

# Building sustainability actions in Latin American and Caribbean cities: perspectives from Afro-descendant community struggles in Colombia and Brazil<sup>1</sup>



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## ABSTRACT

In Latin America and the Caribbean, policymakers rarely take Afro-descendant cosmologies seriously in the design of urban public policies and territorial development. After reviewing the literature on the emerging concept of “urban extractivism”, which implies extreme environmental exploitation, State neglect, illegal territorial control, socio-economic and racial segregation, we review studies of recent struggles and actions of re-existence that some Afro-descendant communities are taking to influence their daily lives. Focusing on specific contexts in Colombia and Brazil, we find that some of these communities’ practices mean that an Afro-descendant perspective should be included in the development policy and local plan-ning, as new forms of Right to the City.

**Keywords:** Vivir Sabroso, Amefricanidad, LaBoquillaTeVe, casa-tela, Sustainable Development Goals.

## Construyendo acciones de sostenibilidad en ciudades latinoamericanas y caribeñas: perspectivas desde las luchas comunitarias afrodescendientes en Colombia y Brasil

## RESUMEN

En América Latina y el Caribe los tomadores de decisiones políticas raramente toman en serio las cosmo-visiones afrodescendientes en el diseño de las políticas públicas urbanas y de desarrollo territorial. Después de revisar la literatura sobre el concepto emergente de «extractivismo urbano», que implica explotación ambiental, abandono estatal, dominación territorial ilegal, segregación

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socioeconómica y racial, revisamos los recientes estudios sobre luchas y acciones de re-existencia que algunas comunidades afrodescendientes emprenden para incidir en su vida cotidiana. Centrándonos en contextos específicos de Colombia y Brasil, constatamos que algunas de las prácticas de estas comunidades abogan para la inclusión de una perspectiva afrodescendiente en la política de desarrollo y planificación local como nuevas formas de Derecho a la Ciudad.

**Palabras clave:** Vivir Sabroso, Amefricanidad, LaBoquillaTeVe, casa-tela, Objetivo del Desarrollo Sostenible.

## Construindo ações de sustentabilidade nas cidades da América Latina e do Caribe: perspectivas das lutas das comunidades afrodescendentes na Colômbia e no Brasil

### RESUMO

Na América Latina e no Caribe, as visões de mundo dos afrodescendentes raramente são levadas a sério pelos tomadores de decisão política na elaboração de políticas de desenvolvimento urbano e territorial. Depois de analisar a literatura sobre o conceito emergente de “extrativismo urbano”, que implica exploração ambiental extrema, negligência do Estado, dominação territorial ilegal, segregação socioeconômica e racial, analisamos estudos recentes sobre lutas e ações de re-existência que algumas comunidades afrodescendentes empreendem para influenciar suas vidas diárias. Com foco em contextos específicos na Colômbia e no Brasil, descobrimos que algumas das práticas dessas comunidades defendem a inclusão de uma perspectiva afrodescendente na política de desenvolvimento e no planejamento local como novas formas de Direito à Cidade.

**Palavras-chave:** Vivir Sabroso, Amefricanidade, LaBoquillaTeVe, casa-tela, Objetivo de Desenvolvimento Sustentável.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper has two main aims. Firstly, to review the specialized literature on the dominant model of the Latin American city based on “urban-extractivism”; and, secondly, to make visible the recent work related to the struggles and actions of re-existence<sup>2</sup> that several Afro-descendant communities are carrying out to shape their own daily lives from the praxis (Do Nascimento, 2023) and, in some cases, the public policies of their urban environments.

Afro-descendant struggles in Latin America offer alternatives to the capitalist-extractivist neoliberal development model, based on ‘life plans’ linked to praxis that aim to defend ancestral territory through bio-cultural preservation actions (Melo-Ascencio, 2024; Stålhammar & Brink, 2021; Díaz-Reviriego, Torralba, Vizueté, Ortiz-Przychodzka, Pearson, Heindorf, Llanque Zonta & Oteros-Rozas, 2024). “Vivir Sabroso” (Sorzano, 2022) and “Amefricanity” (González, 2020) are examples of forms of militant Afro-descen-

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<sup>2</sup> “Thus, the decolonial praxis of re-existence consists of facing all forms of domination, exploitation, and discrimination, through collective actions that help build awareness of being, feeling, doing, and thinking from a given place of life” [1].

dance that invite us to reimagine urban development and broaden the concept of the Right to the City within the Sustainable Development Agenda. These two terms, the first specific to the Afro-Colombian context and the second to the Afro-Brazilian reality, have become references for many Afro-descendant community struggles. Both concepts seek to put an end to the structural racist violence that State, and hegemonic cultures perpetuate against Black communities. Because of this, comprehensive equality is demanded, which guarantees, on the one hand, fundamental rights in the classic sense of the term (political, civil, and socio-economic); and, on the other hand, the recognition of possible alternatives to the hegemonic development model, which implies, above all, respect for Afro-ancestral territorial integrity and its surrounding nature. Such integrity is often the premise for safeguarding the local economy, which, more than being a means of accumulating wealth, is an important foundation for community cohesion. In such scenarios, we observe that cultural memory becomes a powerful tool of struggle in specific contexts in Colombia and Brazil: Cali, La Boquilla - Cartagena de Indias, Aratu Bay - Bahia and Rio de Janeiro. This manifests through protest actions, cultural celebrations, and new ways of thinking about peripheralized public space as an open-air museum.

Afro-descendant populations are the subject of this investigation because, among the ethnic groups that experience epistemicide, they are the ones that suffer significantly from these forms of oppression in the cities. In fact, approximately 133 million people in Latin America and the Caribbean are Afro, a figure that corresponds to 20% of the total population. 95% of this Afro population group lives in Brazil, Haiti, Colombia and Cuba and 80% of them reside in urban areas (CEPAL ONU, 2020). The article does not aim to provide exhaustive answers or indisputable empirical findings, but rather to offer inputs from different ethnic and local perspective to enrich the debate on sustainable cities and communities.

In addition, we consider that the discussion on the actions needed to achieve urban sustainability must be able to situate the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals within the dialogue on the different local contexts, in particular those of the Global South.

In fact, two-thirds of the SDG indicators have urban components and the Latin American and Caribbean region is the most urbanized region in the Global South, with eight out of ten people living in cities (CEPAL ONU, 2023). According to the latest report published by the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean - ECLAC - linked to “sustainable cities and communities” (SDG 11), in 2030, it will be difficult to achieve the proposed goals (CEPAL ONU, 2023).

The previous premise shows how urban public policies rarely take into consideration alternative cosmopolitanism to the capitalist-extractivist neoliberal model. The latter is based on the logic of extreme predation, and has historically assumed that everything that has the capacity to be converted into profit can be exploited or even destroyed, justifying such action in the name of “development” (Francelino, Bezerra, Santos & Colombani, 2024). In such a scenario, the role of the State, instead of reversing or, at least, mitigating the effects of the economic and social model, is usually complicit in predatory action, thus exacerbating the dynamics of State abandonment, illegal territorial domination and segregation by socioeconomic and racial paradigm (Álvarez, Romero & Riccardi, 2024; Romero & Riccardi, 2022) that accelerate epistemicide against cultures and “life plans” alternative to the hegemonic model. In this regard, several authors of work on decolonization (Villalón, 2024; Echazú, Santos, Tempesta, Giatti, 2022; Stefanoni, 2022; Phiri, 2024; Santos, 2022) argue, from different perspectives, that social and ethnic-racial justice is promoted by breaking with the Western colonial legacy through the construction of multiple processes of cognitive justice, which imply radically changing the current epistemological perspective. For example, this can be done by promoting research and consequent urban planning policies based on the situated knowledges of historically invisible local communities (Harrison, 2022).

## **2. “Urban extractivism”, a facet of “cannibal capitalism” that particularly affects Afro-descendant communities**

Extractivism has accompanied Latin America and the Caribbean since the Conquest by the European empires of portions of Abya Yala. This term identifies the extraction and export of natural resources from colonized territories to Europe; This trade gave rise to the “World System” and its current reconfigurations (Jacob, 2022). The transatlantic slave trade that occurred between the 16th and 19th centuries are also related to extractivism sources. As a result of the increases in the value of raw materials between 2000 and 2014, extractivism became known as neo-extractivism to highlight the commercial dynamics that Latin American governments promoted, establishing patterns very similar to the colonial era. Regardless of the political color of the governments in any given historical period, this large-scale export of raw materials by a significant number of Latin American countries has unleashed various socio-environmental conflicts, especially involving rural communities belonging to Afro-descendant groups (Global Witness, 2022).

Today, Latin America and the Caribbean are in another new stage of extractivism, due to the intensification of the exploitation of hydrocarbons in a non-conventional way (using techniques such as fracking) and critical minerals (such as lithium). This process is occurring alongside an increase in State and parastatal violence, which is expressed in the form of threats and the murder of numerous environmental activists in rural and urban areas (Streule, 2023). According to the latest Global Witness (2023) report, 177 environmental leaders were killed worldwide in 2022. The main countries affected were Colombia and Brazil, respectively with 60 and 34 murdered. The same document highlights that 7% of them were from Afro-descendant communities. Although the majority were killed in Amazonian or rural areas, there is an alarming increase in threats and executions of Afro-descendant leaders in urban areas (or on their borders) who are demanding social, environmental and territorial justice for their communities. This is the case of the Afro-Colombian and Afro-Brazilian contexts analyzed in this article: the ‘comunas’ of the eastern zone of Cali (ILEX Acción Jurídica, Raza & Igualdad, Codhes, 2021), La Boquilla neighborhood in Cartagena de Indias (Comisión de la Verdad, 2022, 27 Jul.), Aratu Bay on the outskirts of Salvador de Bahia (Bledsoe, 2019) and the favela of Pavão-Pavãozinho e Cantagalo in Rio de Janeiro (Håndlykken-Luz, 2023). The geopolitical context also plays an important role, due to the growing economic dependence on new power centers, in particular China, while moving away from traditional power centers, such as the US and the EU (Jenkins, 2022). According to a considerable number of Latin American and Caribbean scholars (Valle, 2022; Torino, 2021; Heredia, 2022), the idea of extraction of natural resources in rural contexts, which are home to Afro-descendant populations, goes beyond the countryside/city dichotomy, because of its impact on the dynamics of urban territories. In this perspective, Heredia (2023, p. 236) shows how the geography of conflict (and community struggles) and so the rural-urban relationship keep a logic that is not dichotomous but “reticular” that integrates both realities.

The capitalist-extractivist neoliberal logic extends into cities, giving rise to “urban extractivism”. This paradigm involves the extreme accumulation of wealth and the exploitation of nature and of the urban population, a process which is driven by powerful private interests in complicity with the State. Extractivism emerges as a hegemonic territorial ordering of capital, where the countryside-city dichotomy is diluted in a territorial network which is vertically integrated into global-scale production chains, fashioning the social production of cities and reproducing the coloniality of its territory (Heredia, 2023). In this sense, “urban extractivism” has a correspondence with Harvey’s concept of “accumulation by dispossession” (Harvey, 2003, p. 236), something which continues to be discussed from perspectives of the global South, particularly from African (Ibrahim, Abubakari, Cobbinah & Kuuire, 2024; Adamu, Frimpong Boamah & Grooms, 2023), Latin American (Omena, 2023) and Asian perspectives (Chowdhury & Biswajit, 2023). This is a form of “bad development” that Svampa & Viale (2014, p. 26) observe in Latin American cities

by way of three phenomena: i) real estate speculation that hyper-commercializes the conditions of access to housing and public spaces, configuring an exclusive city with much reduced social mobility; ii) the expansion of residential mega-projects in the hands of large private corporations which violate strategic ecosystems and the rights of Afro-descendant populations, thereby increasing urban inequalities; and iii) the fencing of coasts, lakes and rivers that privatize access to nature and stripping urban borders. Such dynamics today are further accelerated by the growing wave of touristification, which is manifested transversally in the contexts of the Global North and the South, shaping new forms of gentrification that in turn give rise to new expulsions (Soriano & Sassen, 2023) and housing without local inhabitants (Lees, Slater & Wyly, 2023), for example, because of short-term income generation models.

From the perspective of “urban extractivism” it is possible to arrive at a new interpretation of the dimensions of exclusion that Franco, Mendoza & Czerny (2023, p. 1287) found in their systematic review of the literature on “urban fragmentation” in Latin America and the Caribbean (1982-2023). There is a tendency within the literature on urban fragmentation that revolves around the socio-racial component, and it is for this reason that the next section highlights the struggles of some Afro-descendant communities in Colombia and Brazil. This is consistent with the definition of “cannibal capitalism” that Nancy Fraser (2023, p. 10) attributes to the social model described above and which bases its exploitation and expropriation on the racialization of work in modern and postmodern times

### 3. Afro-urban struggles in Colombia and Brazil: advancing with *vivir sabroso* and *amefricanity*

Territory and freedom have been the drivers of struggles for Afro-descendant emancipation in Latin America and the Caribbean (Mina, 2023). In urban contexts these struggles, although with different facets, still demand the end of violence related to structural racism which is caused by the capitalist-extractivist-neoliberal model. This implies the demand for socioeconomic and political inclusion, respectful of the different and specific Afro-descendant perspectives.

Language is a key element of these resistance struggles against historical epistemicide. In Colombia, for example, the idea of *juntanza* (union) is a native way of rethinking solidarity between subordinated groups, particularly between women and black people of dissident gender (González, 2022). The *juntanza* has powerfully entered the political vocabulary since the national strike that broke out in the city of Cali - and then throughout Colombia - during April 2021, against a new regressive tax reform that the government proposed. This was a cultural revolt which was capable of exalting an apparently new demand for social and cultural justice, but which was the same one that had remained invisible throughout five centuries of colonial and republican whitening, despite the current Constitution of Colombia being multicultural. Even so, the lack of effective implementation of cultural and socioeconomic rights was due to several reasons of a political (traditionally conservative), and economic (strongly neoliberal) nature, as well as related to the public order (persistence of the internal armed conflict) (Riccardi, 2024). The monument to re-existence in Cali is the emblem of the symbolic rupture of the border between center and periphery that the main cities of Colombia lived at that time, and in which the Afro struggle was the protagonist. Despite the police violence that occurred during the three months of the strike, which caused the death of 108 people in total, 39 of whom were Afro-descendants (ILEXAcción Jurídica, Raza & Igualdad, Codhes, 2021), *vivir sabroso*<sup>3</sup> broke into the Afro-Colombian emancipatory political language, finding a reverbera-

<sup>3</sup> “*vivir sabroso* (living tasty) is: “changing the politics of death for life” (...) “today we nobodies are here occupying the State because we want to live tasty, with joy, in peace, with dignity (...) living tasty is not money (...) it is possibilities for people to be able to live in their quiet territories (...) it implies that the State arrives with presence to fulfill its constitutional mandate where it has never done before (...) ‘I am because we are’ is a philosophy, a life commitment to see ourselves in collective societies, as an extended family in harmony with nature” [Noticias Caracol, 2023, 23 Mar.).

tion in its main spokesperson: Francia Márquez, current vice president of Colombia. She is the first black woman to hold such a public position and comes to government with the purpose of decolonizing reality through language and, therefore, thought (Sorzano, 2022; Noticias Caracol, 2023, 23 Mar.; Nieto, 2023).

In this way, Afro-Colombian struggles move from the most isolated rural territories (such as the Pacific coastal region of Colombia from where Francia Márquez originates) to the cities (Riccardi, 2021): to Cali and Cartagena de Indias, among others. In the latter, since the second half of the 1980s, there has been an acceleration in the segregation of the Afro population (Álvarez, 2023), due to the progressive touristification of the historic center of Cartagena and its beach areas because of the recognition of the city as a UNESCO Heritage site (Pérez, 2023). Currently, one of the most visible Afro-Cartagena struggles in the city, because it involves access to the Caribbean Sea, is that which is taking place in defense of the black territories of the La Boquilla neighborhood (Hernández & Deavila, 2022). In fact, “urban extractivism”, driven by new tourist-residential real estate projects (Valle, 2022; Trivi, Moscoso, Morales, 2023), induces a part of the native population to sell their land; however, in response, collective black territorial recognition is currently in the legal dispute phase (ILEX Acción Jurídica, 2023). In addition, new road infrastructure has changed the ecosystem surrounding the area where the Ciénaga de la Virgen (an inland lagoon) enters the Caribbean Sea, compromising historical subsistence activities based on artisanal fishing (Dirección de Asuntos para Comunidades Negras, Afrocolombianas, Raizales, y Palenqueras, 2023). In such a scenario, local struggles acquired a connotation of cultural re-existence that passes through independent community information media in defense of ancestral territory, against the advance of “urban extractivism” (La Boquilla Te Ve, 2022, 21 Mar.). Community media, in addition to informing, vindicate the rights of the communities, articulating the struggles with the new media, the film industry (La Boquilla Te Ve, 2023, 26 Apr.) and the Colombian peace process (Comisión de la Verdad, 2023).

Another representative example of “urban extractivism” is manifested on the outskirts of Salvador, in Aratu Bay, Brazil. There, Afro-descendant communities suffer from the expansion of the city due to the territorial advance of the petrochemical industry. Some community leaders struggle to stay alive on the edge of urban life in order to avoid the structural violence of the city and the economic marginalization that the structural racism of the city causes (Bledsoe, 2019; Bledsoe, 2022). It is a daily re-existence outside the logic of wealth accumulation (Lilja, 2022), which bases its subsistence on economic activities such as fishing (Silva, 2022) in a natural environment and which is affected by activities related to oil extraction.

Although this case is about 7,500 km from the previous example, there are some similarities negative externalities that “urban extractivism”, through the advancement of industries in the energy-mining and mass tourism sectors, dumps on Afro-descendant communities in Colombia and Brazil.

On the other hand, Rio de Janeiro is one of the most emblematic examples of Afro-urban struggles. It was in this metropolis where Lélia González coined, during the decades of research and political militancy, the terms of *amefricanidade* and *pretuguês* (González, 2020). In addition to a compilation by another prominent black intellectual, Beatriz Nascimento (2022), the struggles of women warriors in the Pavão-Pavãozinho e Cantagalo favelas have recently been studied (Håndlykken-Luz, 2024). In particular, the rescue of memory becomes an action of claiming identities that goes beyond special recognition. In this perspective, community work, frequently led by women, has contributed to the “Favela Museum” with the support of several public institutions of a university and government nature. Contrary to the Eurocentric museum perspective, this initiative seeks to react to the historical Afro epistemicide from an open-air narrative, where the houses of the favelas (*casas-tela*) communicate the praxis of daily life, through the murals that represent it.

These case studies show how Afro-descendant communities are not only resisting in passive form but also actively re-existing and reshaping the urban landscape in ways that affirm their Right to the City. These efforts are closely tied to environmental sustainability, as they often involve defending local ecosystems from destructive industrial activities.

#### 4. Conclusions: Afro-perspectives of the Right to the City

Integrating Afro-descendant perspectives into the Sustainable Development Agenda, and consequently in development policy and local planning, is not just a matter of inclusion but a necessary step toward dismantling the racial and economic hierarchies that continue to shape urban development in Latin America. Concepts like “Vivir Sabroso” and “Amefricanidad” provide critical frameworks for rethinking urban spaces as sites of communal well-being rather than mere economic assets. By centering these perspectives in urban planning, we can begin to construct cities that are not only sustainable but also socially just, reflecting the diversity and resilience of their inhabitants. The struggle for the Right to the City is, therefore, inherently a struggle for cognitive justice: a recognition of the value of Afro-descendant knowledge systems in shaping more equitable and inclusive urban futures. As recent reviews of specialized literature have suggested, socio-environmental sustainability paradigms need to include the voices of the silenced, embrace the interests of local Afro-descendant people, and be socially inclusive (Kyriacou, 2024; Levorato, 2023). To achieve this, it is important to provide specific recommendations that can be applied and replicated in other regions facing similar challenges. These recommendations include policies that guarantee the protection of Afro-descendant cultural and natural heritage, strategies for integrating Afro-descendant perspectives into urban planning, and frameworks for community-led environmental stewardship. By doing so, these communities can offer scalable solutions that contribute to global efforts toward sustainable development. This debate is also gaining relevance within the United Nations. In fact, members of the “Permanent Forum on Afro-descendants” have repeatedly expressed the need to include the Afro-focus in the Sustainable Development Agenda, with the purpose of putting an end to all forms of historical and systematic racism that affects the lives of millions of people of African descent, including an alternative to the capitalist-extractivist neoliberal model (UNHR, 2023). In the cities of Latin America and the Caribbean, considering the significant presence of Afro-descendant populations, it is especially urgent to open public spaces - physical, digital and intellectual - capable of promoting, above all, the epistemic recognition of these historically discriminated groups. In this sense, some Colombian and Brazilian experiences show that the struggles for territorial, social, environmental and cultural rights advance through initiatives charged with political, cultural, intellectual and aesthetic repositioning in the surrounding social environment which, of course, break with the dominant vision of capitalist-extractivist neoliberal development.

It remains for governments, both local and national, to finally recognize this diversity of the Right to the City. In this regard, initiatives that value and systematize memory in dispossessed territories can contribute to greater respect for their communities, promoting a domino effect in the extension of rights. For this to happen, communicative tools are essential to promote visible and transformative pedagogical processes. The academic world, together with think tanks and social movements, also have the responsibility of advancing new research and actions on the topic, to continue contributing to the process of cognitive and epistemic justice, from which new patterns of social and ethnic-racial justice can be built.

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### **Data Availability**

We used data related to the texts in the bibliography. At the same time, we elaborated considerations based on field work carried out in Colombia (La Boquilla, Cartagena de Indias and Cali) and Brazil (Rio de Janeiro). These considerations were publicly debated in the following international academic events:  
- Second International Meeting of Researchers in Afro-Latin American Studies at the University of Cartagena, Colombia (June 4-7, 2024).  
- I Congress of Afro-Latin American and Caribbean Researchers and V Colloquium on Race and Intersectionalities in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (June 25-28, 2024).

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