

## Perspectives regarding local regional development for Orinoquia

There has been consensus that the Orinoquia area of Colombia should assume leadership as a region from colonial and republican times, up to today; an academic exercise may illustrate its level of prominence. On a scale of 1 to 10, a 7 or higher could be assigned to colonial and republican times in history and a 10 for today (from the 1930s onwards). Such protagonist role within a national context depends more on economic factors involving significant variables, such as the market, production activities and resources. This is followed by political (institutions, government participation) and social factors (population, social organisations and education). Consequently, what could be the hidden treasure involved in the Orinoco region assuming a significant leadership role?

The Colombian Orinoquia region extends over a 347,165 Km<sup>2</sup> area (if the Venezuelan Orinoquia region were to be included then the total area would be 991,587 Km<sup>2</sup>), representing 30.4% of Colombia's mainland (Instituto Alexander Von Humboldt; IAVH-Unidad SIG 2003), hosting a wide variety of natural aquatic, wildlife, flora, mining, energy and mining resources and land for agricultural and livestock production. Such riches provide a most promising economic base which the Spaniards perceived as being important but difficult to access. Jane Rausch's book (2011) entitled, *De pueblo de frontera a Ciudad Capital, La historia de Villavicencio, Colombia, desde 1842* (Border town to capital city, the history of Villavicencio, Colombia, since 1842), recognises that Orinoquia (known colloquially as Colombia's eastern plains) has great economic potential, even before the arrival of the Spaniards. It also stresses that governments (particularly radical liberals) made repetitive efforts to seize the eastern plains' "fertile land," and mentions that "Congress enacted many laws aimed at promoting the development of the eastern plains by constructing roads, encouraging foreign immigration and internal colonisation, educating the natives, treating the salt to make it available for consumption by people and animals and improving public administration" (p. 24).

The aforementioned US researcher also stated that "the attraction of the eastern plains is irresistible" (citing Nieto Caballero, p. 190), an expression from 1934, inspired by a very particular observation by Nieto; however, now there is a very different message. The 1994-2004 Regional Development Plan (RDP), Orinoquia facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century (CORPES de La Orinoquia, 1994) states that "as the Orinoquia economy is an economic border zone, a national frontier, having incipient exchange processes, especially a reproduction-dependent economy, then this is expressed in its relationship with the Bogota market" (p. 74). In line with such premise, it can be deduced from the aforementioned RDP's other considerations that Orinoquia's regional development regarding economic growth via the Bogota market (basic destination *par excellence*) can be complemented by boosting national integration and coordination of Orinoquia's departments (i.e. Arauca, Casanare, Guainía, Guaviare, Meta, Vaupés and Vichada) in terms of competitiveness. Nevertheless, it is clear that "Current trends indicate that economic coordination will remain extractive and environmental conditions, such as the distribution of natural resources, water and soil, dominate how urban centres become prioritised" (P. 95). The oil industry is considered an exceptional opportunity due to the stream of royalties which it generates (p. 97). Consequently, the document fixed regional development's reference points, which have not changed in the last 20 years, prioritising the region's comparative advantages which are irresistible for investors. Such fact must be fathomed because it involves speeding up environmental, social and political imbalances which are already indicating crisis conditions.

The current version of the RDP approaches economic development focusing on an internal environment and the centre, Bogotá, "(...) regarding the real adoption of decentralisation" (p.12). New National Planning Department (DNP) and public and private research centre studies since 2000 concerning Orinoquia have described its line of development by combining adjectives, the most commonly used ones being territorial, local, endogenous, environmental, sustainable and regional. They have emphasised space or geography when referring to economic, social, political, institutional and/or environmental matters and added a complementary international context when referring to the 1994 RDP, Orinoquia facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

The Orinoco region's prevailing course (given the international element) is notoriously directed by central government, as stipulated in the development plans. The National Development Plan (NDP) 2002-2006, *Towards a Community State*, shares the territorial development approach concerned with comparative advantages and promotes a policy of national integration; it does not break from Orinoquia facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century RDP guidelines. It acknowledges the potential of agricultural production, hydrocarbon exploration and exploitation and mining (DNP, 2003, P. 97- 227). NDP 2006-2010, *Community State: development for all* (2007), reiterated the fact that Orinoquia covers an area apt for being colonised and explored, having ample opportunities for private initiative but, unlike the Amazon, having no major environmental constraints (Corporinoquia, 2011, p. 34). Following such line of thought, research entitled *The best Orinoquia we can build* embodied the business logic with which the government sees the region and the Programme for Developing Motorway Concessions 2006-2014 (DNP, 2007) responds to such goal by promoting highway construction and accelerating the region's development dominated by the private sector, leaving other (regional) actors in second place: local governments, associations and private associations, indigenous organisations, plains dwellers, Creoles, settlers and cowboy (p.36).

The same study pointed out that the Orinoco region is seen as having three possibilities: a territory for agribusiness, a region for agricultural projects and an ideal area for large-scale forestry projects (p.36). It is easy to deduce that such strong advantages in the hands of private capital highlight the Orinoco region's environmental sensitivity and the upcoming imbalances. It is not difficult to assimilate an approach to economic growth with versions of regional, territorial, local, endogenous or environmental development within Colombia's socio-economic and political characteristics; however, this runs the risk of delving into the unknown, environmental sustainability for example, as long-term policy. In short, a (short-term) economics-based approach has prevailed over the Orinoco region's development, leading to a concentration of wealth, high levels of corruption and capture of state funding by business and political elites and the shallow roots of the local actors.

In such terms, the region's leadership role continues to be subjected to economic factors, lacking sustainability and local actors' loyalty and participation, short-term views prevailing and its growth depending only on settings in which international prices favour exports, the most noticeable being bonanzas. This means development reflecting a picture at odds with other visions of alternative local regional development, understood as being a strategy for participatory social transformation, by constructing a mode of local regional development whose strength lies in economic benefits aimed at breaking inequality and, in turn, favouring living conditions aimed at consolidating human beings' integration with nature.

The 2010-2014, "Prosperity for all", NDP recognised the need for framing the Orinoco region within the range of an economic region; it thus introduced elements in line with current trends, "achieving sustainable and convergent levels of growth and socioeconomic development, recognising and taking advantage of economic, social, institutional and regional capability and regional development initiatives" (p. 27); in other words, "promoting integral territorial development." This was confirmed by a document entitled, *A policy for the Orinoquia region's integral development: Altillanura* (high plains) *Phase I*, listing the ways forward: providing infrastructure and services, ordering the territory according to regional vocation, encouraging investment to take advantage of agriculture and agribusiness and expanding institutional capability, all aimed at "inclusive and sustainable development" (COMPES, 2014, p. 2). The government persists in promoting the traditional development model, having recourse to attractive mutations of speech in doing so; this means that the region's image/objective is not changed; it will be a large production factory, to the detriment of substantial aspects of regional development, such as inclusion, ecosystems, a lack social interpenetration from below, accompanied by a fragile models of development, institutional ethics and social justice. The document states that, "In institutional terms, the region is highlighted by poor performance regarding governance related to the instability of local authorities, corruption, the inefficient use of resources and the armed conflict's impact on traditional areas, such as the Macarena, Arauca and Guaviare" ( p. 13).

Notwithstanding the prevailing government-driven preference for dominant economic theory and its production function, the Colombian Orinoquia region can explore an alternative model of local and regional development when there is real consensus regarding its strengths and opportunities. Focusing such development from a critical, holistic and integrative view of heterogeneity, diversity and complexity regarding the region's conditions is to recognise its dynamic existence and thus discern differences from the national economic model within a local-global context. In other words, the region needs to rethink itself (not isolate itself), being clear that its contradictions and characteristics represent inherent potential for social and economic change to channel its destiny. However, it now seems

that change involves the solution of internal structural phenomena and dilemmas regarding the national level and the whole world. Ethical and political matters are involved in an alternative model of development; these represent adjuvants for achieving the main goals, an emancipatory approach recognising life as a substantive right and duty to preserve and protect. The latter is crucial regarding the complexity of the alternative path towards any type of development.

The journal *Orinoco* promotes the academic community's commitment to disclose different views about constructing knowledge. This issue includes articles on topics regarding the development of the territory, expressing divergent positions, but which complement each other and converge in solving hypotheses about how to understand reality to advance its transformation.

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