

Editorial

Rethinking the common: Community Work as a praxis of Political Ecology for local development



Repensando lo común: Trabajo Comunitario como praxis de la Ecología Política en función del desarrollo local

Repensando os bens comuns: o Trabalho Comunitário como práxis da Ecologia Política a serviço do desenvolvimento local

Ania Bustio Ramos¹  0000-0002-1605-6717  ania.bustio@upr.edu.cu

¹ PhD in Economics Sciences. Full Professor at the University of Pinar del Río "Hermanos Saíz Montes de Oca". Faculty of Economic Sciences. Center of Studies for Management, Local Development, Tourism and Cooperativism. Cuba.

According to Bustio Ramos (2023), conceiving of local development from the perspective of the social community—centered on the agents of change—constitutes a challenge for research with a social innovation focus, insofar as tools are developed from, with, and for the community to facilitate the creation, development, and application of solutions, from a novel perspective, to the problems it faces.

Another significant challenge in research with a social innovation focus is to consider the environmental dimension as a cross-cutting axis of development; from this perspective, it will be addressed the importance of this dimension with an integrative and systemic approach characteristic of local development.

Environmental issues reflect the nature-society relationship in human consciousness, shaped by advances in science and technology in the service of human development and progress. However, this orientation has not always led to true development, nor has it been accessible to all societies.

Every moment of humanity's interaction with nature has marked a historic milestone in human development, simultaneously bringing about substantial changes in living conditions and in relationships with other individuals.

The need to understand environmental phenomena and the relationships that have historically been established between species within an ecosystem has accompanied human beings throughout their development. Each historical era that humanity has gone through corresponds to a specific form of the relationship between social and natural reality, mediated by human productive activity, regulated and modified by forms of social organization, by the economic system, and by a whole system of values; and by natural reality, which in turn is regulated by the inherent dynamics of natural phenomena—there is a very strong link that serves as a mediator: technology.

The bond established with nature has thus evolved from an interaction of subordination to the failed notion of domination and control over it. The final decades of the last century were marked by the recognition of the global ecological crisis and the exhaustion of development models that have made the effects of vulnerability and environmental and social deterioration evident on a global scale.

The globalization of the contradictions generated by the nature-society relationship—as a result of the imposition of consumerist development models on a global scale that have significantly affected the dynamics of nature's objective laws—is becoming increasingly evident. The environmental problems that characterize today's world are the result of this relationship, which is eminently social in nature, given that their origins stem from social processes with an ever-increasing impact on the social context; however, this does not mean that it is a phenomenon exclusive to the contemporary era—it is as old as humanity itself.

Society, as a collection of individuals who relate to one another through their fundamental activity—work—is situated within a given natural space, where both elements are dialectically interrelated. Separating human beings (and with them, society) from their natural environment would make no sense, since both are part of the same system, forming a process of dialectical interaction. "That human beings live off nature means that nature is the body through which human beings are in a permanent process. That the physical and spiritual life of human beings depends on nature means nothing other than that nature depends on itself, for human beings are part of nature" (Marx, 1979).

The human-nature relationship is a social phenomenon insofar as this relationship is mediated by a process in which humans intervene not as isolated entities, but as a social group, as part of a specific

social system, situated within a concrete natural environment. "Society is the complete unity of human beings with nature, the true resurrection of nature, the consummated naturalism of human beings, and the consummated humanism of nature" (Marx, 1979). This dialectical interrelation does not occur in abstract or absolute terms; it is the result of human action on the environment as a social entity—that is, as a group that is part of a system of individuals interacting with one another. It is precisely here that the social character of the nature-society relationship manifests itself.

All of the above explains the imperative need to address environmental issues from a holistic perspective—as a historical reality that is becoming increasingly intertwined with other phenomena of social life, a reality evidenced by the increasingly evident global dimension of environmental problems, which are ultimately determined by human relationships and different forms of social organization.

Practice has shown that behind every social system, at every historical moment in human development, economic activity has been centered on economic growth; this has been the essential objective of all socioeconomic formations, corresponding to the type of society. However, the obsession with economic growth has led humanity into an unprecedented crisis regarding the fate of the environment on a global scale, which manifests itself in the destruction of the natural resource base (the foundation of human life), in environmental pollution, in ecological imbalance, and on the social level, it translates into the widening of the North-South divide, and consequently, the degradation of quality of life.

By the 1960s, global awareness began to grow regarding the need to care for the planet and the resources it possesses, which serve as the basis of life for millions of human beings. The Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, laid the groundwork for rethinking human behavior in relation to the environment and the rational use of resources, as well as the need to reverse the global environmental crisis by embracing a shift in the values that govern the behavior of economic and social actors, the transformation of knowledge, and technological innovation to solve the most pressing environmental problems.

The scale that environmental issues have reached globally as a result of development that is unequal for human societies and harmful to natural systems is not merely a technical problem, but a social and political one, leading to the exposure of the various economic, political, and strategic interests at stake in today's world. The strictly economic view of development completely ignores the question

of to what extent the development of the national and international economy is fully compatible with the much broader imperative of preserving the planet Earth—the basis of human life—in the long term; for it is becoming increasingly evident that the insurmountable rivalry among different countries and groups of countries to gain competitive advantages will ultimately be won by those capable of plundering existing natural resources with the greatest speed, sophistication, and thoroughness.

Despite efforts made in the international context to preserve the health of the planet, environmental degradation and the unchecked spread of poverty continue to be, on a global scale, the most evident signs of the crisis the planet is currently undergoing. Since then, many scientists, economists, politicians, sociologists, and naturalists in general have foreseen an apocalyptic future for humanity.

The current environmental crisis necessitates a global rethinking of humanity's relationship with nature, and in particular, the prevailing productive rationality through which ecological processes that generate natural resources and technological processes of industrial transformation are articulated. This leads to a reevaluation of policies that have assumed that poverty would be resolved by economic growth, and that the poor are passive subjects, marginalized from their own problems, who would eventually receive the benefits of development (Leff, 1995).

Global reality demonstrates that the current economic-productive rationality only makes the human economy more unsustainable, given that it consumes its own natural capital through the irrational and excessive use of natural resources, in pursuit of economic growth that is incompatible with the planet's resource base and ecological balance.

The global economic crisis, resulting from irrational economic growth policies and, furthermore, from a crisis of thought that considers only quantitative factors as essential variables of development, is the result of a model that has focused its concern on production for the market rather than on the social distribution of income and access to resources, let alone on grassroots organization and its capacity for self-management in the context of development, causing unprecedented environmental degradation that has led to declines in income levels and quality of life, primarily in underdeveloped countries.

As Reyes Hernández et al. (2022) point out, the severe environmental crisis currently facing humanity and the economic and social challenges that must be resolved immediately demonstrate that the prevailing model of socioeconomic development is unsustainable.

Rethinking "the common good"—which is nothing more than rethinking the fate of the planet as our shared home—requires more rational and sustainable development models. The top-down approach that has characterized development, as well as the imposition of exogenous models, has prevented the population from taking charge of its own destiny and the changes required by our common home. Social praxis, on the other hand, has shown that, to the extent that people participate and become conscious of their actions, understanding the need for development and the benefits it can bring, results and commitment inevitably grow.

At the present time, when nature in general has seen its capacity for spontaneous self-regeneration limited as a result of increasing human activity, the "optimization of the subject" is required—understood as the conscious participation and mobilization of individuals—in order to restore nature to its rightful role, recognizing it as a subject of rights, and to reverse the damage caused, which, to a large extent, is already irreversible.

Achieving sustainable development—a concept championed and disseminated since the 1992 Rio Conference— and reformulated through the Sustainable Development Goals, also known as the 2030 Agenda, adopted in 2015 by the Member States of the United Nations to eradicate poverty, protect the planet, and ensure prosperity for all, constitutes a bold and transformative action plan that represents an unprecedented opportunity for the transformation of the planet.

The 2030 Agenda, as a global initiative, is aimed at eliminating poverty through strategies that enable more rational, environmentally friendly economic growth and address the needs of vulnerable people, while simultaneously combating climate change and its dire consequences. Within this framework, community-based environmental management is also recognized as a process of singular importance for achieving these goals and as a means to strengthen citizen action through its various forms of organization.

From this perspective, its implementation inevitably requires the collaboration of governments, businesses, organizations, and citizens; it also involves training the necessary human resources capable of changing the course of the current economic, political, and cultural processes unfolding in today's world, and concentrating all efforts into a strong movement for sustainability that leads to a socially just, economically viable, and ecologically balanced society.

All of the above implies developing a movement of people willing to defend and conserve natural resources as part of the resources available in their communities. In this sense, the strength of the

sustainability movement lies essentially in strengthening local actions in the management and stewardship of their resources, while taking into account global commitments to make this development paradigm viable.

Achieving sustainability requires a new economic rationality, which implies a more rational New World Economic Order, where the cost of natural capital is internalized in the economy; this, in turn, requires a new ethical rationality, necessitating a rethinking of the relationship between humanity and nature. Human progress and the maintenance of the population's quality of life depend on the existence of a habitable planet; hence the indissoluble relationship between development and the environment as pillars of economic relations that extend into the social and political spheres.

In this sense, what is needed is not only a style of development but also a way of life resulting from a cultural adaptation grounded in ethics and inter- and intragenerational solidarity, as well as in the equity of the social system. The formation of Sustainable Societies entails a profound commitment to the ethics of subsistence in order to live sustainably, consciously developing a new environmental culture.

Achieving sustainable development therefore requires:

- Achieving real changes in our way of life, based on production methods that are more compatible with the conservation of nature and its resources.
- Improving efficiency in the production of goods and services.
- Consuming resources more efficiently, taking into account their carrying capacity.
- Eliminating the disparity in consumption between the richest and the poorest.
- Protect and manage natural resources more wisely.
- Conserve biodiversity and maintain the ecological services provided by the planet.
- Preserve the planet's biological productivity to ensure the well-being of present and future generations.
- Political will and social commitment.
- Develop funding sources that ensure the viability of Local Agendas, fostering external aid for development.
- Achieve the informed participation of the population in development processes.

Currently, all institutions and agencies with a mandate to achieve sustainable development—as a means to improve social, economic, cultural, and environmental conditions at all levels of society—

have as their central objective the involvement of various community stakeholders in identifying the key issues affecting them. This will require the development of community management processes that are increasingly participatory, proactive, and innovative.

The community as an agent of action in community environmental management

The term "community," widely used in scientific literature, has been associated with various variables, such as: geographic space, the size of the population that comprises it, the economic activity that characterizes the locality, the level of development of a given territory, existing traditions, habits, and customs, the psychology of its inhabitants, and its laws. This has sometimes led to an overemphasis on certain aspects or the absolutization of others.

Bustio Ramos (2004) defines the term as "an awareness of one's historical identity within one's own environment, existing to the extent that it allows for conscious identification with those values and objects that distinguish it from other territories and nations... it is an expression of the unique and the diverse. Avella Bernal (2004) defines it as the set of representations in the structural, symbolic, communicational, and physical realms; for Romero Sarduy and Muñoz Campos (2014), it is a form of social relationship that implies symmetry, equity, inclusion, participation, cooperation, and collective endeavor.

Bustio Ramos (2023) identifies the term "community" not only as a well-defined physical space where several people coexist, but also as the relationships established among people through their interaction as agents of action, from which a certain community identity emerges, defining the common traits that distinguish one community from another and set it apart from others, highlighting the central role of community knowledge and wisdom that emerges from community practices as a framework for development management.

All of the above indicates that being a member of a community is, above all, about creating the socioeconomic, cultural, environmental, and institutional conditions that allow members of any community to integrate into it, to feel that the physical space they inhabit is their own, to have a sense of belonging, and, consequently, to be able to voice their demands and requirements in order to use the community and collective assets for the self-management of development.

In this sense, it is in the relationship (knowledge-community praxis) where the terms "community" and "community management" find their strongest connection, where the community can be

understood, as Romero Sarduy and Hernández Chávez (2021) propose, as the agent of its own actions for change, and community management as the participation of local communities in the entire community development process—as a process of continuously building their autonomy and self-development—as the way in which the community organizes itself, defines needs, formulates plans, and carries out activities that lead to a continuous improvement in their standard of living. From this perspective, the community constitutes the fundamental setting for community management oriented toward community development.

Authors such as Fernández Montes and Miró Acedo (2016) link community management to the population's reappropriation of resources as a tool that enables self-management of production and reproduction; highlighting its role in social transformation and the empowerment of communities; Padilla Ospina and Ospina, and Holguín (2020) link it to community development approaches and community organizations, focusing on the role of community members' participation in problem-solving or the search for strategies to improve the community's social well-being. For Bustio Ramos (2023), it is the set of activities and the sense of responsibility with which community actions are undertaken to transform reality and solve social, economic, environmental, cultural, and political-institutional problems, based on community development focused on community needs and interests.

An analysis of the above references reveals that empowerment for decision-making, as well as participation in transformative actions, constitutes essential variables of community management. According to Covarrubias Melgar (2024), citizen participation is considered an essential characteristic, a key tool for achieving effective governance, which in theory involves the inhabitants of the territory in public policy decision-making.

Incorporating the environmental dimension into community management processes involves developing a process in which local communities actively participate in the protection, conservation, and sustainable management of their natural environment, based on collaboration among residents, organizations, and authorities to make decisions that benefit both the environment and the well-being of the community.

Community-based environmental management is characterized as a process where local participation is interwoven, in which communities identify environmental problems and propose solutions with a sustainability approach that seeks to balance development with the conservation of natural resources, for which it will be necessary to empower communities by strengthening their capacity to

manage their resources, taking into account the role of traditional knowledge and ancestral practices, and through collective work involving community leaders, local governments, NGOs, and other stakeholders.

From another perspective, according to Bustio Ramos et al. (2021), it is necessary to refine the economic and financial mechanisms that enable addressing environmental problems, as well as to strengthen the tools, mechanisms, and instruments aimed at ensuring the management and rational use of natural resources.

In this regard, local communities play a transformative role in environmental management, for which it will be necessary to reflect on how they interact with their natural environment through critical approaches that bring into dialogue the role of governance structures, socio-environmental justice, and resource distribution. To this end, it will be necessary to develop processes of knowledge construction and appropriation—as a process of collective construction and deconstruction—that promote environmental management, help ensure environmental sustainability, and enable the community to make decisions that meet their expectations without compromising the needs of future generations.

Community Work as a praxis of Political Ecology

Community work, as a working method, constitutes an essential tool in community transformation processes from a socio-environmental perspective, insofar as it offers concrete practices of resistance and the collective construction of alternatives, as well as ongoing education and training, and takes into account behaviors and cultural, social, political, and economic values in relation to nature. This process fosters and facilitates tools so that people can generate and appropriate knowledge, techniques, and expertise, enabling them to participate more fully in environmental management through their productive activities and the transformation of those productive practices that do not align with the organization's environmental objectives.

Community work focuses on empowering communities to address their problems and needs through collective organization. It enables the development of community-based management processes for natural resources, promoting sustainable local alternatives and creating tools to tackle environmental problems and challenges through solidarity and a critical analysis of reality. It helps build pathways for socio-environmental transformation based on democratic participation, equity, sustainability, and environmental democracy.

As a method of working with communities and for their well-being, it aims to create spaces for advocacy that transcend the group and local levels and can influence public policy to foster transformations in favor of community development. From an environmental perspective, it focuses on local actions through horizontal and collective organization to defend territories (e.g., resistance against mining or deforestation) and on the development of sustainable practices based on traditional knowledge (agroecology, ancestral water management). It strengthens political advocacy to demand environmental rights through (public consultations, legal regulations), and promotes self-management of resources (e.g., communal forests, energy cooperatives). It is a collective action that promotes autonomy in management and decision-making.

Community work does not achieve its ultimate goal if people are not equipped with the knowledge that underpins and serves as the foundation for their environmental struggles; it is not enough to possess practical tools for the environmental transformation of territories focused on sustainability. It will be necessary to understand the origins of their struggles, the causes and consequences that generate them; the "how" is not enough; the "why" and "for what" they are fighting are essential in the search for new common horizons.

From this perspective, Labrador Machín et al. (2019) consider capacity building to be imperative for proper environmental management, posing the questions: should we manage training? Or should we train for better management of processes based on decision-making? Both questions are essential in local-scale environmental projects. Training from a community perspective involves creating spaces for dialogue in experiential contexts where, as Freire proposed regarding the problem of "being in itself" and "being for what," hope is projected as people take ownership of their living spaces to learn about reality and to think about transforming it.

In this sense, political ecology provides the theoretical framework for understanding the causes of the environmental struggle, whose origins lie in the existence of development models that are far from environmentally friendly and have failed to achieve the necessary and much-desired balance between nature and society, as discussed earlier. In general terms, political ecology allows us to understand the structural roots of socio-environmental conflicts, focusing on how political, economic, and social structures influence access to, distribution of, and management of natural resources.

As a critique of apolitical views of ecology, it integrates perspectives from various fields of knowledge—such as geography, anthropology, sociology, and environmental studies—to understand

the socio-environmental differences generated by different forms of social organization and the conflicts these generate in relation to nature as a source of life for human beings.

Community work and political ecology form a deeply interconnected pair of perspectives for addressing socio-environmental conflicts, the distribution of power in natural resource management, and the promotion of sustainable alternatives at the community level. Both examine how societies interact with their natural environment and how to address the environmental challenges posed by different forms of social organization. They view communities as agents of socio-environmental transformation. They highlight the need for alliances at all levels to address environmental challenges and promote democratization in environmental decision-making by challenging the influence of political power, thereby advancing social justice.

In summary, community work is the praxis (concrete action), while political ecology is the critical theoretical framework that underpins it. Both form a key axis for moving toward more just and sustainable societies, hence the importance of rethinking community work, in its environmental dimension, from the foundations of political ecology.

REFERENCES

Avella Bernal, L. (2004). *Manual de gestión comunitaria*. Centro de Arbitraje y Conciliación de la Cámara de Comercio de Bogotá. <https://repository.iom.int/handle/20.500.11788/918>

Bustio Ramos, A. (2004). *Gestión comunitaria y planificación integrada de zonas costeras: La Coloma y Cortés, dos estudios de casos cubanos* [Doctorado en Desarrollo Sostenible Conservativo de Bosques Tropicales. Manejo Forestal y Turístico, Universidad de Alicante]. <http://hdl.handle.net/10045/3324>

Bustio Ramos, A. (2023). El Trabajo Comunitario Integrado y su incidencia en el desarrollo local. *Cooperativismo y Desarrollo*, 11(2), e642. <https://coodes.upr.edu.cu/index.php/coodes/article/view/642>

Bustio Ramos, A., Labrador Machín, O., & Mitjans Madan, M. (2021). Estrategia ambiental desde la perspectiva de la gestión de empresas cooperativas. *Cooperativismo y Desarrollo*, 9(3), Article 3. <https://coodes.upr.edu.cu/index.php/coodes/article/view/472>

Covarrubias Melgar, F. (2024). Gobernanza para la ciudad: El poder de decisión de los ciudadanos. *Revista Latinoamericana de Ciencias Sociales - Relacis*, 3(1), 137-149.

<https://revistas.jjsanmarcos.org/index.php/relacis/article/view/119>

Fernández Montes, A., & Miró Acedo, I. (2016). *La economía social y solidaria en Barcelona*. Marge Books. <https://ajuntament.barcelona.cat/barcelonallibres/ca/lilibres/la-economia-social-y-solidaria-en-barcelona>

Labrador Machín, O., Bustio Ramos, A., Reyes Hernández, J., & Carvalhais Cionza Villalba, E. L. (2019). Gestión de la capacitación y capacitación para una mejor gestión en el contexto socioeconómico cubano. *Cooperativismo y Desarrollo*, 7(1), 64-73.

<https://coodes.upr.edu.cu/index.php/coodes/article/view/222>

Leff, E. (1995). Pobreza, gestión participativa de los recursos naturales en las comunidades rurales: Una visión desde América Latina. *Ecología Política*, (8), 125-136.

https://www.ecologiapolitica.info/novaweb2/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/08_Leff_1995.pdf

Marx, K. (1979). *Manuscritos Filosóficos y Económicos de 1848*. Editorial Ciencias Sociales.

Padilla Ospina, A. M., & Ospina Holguín, J. H. (2020). Gestión comunitaria durante la pandemia COVID-19 bajo la mirada de la innovación social: Estudio de seis casos. *Perfiles Económicos*, (9). <https://doi.org/10.22370/pe.2020.9.2620>

Reyes Hernández, J., Bustio Ramos, A., & Alfonso Porraspita, D. (2022). Estrategia de educación ambiental, con enfoque de organización que aprende, en una empresa pesquera industrial. *Universidad y Sociedad*, 14(2), 388-401.

<https://rus.ucf.edu.cu/index.php/rus/article/view/2719>

Romero Sarduy, M. I., & Hernández Chávez, C. N. (2021). Trabajo comunitario y participación popular en la gestión del desarrollo local. *Revista de Gestión del Conocimiento y el Desarrollo Local*, 8(1), 43-58.

<https://revistas.unah.edu.cu/index.php/RGCDL/article/view/1425>

Romero Sarduy, M. I., & Muñoz Campos, M. R. (2014). Comunidad y desarrollo comunitario: Aspectos teóricos y metodológicos. *Estudios del Desarrollo Social: Cuba y América Latina*, 2(2). <https://revistas.uh.cu/revflacso/article/view/6349>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License