colombian Civil Code*, “[...] being located within national borders, lack a private owner” (Art. 675). However, in Colombia, as Romo (2024) notes, there is debate regarding the mechanisms, criteria, and conditions for defining the scope of public versus private property in agricultural matters, which has contributed to the country's land issues.

Regardless of the meaning of “wasteland”, which is not the focus of this research, this figure was established as an important instrument of agrarian reform aimed at promoting democratic access to land ownership, though it has not been effective in the case under examination. However, the 1991 constituent covered the wasteland with a general and specific protection regime, within which the environmental factor (environmental heritage) is included, turning it into a territorial reserve of the State that cannot be appropriated or subjected to practices incompatible with the natural environment underlying the land in question.

Theoretical Aspects of Territory

A theoretical and conceptual review of the notion of territory must trace its roots back to Greece and follow its evolution to the present day. Etymologically, the term derives from the roots *terra* (land) and *orio* (belonging or place), so “territory” essentially means “a stretch of land divided politically” (Kwan, 2020). Thus, the concept refers not only to land or a geographical location but is inherently political, indicating the geographic domain controlled by a political entity, usually through the exercise of jurisdictional authority (Moore, 2015). According to Moore, the theoretical-political tradition conceives territory as a form of property (either as a collection of individual possessions or as a type of state property). The author proposes a theory called “On the political self-determination of the territory” based on two fundamental lines.

On the one hand, the existence of particular relationships between people that can generate moral reasons and obligations, and on the other, justice in the territory has to recognize the existence of significant relationships and norms between people and places. That is, land is both a universal and a particular good. In the first case, because everyone has an interest in its benefits, which is important in establishing rights over it; in the second case, because of particular interests, making land rights especially contentious (Moore, 2015). In this regard, Soja (2014) develops the category of (in)just geographies, dividing it into two scales: endogenous and exogenous.

The first refers to local decision-making and the aggregate distribution effects that follow, essentially, the implications of where things are located. In the case of the BSWC, these effects have been more negative than positive due to unresolved land access claims following *Resolution 010 of 1982* by the National Land Agency (ANT), which failed to fulfill peasant demands for fair redistribution of land, its resources, and opportunities for a decent life. On the contrary, it harmed the social life of the wetland's inhabitants and caused what Sedano *et al.* (2021) describe as “spatial (in)justice”. Thus, this reality contrasts with Moore's proposal (2015), as injustice is perceived in this territory due to the State's failure to acknowledge the significant relationships and norms between local people and the wetland territory.

In this territory, the spatial configurations resulting from the analyzed concepts are expressed in public spaces in a contextual way, since they respond to structural factors articulated to uneven geographical development (Sedano *et al.*, 2021). Achieving social inclusion in the BSWC's public jurisdictional space requires recognizing and respecting the right to community-based citizenship as a condition for advancing spatial justice. Within this framework, Moore (2015) asserts that a people hold jurisdictional rights, such as liberties and claims, over the land they inhabit, provided their occupation is legitimate. Additionally, Castaño-Aguirre *et al.* (2021) emphasize that understanding territory also requires considering the emotional bond people establish with it, as a foundation for personal and social identity, community relationships, and experiences that give meaning to inhabited space.

Given the ecological and legal characteristics of this ecosystem, it is subject to State protection and, consequently, cannot be adjudicated. Nonetheless, land claims for agricultural purposes were made on this territory, resulting in the allocation of public land and its transfer (without conferring ownership) to peasant communities. These groups engaged in what Ostrom (2000) conceptualizes as “sustainable and organized management of common goods”. In this line, the case of the BSWC reflects the limited capacity of the State, from a legal point of view, to respond effectively to the occupation of this common wasteland. Far from

resolving the conflict, the current regulatory framework has produced regulations lacking both substantive and procedural capacity to manage emblematic cases like this. These regulations have failed to establish clear guidelines for shared resource use and have perpetuated the exclusion of historically marginalized sectors, such as the peasant population living around the BSWC.

This situation illustrates how the regulatory regime governing ecosystems like the BSWC not only presents legal limitations in substantive and procedural terms but also reflects discursive frameworks that construct territory as available wasteland, nature as a manageable resource, and peasants as subordinate subjects. From a CDA perspective, such representations are not neutral: they are discursive practices that legitimize exclusionary mechanisms, reinforce state control, and weaken community-based management systems. In this regard, legal and technical language functions as a performative act that consolidates specific notions of legality and order, while simultaneously obscuring the knowledge, rights, and emotional bonds that underpin alternative forms of territoriality.

Conclusions

The SD discourse, far from offering a structural solution to the socio-ecological crisis, operates as a bureaucratic-capitalist device that reproduces colonial, extractivist, and anthropocentric logics. Under an appearance of neutrality, it subordinates life to economic growth and legitimizes dispossession through a technical and ambiguous language that supports the hegemony of the cumulative model. In response, territorial and anti-colonial resistances emerge that denounce this sustainable fiction and propose alternatives from the Global South, based on the de-privatization of the commons, the dissolution of the nature-human dualism, and the reconfiguration of life as a bond, not a commodity.

In this context, wetlands cease to be natural resources to reveal themselves as living, ancestral, and culturally significant territories. Their destruction shows the structural violence of extractivism and the capture of legal frameworks by technocratic discourses. Instruments such as Ramsar or POMCAs, far from protecting, are neutralized, while those who defend them are criminalized. This legal paradox renders community memories and bonds invisible. The analysis of the BSWC confirms that territory is not a physical entity but a political and affective construction; defending it means contesting meanings, decolonizing its governance, and reclaiming other ways of inhabiting rooted in memory, dignity, and collective life.

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