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Karolien van Teijlingen and Barbara Hogenboom

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# Development discourses at the mining frontier: *Buen Vivir* and the contested mine of El Mirador in Ecuador

Karolien van Teijlingen and Barbara Hogenboom

## Abstract

In Ecuador, the recent introduction of mineral mining led to a conflictive debate on mining and development, particularly *Buen Vivir*. This article examines the discourses on the mining-development nexus articulated in the conflict around the first large-scale mine of Ecuador, El Mirador. The findings indicate that although the conflict concerns tangible territorial transformations, it is also a struggle over meanings. In this struggle, *Buen Vivir* runs the risk of becoming an empty signifier. The case of El Mirador illustrates the challenges of advancing *Buen Vivir* from concept to practice in the context of a search for a post-neoliberal development framework.

## Keywords

Large-scale mining, environmental conflict, discourse analysis, development, *Buen Vivir*, Ecuador.

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## 1. Introduction

The economic, political and social history of Latin America is a history shaped by the extraction of natural resources. Some authors refer to resource extraction as being “*the history of the region*” (Bebbington 2009a, 7) or describe Latin American history as “five centuries of the pillage of a continent” (subtitle of the renowned book *Open Veins of Latin America* by Galeano 1973). Although this has always been a conflict-ridden history, changing market conditions, policies and social processes affect the extent and nature of these conflicts. Neoliberal reforms, aggressive natural resource extraction and poor development outcomes since the 1990s have triggered conflict all over the continent (Martinez-Alier 2001; Muradian, Martinez-Alier, and Correa 2003). Since the turn of the century, the region's extractive industries have expanded even further as a result of the booming international commodity market, the globalisation of companies and capital, and new mining techniques.

As most Latin American governments are welcoming these investors and companies, the so-called mining frontier is increasingly moving into non-traditional mining environments (countries and regions). Mining companies now begin to operate in “environments that, although known to possess important mineral deposits, were previously considered too difficult and dangerous to invest in” (Bebbington et al. 2008, 898). This mining frontier expansion occurs in various biomes, including the Andean highlands and the Amazon rainforest, and generally does not take place on empty lands, but rather on lands inhabited and used by local populations, such as agro-pastoral communities, including indigenous peoples. Not surprisingly, this expansion is accompanied by a rise of social mobilizations and conflict, as the large amount of recent studies on mining conflicts in Latin America witness (Bebbington et al. 2013; Urkidi and Walter 2011).

Ecuador has a special position in the region-wide expanding mining frontier. First of all, although this small Andean country holds substantial reserves of metals, it is a newcomer in mining. Starting as a provider of agricultural products (cacao, coffee, bananas) to the global market, as of the late 1970s oil-drilling has shaped the nation's economy and the population's imaginaries of resource extraction (Sawyer 2004). While thus being a textbook example of an extractivist country, large-scale mining has only taken off very recently. Second, Ecuador's New Left regime has implemented some far-reaching reforms and is usually mentioned together with the regimes of Venezuela and Bolivia. Since the 2006 election of the leftist President Rafael Correa, who claims to be leading a Citizens' Revolution, Ecuador has decisively stepped away from the Washington Consensus and adopted a post-neoliberal development agenda (Arsel 2012; Radcliffe 2012). The extractive industries have been repoliticised, combining resource nationalism with the redistribution of state revenues through extended social spending (Burchardt and Dietz 2014; Hogenboom 2012). Yet despite its leftist orientations, the new regime continues to welcome large-scale transnational investments in mining and fossil fuel (Bury and Bebbington 2013). Third, with concepts and policies of *Buen Vivir* (good living), Ecuador has acquired a position at the forefront of the international debate on post-neoliberal development.<sup>1</sup> After decades of crises, popular protests and civic proposals for social transformation, Correa's government and Ecuador's new Constitution of 2008 adopted *Buen Vivir* as the guiding principle for development (Radcliffe 2012). The preamble of the Constitution states that

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<sup>1</sup> Various authors see the surge of the Latin American debate on *Buen Vivir* as part of wider international debates on sustainability, de-growth and green economy. For a useful analysis of synergies and differences, see Thomson 2011; Vanhulst and Beling 2013.

the Ecuadorian state aims to “construct a new form of citizen coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature, to reach *Buen Vivir*”. The Correa administration framed this as a revolutionary “shift of paradigm” (SENPLADES 2009, 31). However, after some years of implementation, an increasing number of social movements and scholars question the transformative potential of *Buen Vivir* as implemented in Ecuador, especially looking at the country’s governance of mining activities (Escobar 2010; Humphreys Bebbington and Bebbington 2012; Walsh 2010).

Shortly after his election, Rafael Correa declared mineral mining to be a strategic sector of the Ecuadorian economy in order to reach *Buen Vivir* (Ministerio de Recursos Naturales No Renovables 2011). In 2009 a new mining law was approved that eases transnational companies to invest in large-scale mining operations (Dosh and Kligerman 2009). Like in other Latin American countries, these pro-mining policies have met fierce critiques and various protests by environmental organizations and indigenous movements (Bebbington 2009b; Chicaiza 2009). The rising conflicts on large-scale mining peaked in March 2012, when the exploitation contract for the first large-scale mineral mine of the country was signed by the Ecuadorian government. The contract concerned *El Mirador* copper mine, a large open-pit mine located in the Cordillera del Condor, a highly biodiverse area in the Amazonian south-eastern part of Ecuador inhabited by peasant farmers and indigenous people. For being both the first large-scale mining operation in the country and an open-pit mine in an area with a considerable biodiversity and presence of rural communities, *El Mirador* has become an emblematic case in the national political debate on mining. Taken all together, the introduction of a new development framework, the very recent advent of the mining sector and the rising resistance against it mark significant transformative processes in the governance of Ecuador’s economy, society and territory.

In this article, we analyse the different discourses of the main actors in the debate and conflict around Ecuador’s first large-scale mine, *El Mirador*. Particular attention is paid to the discursive connections that actors establish between mining and development, or in other words, the framing of the mining-development nexus. A particularly puzzling finding is the fact that amidst the conflict about *El Mirador*, notions of *Buen Vivir* were explicitly or implicitly part of all the different discourses on the mining-development nexus. Based on discourse analysis and a political ecology approach, this case-study of *El Mirador* aims to deepen our understanding of the nature of the conflictive debate on mining and development, with a focus on *Buen Vivir*. By doing so, this article also aims to address some recently raised concerns regarding the framing and co-optation of *Buen Vivir* in the current Ecuadorian debate (Houtart 2011; Walsh 2010). The empirical data was gathered during a four-month fieldwork in 2012 in Ecuador, involving the national and several sub-national scales, namely Quito (capital city), Zamora (provincial capital), El Panguí (municipality) and Tundayme (parish where the mine is located). The main source of data are semi-structured interviews held with seventeen national government officials, ten local government officials, six representatives of the mining sector, twenty civil society stakeholders, eleven indigenous organizations, and seventeen local community members, including indigenous peoples and *mestizo* dwellers near *El Mirador* copper mine. Additionally, a range of documents were collected, including constitutional-legal documents, policy documents of national, provincial and local governments, mining company communiqués and civil society statements. Qualitative data analysis software (ATLAS.ti) has been used to interpret the data and carry out a critical discourse analysis.

This article is structured as follows. In the following two sections, we explain our approach to environmental conflicts and discourse analysis, and we introduce the concept of *Buen Vivir*. We then

present El Mirador and the local and national stakeholders that are involved in the conflict around this mine, and describe and analyse the various discourses on mining, development and *Buen Vivir* as framed by the main stakeholders. In the discussion, we elaborate on the processes of strategic framing and what the different discourses of actors involved in the conflict over El Mirador tell us about the dynamics of the *Buen Vivir* debate. Finally, we conclude by highlighting the challenges as well as some opportunities of post-neoliberal development based on notions of *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador and Latin America at large.

## 2. 'Struggles over meanings' and discourse analysis

Conflicts over mining could be seen as environmental conflicts, involving a variety of stakeholders who operate at different scales and have diverse notions of the relationship between society and nature, often resulting in different and conflicting spatial practices and territorial claims. These notions of society-nature relations include tangible aspects such as the use of land and water, as well as non-tangible aspects such as knowledges, histories, cultures, value systems and ultimately notions of what nature, development and territoriality mean. These non-tangible dimensions are stressed in Van den Hombergh's (2004, 65) definition of environmental conflicts as "conflicts in which clashes based on opposing values, norms and interests related to the use and conservation of natural resources play a dominant role in the triggering, escalation and/or articulation of the conflict". In the same vein, Li convincingly argues that struggles over natural resources are often also "struggles over meanings" (Li 1996, 522). Martinez-Alier (2001, 167) comprehends such struggles as being based upon the discrepancy and incommensurability of different standards of valuation of the environment, expressed in different vocabularies or "languages of valuations". These values and meanings can be explored through critical discourse analysis. We hence borrow Long's definition of discourses as "set[s] of meanings embodied in metaphors, representations, images, narratives and statements that advance a particular version of 'the truth'" (Long 2007, 75).

Next to values and meanings, the discourses and representations in environmental governance struggles are also intimately related to very material processes in nature, as well as to dynamics of scale and power. Political ecology offers a useful perspective to capture the complexity of dimensions that shape environmental governance (de Castro, Hogenboom, and Baud 2013). Watts and Peet (1996, 263) argue, there should be attention for the "social construction of nature" as well as for the "natural construction of the social". Hence, discourses are not only transforming the natural environments by orienting governance systems and human actions, they are also shaped by the place-based physical, political-economic and institutional settings in which they emerge, resulting in "regional discursive formations" (Watts and Peet 1996, 16). This appreciation for the aspects of spatiality is reflected in Bebbington's (2013) recent call for the explicit analysis of scales and politics of scale involved in strategic framing processes in natural resource governance and extraction conflicts.

A critical analysis of discourses furthermore allows studying how "imaginaries, ideologies and metaphors work to produce textual products that both reflect and shape relations of power" (Neumann 2005, 95). From a Foucauldian perspective, the "power of definition" (Keller in Neumann 2005, 82) of discourses creates power structures that enable thinking and legitimise actions, as well as it "excludes other potentials to speak, think and act" (Winkel 2012, 82). This "attempted regulation of ideas" (Bryant 1997, 12) may lead to the hegemonisation, normalisation or



naturalisation of particular discourses, whereby the discourse becomes taken for granted and the “constructedness of environmental concepts and practices is forgotten”(Robbins 2012, 20:131). These processes are however embedded in conflicts, because “whose discourse is accepted as being truthful is a question of social struggle and power politics” (Castree & Brown in Buchanan 2013, 121). Within these struggles, discourses are often framed strategically, including the use of “discourse shopping” (Boelens 2008, 19) in order to adapt to the conflict’s contexts, opportunities and counterforces (Benford and Snow 2000). Whereas research on development discourses has been generally focused on dominating discourses of powerful actors, it is important to mention that discursive power may work both oppressing and enabling (Neumann 2005). In that sense, discourses can be “both instruments of domination *and* arms of resistance in a fierce struggle over resources” (Boelens 2008, 19).

### **3. *Buen Vivir*: new notions of society-nature relations and development**

*Buen Vivir* (in Spanish) or *Sumak Kawsay* (in Kichwa) roughly translates into ‘good living’ or ‘life of plenitude’. It emerged less than a decade ago and has been referred to as a philosophy of life (Acosta 2012), cosmology (Walsh 2010), life attitude (Cortez 2011), ontology (Thomson 2011), development model (Radcliffe 2012), or rather an alternative to development (Gudynas 2011a). While descriptions of *Buen Vivir* vary, they commonly urge to rethink the relationship between human beings, between social groups, and between society and nature, while stressing notions of harmony, reciprocity and diversity (Gudynas 2011b; Walsh 2010). *Buen Vivir* is a concept that is still under construction, and it has a rather complex history. Many authors suggest that the principles of *Buen Vivir* stem from the cosmologies and ethics that guided the community life of indigenous peoples for centuries (Thomson 2011; Vanhulst and Beling 2013). In the 1980s and 1990s, some indigenous intellectuals called for increased attention to the indigenous cosmologies in the debates on sustainable development and environmental governance (Bréton 2013). These were then further developed by a mix of actors, including indigenous and non-indigenous activists and academics, and became particularly important in Ecuadorian and Bolivian debates on constitutional reforms (Gudynas 2009).

In Ecuador, the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE) was in 1997 the first to synthesise these indigenous principles and claims for recognition into a plan to transform the Ecuadorian society and economy, however without using the exact term of *Buen Vivir*. A decade later, in the constituent assembly in 2007, CONAIE proposed *Buen Vivir* as central element of the new constitution. This idea gained support from Afro-Ecuadorian organisations, *campesino* groups and environmental NGOs. After a polemic process of drafting the constitution, *Buen Vivir* was indeed adopted as the guiding principle and became part of the state’s discourse (Cortez 2011).

*Buen Vivir* has also been coined as the Latin American answer in the international debate on post-neoliberal development strategies (Vanhulst and Beling 2013). In Latin America, the emergence of *Buen Vivir* as an alternative to development reflected a wide-spread discontent with not only the neoliberal model that was hegemonic in the 1980s and 1990s, but also more generally with conventional development thinking. The wave of electoral victories of New-Left regimes in the 2000s strengthened the shift from anti-neoliberal to post-neoliberal strategies for development (Hogenboom 2012). Internationally, in a response to multiple global crises (Harcourt 2011), the

attention to sustainability and the adverse effects of the globalised capitalist economy grew, as well as the global social movements addressing these issues in convergence with their national counterparts, such as CONAIE (Cortez 2011; Villalba 2013).

The tenets of *Buen Vivir* and the concept's transformative potential have been the subject of a vivid scholarly debate. Some –mainly Latin American– authors portray *Buen Vivir* as a panacea for widespread socio-environmental conflicts about the governance of natural resource extraction and development projects. With titles such as “Buen Vivir: germinating alternatives to development” and “Buen Vivir: a utopia to (re)construct”,<sup>2</sup> these publications express optimism and hope for a change ‘from below’ in the quest for post-neoliberal development strategies (Escobar 2011; Harcourt 2011). Other authors, however, are more critical and stress the lack of consensus (Bretón, Cortez, and García 2014), question the attribution of indigenous roots by referring to ventriloquism (Bréton 2013), and scrutinise its implementation and potential of transformation (Radcliffe 2012; Villalba 2013). Walsh (2010, 20) furthermore scrutinises the many challenges and inconsistencies of Ecuador's Citizens' Revolution and concludes by questioning “whether *buen vivir* is becoming another discursive tool and co-opted term, functional to the State and its structures”, particularly in the case of the country's mining and water law. In the remainder of this article we strive to address this question in relation to the field that is considered to be most at odds: large-scale mining.

#### **4. El Mirador and *Buen Vivir*: contrasting discourses on the mining-development nexus**

El Mirador copper mining project is located in Ecuador's southern Amazonian Province of Zamora Chinchipe, in the parish of Tundayme within the Canton El Pangui, not far from the border with Peru. Tundayme forms part of the Cordillera del Condor, a protected biodiversity reserve that covers both Ecuadorian and Peruvian territory (Eguiguren and Jimenez 2011). Traditionally, this region is inhabited by Shuar, an indigenous people that has been present since pre-Incan times and was left relatively unaffected by the Spanish conquest due to their fierce resistance. The internal colonization of the Ecuadorian Amazon that started in the 1960s, partly motivated by the war with Peru over territory which ended in 1941, profoundly transformed these territories, displaced many of the Shuar settlements and induced conflicts over land. The armed border conflict with Peru disrupted again in 1981 and 1995 and added to the region's history of conflict (Warnaars 2013).

The preparations for mining in El Mirador started two decades ago. From 1994 onwards, various transnational companies carried out mining prospects in the area and in 1996 large mineral deposits were confirmed. The Canadian exploration company Ecuacorriente S.A. (ECSA) initiated advanced explorations for El Mirador project in 1999, and from 2000 to 2006 it performed environmental impact assessments and started to engage with the local communities. As of 2006, local communities and civil society organizations began to question ECSA's operations in the area and in that same year protests led to an escalation of the conflict between ECSA and the local Shuar and *colono* communities (CEDHU and FIDH 2010; Eguiguren and Jimenez 2011). In the years that followed, ECSA initiated various corporate social responsibility (CSR) programmes to improve its relations with the local community. An important shift occurred in 2010, when a Chinese investment consortium called CRCC-Tongguan bought the Canadian based Corriente Resources and its four

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<sup>ii</sup> Articles in Spanish: “Buen vivir: Germinando alternativas al desarrollo” by Gudynas (2011c) and “El Buen Vivir, un utopia por (re)construir: Alcances de la Constitución de Montecristi” by Acosta 2011.

subsidiaries in Ecuador, including ECSA. In 2011, the national government announced that negotiations with the company were advancing. Finally, on the 5th of March 2012, after 87 meetings and more than a year of negotiations, the contract for exploitation was signed.<sup>3</sup> The concession covers 9.230 hectares (CEDHU and FIDH 2010) and over a period of 17 years, ECSA foresees to extract 208.800 tonnes of copper concentrate annually (Chicaiza 2014).

With the mining operations of El Mirador advancing and the resistance growing, the different positions with regard to the project evolved and the playing-field of stakeholders has come to hold a wide range of actors from the public, private and civil society spheres, operating at the international, national, provincial or local level. From the public sector, several key national authorities have been involved, such as the presidency, the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES), the Ministry of Non-renewable Natural Resources and the Ministry of Environment. While these national authorities are all in favour of mining, the positions on mining of authorities at the subnational level are more mixed.<sup>4</sup> The main stakeholder from the private sector is ECSA, whose pro-mining position is self-evident. Among the national and local civil society groups that have been involved in the debate on mining in general and El Mirador in particular, most are anti-mining. Table 1 provides a general overview of the most important stakeholders and their interests and positions regarding mining. Evidently this overview partly simplifies the conflict's complexities and merely offers a snapshot of a dynamic playing field. Below, we will examine the positions and discourses of the main stakeholders in more detail. All quotes in this article have been translated from Spanish to English by the authors.

**Table 1. Overview of key stakeholders and their positions in El Mirador mining conflict**

Stakeholder	Goals	Position
<i>Public sector sphere</i>		
President Correa	Promote mining in support of national development policies; promote El Mirador as a success case of the link between mining and development	Pro-mining
SENPLADES (National Secretariat of Planning and Development)	Plan development interventions according to the National Development Plan, with focus on areas impacted by strategic projects	Pro-mining
Mining Ministry and ARCOM (Mining Regulation Agency)	Regulate mining activities to ensure responsible mining and combat illegal mining	Pro-mining
Ministry of Environment	Assess and monitor environmental impact of El Mirador	Pro-mining
Ecuador Estratégico EP	Coordinate and finance development projects with mining revenues	Pro-mining
Prefect of Zamora Chinchipe	Coordinate and implement development projects as elected head of provincial government	Against current mining policies
Municipality of El Pangui	Guard for the well-being of its inhabitants and implement development projects	Pro-mining
Parish government of Tundayme	Guard for the well-being of its inhabitants and implement development projects	Mixed
<i>Private sector sphere</i>		
Ecuacorrientes SA (ECSA)	Develop El Mirador Mining project and secure its investment in the mine	Pro-mining

<sup>3</sup> "Hoy se firma el primer contrato a gran escala" in newspaper *Hoy*, 5 March 2012. Retrieved from <http://www.hoy.com.ec/noticias-ecuador/hoy-se-firma-el-primer-contrato-a-gran-escala-537097.html>.

<sup>4</sup> While the municipal and parish governments near El Mirador position themselves in favour of mining, they raise concerns about impacts, autonomy and local development. The provincial government opposes the mining policies of Rafael Correa.

Ecuadorian Chamber of Mining	Guard for the interests of the medium- and large-scale mining companies	Pro-mining
<i>Civil society sphere</i>		
Environmental organizations and NGOs such as Acción Ecológica	Defend the rights of nature; guard for sustainability of the Ecuadorian ecosystems; promote environmental justice; defend human rights and indigenous rights; promote Sumak Kawsay	Anti-mining
Indigenous organizations such as CONAIE and ECUARUNARI	Defend indigenous rights; promote a plurinational state; promote cultural identities and languages among the indigenous peoples of Ecuador; promote Sumak Kawsay	Against current mining policies
FESHZCH (Provincial Shuar Federation Zamora Chinchipe)	Represent the Shuar associations; foster well-being of Shuar communities	Mixed, pro-mining
FEPNASH-ZCH (Provincial Shuar Federation Zamora Chinchipe)	Represent the Shuar associations; foster well-being of Shuar communities; defend territories of Shuar communities	Anti-mining
Local Shuar association Asociación Kakaram	Defend rights and territories of Shuar; promote development of associated Shuar communities	Anti-mining
Local Shuar association Asociación Shuar del Panguí	Defend rights and territories of Shuar; promote development of associated Shuar communities	Pro-mining
Local citizens' group Comité en Defensa de la Vida del Panguí	Promote the rights of nature; protest against adverse impact of mining on the area	Anti-mining

Source: own elaboration based on interviews and collected documents

#### 4.1 National government discourses: responsible mining for development

Since his campaign and election in 2006, Correa has employed a discourse of economic, political and social transformation towards a new development model. He introduced the notion of a “Citizens’ Revolution” to mark his fight against the political establishment and the conservative economic elite that had implemented the neoliberal development model during the 1980s and 1990s. A key element of this citizens’ revolution is the Constitution that was adopted in 2008, which includes *Buen Vivir* as its guiding principle.

Based on the constitution<sup>5</sup>, the National Secretariat for Planning and Development (SENPLADES) puts forth the official conceptualization in a detailed and highly visionary national development plan, called Plan Nacional para el Buen Vivir 2009-2013. In the introduction of the plan *Buen Vivir* is summarised as (SENPLADES 2009, 10):

Covering needs, achieving a dignified quality of life and death; loving and being loved; the healthy flourishing of all individuals in peace and harmony with nature; and achieving an indefinite reproduction and perpetuation of human cultures. *Buen Vivir* implies having free time for contemplation and personal emancipation; enabling the expansion and flourishing of people's liberties, opportunities, capabilities and potentialities so as to simultaneously allow society, specific territories, different collective identities, and each individual, understood both in universal and relative terms, to achieve their objectives in life (without causing any kind of material or subjective dominance over any other individual).

It is remarkable that both the Constitution and the development plan seek to profoundly redefine society-nature relations. Ecuador's Constitution is the first in the world to grant rights to nature, and

<sup>5</sup> In order to craft a new institutional framework for his citizens’ revolution, Correa called for the design of a new constitution by a constituent assembly. In 2008, the constitution was approved through a popular referendum, in which 63,93 percent voted in favour of the new constitution (López and Cubillos Celis 2009).

the development plan proposes a shift from “anthropocentrism to bio pluralism”(SENPLADES 2009, 10). In order to reach the transformation of society-nature relations and realise *Buen Vivir*, the plan proposes twelve objectives which include the establishment of a solidary and sustainable socio-economic system, guarantees of the rights of nature, quality of life, plurinationality and a democratic and participatory state. The plan sketches a long-term strategy in which *Buen Vivir* should be realised by putting aside the current commodity export model and by making use of Ecuador’s international comparative advantage, to wit biodiversity and bio-knowledge. However, according to the plan, the first phase of this long-term strategy requires an intensification of the extractive industries in Ecuador, one of them being large-scale mining.

As El Mirador is the first large-scale mine to be exploited on Ecuadorian territory, it has served as an exemplary case to promote the government’s view on the mining-development nexus. When visiting the province of Zamora Chinchipe during his electoral campaign in 2012<sup>6</sup>, President Correa stated:

These resources will serve to eradicate the poverty in this country, and first and foremost in the territories where the mining projects are located. Zamora, listen to me, this will be the first [territory] in which absolute poverty will be eradicated.

In order to legitimate and gain public support for its mining policies and the signing of the contract with ECSA on El Mirador, the Correa administration has employed a discourse in which mining is intimately connected to development as *Buen Vivir*.<sup>7</sup> Central to its discourse is the concept of ‘responsible mining’, which was in fact originally coined by the transnational mining industry (Whitmore 2006). In a speech during the government’s campaign for the new mining law, President Correa explains the concept of responsible mining he envisions for Ecuador:

We have said, comrades, “yes” to mining, to this mining that is responsible to the environment, that uses the latest technologies to minimise environmental impacts. “Yes” to this mining that is socially responsible, of which the first to benefit are those communities impacted by it. “Yes” to economically responsible mining that pays what it should pay to the state, which means to all Ecuadorians, as we are the owners of these non-renewable resources.<sup>8</sup>

When scrutinizing the ‘responsible mining’ discourse of the Correa administration, it actually turns out to be a blend of various, partly contradictory, development discourses. First, the most prominent element is the strong notion of resource nationalism. This guides a development model in which the control over resources rests primarily with the national state and the extraction of resources serves the distribution of wealth and national development (Mares 2011). The new mining law has been an important tool to facilitate this shift to a more resource nationalist regime. As article 16 of the mining law states:

The non-renewable natural resources are the inalienable, imprescriptible and indefeasible property of the state. [...] The control of the state over the subsoil will be exercised independently from the property rights of the surface that covers the mines and deposits. [...] Its rational exploration and exploitation will serve national interests.

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<sup>6</sup> During campaign for elections in the municipality of Panquintza, Zamora Chinchipe, at July 12, 2012.

<sup>7</sup> Sovereignty has been another important element in the national government’s mining discourse. Refer to Moore and Velásquez (2011) for an in-depth analysis of this.

<sup>8</sup> Speech by Correa to a pro-mining rally on May 6, 2008.

As part of this resource nationalist discourse, the focus is on the national territory, rather than on local territorial dynamics. This becomes clear in Correa's reaction to mining opponents, who are portrayed as an "absolute minority, imposing their particular visions and interests [...] who want to keep us being like beggars living on an incalculable wealth".<sup>9</sup> In this discourse, he grants the national government with the power to intervene in these territories and legitimises the infringement of the rights of some individuals or groups for the good of "us", the nation as a whole. This central role for the national state as the key actor to govern local territories of the country is also aired by a SENPLADES official<sup>10</sup>, when talking about local communities:

Well, they can have a lot of discourses. But in the end it is the state who decides, that is what our constitution prescribes. We have to cater for the large majorities.

Secondly, the national government's discourse of 'responsible mining' refers to the renowned sustainable development framework. The Constitution guarantees a 'sustainable development model' with respect to cultural diversity and biodiversity in order to fulfil the needs of current and future generations (Art. 395). This is echoed in the National Plan for the Mining Sector, which mentions with respect to large-scale mining sector:

The exploitation of natural resources and the application of mining rights shall be conform the principles of sustainable development, the protection and conservation of the environment, citizen participation and social responsibility.

Third, while the prominence of notions of 'responsible mining' and *Buen Vivir* points at a remarkable discursive innovation, the national government's policy on mining seems to make much less of a break with the neoliberal past. Although the role of the state has increased significantly, the government's policies and attitude to transnational mining investors and companies have remained welcoming, aiming at the expansion of the export-oriented extraction of primary materials. In this same vein, the responsible mining discourse airs a strong influence from modernist ideas of the rational use of natural resources and reflects controllability over nature, a managerial state and a technological fix for environmental problems.<sup>11</sup> This is well expressed in the words of Jaime Jarrín, the director of the mining regulation agency ARCOM:<sup>12</sup>

There is currently no rational growth of the mining sector, so that is why it is good there are projects coming up that are developed in a rational way. Rational means that they are exploited with technology, that they are environmentally responsible and they have a social responsibility. [...] Responsibility regarding environmental aspects - it is logical. Using technology is just more rational than not using technology.

Not surprisingly, the totality of mixed and at some points internally inconsistent new discourses of the national government under Correa are only partly implemented in actual policies and programmes. Especially the notion of *Buen Vivir* seems to have hardly trickled down to the interviewed government officials from the Ministry of Environment, the Secretary of Peoples' Social Movements and Citizen Participation, the Institute for Amazonian Eco-development (ECORAE), SENPLADES and Ecuador Estratégico EP (EEEP). Their views on development hold strong elements of

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<sup>9</sup> Quoted in (Chicaiza 2009, 168).

<sup>10</sup> During interview held on May 4, 2012.

<sup>11</sup> For a more detailed analysis of neoliberal and modernist orientations in Ecuador's current development policies, see (Escobar 2010, 20–26).

<sup>12</sup> Interview held on May 14, 2012.

the human development discourse (Walsh 2010), envisioning the attainment of quality of life through the fulfilment of human needs and the construction of infrastructure. This is well illustrated by the views of representatives of EEEP. This public company is to administer a large share of the royalties of mining, providing funds for the construction of what could be described as “classic imprints of modern development, including schools, hospitals, bridges and power plants” (Arsel 2012, 161). With regard to their work they say:<sup>13</sup>

We depart from what is most necessary. So, among the first priorities are sewerage, electricity and landfills. And talking about *Buen Vivir*, we talk about quality education and health care centres providing good care. Improving the quality of life, and when that is ready we start to work on roads.

While alternative economic or environmental projects could help to establish a local ‘solidary’ and ‘sustainable’ socio-economic system, as aspired by the National Plan for *Buen Vivir*, EEEP does not have the mandate to provide support for such projects. Locally, this prioritization of *obras* (infrastructure) leads to discomfort and misunderstandings. In a reaction on the policies of EEEP, a Shuar leader from El Pangui says<sup>14</sup>: “They tell us they will come here to build roads and playing fields. But I cannot eat a road; it does not provide me with food”. When asked for their understanding of *Buen Vivir*, none of the interviewed government officials referred to the need for a fundamental change of society-nature relations, a different economic logic or a harmonious use of natural resources, although these are presented in the National Development Plan and considered to be crucial elements of *Buen Vivir* by those groups originally advocating for it (Acosta 2012). This shows that a comprehensive conceptualization of *Buen Vivir*, if existent, has not fully reached those who are in the position to facilitate the claimed ‘shift of paradigm’.

## 4.2 The company discourse: ‘The Fair Deal’

Like other mining companies and governments around the world (Whitmore 2006), ECSA responded to anti-mining protests and proposals with a plan for more sustainable practices. The company adopted the ‘responsible mining’ concept introduced by the International Council of Mining and Metals under the slogan ‘*El trato justo*’, the fair deal. Interestingly, the company discourse on responsible mining holds many similarities with the government’s discourse, as ECSA also mingles in neoliberal, sustainable, modernist and, surprisingly, even resource nationalist elements. By showing off with their generous contribution to the Ecuadorian society through relatively high percentages of royalties and taxes, the company furthermore stresses its collaboration with the popular national government.

There are nevertheless also differences between the company and the national government discourses, particularly when it comes to the role of the private sector in (local) development. The vice-president of ECSA, for instance, expresses that transnational mining companies and global markets are indispensable for civilization and that large-scale open pit mining serves humanity. In an interview with this vice-president, an Ecuadorian citizen who kept his position when ECSA was sold to the Chinese investment consortium, he expressed his view on society-nature relations by saying:<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>13</sup> Interview held on June 1, 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Interview held on June 20, 2012.

<sup>15</sup> Interview held on May 22, 2012.

I noticed there are three things that move humanity. In the history of civilization three resources are being used: the soil and its waters, energy and mines. If you take away one of them, there is no civilization, we would not be here (...). If I would turn down 7,000 mines on the planet, (...) we would die within three weeks.

This quote expresses a vision of society-nature relations that are based on large-scale exploitation of the world's natural resources for the fulfilment of the needs and prosperity of humanity. ECSA's vice-president thus portrays the exploitation by the company as a societal virtue. Human dependency on mining in his view legitimises transnational companies to gain exclusive access to resources, to assure private property rights and to change existing territorial structures present in the Mirador mining area for the commodification of copper. Such notions reflect a rather neoliberal conceptualization of the relation between society and nature (Himley 2008).

Moreover, in contrast with the discourse of the Correa administration, in ECSA's discourse no mention is made of *Buen Vivir* - not in its official documents or announcements, nor in the vocabulary of its representatives. When asked about *Buen Vivir* and indigenous visions of development and nature, the vice-president of ECSA says:<sup>16</sup>

I can only respect it, and it seems wonderful to me that they spiritually tie such normal things [from nature] to the supernatural. But in their view on development they assume that we can live in harmony with that place [nature] and that we would not need civilization. [...] Those are visions; those are a wish to live in a unreal way, as unreal as living without mining. Because the indigenous that wants to live without mining, who says 'I do not want anything like that', is the same indigenous that takes the bus to get home.

This statement airs scepticism towards the society-nature relations as proposed by indigenous groups and stresses the importance of a proper investment in mining for the sake of development.

### 4.3 Civil society discourses for a ban on mining

The conflict over the meaning of mining, development and *Buen Vivir* becomes evident when looking at the critical counter-discourses of the indigenous groups, social movements, labour unions and environmental organizations operating at the national level. A coalition of these organizations, in which also their regional and local constituents are invited, proposes *Buen Vivir* or *Sumak Kawsay* in a different sense, speaking of a 'cosmology' that reflects the characteristics we have mentioned in section 3. Harmonious human-society relations, respect for diversity and reciprocity between communities are cornerstones in their discourses, as well as the revaluating of ancestral practices such as *mingas* (joint community work) and the exchange of goods. As one of the leaders of a national indigenous organisation explains his opinion on the current mining policies in Ecuador:

For Sumak Kawsay we need a healthy environment, a healthy mother nature. [...] The way in which they now destroy our mother nature, the water, the river, the air, the forest, the mountain, the lands... If those are contaminated, destroyed, plundered there will be no Sumak Kawsay. Sumak Kawsay is a Kichwa term that means fullness. What kind of fullness will there be with all these offenses of damaging our nature?

This quote shows the fundamental contradictions that these national civil society groups regard as inherent to the government's discourses and interventions regarding *Buen Vivir* and mining. After

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<sup>16</sup> Interview held on May 22, 2012.



these stakeholders pushed for years to include *Buen Vivir* in the Ecuadorian constitution, they now argue that the concept has been hijacked by the national state in a completely mistaken way. The words of a representative of an environmental organization based in Quito air this critique:<sup>17</sup>

For us, the constitution marked a new horizon. This new horizon was *Buen Vivir*, which is a distinct logic and we hoped it would be translated into politics. It is a proposal that is not finished nor has only one meaning, but it did not imply the intensification of the development model we already had, based on extractivism. [...] [*Buen Vivir*] is translated into the construction of hydroelectric dams, an oil refinery, more oil, more mining. So we do not understand that. They say we will stop depending on oil and mining, and for that reason we have to exploit the minerals and oil?

Among indigenous groups and social movements, however, the 'cosmology' of *Buen Vivir* is far from unambiguous. As mentioned by various interviewees, every community or every person defines *Buen Vivir* differently, according to their place, culture and history, among other. They reason that these plural values and notions of nature and coexistence lived by the people 'from below' should be the very foundations for the construction of *Buen Vivir*. This is illustrated by the words of a representative of a Quito-based environmental organization:<sup>18</sup>

We do not want to overthrow this government. We want them to listen to us, have a dialogue, and jointly construct *el Buen Vivir*. We do not want this government to leave. This government is in place because of us, or due to the indigenous movements that have been pushing for all of this. So it is ours as well. The critique we have is that they have empowered themselves, they see themselves as the owners of the truth. But that is not true. We are part of this, but we have been put aside, they have marginalised us. But we want to strengthen this revolution, and really construct a new vision, among all of us.

Actors from this civil society coalition hence recognise that the concept of *Buen Vivir* is still under construction. They respond to the political and territorial project of the national government by portraying themselves strategically as forces from below, from the 'people', who see their diversity in notions and values rather as their strength. In their discourses on *Buen Vivir* they therefore stress the *participatory* construction of the concept of *Buen Vivir* and new society-nature relations as opposed to – what they see as – the rather top-down path chosen by the Correa administration.

#### 4.4 Local stakeholders: heterogeneous discourses

The communities, inhabitants and civil society groups of El Panguí and Tundayme constitute the most heterogeneous set of stakeholders analysed in this research, with some groups fiercely resisting the presence of the company and others welcoming the arrival of miners in the region. The opponents to the project of El Mirador, made up by most of the indigenous inhabitants of the area and a coalition of anti-mining *mestizos*. They distrust the promises of ECSA to induce local development and perceive the mining site as a threat for the quality of the environment, their livelihoods, their territories, their life worlds, their autonomy and their identity. Territory forms the cornerstone of their discourses, especially of those of the opposing Shuar communities. For them, land and territory means more than just making a living, as their relation to their territories is also historical, cultural and spiritual. This attachment to their territory is fed by a history of generations

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<sup>17</sup> Interview held on May 4, 2012.

<sup>18</sup> Interview held on May 8, 2012.

of Shuar living in the forests of the Cordillera del Condor. When describing how the territorial belonging of his people is related to the life style of their ancestors, a leader of a Shuar association from El Pangui interestingly starts with a metaphor to modern consumption:<sup>19</sup>

The forest was our big super market, with the waterfalls, the sacred temples of Arutam. It provides winds, lightnings and animals. We are no holders of land titles, we cannot sell these lands. We are the owners.

Although there is always a risk of romanticizing the indigenous ties with nature, it becomes clear that for indigenous peoples their territory is valued through rather qualitative standards of valuation (Martinez-Alier 2001, 167): territory constitutes their way of life and forms the context in which their daily meaningful practices take place.

Various Shuar moreover refer to their cultural identity, collective land ownership, indigenous governance and autonomy, and call themselves the original *dueños*<sup>20</sup> (owners) of the concession of ECSA and the region's forests. Their discourse is informed by notions of ethnic identity and decolonization as they often refer to the Spanish conquest, domination of *colonos* and transnational companies, and the history of indigenous resistance. As a Shuar leader from a community nearby El Mirador mining project tries to convince his fellow community members:<sup>21</sup>

Mining means hell, because it will take us to death. As soon as they will start operating, they will not pay you, they will not give you a job. They will give jobs to the mestizos, yes, to the engineers. But not to us, because they have betrayed us for the last 600 years [sic], as they will betray us now.

In addition, the local opposition groups feel that the expectations that ECSA's promises raised in terms of local development, are far from being met. This discourse of distrust and scepticism about the relation between mining and development is also fed by historical accounts from the Northern Amazon region. Oil extraction by transnational companies during the 1990s caused disastrous and irreversible environmental and social impacts (Sawyer 2004), and these experiences have become part of the imaginaries of many Ecuadorians, especially indigenous people.

Simultaneously, there are numerous local community members and organised civil society stakeholders who see El Mirador project as an opportunity for local (economic) development and therefore do not oppose to the presence of ECSA. These supportive local inhabitants are usually directly benefiting from the presence of the company, in the form of employment, provider contracts, scholarships, or indirect profit from the increased commercial business in the area. Although in a different fashion, references to territory and autonomy are to a certain extent also present in the discourses of the supportive inhabitants and the local governments of Tundayme and El Pangui, as they often refer to the extraction of 'their' resource wealth. Both the interviewed inhabitants as the local government officials are fully aware of the strategic value of their territory for the national economy, and are determined to claim 'their' share of the revenues coming from the mine. They furthermore claim increased autonomy in the spending of these revenues. However,

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<sup>19</sup> Interview held on June 20, 2012.

<sup>20</sup> From a speech of a Shuar leader during a community meeting in a Shuar community in the parish of Tundayme on July 7, 2012.

<sup>21</sup> During community meeting in a Shuar community in the parish of Tundayme on July 6, 2012.

local autonomy concerning the mining area itself seems to be much less of an issue among these groups than among opposing Shuar communities.

Even though they are highly divided in their positions, the local communities are often referred to as key stakeholders in the debate over mining and *Buen Vivir*. Many of the discourses used by national stakeholders strategically address the well-being of local communities and indigenous populations. Despite this attention for the local level, the national debate remains a faraway affair for most of the members of the communities near El Mirador. For most of them *Buen Vivir* and ‘responsible mining’ are mere terms they hear on the radio. Still, when local Shuar and *campesinos* are asked for what they most value in their lives, they name issues that form elements of the *Buen Vivir* discourses used in the national debate. For example, they refer to nature by saying they value “a clean environment”, “fresh air” and “nature without contamination”. They also address their attachment to the land, place and their agrarian lifestyle, by stating “agriculture should never change, as that’s how we’ve lived always”, “I live here next to the bones of my grandparents, so I will not leave” and “here, I have my land, my animals, that always provided me with food”. Lastly, they give importance to close community ties, and mention that “the community should never change” and the community should remain “united” and “tranquil”.<sup>22</sup>

Only a few local leaders have adopted *Buen Vivir* as part of their vocabularies. In their positions as leaders of local indigenous associations or protest groups, they frequently engage with the national government officials or national NGOs representatives. In the course of these interactions, they have become acquainted with the language from the new Constitution. As the following quote from a local Shuar leader showcases, the language of *Buen Vivir* is being used as a vehicle to make their claims for recognition being heard:

It is very contradictory. They say that we have to exploit this [the resources] for the *Buen Vivir* in the Shuar territories. But at the same time, it generates cultural impacts, environmental impacts, alcoholism and crime. It rather generates the bad living. [...] For the *Buen Vivir* we need education adapted to our culture, we need housing according to our culture. Our territory is primordial for our food security, the waters are at the basis of the life of the Shuar. The *Penker Pujustin* means that our sons go to the waterfalls to cleanse, to drink *ayahuasca*.<sup>23</sup> Only then we will be fine.

## 5. Discussion

The findings indicate that the stakeholders involved in the conflict over El Mirador use very different sets of discourses, leading to conflictive propositions with regard to the mining-development nexus. These discourses range from picturing mining as the door to equitable socio-economic development, to comparing mining to destruction and death. The meanings adhered to various natural resources, territory and development underpin the various and sometimes clashing ‘languages of valuation’ (Martinez-Alier 2001, 167). For example, many of the local Shuar and to some extent the *colono* farmers value their land and territory through the ties of livelihood, history and culture. Such valuations certainly conflict with the rather technocratic language of valuation employed by ECSA

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<sup>22</sup> Quotes come from various interviews with Shuar and non-Shuar inhabitants from Tundayme, Churuwia and San Marcos in the period July 26 till August 2, 2012.

<sup>23</sup> *Penker Pujustin* is the Shuar translation of *Buen Vivir* or good living. *Ayahuasca* is a brew traditionally used for shamanic, spiritual and healing purposes.

and the national government, whose main aims are successful exploitation and national development and sovereignty respectively. Thus, while the conflict over the resources of the Cordillera del Condor concerns material and very concrete transformations, it is also a substantial “struggles over meanings” (Li 1996, 157). This conflict hence evolves between public sector, private sector and civil society actors that all have specific characteristics, as well as along the different geographical scales of analysis. The findings demonstrate that, in concordance with Bebbington (2013), discourses on territory, autonomy, participation and development differ substantially between the national level and the subnational actors.

The findings also point at the strategic framing of *Buen Vivir* in the debate on large-scale mining, particularly by the state. For the national government, turning a notion that originated from indigenous organizations and other civil society groups into its guiding principle has been a strategic step to strengthen its position in the political debate on the future model for development. By employing a development discourse that is framed very different from the neoliberal discourses of the past, the Correa administration highlights the novelties while obscuring the continuities of its development paradigm. Through this strategic framing (Benford and Snow 2000) and discourse shopping (Boelens 2008), the government caters for different interests and is able to appeal to various audiences, ranging from the urban poor to foreign investors in extractive industries, all of which are crucial for Correa to stay in power. His government thus strategically co-opted the concept of *Buen Vivir*, implying its appropriation and redefinition to serve the government discourse. Such a co-optation of discourse is a proven tool in environmental politics (Hajer and Versteeg 2005), used in this case to rule out those opponents who originally advocated for *Buen Vivir*.

Furthermore, through an intensive campaign that links *Buen Vivir* to pro-mining policies, presenting their combination as naturally given and as the only viable option for progress, the national government’s discourse has become normalised as the revolution of the national majority – and for many has become viable version of ‘the truth’. While this ‘truth’ delegitimises the actions of opponents to mining, it has been beneficial for ECSA. The company obviously profits from a government that forcefully ‘normalises’ and promotes mining and its (positive) nexus to development, and it has strategically framed its discourse on mining and development quite closely to that of the government. In addition, a critical analysis of the framing of the national government’s discourse on mining and development reveals a strategic use of notions of scales. On the one hand, the resource nationalist elements portray minerals as national wealth and ‘the local’ as a minority group that obstructs the redistribution of this wealth to the majority, ‘the people’. On the other hand, the attention that the government’s *Buen Vivir* discourse pays to community-level development, poverty alleviation and participation, might suggest that it values decentralization, but it may equally serve to cover up the actual recentralization of power over natural resources by the Correa government.

Nevertheless, strategic framing of the concept of *Buen Vivir* is not limited to the state and the company, and can also be witnessed among indigenous organizations, environmental NGOs and local communities. *Buen Vivir*’s roots attributed to indigenous people’s cosmologies have been reworked and reframed strategically into a discourse that would serve the movement’s campaign towards the Constituent Assembly. Notwithstanding the traces of *Buen Vivir* within the discourses of communities near El Mirador, it seems that the discourse of *Buen Vivir* as promoted by national indigenous organizations and NGOs has become somewhat disconnected from practices at the grassroots level. This is not to claim that *Buen Vivir* is co-opted by these national organisations, or an

“invented tradition” or result of “ventriloquism” on behalf of local indigenous populations (Bretón, Cortez, and García 2014, 87). This framing can be considered part of a process of building a coalition between local and national level organizations, including indigenous groups, which offers strategic advantages to both.

As the mining-development nexus forms one of the major stings in the debate on *Buen Vivir*, as alternative to neoliberal development in Ecuador, let us now turn our attention to this wider debate. What do the discourses and framing processes related to the El Mirador conflict over mining and development tell us about the nature of *Buen Vivir* as a “concept under construction” (Gudynas 2009, 17)? Our analysis of the different discourses with some fundamentally contradictory values and views demonstrates the lack of consensus on how *Buen Vivir* should be understood and implemented, particularly in relation to the current expansion of large-scale mining. Furthermore, rather than being involved in a constructive debate, the national government has engaged in the co-optation, instrumentalization and naturalization of *Buen Vivir*. This gives reason to think of *Buen Vivir* as an empty signifier. That is to say, *Buen Vivir* runs the risk of becoming a term which can be interpreted through a variety of meanings, and which despite its lack of clear-cut meaning is used extensively within a societal debate (Böhm and Brei 2008). Whereas the conceptualization of *Buen Vivir* and the shift in thinking it indulges are very worthwhile contributions to the debate on post-neoliberal development, the tendency of *Buen Vivir* becoming an empty signifier limits its transformative potential of *Buen Vivir*.

Add to these observations the recent trend of criminalization of protest<sup>24</sup>, and our analysis would read as quite a pessimistic story. However, it should be stated that the debate on *Buen Vivir* and post-neoliberal development is far from being stalled. On the contrary, it has just been opened (Svampa 2013) and has provided a floor to actors and ideas that have hardly been heard before. The Mirador conflict on mining and development showcases that the concept of *Buen Vivir* and the debate around it produce government discourses that co-opt and delegitimise critical groups and local interests, as well as they provide civil society actors and local populations with “arms of resistance”(Boelens 2008, 19). The appropriation of the language of *Buen Vivir* by local Shuar leaders in order to strengthen their claims for territory are an example of this.

## 6. Conclusion

The continuous expansion of the mining frontier towards non-traditional mining environments in Latin American has produced an alarming increase of environmental conflicts. The booming extractive sector has the potential to radically transform the territories and development trajectories. The issues at hand can be seen as products of the challenges of our times – the quest for harmonious and sustainable well-being for all, in the context of an ever growing global demand for minerals. To address these issues of environmental governance, our research has focussed on the conflicting discourses regarding the mining-development nexus and the meanings attached to development, nature and territory that underpin these discourses within an Ecuadorian mining conflict. While partly reflecting region-wide trends, Ecuador holds some relevant national particularities too. The presidency of Rafael Correa has brought about a series of changes in the extractive politics and development strategy, also referred to as *Buen Vivir*, opening the country for

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<sup>24</sup> For elaborated accounts of the criminalization of dissent in Ecuador refer to (Becker 2013; Humphreys Bebbington and Bebbington 2012; CEDHU and FIDH 2010; Chicaiza 2009)

large-scale mining projects for the first time in history. El Mirador is the first large-scale copper mine of Ecuador and it has become the subject of conflict between the mining company, different government bodies, NGOs, indigenous communities, *campesinos* and *colonos* becomes prominent. In this article, we have approached the discourses of the main actors in the El Mirador conflict both as “languages of valuations” (Martinez-Alier 2001, 167) that reflect the actors’ positions and values, and as products of strategic framing processes that “reflect and shape relations of power” (Neumann 2005, 93).

The strategic framing and use of *Buen Vivir* to promote a certain position regarding the mining-development nexus appeared to be particularly striking. As indicated in section 3, some scholars and politicians have presented *Buen Vivir* as a panacea for conflicts encountered within the realm of natural resource governance, development and participation. However, the conflict around El Mirador demonstrates that *Buen Vivir* runs the risk of becoming an empty signifier, which can in turn prevent or hinder a genuine debate on the expanding mining sector in Ecuador as well as on post-neoliberal forms of development (Radcliffe 2012). In effect, the wide-spread reference to *Buen Vivir* in this case seems to trigger, deny or cover up the conflictive elements in the debate, rather than solve them. It is therefore questionable whether the current rearrangements in Ecuadorian development policies and practices can bring about the aspired ‘change of paradigm’. This holds particularly for the policies promoting the expansion of the mining sector in Ecuador, which put substantial pressure on the debate on *Buen Vivir*. Our analysis of the use of *Buen Vivir* in relation to mining to a certain extent supports the claim that “the language of Sumak Kawsay has been used to cloak postcolonial development as usual” (Radcliffe 2012, 248). Although we consider this a too far-reaching qualification, we agree that the transformative potential of *Buen Vivir* in the context of the current expansion of mining has been overestimated.

Finally, *Buen Vivir* has been subject to processes of strategic framing and normalization in which both the government and the social movements claim to promote the “true” path towards *Buen Vivir*. These claims essentialise *Buen Vivir* into a kind of absolute phenomenon that exists “out there” and can be attained. This obscures the power relations and the various political choices that underlie any development strategy, including *Buen Vivir*. This observation reflects critiques that were aired in the 1990s regarding the tendency to depoliticise development into a set of instrumental and technical interventions, instead as a range of political choices (Ferguson 1990). In our view, the scholarly debate on conflicts around mining and development in Ecuador would be reinvigorated if *Buen Vivir* were to be approached as a (highly) politicised concept. Similarly, in order to estimate the current and potential significance of *Buen Vivir* in the international quest for post-neoliberal development paradigms, it is necessary to carefully consider the political, economic and social dimensions that have shaped its adoption as guiding principle of the Ecuadorian development agenda, as well as the many ongoing political challenges to the implementation of *Buen Vivir*.

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