FROM THE TERRITORIALIZATION OF PUBLIC POLICIES TO THE CONSTITUTION OF A TERRITORIAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT: EPISTEMOTHEORETICAL AND PRAXIOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS

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ABSTRACT

This study begins with a question that poses a challenge to research: Is there a consistent theoretical framework for grounding a "territorial approach to development"? Accordingly, it seeks to broaden understanding by analyzing different conceptions through a theoretical-conceptual and interpretive study. Particular emphasis is placed on understanding the territorial approach as a means of moving beyond a sectoral perspective and as a shift in the very conception of development. This debate emerged from criticism of the sectoral perspective that historically equated the rural with the agricultural, advancing toward an understanding of territory as a social construction and an analytical category. This perspective was subsequently reflected in the institutionalization of rural development policies, in which territory came to assume functions related to planning, participation, and governance. The limitations of these experiences, however, prompted criticism of the mere territorialization of policies, demonstrating that adopting territory as a framework for intervention does not necessarily entail the incorporation of an effective territorial approach to development. Recent literature has moved toward a relational, historical, multidimensional, multiscalar, and systemic conception of territory, incorporating dimensions such as power, governance, autonomy, sustainability, and collective action. From this perspective, the "territorial approach to development" represents not merely a broader understanding of "rural territorial development," but rather a shift in the theoretical status of territory itself: from a space or scale of intervention to a structuring category for the interpretation and praxis of development. This understanding results from a review of the literature published on the subject over the past twenty-five years, with a geographical focus on Brazil and Ibero-American countries.

Keywords: territory; territorial approach; epistemology; territorial praxis**;** territorial development.

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1 INTRODUCTION

Research and discussions on development have undergone significant theoretical and methodological shifts in recent decades. For a long period, an understanding prevailed that linked development to economic growth, the modernization of production, and the sectoral organization of public policies. In the rural context, this rationale fostered a persistent association between rural and agricultural, leading to a perspective on development defined primarily by the modernization of farming activities, increased productivity, and the adoption of instrumental technical rationality within institutional structures and individual behaviors. From the late 20th century, this perspective has been challenged by various theoretical currents in development studies and public policy implementation research, which highlighted the need to consider territorial specificities and the relationships among the diverse actors constituting these territories (Jannuzzi, 2022; Lotta, 2019).

The territory gradually assumed a prominent role in development discussions, shifting from being viewed merely as a physical space or a political-administrative boundary to being interpreted as a social, historical, and relational construct. This conceptual shift made it possible to move beyond an exclusively sectoral perspective, incorporating into the analysis the diversity of actors, institutions, power relations, forms of social organization, and the economic, cultural, and environmental dynamics present within territories. Within this process, the notion of a territorial approach to development gained traction, particularly in the realm of rural development policies. Integrating the territory into public policies represented an attempt to overcome fragmented interventions and to align planning, social participation, institutional coordination, and the recognition of local specificities.

Consequently, the territory became a reference point for formulating and implementing development policies, programs, and strategies, taking on functions related to decentralization, the participation of social actors, governance, and the coordination of

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interventions across different scales. A central theoretical-practical challenge emerges from this: what is the difference between territorializing a policy and effectively adopting a territorial approach to development? This distinction is significant because it allows us to question whether the territory is being understood merely as a spatial scope for intervention or as a category capable of guiding the very interpretation of development processes.

Thus, the territorial approach is not reduced to expanding the spatial scale of public policies or replacing the sector with the territory as the unit of intervention. It involves a shift in the theoretical status of the territory itself: moving from a space or scale of intervention to a structuring category for the interpretation and praxis of development - one capable of revealing social relations, institutional frameworks, forms of collective organization, power structures, historical processes, and possibilities for transformation.

It is in this context that the study's central question arises: is there a consistent theoretical framework capable of underpinning the territorial approach to development? This question does not presuppose a single, consolidated, or consensual conception; rather, it seeks to understand how various theoretical contributions have shaped it over time, drawing upon diverse epistemological traditions.

Based on this perspective, the study aims to analyze the evolution and theoretical trajectories regarding the territorial approach to development within the scientific literature produced in Brazil and Ibero-American countries over the last twenty-five years, seeking to identify the key conceptual foundations that support this perspective.

The study is guided by a theoretical-conceptual and interpretive perspective, linked to a review of the scientific literature on the subject. The analysis considers categories related to moving beyond a sectoral perspective; territory as a social construct; the territorialization of public policies; the relational dimension; multidimensionality; multiscalarity; power relations; governance; autonomy; sustainability; and collective action. It thus seeks to reconstruct the conceptual trajectory leading from an

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understanding of territory as a space or scale of intervention to its affirmation as a structuring category for the interpretation and praxis of development.

The study proceeds from the understanding that consolidating the territorial approach to development depends less on the formal adoption of territory as a spatial unit of intervention and more on incorporating a conception grounded in social relations, historicity, power, diversity, multidimensionality, multiscalarity, and the agency of territorial actors. Analyzing the scientific literature of the last twenty-five years makes it possible to examine the extent to which these elements form a recognizable theoretical framework, as well as to identify key convergences, divergences, and gaps. The challenge, therefore, lies in understanding territory not merely as the space where development occurs, but as a constitutive dimension of the very processes, relations, and possibilities of development.

Methodologically, this is an exploratory bibliographic study guided by an approach that surveys and analyzes the state of knowledge, seeking to identify how the territorial approach to development is addressed, conceptualized, and problematized in Brazilian and Ibero-American scientific literature.

In addition to this introduction, the article is structured into four further sections: the first outlines the theoretical framework underpinning the understanding of territory as a social construct and the foundations of the territorial approach to development; the second presents the methodological approach adopted in the research; the third demonstrates the results of the analysis of the selected scientific literature; and the fourth, in the final considerations, highlights the most relevant inferences drawn from the study, emphasizing the assertion of the Territorial Approach to Development as an "epistemic/paradigmatic shift in the very way development is conceived."

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2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 TERRITORY AS A SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION

When reflecting on the territorial approach, it is first necessary to reaffirm that the central theoretical category for understanding this subject is "territory" - from which the notion of a "territorial approach" is derived. Therefore, without understanding territory, it becomes difficult to grasp the territorial approach adequately. In literature that addresses the concept of territory, the term "social construction" is frequently used to summarize its contemporary meaning. This usage is theoretically grounded, as evidenced by the contributions of various authors who, over time, have examined the complex relationship between space, society, power, culture, and human action.

There is a strong connection between the notion of "social construction" and the sociology of knowledge - most notably in the classic work of Berger and Luckmann (1966). Their central thesis is that reality is not merely a natural or pre-existing given; rather, it is socially produced and continuously maintained through the interaction between individuals and society[6].

In this sense, society emerges from the ongoing process of socially constructing reality. Social processes and human interactions not only shape the perception of reality but also play a role in its institutionalization, legitimation, and reproduction. Thus, the reality of everyday life is not a static or exclusively natural phenomenon, but a dynamic social construction - produced, shared, and continuously sustained by human relationships and practices.

Later, scholars within human and critical geography - a movement that sought to liberate the category of "territory" from purely naturalistic or ethological perspectives, as well as from limitations tied to the traditional state apparatus - began to incorporate the term "social construction" into debates within the field of geography. For instance, Lefebvre (1974) proposed that space is socially produced. Similarly, Milton Santos

[6] There is a Portuguese translation of the book, published by Editora Vozes: Berger and Luckmann (1973). For a reflection on the subject, see Moreira (2022).

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(1978) reaffirmed the understanding of territory and geographical space as the result of historical and social action, which brings together both objects and human activities. Sack (1986) proposes a notion of territoriality - society objectified - as a strategy for exercising control and influence over people and areas. Raffestin (1980), in turn, develops a relational conception of territory, viewing it as the result of the appropriation and territorialization of space by social actors through power relations. This formulation serves as one of the foundations for the contemporary understanding of territory as a social construct.

Thus, for Raffestin (1980), space precedes territory: territory is produced when an actor appropriates space and territorializes it. In subsequent literature, this conception is recognized as one of the foundations of a constructivist and relational view of territory. In this sense, the term "social construction" has its conceptual origins in the sociology of knowledge as developed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), while its spatial roots lie in Lefebvre's theory of the production of space - a perspective explicitly applied to the concept of territory within French geography and historiography between 1980 and 1981, a field in which Raffestin (1980) is a central figure.

However, although his theory is clearly compatible with such a formulation, Raffestin (1980) does not use the term "social construction" literally. Its introduction into geography is actually credited to Roncayolo (1981), who defined "*territory*" in an entry for the *Enciclopedia Einaudi*, explicitly conceiving it as a social and cultural construction resulting from human practices, rather than as a mere physical substrate or a raw natural datum. Bibliographic sources from that period explicitly record Roncayolo's assertion that territory is "*une construction sociale*" (a social construction) - the product of a historically situated social group. Nevertheless, it is to Raffestin (1980) that we owe the first explicit and systematic formulation of the concept of "territory as a social and relational production," as presented in his seminal work, "*Pour une géographie du pouvoir*" (Toward a Geography of Power).

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Roncayolo (1981) does not use the term merely in passing; his conception breaks with the notion of territory as a simple physical, natural, or administrative substrate. Territory is understood as something historically produced by society, involving the appropriation of space, social practices, collective identity, delimitation, power relations, memory, history, and social organization. The author's formulation is quite clear: "every territory is constructed by a society." While this is unquestionable, it is also true that not all social formations possess "constructed territories."

Raffestin (1980) grounds the concept of territory in power relations and the actions of actors upon space, while Roncayolo (1981) establishes it as a historical, social, and cultural construct centered on representation and urban forms. Both reject the notion of territory as mere physical geography or a predetermined state boundary. For both authors, space pre-exists; territory emerges the moment human beings intervene in, re-signify, and modify that space. It is precisely this human intervention that transforms space into territory.

This understanding is supported by Magnaghi (2000), who asserts that territory does not exist in nature; rather, it is the historical product of human territorial action, emerging from a dialectical and co-evolutionary relationship with the natural environment. According to the author, territory incorporates the variable of time, as the process of its formation is historical - a fundamental aspect for understanding a place's identity and its reproductive dynamics. Thus, it is through the accumulation of human territorial actions that the natural environment is transformed into territory, giving rise to "places" - human environments endowed with identity, personality, and a distinct landscape individuality. Furthermore, to reinforce the idea that every territory is constructed by a society, one may refer to Pecqueur's (2005, pp. 12–13) concepts of "given territory" and "constructed territory".

> The "given" territory is the portion of space that serves as the object of observation. In this case, the territory is posited as pre-existing, and what occurs within it is analyzed. It is, in effect, an *a priori* territory; there is no attempt to examine its genesis or the conditions of its formation - it functions merely as a support. This generally refers to the institutional territory: a region,

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> a district, a province, etc. In contrast, the "constructed" territory - viewed from this perspective - results from a construction process carried out by various actors. Here, the territory is not posited beforehand but is identified *a posteriori*. This implies that a constructed territory does not exist everywhere; one may encounter spaces governed by exogenous laws of location that do not qualify as territories...[7]

The meaning attributed to "territory" by Pecqueur (2005) - specifically his assertion that a "constructed territory does not exist everywhere," referring instead to spaces or places "dominated by exogenous laws of location" - contributes significantly to understanding the distinction between the concepts of "region" and "territory." Thus, by opting for the category of "territorial development," we are necessarily referring to a process of social, economic, cultural, environmental, and institutional activation - one that is integrated, multidimensional, and multisectoral. This process is driven by a social group with a vision for the future, prioritizing the legitimate interests of local society - interests that, consequently, do not necessarily align with globalizing agendas.

2.2 FUNDAMENTALS OF THE TERRITORIAL APPROACH

Various publications seek to situate - epistemologically and theoretically - what we term the "territorial approach." For instance, a perspective has predominated within institutional bodies and/or government advisory agencies. We begin by citing three publications: (i) Morales and Jiménez (2018); (ii) Costamagna, Spinelli, and Pérez (2013) - a conception systematized based on experiences from ConectaDEL (Argentina); and (iii) the perspective of a primary advisory body for rural affairs, the IICA (Sepúlveda et al., 2003).

[7] Translated from Pecqueur (2005, pp. 12-13): O território dado é a porção de espaço que é objeto da observação. Neste caso, postula-se o território como preexistente e analisa-se o que aí acontece. É, de qualquer forma, o território a priori; não se procura analisar sua gênese e as condições de sua constituição; é apenas um suporte. Trata-se, geralmente, do território institucional: a região, o distrito, a província, etc. O território construído: nessa perspectiva, o território é o resultado de um processo de construção pelos atores. O território não é postulado, é constatado a posteriori. Isto significa dizer que o território construído não existe em todo lugar; podemos encontrar espaços dominados pelas leis exógenas da localização e que não são territórios...

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Morales and Jiménez (2018) argue that the territorial approach is rooted in the concept of territory as a social construct - the result of relationships among human beings and between humans and the planet's biophysical components. The territorial approach to development rests on three main pillars: actors, territorial dimensions, and spatial scales (along with their respective levels). Furthermore, the authors emphasize that a territorial approach to development must adhere to the principles of relationality, multidimensionality, and multiscalarity, focusing on the analysis of the social relations that shape and transform territories. This perspective makes it possible to move beyond reductionist views and foster more integrated, context-specific development initiatives.

Costamagna, Spinelli, and Pérez (2013) define the territorial approach as an integrated, systemic framework that views the territory not merely as a geographical space, but as an active agent of development. The territory is understood as a complex of actors, institutions, culture, history, and natural, social, and economic resources that interact and organize themselves to promote local development. In this sense, the territorial approach stands in opposition to the traditional, centralist logic of "descending upon" territories with pre-packaged or purely technocratic solutions. Thus, for the authors, a territorial approach to development requires an integrated, participatory, and contextualized framework that: (i) values the territory as an active, multidimensional subject of development; (ii) prioritizes the mobilization of local stakeholders, the leveraging of endogenous resources, sustainability, and innovation; and (iii) demands the coordination of policies and actions that cut across various sectors and levels of government, fostering governance and collective learning. This concept - systematized based on experiences from ConectaDEL - seeks to strengthen local capacities, promote social inclusion, and transform the territory into the protagonist of its own development.

The perspective of the *Inter-American Institute for Cooperation on Agriculture* (IICA) (Sepúlveda et al., 2003) played a prominent role in the debate, serving as a reference for rural development policies with a territorial focus in many Latin American countries - including Brazil - through guidelines known as the "Territorial Approach to

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Rural Development" (ETDR, by its Spanish/Portuguese acronym). The ETDR emerged as a strategy for rural areas in Latin America, advocating for a move beyond an exclusively agricultural focus toward the integration of economic, social, environmental, and institutional aspects in a decentralized manner. It was envisioned as a "model solution" to the challenges facing agriculture and the rural world, with a primary focus on overcoming rural poverty.

Another publication considered fundamental to understanding the territorial approach is a thesis by Ahumada Cabello (2021). In general, the author aligns with various other scholars in the field, positing that a territory is not merely a physical or geographical space, but rather a social, historical, cultural, and political construct - the result of interactions among multiple actors (both individual and collective, public and private). However, Ahumada Cabello advances the discussion by arguing that the territorial approach should neither be conflated with the concept of a "development process" nor viewed as a fixed model for intervention. Instead, from the standpoint of "complexity," he defines the territorial approach as an "analytical perspective" that interprets and understands the territory - and interventions within it - through the lens of this complexity. Consequently, the territorial approach enables an understanding of the diverse themes and dimensions inherent to a territory, as well as the ongoing dynamics of territorial processes and their connection to the external environment.

Therefore, Ahumada Cabello's (2021) core conception of the territorial approach is rooted in a complex, multidimensional, and relational perspective of the territory. For the author, the territorial approach offers a complex view of the territory, in which multidimensionality, multisectorality, and the constant interaction among its actors create complex, dynamic, and ever-evolving scenarios for intervention. This necessitates public policy capable of understanding and analyzing such complexity through a situational perspective - one that can foster social intervention processes that acknowledge this reality and are able to provide or develop responses in a participatory and deliberative manner, facilitated by collective territorial bodies.

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Thus, the author argues that the territorial approach to development is an analytical and methodological perspective that views the territory as a dynamic social construct, characterized by complexity, diversity, and interactions among multiple actors and dimensions. The central objective is to promote integral and sustainable development, featuring effective social participation, respect for territorial uniqueness, and the coordination of public policies - thereby moving beyond sectoral and centralized viewpoints. Consequently, incorporating a territorial approach into public policy planning is not merely a technical, operational, or programmatic matter; it is a political, conceptual, and methodological decision with implications for significant transformations in how the State designs and implements public policy. "Therefore, incorporating a territorial approach into the design of a public policy implies adopting a complex view of the territory and, by extension, a complex perspective on territorial intervention" (Ahumada Cabello, 2021, pp. 17–18).

A final aspect Ahumada Cabello (2021) highlights concerns conceptual differences in how the territorial approach is understood: the developmentalist perspective versus the perspective rooted in complexity. According to the developmentalist view of the territorial approach: (i) it is centered directly on the theme of development, aiming to improve the population's quality of life through sociotechnical and environmental changes, as well as the redirection of public policies; (ii) it seeks to contribute to solutions for poverty and to position territories within the framework of a new information- and knowledge-based economy, integrated into the dynamics of globalization; and (iii) it serves as an alternative way of perceiving development, proposing an efficient and intelligent approach to managing the territory.

From the perspective of complexity, the territorial approach: (i) must be understood according to a "holistic-systemic" and "dynamic-historical" conception of territorial development, favoring highly complex analytical models characterized by a large number of variables and indicators; (ii) is understood as an "analytical perspective," moving away from concepts such as progress and development; (iii) posits the territory

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as a "systemic complexity," distinguishing itself - both epistemologically and conceptually - from a "model or process of intervention"; (iv) views the territory as a "social construct," assigning a central role to territorial actors; (v) regards these actors as the "foundation of the territorial approach," which entails including all those connected to the life of a given territory.

2.3 A REFLECTIVE PROCESS REGARDING THE TERRITORIAL APPROACH

The four sources mentioned constitute a significant sample of documents that have sought to contribute to and guide the debate on the "territorial approach" - most notably the thesis by Ahumada Cabello (2021), which goes further by attempting to deepen the subject from both epistemic and theoretical standpoints. A key highlight is the conceptualization of "territory" through a complex, multidimensional, and relational lens -defined as a "systemic complexity" that emerges from a multi-actor process of "social construction." Consequently, the territorial approach is neither equated with a "development process" nor with an "intervention model"; rather, it serves as an "analytical perspective" that interprets the territory - and interventions within it - by accounting for this inherent complexity. A second point worth noting is the distinction between the territorial approach, a "developmentalist" perspective, and a complexity-rooted perspective. It appears that the existing theoretical literature on the territorial approach is dominated by a "developmentalist" view - a preliminary observation that warrants further empirical study.

Given this - and specifically to address the question posed at the beginning of this article: "Is there a consistent theoretical framework to underpin a 'territorial approach to development'?" - the authors undertook a literature review. The objective was to assess the current state of the debate on the territorial approach, with a particular focus on Brazil

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and Ibero-American countries, by synthesizing key theoretical and methodological reflections from publications released over the last twenty-five years[8].

3 METHODOLOGICAL PATHWAY OF THE REFLECTIVE PROCESS

The central objective of this research is to examine the current state of the academic debate regarding the territorial approach to development. To this end, an initial exploratory survey was conducted of scientific journals that might potentially contain publications related to the topic under investigation. This process yielded an initial list of approximately 100 journals, indicating a need to expand and systematize the search strategy.

Subsequently, tests were performed using major indexing services and scientific databases - specifically *Scopus*, *Web of Science*, *SciELO*, *Redalyc*, *DOAJ*, and the CAPES Journal Portal. The focus on articles published in scientific journals was chosen due to their significance as a primary medium for the dissemination and communication of academic work. In this sense, the research is characterized as a bibliographic and exploratory study, aimed at surveying and analyzing the "state of knowledge" - seeking to identify how the territorial approach to development is addressed, conceptualized, and problematized within scientific literature. This approach aligns with "state of knowledge" research, which seeks to map and analyze specific bodies of academic work, identifying trends, approaches, themes, and perspectives within a given field (Ferreira, 2002; Romanowski & Ens, 2006).

An initial discussion focused on the search terms. Three terms were initially considered: "territorial approach to development," "territorial focus on development," and

[8] This publication, which includes epistemic-theoretical contributions to the subject at hand, serves an additional purpose: to conclude a cycle of research within the so-called "ProPAT Project," which engaged dozens of scholars between 2021 and 2025. Several of the works referenced here present findings from that project, including: Dallabrida, Büttenbender, and Rotta (2021); Dallabrida et al. (2023, 2024); Dallabrida (2025, 2026); and Gumiero et al. (2023). In 2025, the methodological approach known as IMAP - discussed in these articles - was pilot-tested, leading to a further publication that offers suggestions for revisions: Dallabrida, Rotta, and Büttenbender (2025).

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"rural development with a territorial focus." However, preliminary testing revealed that these were not ideal, and that the number of terms needed to be reduced.

A second test was conducted using three different search terms: "territorial focus," "territorial approach," and "territorial development." The first two terms proved effective, successfully retrieving a significant collection of articles that focus centrally on the theme of the "territorial approach to development." The term "territorial development" - along with its variations in English and Spanish - proved too generic, encompassing hundreds of articles. Many of these, despite using the term, addressed broad issues concerning development within territories or regions without necessarily focusing on the central theme of this research. In other words, with few exceptions, the term "territorial development" is used in the same sense as the terms "regional development" or "local development."

Thus, based on the results of the two initial tests, our analysis led us to select only two search terms: "*enfoque territorial*" and "*abordagem territorial*," along with their English equivalents, "*territorial focus*" and "*territorial approach*."

The initial tests using these two terms yielded satisfactory results in two respects: (i) the number of publications was manageable within the time frame available for conducting the research; and (ii) more importantly, the selected articles included some of the most frequently cited works by scholars addressing the "territorial focus of development" over the last 25 years.

To validate that the search was successfully capturing foundational publications, the selection was reviewed by a researcher with extensive experience studying the "territorial focus - or approach - to development," who has published work on the subject over the past decade in both Brazilian and international journals ranked highly by CAPES.

Two artificial intelligence platforms - *Gemini-AI* and *ChatGPT* - were used as auxiliary tools for searching and structuring the information. The search strategy focused on two aspects: (i) a synthesis of the topic addressed in each article; and (ii) whether the

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article engaged with the concept of a "territorial focus or approach," and, if so, the author's specific perspective on it.

Initially, the systematic review yielded a total of 227 articles, spanning 115 journals. Following a more detailed analysis of these 227 articles, 142 were selected - originating from 92 journals - which served as the basis for the research and analysis. The temporal distribution of these 142 publications is as follows: (i) 38 articles published between 2000 and 2010; (ii) 51 articles between 2011 and 2019; and (iii) 53 articles between 2020 and 2026.

Based on the number of articles published, the primary journals among the 92 identified are: (i) *EUTOPÍA-Revista de Desarrollo Económico Territorial* (Ecuador) - 9 articles; (ii) *RAÍZES* (Campina Grande) and *RBGDR* (*Revista Brasileira de Gestão e Desenvolvimento Regional* - Taubaté) - 6 articles each; (iii) *Economía, Sociedad y Territorio* (Mexico) and *Desenvolvimento em Questão* - 5 articles each; (iv) *Política & Sociedade* and *RBEUR-ANPUR* - 4 articles each; (v) *Campo - Território*, *Revista de Economia e Sociologia Rural*, *Polis*, and *REDES* (Santa Cruz do Sul) - 3 articles each; (vi) *Estudos Sociedade e Agricultura*, *Estudos Avançados*, *Cadernos do Desenvolvimento*, *Desenvolvimento Regional em Debate*, *Cuadernos Geográficos*, *Estudios Políticos*, *Revista Portuguesa de Estudos Regionais*, *Agroalimentaria*, and *GUAJU - Desenvolvimento Territorial* - 2 articles each. The remaining journals each published only one article.

Of the 20 journals with the highest number of published articles, 13 are from Brazil. The other seven are distributed across Ecuador, Mexico, Colombia, Venezuela, Portugal, and Spain. In terms of the distribution among authors, the situation is as follows: (i) Dallabrida, V. R. - 12 articles; (ii) Favareto, A. - 11 articles; (iii) Saquet, M. A. - 8 articles; (iv) Pedro Luís Büttenbender - 6 articles; (v) Edemar Rotta - 5 articles. Following

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these, there are over a dozen authors with two articles each, and many others with one article each[9].

4 MAIN RESULTS AND ANALYSES[10]

The presentation of the results of this study will be divided into two sections: the first highlights the different perspectives on the territorial approach, while the second identifies and characterizes the four stages of the debate on the subject in question.

4.1 EXISTENCE OF DIFFERING VIEWS REGARDING THE UNDERSTANDING OF THE TERRITORIAL APPROACH

The synthesis of the analysis, drawing on the contributions of various authors, reveals - first and foremost - a duality (real, though not absolute) between two ways of understanding the territorial approach. Rather than a simple opposition, what emerges is a shift: from a territorial approach applied primarily to the transformation of rural areas, toward a territorial approach that represents a fundamental change in the very conception of development (see Table 1).

Table 1- Aspects that characterize the duality of perception regarding a "territorial approach"

Aspect	Territorial Approach to Rural Development (ETDR)	Territorial Approach to Development (ETD)
Starting point	Problems and transformations in the rural world	Critique of the conventional conception of development itself
Main object	Rural development, family farming, rural poverty, economic diversification, and rural-urban relations	Territorial development as a multidimensional, relational, historical, and multiscalar phenomenon
Territory	A new scale and unit of reference to move beyond an agricultural/sectoral view of the rural	A synthetic category and social construct that reorganizes how development is understood
Rural	Remains the central empirical reference, though expanded beyond agriculture	Just one of the dimensions/expressions of the territory; seeks to overcome the rural-urban dichotomy

[9] Not all publications by the authors mentioned here were necessarily used in this article; they should be included in a more comprehensive publication.

[10] Given the scope and breadth of the research, this article presents a summary. The detailed final results and analyses will be presented in a book of more than 180 pages: Dallabrida (2026b).

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Purpose	To make rural development policies and strategies more integrated, participatory, and territorialized	To bring about an epistemological and paradigmatic shift in how development is understood
Public policies	Constitutes an important vehicle for territorialization	One dimension of the process, but they do not encompass the full meaning of the territorial approach
Emphasis	Governance, participation, rural diversification, rural-urban linkages, endogenous development	Totality, multidimensionality, complexity, power relations, autonomy, sustainability, and social transformation

Source: Own work, based on the arguments of the authors consulted

In summary, it can be stated that the first approach begins with rural development and incorporates the "territory" as a frame of reference to move beyond the sectoral, agricultural, and top-down approach to development policies. The second approach starts with the territory as an analytical, relational, and multidimensional category; from this perspective, it questions the conventional definition of development itself, proposing an epistemological, methodological, and political shift in how it is understood.

An analysis of the relevant literature allows classification of authors by which side of the debate they align with, while also identifying the foundations of their arguments[11]. However, some authors' reflections bridge both perspectives. This distinction helps explain why grouping all authors who use the term "territorial approach" into a single category is insufficient. For some, the territory serves primarily as a new frame of reference for refining rural development policies, while for others, it represents a departure from the sectoral, economistic, and disciplinary rationality that has traditionally guided the concept of development.

4.2 FOUR MOMENTS IN THE DEBATE ON THE TERRITORIAL APPROACH

Synthesizing the analysis of contributions from various authors makes it possible, secondly, to distinguish four moments in the debate on territory and the territorial approach, as summarized in Table 2. In other words, the literature review reveals a

[11] As previously mentioned in the preceding note, the publication of a book in 2027 will provide a more detailed account of the analyses made possible by the research in question - whether in this section of the text or elsewhere.

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trajectory spanning approximately 25 years, organized into four partially overlapping analytical moments. These do not constitute discrete, self-contained phases, nor does it mean that one perspective has replaced the previous one. Rather, what evolves progressively is the status assigned to the territory within the discourse on development.

Table 2- From the concept of "territory" to the evolution of the debate on the "territorial approach"

Moment	Foundational question	Perspective on territory	Most representative authors
I- Emergence and justification of the ETDR/DTR	How can we move beyond the "rural-agricultural" perspective and interpret rurality in terms of territory?	Social construction; relational fabric; analytical category; multisectoral space	Abramovay (2000); Schejtman and Berdegué (2004); Schneider and Tartaruga (2004); Schneider (2004); Alonso Alemán (2006); Saquet (2006); Torres e Macías (2009); Molina (2010)
II. Institutionalization of the approach	How can rural development policies be territorialized?	Planning scale; unit of intervention; participation and governance	Rambo e Filippi (2009); Favareto (2010); Delgado and Leite (2011); Ortega (2012); Silva (2012**),** Gallicchio (2010) and literature on PRONAT, Territórios da Cidadania, PRET, and PDET
III. Criticism of territorialization	Why do territorialized policies often remain sectoral, centralized, or lacking in participation?	Arena of power, conflicts, and governance; juxtaposition of the "given" versus the "constructed" territory	Hespanhol (2010); Delgado and Leite (2011); Silva (2012); Santana Porto (2013); Grígolo, Deon e Froehlich (2015); Sánchez Macchioli (2020); García-Giraldo (2020); Valencia-Agudelo and Restrepo-Cano (2020); Berdegué, Christian and Favareto, (2020)
IV. Epistemic-theoretical and praxiological construction of the Territorial Development Approach	How can we understand and promote development based on the territory?	Synthesis category; relational system; multidimensional totality; foundation of praxis	Saquet (2006, 2014, 2018, 2024); Samper (2019); Custodio González et al. (2022); Dallabrida, Rotta e Büttenbender (2021); Dallabrida (2020, 2022, 2025, 2026); Dallabrida et al. (2023, 2024); Favareto (2024)

Source: own work, based on a synthesis of the authors' approach

The trajectory can be summarized as follows: (i) the use of the category "territory" to reinterpret the rural; (ii) the territory as a frame of reference for rural development policies; (iii) a critique of the territorialization of policies; (iv) the territory as a foundation

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for reinterpreting development itself. This final step is crucial, as it allows for a distinction between two formulations that, while related, are not equivalent: the Territorial Approach to Rural Development (ETDR/DTR) and the Territorial Approach to Development (ETD).

4.3 CHARACTERIZATION OF THE FOUR STAGES OF THE DEBATE ON THE TERRITORIAL APPROACH

The first phase - the emergence and conceptual grounding of the territorial approach to rural development - occurred roughly between 2000 and 2010. It stemmed, fundamentally, from a critique of the traditional association between "rurality" and agriculture, as well as the inadequacy of sectoral interpretations of rural development. This fundamental shift can be summarized by the evolution in understanding: from "agricultural" to "rural," and to "territorial." The rural sphere came to be understood as a heterogeneous, multifunctional space - interlinked with the urban - comprising both agricultural and non-agricultural activities, institutions, social relations, identities, and territorial resources.

Several authors played a pivotal role in this debate. Abramovay (2000) was one of the precursors of this shift. He argued that a territory should not be viewed merely as a physical base or a location for productive activities, but rather as a social fabric - shaped by historical relations, identities, political configurations, trust, reciprocity, and the capacity for collective action. This introduced a fundamental concept: development potential does not derive solely from the resources present within a space, but from the quality of the social relations that link those resources together territorially.

Schejtman and Berdegué (2004) provided a decisive systematization of Territorial Rural Development (TRD). Its two primary pillars - productive transformation and institutional development - aimed to overcome rural poverty and stagnation. Notably, these authors defined "territory" as a social construct that emerges from social relations that generate both identity and a shared development agenda.

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In this context, Schneider and Tartaruga (2004) made their contribution. Rather than simply proposing yet another model of TRD, they drew attention to a deeper conceptual issue: the distinction between using "territory" as an analytical or cognitive concept and employing a "territorial approach" as a practical instrument for development. In other words, they helped formulate a question that precedes policy-making: what does it actually mean to analyze development processes from a territorial perspective? His contribution thus bridges the conceptual tradition of "territory" - particularly within Geography and the Social Sciences - and its application to the analysis of rural social processes.

Schneider (2004) delves deeper into this direction by drawing on references from the social sciences to understand the various dimensions of territory and relate them to transformations in rurality and development. Saquet (2006) offers a further contribution: for him, territory is the result of processes of territorialization and constitutes a web of economic, political, cultural, and natural relations, encompassing multiple scales and rural-urban linkages. He also begins to shift the debate toward a relational and multidimensional conception - one that would later gain greater epistemological and praxiological depth.

Thus, this initial phase introduces theoretical seeds that extend beyond the scope of the "territorial development of rural areas" (DTR) framework itself, even though they remain predominantly linked to rural issues.

The second phase - institutionalization: rural development policies with a territorial focus - occurred roughly between 2000 and 2015. It is characterized by the transition from conceptual formulation to the institutionalization of the territorial approach. Territory became a reference point for planning, decentralization, social participation, and the coordination of public policies. In Brazil, this process is primarily associated with the proposal of public policies through the Ministério do Desenvolvimento Agrário (MDA/SDT), via programs such as PRONAT, "Territórios Rurais," and the "Territórios da Cidadania" program. The works of Favareto (2010),

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Delgado and Leite (2011), Ortega (2012), and Silva (2012) - along with various subsequent studies analyzing territorialized programs in Brazil and other Latin American countries - can be situated primarily within this period.

Delgado and Leite (2011) provide a clear characterization of this phase. In their study of initiatives related to PRONAT and the "Territories of Citizenship" program, they demonstrate that the adoption of a territorial scale was an attempt to move beyond both the agricultural/sectoral approach and administrative scales deemed inadequate, thereby creating new institutional frameworks for participation and governance. Favareto (2010) also occupies a central position. Territorial development emerges as one of the key innovations in Brazilian rural policies during the 2000s; however, his work already identifies issues regarding intersectoral coordination, participation, and the inclusion of non-agricultural actors.

According to the interpretation prevalent at this stage, the territory is primarily understood as: a planning unit, a scale for intervention, a space for participation, and a governance structure.

The third phase - a critical assessment of the territorialization of policies - spans roughly from 2010 to 2020 and has persisted since. This phase emerged from the experience accumulated through territorial policies. The central question shifted from simply "How should territorial policies be implemented?" to "Why do policies labeled as 'territorial' continue to reproduce sectoral, centralized, or top-down practices?" A crucial insight for this entire review arises here: territorializing a policy does not necessarily mean adopting a territorial approach to development.

Among the authors, Hespanhol (2010) points to the reduction of the territory to a merely operational dimension, alongside the persistence of existing land tenure structures, inequalities, clientelism, and patrimonialism. Silva (2012) highlights the gap between the territorial rhetoric of these policies and their actual institutionalization. Porto (2013) adds another essential element: many initiatives overlook the power relations, conflicts, networks, and diverse political projects that exist within a territory. Favareto (2010),

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Grígolo, Deon, and Froehlich (2015), Favareto and Lotta (2017; 2022), and Feitosa and Aranha (2020) identify the risk of "innovation by addition" - or "geographic blindness" - where territorial vocabulary is adopted without abandoning a sectoral and productivist logic. The contrast between a "given territory" and a "constructed territory" becomes particularly significant (Bernard Pecqueur, 2005).

Subsequent Latin American experience - including the Rural Development Program with a Territorial Focus (Colombia), analyzed by various authors such as Valencia-Agudelo and Restrepo-Cano (2020), among other policies - reinforces the critique regarding centralization, financial insufficiency, limited participation, and difficulties in institutional coordination.

Therefore, the third stage yields a theoretically fruitful conclusion: "territory as a spatial delineation" is distinct from "territory as an analytical category" and from a "territorial approach to development." This distinction directly paves the way for the fourth stage.

The fourth stage - the epistemic-theoretical and praxiological construction of development based on the territory - is particularly characteristic of recent scholarship, where the most significant shift identified in this review appears to occur. The central question shifts away from a focus on rural territorial development or territorialized policies toward a new inquiry: "Is it possible to reinterpret the very phenomenon of development through the lens of the territory?"

The status of the territory changes once again. It is no longer primarily a spatial delineation, a scale, a planning unit, or a policy arena; instead, it emerges as a social and historical construct, a relational system, a multidimensional totality, a synthetic category, and an epistemological, theoretical, methodological, and praxiological foundation for development.

The trajectory of the Brazilian geographer Marcos Saquet is particularly significant, as it spans several of these stages. In Saquet (2006), debates regarding territorialization, rural-urban relations, multidimensionality, and multiscalarity already

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emerge. By Saquet (2014), the territorial approach takes on an explicitly praxiological dimension: participation, political organization, dialogue, autonomy, identities, and the recognition of differences begin to guide territorial intervention. In Saquet (2024), an even deeper shift occurs: the very subject-object relationship is called into question, and the author proposes "territorial involvement" - grounded in a subject-subject relationship and a synthesis of society, nature, and the cosmos. Participatory action research, popular and indigenous knowledge, ancestry, emancipation, self-management, and the reproduction of life become integral to this approach, representing the author's specific contribution.

Favareto also serves as a "bridge" author, though in a different capacity. In Favareto (2010), the approach is primarily focused on the evaluation of territorial policies. However, in his analysis of the "territorial turn," Favareto (2024) establishes a fundamental distinction between "weak uses" and "strong uses" of policies with a territorial focus. In "weak uses," policies are territorialized without any substantive alteration to their underlying logic. In "strong uses," the territory becomes a synthetic category, incorporating diversity, relationships, multidimensionality, and multiscalar processes.

This reveals a particularly interesting connection to the work of authors such as Schneider and Tartaruga (2004). The earlier distinction between the analytical/cognitive status of territory and its instrumental/applied use can be seen as a precursor to an issue that reappears - albeit in a different formulation - in Favareto's distinction between strong and weak uses. While not equivalent concepts, they address a similar tension: territory as an analytical foundation versus territory as a mere operational device.

In more recent work, Dallabrida et al. (2024) express an intent to contribute to a theoretical corpus on development with a territorial focus. The authors explicitly state this objective, defining territory as a multidimensional social construct and the territorial focus as an alternative to disciplinary or sectoral approaches and the traditional rural–urban dichotomy. They propose six guiding principles: environmental sustainability,

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inclusion/equity, innovation, totality, multidimensionality, and autonomy. Furthermore, in Dallabrida et al. (2023), the authors advance into the methodological realm, proposing an integrated analysis of six dimensions of territorial heritage: social, productive, cultural, human-intellectual, institutional, and natural. These insights draw upon a previous publication by Dallabrida (2020), which articulates territory, territorial governance, territorial heritage, and territorial development within an integrated conceptual framework, addressing complexity and a systemic approach.

Other authors also contribute to the debate that underpins this fourth phase - for instance, González *et al*. (2022), who employ the epistemology of complexity, emergence, self-organization, and non-linearity to interpret development as a complex, relational phenomenon, the spatio-temporal manifestation of which is expressed through the territorial system. Samper (2019) approaches territory as a historical-cultural construct - an open, dynamic system - integrating multidimensionality, multiscalarity, relational governance, collective action, and sustainability. While this debate remains relevant today, it has yet to become a dominant theme in the academic output of the more than forty graduate programs (Master's and Doctoral) in Brazil that focus primarily on the study of development (at the local, regional, or territorial level).

4.4 A SYNTHESIS OF THE FOUNDATIONAL FRAMEWORKS FOR A TERRITORIAL APPROACH TO DEVELOPMENT

A more in-depth grounding of ETD requires the identification of five interdependent planes: the ontological, the epistemological, the theoretical-conceptual, the methodological, and the praxiological. Based on the report that outlines the positions held by various groups of authors, it is possible - for didactic purposes - to construct a matrix that does not treat ETDR and ETD as entirely separate branches, but rather as two poles within a process of theoretical transformation. This approach allows for a better positioning of intermediate authors and, crucially, helps identify what actually shifts when moving from one perspective to the other.

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Table 3 presents an analytical matrix of the ETDR versus ETD dichotomy, highlighting the following for each of the five planes: (i) the structuring question; (ii) the foundation of ETD; (iii) the key categories or concepts; and (iv) the implications for "development" based on the territory.

Table 3- Analytical matrix of the foundations of the Territorial Approach to Development (ETD)

Plane	Foundational question	Basis of the ETD	Category/key concepts	Implication for "development from the territory"
Ontological	**What is territory, and what is the nature of development?**	Territory as a historical-social, relational, dynamic, and multidimensional construct; society and nature constitute an interdependent totality.	Territory; territoriality; historicity; society-nature; power relations; identity; multidimensionality; multiscalarity.	Development does not simply occur within a territory; rather, it is constituted by territorial relations. The territory shifts from being a spatial support to becoming a constitutive reality of development
Epistemological	**How can development be understood and interpreted from a territorial perspective?**	Moving beyond disciplinary, fragmented, sectoral, and dichotomous interpretations, embracing relational, systemic, complex, and situated knowledge.	Complexity; interdisciplinarity; relationality; totality; situated knowledge; dialogue of knowledges; subject-subject.	The territory serves as an epistemological frame of reference for interpreting development, bringing together dimensions and forms of knowledge that were previously treated separately
Theoretical-conceptual	**What categories can be used to explain development in territorial terms?**	Territory as a synthesizing category that articulates actors, resources, institutions, relationships, scales, powers, and assets.	Actors; networks; territorial governance; power; conflict; institutions; identity; resources/assets; territorial heritage; autonomy; rural-urban.	The ETD moves beyond a mere aggregation of dimensions, evolving into a relational theoretical architecture that explains how territories shape and construct their own development trajectories.
Methodological	**How can territory - and its development possibilities - be analyzed, interpreted, and evaluated?**	Multidimensional and relational analysis, integrating quantitative indicators, qualitative processes, interconnections between dimensions, and the participation of actors.	Territorial diagnosis; multidimensional analysis; indicators; social cartography; networks; action research; participatory methodologies; territorial heritage.	The territory is no longer just a unit for data collection; it becomes an organizing principle for research, requiring an understanding of interdependencies, potential, conflicts, and territorial specificities.
Praxiological	**How can one act territorially**	The agency of territorial stakeholders,	Collective action; participation; governance;	Development shifts from being an intervention *upon* a

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	to build development processes?	collective action, governance, substantive participation, autonomy, conflict negotiation, and the development of future-oriented territorial projects.	autonomy; cooperation; consensus-building/agreement-making; innovation; sustainability; inclusion; vision for the future.	territory to becoming a process constructed *with* and *by* territorial actors, while remaining linked to other scales.

Source: own work, based on analyses of the literature consulted

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

The recent trajectory of the debate surrounding the territorial perspective allows for a distinction to be made between the "Territorial Approach to Development" (ETD) and both the formulations initially associated with the "Territorial Approach to Rural Development" (ETDR) and the mere territorialization of public policies. This distinction does not imply a rupture with or a rejection of these earlier contributions, but rather their further development. While the ETDR represented an important advancement by moving beyond the equation of "rural" with "agricultural" and by incorporating rural-urban linkages, actors, institutions, and territorial resources, the ETD shifts the issue to a different level: the territory is no longer merely a space, a scale, or a unit of intervention for development; instead, it becomes a frame of reference for understanding the very phenomenon of development. It is, therefore, a matter of conceptualizing development through the lens of the territory - viewing the latter as a historical, social, relational, multidimensional, and multiscalar construct.

The five foundational pillars of the territorial approach to development constitute inseparable dimensions of a single construct: (i) ontology defines what is meant by territory and development; (ii) epistemology guides how this reality can be known; (iii) the theoretical-conceptual architecture provides categories for its interpretation; (iv) methodology indicates how it can be investigated and evaluated; and (v) praxiology guides the collective processes of territorial transformation. It is precisely this articulation that distinguishes the ETD from both sectoral approaches and the simple territorialization of public policies.

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Understood in this way, the Territorial Approach to Development is not merely an extension of the Territorial Approach to Rural Development to non-rural spaces. Its specificity lies in a more profound shift in the status accorded to the territory. Rather than serving as a container, a location, a delimited area, or a scale for development, the territory becomes a structuring frame of reference for understanding, interpreting, and guiding the development process itself. The expression "development from the territory" encapsulates this shift: development conceived as a historically and socially constructed, multidimensional, relational, and multiscalar process, the direction of which emerges from the interaction among actors, institutions, assets, power relations, nature, and visions for the future. From this perspective, the Territorial Approach to Development (ETD) can be understood as a theoretical field still under construction - yet one where sufficient convergences have already emerged to advance the formation of its own distinct epistemic-theoretical, methodological, and praxiological corpus.

Ultimately, the state of the art regarding this subject can be summarized as follows: a progression from agricultural/sectoral development to broadened rural development, then to the territorial approach to rural development, the territorialization of public policies, a critique of the superficial uses of the concept of territory, and the "territorial turn" - culminating in the territory becoming the synthesizing category of the Territorial Approach to Development, representing an epistemological and paradigmatic shift in how development is conceived. This framing helps avoid an overly binary interpretation. The Territorial Approach to Rural Development (ETDR) and the Territorial Approach to Development (ETD) should be viewed not as mutually exclusive strands, but rather as two moments or poles within a trajectory of transformation in development thought.

The Territorial Approach to Development can be understood as an epistemic-theoretical, methodological, and praxiological perspective that takes the territory - conceived as a historically social, relational, multidimensional, and multiscalar construct - as a foundational reference for interpreting and guiding development processes. It

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recognizes territorial actors as the protagonists in mobilizing resources, assets, knowledge, and capabilities to construct visions for the future. Thus, it is not merely a methodological strategy or a means of territorializing public policies; it can be interpreted as an "epistemic-paradigmatic shift in the very way development is conceived."

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