

DEBATING ALTERNATIVE DEVELOPMENT AT THE MINING FRONTIER: *BUEN VIVIR* AND THE CONFLICT AROUND EL MIRADOR MINE IN ECUADOR

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Abstract

In Ecuador, the recent introduction of mineral mining led to a conflictive debate on mining and development, particularly the concept of 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 has become subject to strategic framing processes and eventually turned into 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.

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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, p. 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). While this history has been conflict-ridden, recently changing market conditions, economic policies and social processes affect the extent and nature of these resource conflicts. As of the 1990s, neoliberal reforms, aggressive natural resource extraction and poor development outcomes have triggered conflict all over the continent (Martinez-Alier, 2001; Muradian et al., 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 investors and companies, the so-called mining frontier is increasingly moving into non-traditional mining environments (countries and regions). Mining companies began 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, p. 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 agro-pastoral communities, including indigenous peoples. Not surprisingly, this expansion is yet again 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 particular 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 large-scale mining. Starting as a provider of agricultural products (cacao, coffee, bananas) to the global market, oil-drilling has shaped the nation's economy and the population's imaginaries of resource extraction as of the late 1970s (Sawyer, 2004). While being a textbook example of an extractivist country, large-scale mining has only taken off quite recently. Second, Ecuador's New Left regime has implemented some far-reaching political and economic 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). Ecuador's 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. 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 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 institutionalization of *Buen Vivir* as a revolutionary "shift of paradigm" (SENPLADES, 2009, p. 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, particularly concerning the country's governance of mining activities (Escobar, 2010; Houtart, 2011; Vanhulst, 2015; Walsh, 2010).

Our research focuses on the nascent mining sector that has become a major field of tension within the significant transformative processes initiated by the "Citizen's Revolution". Shortly after his inauguration in 2007, President 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 increased the role of the State while remaining promotive of large-scale mining operations (Dosh and Kligerman, 2009). After only a few years of existence, this law was amended in order to ease the tax-regime and attract transnational investors. Like in other Latin American countries, these pro-mining policies have met with fierce critiques and 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. This contract concerned *El Mirador* copper mine, a large open-pit mine located in the Cordillera del Condor, a highly biodiverse area in the Amazonian 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 and evermore conflictive case in the national political debate on mining. 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 the actors establish between mining and development, or in other words, the framing of the 'mining-development nexus' (Himley, 2008). Amidst the conflict about *El Mirador*, notions of *Buen Vivir* emerged as an important discursive category concerning the mining-development nexus. Thus, through a 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 (Fernández et al., 2014; Houtart, 2011; Vanhulst, 2015; 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 Pangui (municipality) and Tundayme (parish where the mine is located). The main sources 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 actors, eleven representatives of 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 national and subnational actors that are involved in the conflict around this mine, and analyse the various discourses on mining, development and *Buen Vivir* as framed by these actors. In the discussion, we elaborate on the processes of strategic framing and on what the different discourses of the 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.

1. ‘Struggles over meanings’ and discourse analysis

With the expansion of the mining frontier, the scholarship on the extractive industries is experiencing boom times with contributions from economic, political, anthropological, geographical and environmental angles. Recently, this scholarship got new impulses with Bebbingtons’ and Bury’s call for “a political ecology of the subsoil” (Bebbington and Bury, 2013, p. 3). Although the idea that struggles over resources are simultaneously discursive struggles is a quite well established tenet in the field of environmental conflict and political ecology (Bryant, 1997; Mels, 2009; Neumann, 2005; Watts and Peet, 1996), this approach has remained relatively marginal in recent studies of Latin American mining conflicts.¹ We hence combine insights from environmental governance,

environmental conflict and political ecology literature to decipher discourses on the mining-development nexus used in El Mirador mining conflict.

Conflicts over mining such as those surrounding El Mirador, involve a variety of actors who operate at different scales and have diverse notions of the relationship between society and nature, which often results in different and conflicting spatial practices and territorial claims. These notions of society-nature relations go beyond tangible aspects such as the use of land and water and include as well the non-tangible aspects such as knowledges, histories, cultures, value systems and ultimately situated understandings of what nature, development and territoriality entail. These non-tangible dimensions are stressed in Van den Hombergh's (2004, p. 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" (1996, p. 522). Martinez-Alier (2001, p. 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 study of discourses. We hence borrow from Long (2007, p. 75) to define discourses as "set[s] of meanings embodied in metaphors, representations, images, narratives and statements that advance a particular version of 'the truth'".

A critical analysis of discourses and representations in resource conflicts takes into account their intimate relation to very material processes and tangible aspects of nature, as well as to dynamics of scale and power. Political ecology offers a useful perspective to capture this complexity of dimensions that shape environmental governance (de Castro et al., 2016). As Watts and Peet (1996, p. 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 and legitimizing 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, p. 16). This appreciation for the aspects of spatiality is also reflected by Bebbington's (2014) more recent call for the explicit analysis of scales and politics of scale involved in strategic framing processes in natural resource governance and extraction conflicts. Next to the issue of scale, a critical analysis of discourses interrogates how "imaginaries, ideologies and metaphors work to produce textual products that both reflect and shape relations of power" (Neumann, 2005, p. 95). From a Foucauldian perspective, the "power of definition" (Keller in Neumann, 2005, p. 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, p. 82). This “attempted regulation of ideas” (Bryant, 1997, p. 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, p. 131). These processes are permeated with conflict, because “whose discourse is accepted as being truthful is a question of social struggle and power politics” (Castree & Brown in Buchanan, 2013, p. 121). Within these struggles, discourses are often framed strategically, including the use of “discourse shopping” (Boelens, 2008, p. 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, p. 19). In this article we aim to show that the political ecology approach outlined in this section is particularly apt to study mining conflicts as conflicts over meaning. By doing so it pushes the boundaries of current approaches to mining conflicts and simultaneously addresses the concerns on *Buen Vivir* as described in the next section.

2. *Buen Vivir*: Alternative 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’. This paragraph will provide a brief overview of the rather short but complicated history of this concept. The concept 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). Many authors suggest that the principles of *Buen Vivir* stem from the cosmologies and ethics that guided the community life of Latin America’s indigenous peoples for centuries (Thomson, 2011; Vanhulst and Beling, 2013). From the 1980s and 1990s onwards, indigenous intellectuals called for increased attention to the indigenous cosmologies and principles in the debates on sustainable development and environmental governance (Bréton, 2013), a call that was 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 *Buen Vivir*. A decade later, CONAIE proposed *Buen Vivir* as central element of the new constitution to the constituent assembly. This proposal gained support from Afro-Ecuadorian organisations, *campesino* groups and environmental NGOs and, after a polemic process of drafting Ecuador's new constitution, *Buen Vivir* was adopted as its guiding principle and became part of the state's discourse (Cortez, 2011; Vanhulst, 2015).

Buen Vivir as an alternative development concept has also gained momentum in international debates on post-neoliberal development strategies taking place in both academia and society (Delgado Ramos, 2014; Vanhulst and Beling, 2013). In Latin America, the concept resonated with a wide-spread discontent with the far-reaching neoliberal reforms in the 1980s and 1990s and, more generally, with hegemonic ideas of development as economic growth and modernization. The wave of electoral victories of New-Left regimes in the 2000s strengthened the shift from neoliberal to post-neoliberal strategies for development (Hogenboom, 2012). Also outside Latin America the concept appeals to a burgeoning sense of multiple global crises (Delgado Ramos, 2014; Harcourt, 2011) and growing concerns about sustainability and the adverse effects of the globalised capitalist economy.² This has invoked global social movements addressing these issues in convergence with their national (indigenous) counterparts such as CONAIE (Cortez, 2011; Villalba, 2013), and has drawn attention to *Buen Vivir* as the Latin American answer in these matters.

The tenets of *Buen Vivir* and the concept's transformative potential have been - and still are - subject of this vivid scholarly debate. Some –mainly Latin American- authors have portrayed *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*”,³ 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 about the concept (Bretón et al., 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). Walsh (2010, p. 20) for example scrutinises the many challenges and inconsistencies of Ecuador's Citizens' Revolution and ends up questioning “whether *buen vivir* is becoming another discursive tool and co-opted term, functional to the State and its structures”. In the remainder of this article we strive to address this question in

relation to one of the fields that is considered to be most at odds (Báez and Sacher, 2014): large-scale mining.

3. El Mirador and *Buen Vivir*: Contrasting discourses on the mining-development nexus⁴

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, near to the country's border with Peru. Tundayme forms part of the Cordillera del Condor, a mountain range and protected forest reserve that stretches along the eastern border of Zamora Chinchipe with Peru and is known for its remarkable biodiversity (Eguiguren and Jimenez, 2011).

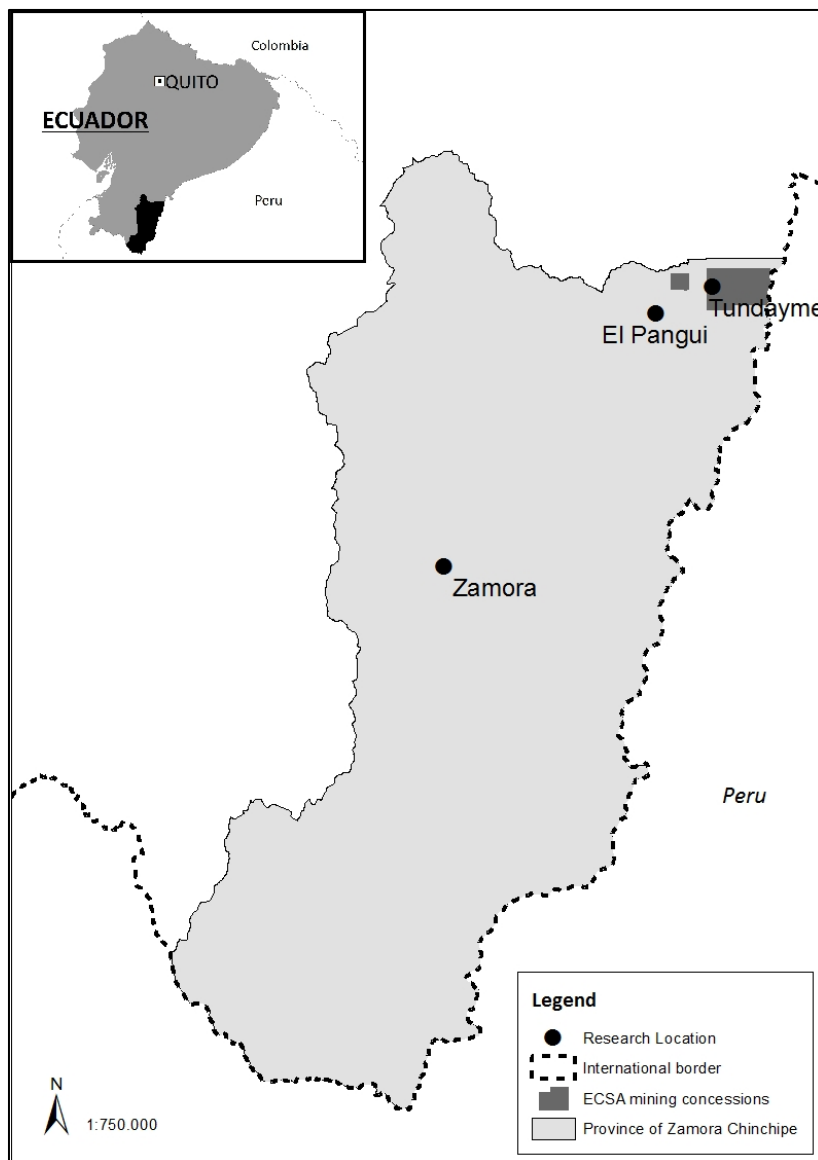


Figure 1. Map indicating the location of ECSA's mining concessions. Source: own elaboration.

Traditionally, this region is inhabited by Shuar, an indigenous people who was left relatively unaffected by the Spanish conquest due to their fierce resistance and remoteness (Arias Benavides, 2004). The internal colonization of this part of the Amazon took off in the 1950s, motivated by the 1941 war with Peru after which the Ecuadorian government promoted settlement in the Amazon to create 'living borders', the agricultural reforms and the long drought in Ecuador (Arias Benavides, 2004). This colonization profoundly transformed the existing territorial configurations, as the colonos⁵ need for lands displaced many of the Shuar settlements and induced conflicts over land. The border conflicts with Peru that disrupted in 1981 and 1995 added to the region's history of conflict (Warnaars, 2013).

The preparations for the Mirador project 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 the 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 their protests led to an escalation of the conflict between ECSA and the local Shuar and *colono* communities during that same year (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 (Warnaars, 2012). After the Chinese investment consortium CRCC-Tongguan bought the Canadian based Corriente Resources and its four subsidiaries in Ecuador (including ECSA) in 2010, the negotiations between the company and the government over the exploitation of the Mirador project advanced significantly. Finally, on the 5th of March 2012, after 87 meetings and more than a year of negotiations, the contract for exploitation was signed.⁶ The concession covers 9,228 hectares and according to the approved Environmental Impact Assessment ECSA foresees to extract an average of 208,800 tonnes of copper concentrate annually over a period of 17 years.⁷ Recently, ECSA submitted a new study to expand the yearly production of copper concentrate to an average of 354,294 tonnes per year over a period of 30 years.⁸

As the operations of El Mirador advanced, the playing-field has come to hold a wide range of actors from the public, private and civil society spheres operating at the different scale levels and holding very distinct positions regarding the project and mining in general. 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 act all in favour of mining and the Mirador project, the authorities at the subnational level hold rather mixed positions.⁹ The main actor

from the private sector is ECSA, whose pro-mining position is self-evident. Among the national and local civil society groups that are 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 actors and their interests and positions regarding mining. Evidently this overview partly simplifies the conflict's complexities as it focusses on one phase of ongoing processes of conflict and change.¹⁰ Below, we will examine the positions and discourses of the main actors in more detail.

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

Actor	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 affected 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, giving out licenses	Pro-mining
Ecuador Estratégico EP	Coordinate and finance development projects with mining (and oil) 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, recently against current mining policies
<i>Private sector sphere</i>		
Ecuacorrientes SA (ECSA)	Develop El Mirador Mining project and secure its investment in the mine	Pro-mining
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 and INREDH	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
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 Pangui	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
CASCOMI, Comunidad de Acción Social Cóndor Mirador	Defend territorial rights, human rights and well-being of affected families in Tundayme and promote alternative local development	Against current mining policies

Source: own elaboration based on interviews and collected documents

3.1 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 (Conaghan, 2011). 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 constitution¹¹, the National Secretariat for Planning and Development (SENPLADES) puts forth the official conceptualization in a detailed and 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, p. 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.

It is remarkable that both the Constitution and the development plan seek to profoundly redefine society-nature relations. Ecuador's Constitution advances a “new form of citizen coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature” (*preambulo*) is the first in the world to grant rights to nature (Art.71). The document furthermore reflects a ‘comeback of the State’ to the driver-seat of the economy and a repolitization of natural resources (Hogenboom, 2012). The 2009-2013 development plan¹² proposes a shift from “anthropocentrism to bio pluralism” (SENPLADES, 2009, p. 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 renewable energy, 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 2012¹³, 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*.¹⁴ 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.¹⁵

When scrutinizing the 'responsible mining' discourse of the Correa administration, it actually turns out to be a blend of various, partly contradictory, 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.

As part of this resource nationalist discourse, the focus is on the national territory, rather than on transnational interests or local territorial dynamics. The discourses of government officials are, for example, replete with descriptions of "the before" (the neoliberal times in which the state

acted as marionettes of transnational companies and institutes) and “the now” (characterized by national sovereignty and a state acting in the interest of its citizens). Controversially, citizens and local communities opposing the government’s mining policies have been portrayed as an “absolute minority, imposing their particular visions and interests [...] that wants to keep us being like beggars living on an incalculable wealth”.¹⁶ This discourse 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 whole¹⁷. This central role for the national state as the key actor to govern local territories is also illustrated by the response of a SENPLADES official¹⁸, when talking about the claims of 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’ has elements of 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 ‘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 privatization of natural resources and the expansion of the export-oriented extraction of primary materials. In the 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.¹⁹ This is well expressed in the words of Jaime Jarrín, the director of the mining regulation agency ARCOM:²⁰

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. Particularly the notion of *Buen Vivir* seems to have hardly trickled down from the conceptual to implementation level, as our interviews with 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) show. Their views on development hold strong elements of 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, a public company that was established in 2011 to administer a large share of the mining royalties to promote *Buen Vivir* in the areas that are affected by mining operations and other projects of a national strategic interest. With regard to their work they say:²¹

We depart from what is most necessary. So, among the first priorities are sewerage, electricity and landfills. And when 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.

In its practice, EEEP provides funds for the construction of what could be described as “classic imprints of modern development, including schools, hospitals, bridges and power plants” (Arsel, 2012, p. 161). Alternative economic, cultural or environmental projects that could foster a local ‘solidary’ and ‘sustainable’ socio-economic system as aspired by the National Plan for *Buen Vivir*, are hardly supported by EEEP. 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 says²²: “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 government conceptualization of *Buen Vivir*, if existent, has not reached those who are in the position to facilitate the claimed ‘shift of paradigm’.

3.2 The company discourse: ‘The Fair Deal’

Like other mining companies and governments around the world (Whitmore, 2006), ECSA responded to anti-mining protests 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. The company discourse on responsible mining holds many similarities with the government's discourse, as ECSA also mingles in neoliberal, sustainable, and modernist elements into its corporate communication. A leaflet explaining '*el trato justo*', furthermore echoes the technocratic approach to the environment and society that is also part of the government's responsible mining discourse:

Every human activity has an impact on its environment, but it is important to plan actions so this impact is as minimal as possible. The highest technology is the tool to minimize the impacts and diminish environmental risks.

Interestingly, the company also included some resource nationalist aspects into its discourse by showing off with its generous contribution to the Ecuadorian society through relatively high percentages of royalties and taxes and its close collaboration with the popular national government. A brochure of the company describes this as the "fair deal with the state" in a way that was repeated by all interviewed company representatives:

We strictly comply with all Ecuadorian legislation and tax requirements, not just because this is a fundamental duty of all companies, but because we see the state as our best ally in a project that pursues the wellbeing of all Ecuadorians.

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. One of the directors of ECSA, for instance, expresses that transnational mining companies and global markets are indispensable for civilization and that large-scale open pit mining serves the prosperity of humanity. In an interview with this director, 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:²³

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 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. In practice, this view of mining as a societal virtue for development justifies the enclosure of large tracts of farmer land and forest, desintegration of communities and dispossession of farmers in the mining area as the case for the San Marcos community.²⁴ Such notions reflect conceptualizations of territory and the relation between society and nature that resonate with neoliberal logics of property right and the privatization of resources (Himley, 2008).

Moreover, in contrast with the discourse of the Correa administration, no mention of *Buen Vivir* is made in ECSA's discourse - 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 representative of ECSA says:²⁵

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 mere visions; those are a wish to live in an 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 delegitimize them as “mere visions” that are “devoid of reality”²⁶. In the eyes of ECSA representatives, the indigenous and other positions that dispute the Mirador project are “hypocrite”, “poorly argued” and “misinformed” as opposed to the company’s “technical”, “efficient”, “transparent and ethical” approach to mining for the sake of Ecuadorian development.²⁷

3.3 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 2. 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), purification rituals 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 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. They argue that

large-scale mineral mining should have no, or a very reduced, role in Ecuador's strategy towards *Buen Vivir*. Thus, after years of advocating for *Buen Vivir*, they now claim 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:²⁸

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 from these groups, every community or every person defines *Buen Vivir* differently, according to their place, culture and history, among others. 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* as a national development strategy. This is illustrated by the words of a representative of a Quito-based environmental organization:²⁹

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 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.

3.4 Local actors: Heterogeneous discourses

The communities, inhabitants and civil society groups of El Pangui and Tundayme constitute the most heterogeneous set of actors involved in this research, with some groups fiercely resisting the presence of the company and others welcoming the arrival of miners to the region. The

opponents to the project of El Mirador, made up by indigenous inhabitants and a coalition of local anti-mining *mestizos*. They distrust the promises of ECSA to induce local development and perceive mining as a threat for the quality of the environment, their livelihoods, their territories, their life worlds, their autonomy and their collective identity. Territory forms the cornerstone of their discourses, particularly of those of the opposing Shuar communities. For them, land and territory means more than 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 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 says:³⁰

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.

This quote interestingly starts with a reference to modern consumption, it mainly expresses the emphasis they put on their ancestry and history within their territory. Although there is a risk of romanticizing the indigenous ties with nature, this and other interviews with indigenous leaders show that for indigenous peoples their territory is valued through rather qualitative standards of valuation (Martinez-Alier, 2001, p. 167): territory constitutes their way of life and forms the context in which their daily meaningful practices take place. They repeatedly refer to their cultural identity, collective land ownership, indigenous governance and autonomy, and call themselves the original *dueños*³¹ (owners) of the concession of ECSA and the region's forests. Their discourse is informed by notions of their ethnic identity and decolonization discourses 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:³²

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.

Also non-indigenous local opponents invoke discourses on land and territory by emphasizing the treaths of mining to the lands and headwaters so vital for their livelihoods. In accordance with the findings of Moore and Velásquez (2013), their discourses are not so much identity-based and anti-capitalist but do appeal to the importance of small- and medium-scale agricultural production and their *campesino* lifestyle.³³ In addition, 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 large-scale mining and development is further nurtured by

historical accounts from the Northern Amazon region. Oil extraction by transnational companies during the 1990s caused disastrous and irreversible environmental and social impacts in this region (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 actors 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. Referrals to territory and autonomy are also present in the discourses of the supportive inhabitants and the local governments of Tundayme and El Pangui, albeit in a different fashion. The interviewees from this group often refer to the extraction of 'their' resource wealth, identifying themselves with the territory where the mine is located and thus feeling some form of entitlement to the benefits coming from the mine.³⁴ Both the interviewed inhabitants and 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, local autonomy concerning the mining area itself seems to be much less of an issue among these groups than among opposing Shuar and *colono* communities.

Even though they are highly divided in their positions, the local inhabitants are often referred to as key actors in the debate over mining and *Buen Vivir*. Many of the discourses used by national actors 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 mainly terms they hear on the radio. Still, when local Shuar and *colonos* 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".³⁵

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 and, as the conflict unfolds, this process is likely to continue. As the following quote from a local Shuar leader showcases, the language of *Buen Vivir* is being used as a vehicle to make their local claims for recognition being heard:³⁶

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*.³⁷ Only then we will be fine.

4. Strategic framing in a “struggle over meaning”

The findings indicate that the actors 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. In the last section, we have shown that different meanings adhered to natural resources, territory and development underpin the various and sometimes clashing ‘languages of valuation’ (Martinez-Alier, 2001, p. 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 conflict with the rather technocratic language of valuation employed by ECSA 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 and clashes, our findings indicate that is also a substantial “struggles over meanings” (Li, 1996, p. 157).

This conflict over meanings evolves between actors from the public sector, private sector and civil society , as well as along the different geographical scales of analysis. In line with Bebbington (2014), we have found that discourses on the meaning territory, autonomy, participation and development differ substantially between the national level and the subnational actors. These divergences bring to the light the contention between the *national* control over natural resources

and their extraction on the one hand, and *subnational* claims for the recognition of autonomy and alternative views on local development.

Buen Vivir plays a key role in this contention, as both claims are made under the guise of this concept. The studied discourses hence 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 from the past, the Correa administration highlights the novelties while obscuring the continuities within its development strategy. 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*, which implied 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* and pave the way for large-scale mining projects such as El Mirador.

Two issues are particularly salient in this process of strategic framing. The first is the way in which the national government attempts to turn its discourse into commonsense reasoning and the crucial concurrence of state and company discourses. As Bebbington et al. (2013) signal out, many Latin American governments “seek to fix in political and public imagination a certain notion of how to achieve development and of the purportedly commonsense reasons why extraction is an obvious means of putting this development strategy into effect”. The Ecuadorian case confirms this “attempted regulation of ideas” (Bryant, 1997, p. 12) by the government. Through an intensive campaign that links *Buen Vivir* to pro-mining policies, presenting this combination as naturally given and as the only viable option for development, the national government’s discourse has become normalised as the revolution of the national majority – and for many has become commonsense. While this ‘truth’ delegitimises the actions of opponents to mining, it has been beneficial for the government’s relation with ECSA. The company obviously profits from a government that forcefully normalises and promotes mining and its (positive) nexus to development, and has thus strategically framed its discourse on mining and development quite closely to that of the government. At the same time, the national government is well aware of the strategic character of El Mirador for other future large-scale mining projects, their governability and other Chinese investment projects in Ecuador. This might explain why the government has gone lengths to lay the (discursive) base for

mineral extraction.³⁸ Secondly, 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 local participation suggests that it values decentralization and related local autonomy, but as we indicate this 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 that the concept is an "invented tradition" or result of "ventriloquism" on behalf of local indigenous populations (Bretón et al., 2014, p. 87). Rather, this framing may be considered part of a process of coalition building between local and national level organizations, including indigenous groups, which offers strategic advantages to both. For example, for the dispossessed members of the San Marcos community, framing their visions in terms of *Buen Vivir* in accordance with Quito based NGOs can serve as a vehicle to gain support in their struggle for lands.

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, p. 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* has become a term that is interpreted through a variety of meanings, which shift according to the user and the context, and that 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 that it indulges are very worthwhile contributions to the debate on post-neoliberal development, *Buen Vivir* as an empty signifier limits its transformative potential.

Add to these observations the recent trend of criminalization of protest³⁹, and our analysis would read as quite a pessimistic story. Yet 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 been hardly 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, while they also provide civil society actors and local populations with “arms of resistance” (Boelens, 2008, p. 19). The appropriation of the language of *Buen Vivir* by local Shuar leaders in order to strengthen their claims for territory, and by the leaders of CASCOMI to respond to displacement of San Marcos, are examples of this.

5. 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 and to further debates on the ‘political ecologies of the subsoil’ (Bebbington and Bury, 2013), 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 large-scale mining projects for the first time in history. El Mirador, the first large-scale copper mine of Ecuador, has become the subject of conflict between the mining company, different government bodies, NGOs, indigenous communities, *campesinos* and *colonos*. 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, p. 167) that reflect the actors’ positions and values, and as products of strategic framing processes that “reflect and shape relations of power” (Neumann, 2005, p. 93). We have aimed to contribute to the recent surge of political ecology writings on mining (Bebbington and

Bury, 2013), by showing that this analytical approach helps to unveil how the framing of the mining-development nexus plays a crucial role in mining conflicts and the power relations that are part of them.

More specifically, we have engaged with recently raised concerns regarding *Buen Vivir* in the current Ecuadorian debate (Houtart, 2011; Walsh, 2010). 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* has become an empty signifier, which can in turn prevent or hinder a genuine debate on the expanding mining sector in Ecuador as well as on alternative, post-neoliberal forms of development (Radcliffe, 2012). In effect, the wide-spread reference to *Buen Vivir* in this case seems to trigger tensions the debate over nationally incited mineral extraction and sub-national development, rather than to 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 government's 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, p. 248). Although this qualification might overlook some significant recent changes, we agree that the transformative potential of *Buen Vivir* in the context of the current expansion of mining has been overestimated. The strength of the concept hence does not lie in its much celebrated adoption by the Ecuadorian (and Bolivian) State, but – as we foreshadowed in the previous section - in its potential to unite social movements and channel dialogues about new forms of life and alternative developments.

Academics have an important role to play in these dialogues. As our research on the debates around alternative development and Ecuador's nascent mining sector shows, *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 political tactics that underlied the emergence of *Buen Vivir* and continue to mold the contention around it. 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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Footnotes

¹ See for examples of this approach Buchanan (2013); Haarstad and Fløysand (2007); Moore and Velásquez, (2013); Perreault (2013) and Urkidi (2010).

² Various authors see the surge of the debate on *Buen Vivir* as part of wider international debates on sustainability, de-growth and the green economy. For a useful analysis of synergies and differences, see Thomson (2011) and Vanhulst and Beling (2013).

³ 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).

⁴ All citations of interviews and official documents used in this section are translated from Spanish to English by the authors.

⁵ Colonos was the term used to describe the colonist settlers that arrived to the Amazon region. In the case of the Cordillera del Cóndor, colonos arrived from the highlands of Loja and from the surroundings of Sigsig in Azuay. They were mestizos but also Saraguro and Highland Kichwa indigenous peoples. Nowadays the term is used as a local category to refer to the non-Shuar inhabitants of the region (by colonos and Shuar the like).

⁶ “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>

⁷ Information from the Environmental Impact Assessment for the Exploitation Phase of the Proyecto de Cobre Mirador carried out by Walsh Environmental Scientists and Engineers, submitted in November 2010 and approved in February 2012.

⁸ Information from the Environmental Impact Assessment for the Expansion of the Proyecto de Cobre Mirador carried out by CARDNO ENTRIX INC., submitted in May 2015.

⁹ 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.

¹⁰ Furthermore, we would like to stress that this article focuses on the situation anno 2012, since the principal fieldwork was carried out in that year.

¹¹ 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).

¹² The updated version of the plan includes main concepts of its predecessor and continues to seek a “society in harmony with nature” (SENPLADES, 2013, p. 26). For a more detailed analysis of the continuities and changes between the 2009-2013 and 2013-2017 plan, see (Vanhulst, 2015).

¹³ During campaign for elections in the municipality of Panquintza, Zamora Chinchipe, at July 12, 2012.

¹⁴ 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.

¹⁵ Speech by President Correa to a pro-mining rally on May 6, 2008

¹⁶ Quoted in Chicaiza (2009, p. 168)

¹⁷ A discourse that is strengthened by slogans as “Somos más, somos muchísimos más” which roughly translates into “We are with many, we are the great majority”. This phrase has been repeatedly used by President Correa in speeches and his social media communication and has been incorporated into the communication of other central government institutions as well.

¹⁸ During interview held on 4 May 2012

¹⁹ For a more detailed analysis of neoliberal and modernist orientations in Ecuador’s current development policies, see Escobar (2010, pp. 20–26).

²⁰ Interview held on 14 May 2012

²¹ Interview held on 1 June 2012

²² Interview held on 20 June 2012

²³ Interview held on 22 May 2012

²⁴ ECSA has planned infrastructures at the lands of the community of San Marcos. This has led to a severe land conflict, an issue that is minimized by ECSA representatives as “four persons that are bound to leave” while local groups claim it concerns dozens of families. In 2014, the national government got involved in this expropriation process and in September 2015 police forces and private security guards started with the eviction of resisting families and de-demolishment of their houses.

²⁵ Interview held on 22 May 2012

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Quotes from interviews held on 22 May, 28 May and 26 July 2012 with ECSA representatives

²⁸ Interview held on 4 May 2012

²⁹ Interview held on 8 May 2012

³⁰ Interview held on 20 June 2012

³¹ From a speech of a Shuar leader during a community meeting in a Shuar community in the parish of Tundayme on 7 July 2012.

³² During community meeting in a Shuar community in the parish of Tundayme on 6 July 2012

³³ Their discourses could be cast as “market-oriented and ethically minded” (Moore and Velásquez, 2013, p. 121) and combining language of a both quantitative and qualitative nature (Martinez-Alier, 2001).

³⁴ Interestingly, this sense of territorial entitlement is flexible and depends on the issue at hand. When discussing Ecuador’s relations with Chinese mining companies, local dwellers often speak of themselves as Ecuadorians, whereas in other occasions they might see themselves as Zamoranos (as opposed to Ecuadorians or national interests), Panguënses (as opposed to Zamoranos or provincial interests) or pertaining to Tundayme (when it comes to local labour contracting or development prioritizing, for example). This furthermore shows the flexibility and strategic character of the framing of scale.

³⁵ Quotes come from various interviews with Shuar and non-Shuar inhabitants from Tundayme, Churuwia and San Marcos in the period 26 July till 2 August, 2012.

³⁶ Interview held at 10 July 2012

³⁷ *Penker Pujustin* is the Shuar translation of Buen Vivir or good living. *Ayahuasca* is a brew traditionally used for shamanic, spiritual and healing purposes.

³⁸ See for the importance of Chinese investments in Ecuador Gallagher et al. (2012) or Chicaiza (2014).

³⁹ For elaborated accounts of the criminalization of dissent in Ecuador refer to Becker (2013), CEDHU and FIDH (2010), Chicaiza (2009) and Humphreys Bebbington and Bebbington (2012)