

Neoliberal Intergovernmentality in Peru: Centralized Power and Territorial Inequality in Local Arenas

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ABSTRACT

The persistence of centralized state structures in Peru has shaped a landscape of profound territorial inequalities, where planning dynamics, budget execution, and intergovernmental coordination remain subordinated to the power of the national Executive. Within this context, the study explores the tensions between centralism, neoliberal intergovernmentality and local socioeconomic development, drawing on a qualitative inquiry that captures the experiences of local governments in peripheral Andean territories. The analysis reveals that excessive bureaucratization, clientelist dependency, institutional capture of resources, and the inefficiency of decentralized agencies perpetuate the subordination of municipalities and reinforce their exclusion. Nonetheless, proactive community-driven dynamics also emerge, which, grounded in social capacities and a strong sense of belonging, articulate development processes that offer alternatives to the model imposed from the center. The study critically interrogates the prevailing decentralist rhetoric and warns that, without fiscal justice, operational autonomy, and the recognition of territorial capacities, territorial inequality will continue to deepen. Therefore, a structural transformation in the architecture of the Peruvian state is imperative to overcome the centralist model and move toward a situated, democratic, and multilevel territorial governance.

Keywords: Neoliberal Intergovernmentality, Centralism, Territorial Inequality, Local Governments, Peru

INTRODUCTION

The analysis of centralism and neoliberal intergovernmentality (NIG) in local contexts has become a central concern for contemporary social sciences. These phenomena reflect not only the institutional configuration of states but also the historical and structural tensions that constrain the capacity of subnational governments to

influence territorial development with autonomy and legitimacy. Centralism, understood as the concentration of political and fiscal power at the central level of the state, has persisted in Latin America both as a colonial legacy and as a response to fragmented processes of nation-building (Pérez-Medina, 2023; Véliz, 1984). This model has constrained the development of more democratic territorial frameworks, undermining local responsiveness to challenges such as public health emergencies, territorial inequalities, and urban planning.

Several authors have sought to clarify the concepts and dimensions of centralism, distinguishing it from decentralization and deconcentration, while cautioning that the mere transfer of competencies without decision-making power or fiscal autonomy does not amount to a genuine transformation of the centralist model (Alvarez, 2022). In countries such as Chile, this contradiction is manifested in a tense coexistence between municipalities with elected authorities and regions administered by the central government, which has generated inefficiency and structural inequity in urban governance (Daher, 2017). Cases such as urban reconstruction in Valdivia or the failed Transantiago project illustrate how centralized planning imposes homogeneous solutions that disregard local specificities, eroding the right to the city and weakening citizen participation (Garretón, 2014; Hidalgo et al., 2021).

In this scenario, the NIG emerges as a new device of control that redefines the relationships between levels of government under principles of efficiency, austerity, and subordination to market-oriented macroeconomic frameworks (Bouza & Oleart, 2023). This form of intergovernmental articulation not only constrains the room for maneuver of local governments but also turns them into subordinated executors of public policies designed at the central state level or within the transnational sphere (Juliá & Pérez, 2021). Recent critiques have pointed out that this type of intergovernmentality, rather than merely an administrative technique, constitutes a field of ideological contestation, in which the very possibility of democratic and participatory governance from the local level is at stake (Orozco, 2021; Quispe, 2018).

In response to this reality, certain strands of Latin American critical thought propose moving toward alternative forms of intergovernmentality, grounded in institutional complementarity, territorial diversity, and the political participation of local actors (Hernández, 2019). These proposals, far from rejecting intergovernmental coordination, call for a reconfiguration of state power that enables a genuine horizontal articulation between levels of government. In this context, the aim of this article is to analyze the configuration of dynamics of autonomy, coordination, and participation of local governments in Peru within the framework of centralism and the NIG, while exploring possibilities for a more equitable, democratic, and territorially sensitive governance.

In this way, the study of the NIG makes it possible to understand how structures of domination are either reproduced or contested in the territorial sphere, while highlighting the urgent need to explore new forms of governance grounded in equity, subsidiarity, and territorial justice.

THEORETICAL BASIS

Centralism and Neoliberal Intergovernmentality at the Local Level

Centralism and NIG are two interrelated dimensions of power exercised in contemporary states. Both configure a vertical mode of governance that, although through different approaches and mechanisms, restricts the autonomy of subnational governments and reconfigures territorial sovereignty to the benefit of centralized and technocratic interests. Centralism, as Pérez-Medina (2023) argues, historically emerged as a mechanism to consolidate national unity, structuring a strong state apparatus from the center and subordinating the decision-making capacities of provinces or municipalities. This logic persists in many Latin American countries where, despite formal decentralization processes, local governments continue to operate recurrently as delegates of central power, particularly in emergency contexts such as the COVID-19 pandemic.

To this centralist logic is added the NIG, which reorganizes the relations between levels of government according to principles of efficiency, austerity, and the attraction of private investment (Bouza & Oleart, 2023). Far from implying a loss of state power, this model represents a functional reconfiguration of the state through hybrid and technocratic structures that prioritize economic rationality over democratic and redistributive principles. Within this context, local governments become managers of programs designed and formulated at the central level, with limited room for deliberation, thereby reproducing hierarchical dynamics and preventing genuine local autonomy (Quispe, 2016).

The interrelation between centralism and neoliberal governance is evident in phenomena such as urban exclusion, the functional weakening of local entities, and institutional fragmentation. In this regard, Daher (2017) and Garretón (2014) explain how centralism in Chile produces an “urban anarchy” characterized by overlapping competences, limited intermunicipal coordination, and the effective absence of regional governments. This situation is reinforced by national policies “blind” to the local context and by urban planning dictated from the center without binding participatory mechanisms. Similarly, Orozco (2021) demonstrates how globalized

discourses such as the “creative city” or “smart city” are uncritically adopted by local governments, without considering their effects on spatial exclusion or on the dispossession of the political role of localities.

Authors such as Hernández (2019) y Valenzuela-Van Treek & Vaca (2020) propose alternatives that challenge both traditional centralism and neoliberal intergovernmentality. The former advances the notion of a “democratic intergovernmentality,” which incorporates territorial self-determination, cultural plurality, and redistributive justice as guiding principles. The latter introduces the concept of “counterweight cities,” which, through their demographic, economic, and political density, can contest central power and promote effective decentralization based on regional collaboration networks. However, as Daher (2017) warns, these proposals face structural barriers such as economic concentration, political fragmentation, and the resistance of local elites to relinquish power, which ultimately constrains progress toward more horizontal forms of governance.

Finally, from a more critical perspective, Juliá & Pérez, (2021) y Nazarchuk et al. (2025) warn about the global impact of these configurations. On the one hand, political power shifts toward transnational and technocratic networks that elude local democratic control, thereby exacerbating the disconnection between rulers and citizens. On the other hand, neoliberal forms of decentralization often entail the transfer of competences without resources, weakening local governments and consolidating structures of functional domination. In this regard, the logic of biopower is manifested in the production and administration of local life through schemes of centralized control (Urabayen & Casero, 2018; Useche & Pérez, 2019).

Building on the theoretical perspectives outlined above, both centralism and NIG constitute contemporary forms of political-administrative control that reinforce the verticality of power to the detriment of local autonomy. While counter-hegemonic proposals advocating for more democratic and territorially situated governance do exist, significant institutional, ideological, and structural challenges continue to hinder their consolidation. The theoretical and practical challenge lies in constructing a model of public management that articulates national unity with territorial diversity, technical efficiency with social equity, and state sovereignty with the effective participation of local communities.

Centralism and Territorial Inequality

Territorial inequality, understood as the inequitable distribution of resources, goods, services, and opportunities among regions and localities, is a persistent expression of the dynamics of centralism in Latin America and other regions of the Global South. Studies across diverse national contexts reveal that centralism is not merely an administrative structure but a historical logic of accumulation that reproduces spatial hierarchies functional to global capitalism (Pires, 2017; Schweitzer, 2020). In this regard, authors such as Schweitzer & Arancio (2023) argue that spatial differentiation is not a collateral effect of development but rather a structural condition of its reproduction. From this perspective, centralism reinforces an asymmetric model of development that privileges certain territories (typically capital cities) to the detriment of peripheral, rural, or marginalized regions and localities, thereby perpetuating socioeconomic, technological, educational, and political gaps.

Centralism acquires different sectoral manifestations. In the educational sphere, both in Spain and Colombia, the normative homogeneity and the institutional disconnection from territorial diversity exacerbate structural gaps. In this regard, Romero-Sánchez et al. (2020) identify six differentiated regional models of educational policies in Spain which, lacking articulation, reproduce inequalities in school dropout, educational expenditure, and academic outcomes. Similarly, Herrera (2021) demonstrates how the alternation model in Colombia, imposed from the center during the pandemic, disregarded the local and technological realities of regions such as Arauca, thereby reproducing exclusion and school desertion. This critique is framed within the questioning of formal equality in contrast to the need for substantive equality that acknowledges contextual asymmetries (Rawls, 2006). In both cases, the absence of multiscale territorial governance undermines the possibility of inclusive and context-sensitive policies, evidencing a disconnection between centralist design and actual territorial needs.

An analysis from the perspective of territorial political economy reinforces the above. Catalán & Valenzuela (2021), in their study of forestry extractivism in Itata (Chile), show how the absence of a regional revenue law, combined with centralist and welfare-oriented policies, generates an economic enclave disconnected from local development. The Chilean forestry model has produced structural impoverishment, environmental degradation, and territorial disarticulation, without generating productive linkages or added value. This situation reflects what the authors describe as “extraction by dispossession,” where territory is reduced to a space of exploitation without voice or distributive return. In this vein, the critique of neo-extractivism converges with the need to rethink the development model from the standpoint of territorial justice, which entails equipping territories with fiscal, regulatory, and participatory tools for their self-determination and sustainability.

On the other hand, regional systems of science, technology, and innovation (STI), analyzed by Niembro & Starobinsky (2021) in Argentina, reveal a structural inequality reproduced from the center. Peripheral provinces, according to their STI index, display low investment, weak institutional frameworks, and limited participation in national funds. This fragmentation of the scientific system demonstrates how national policies, when neither

differentiated nor territorially evaluated, perpetuate technological lag. Similarly, Vecchio (2022) introduces the concept of “demographic marginality” in analyzing population aging in rural municipalities of Chile. Institutional centralism prevents local governments from addressing this phenomenon, undermining their fiscal, political, and strategic capacity while rendering new forms of exclusion invisible. Both studies underscore the urgency of multiscalar policies that incorporate territorial criteria in their design and implementation.

From the perspective of public policies, several authors concur on the need to move from homogeneous models toward territorial approaches that are sensitive, comprehensive, and participatory. Thus, Pires (2017) proposes a relational approach to territory, emphasizing that inequalities are not explained solely by local deficiencies but rather by power relations between territories. This perspective is shared by Andersen et al. (2020) y de Neergaard et al. (2020), who critique the technocratization of territorial cohesion and advocate for governance rooted in narratives, practices, and inter-institutional articulation. Economic, social, and symbolic cohesion cannot be achieved without local participation, cultural recognition, and contextual adaptation. Within this framework, decentralization emerges as a necessary but insufficient condition, as it must be sustained by multilevel local governance: institutional capacities, vertical and horizontal coordination, and effective redistributive mechanisms (Casademont et al., 2023; Quispe, 2013).

Therefore, the theoretical foundation demonstrates that centralism, rather than a design flaw, constitutes a structural expression of the dominant model of accumulation. It reproduces inequalities through uniform policies, regressive fiscal structures, and the absence of territorial planning. Several studies show that transformation requires a paradigmatic shift: the construction of multilevel governance, differentiated policies, and territorial justice. Only in this way will it be possible to advance toward genuine equity among territories, where development does not depend on the postal code but on a democratic pact grounded in diversity, inclusion, and sustainability.

Centralism and Local Socioeconomic Development

The debate on centralism and its impact on local socioeconomic development has gained renewed relevance in light of the persistence of structural territorial inequalities. Various studies concur that centralism is not only manifested in the administrative and fiscal concentration of power but also operates as a political-cultural system that reproduces hierarchical relationships among territories, thereby limiting local capacities for decision-making, innovation, and sustainability. In this regard, local development is conditioned by normative and structural frameworks that favor metropolitan centers while marginalizing peripheral regions in terms of both investment and effective participation (Martínez & Escobar, 2024; Rafique et al., 2020).

The case of southeastern Colombia analyzed by Martínez & Escobar (2024) clearly illustrates how centralism has been reconfigured in the form of “project-based governance.” This model, which emerged from the decentralization driven by the structural adjustment of the 1980s and 1990s, relies on the implementation of temporary projects financed by external agencies, without solid mechanisms of territorial coordination or institutional continuity. The territory becomes a platform for the circulation of funds and actors with divergent logics (the state, NGOs, international cooperation), where decisions are made externally, thereby reinforcing clientelist relationships, regulatory gaps, and distributive inequities. Far from empowering local governments, this modality displaces political power into a technocratic and instrumental logic that fails to respond to the priorities or knowledge of local communities.

From a comparative perspective, Pérez et al. (2020) argue that economic growth in the European Union has not ensured territorial cohesion or social justice, as regional disparities have persisted-worsening under austerity policies. This insight, highly relevant to Latin America, underscores that cohesion must be treated as a core development goal, requiring context-sensitive social policies, solid institutions, and citizen participation. Otherwise, centralized planning risks obscuring subnational inequalities and reinforcing unjust, inefficient models.

A key dimension in the analysis of centralism is the health sector. In this regard, Peña et al. (2022) examine the distribution of public health expenditure across Spain’s autonomous communities and demonstrate how fiscal decentralization without adequate corrective mechanisms has led to structural disparities. Regions with greater economic capacity tend to invest more in health, thereby generating better outcomes and higher levels of well-being. Conversely, more vulnerable regions receive fewer resources, which deepens cycles of exclusion. This dynamic reflects a form of “unequal federalism,” in which decentralization without fiscal justice reproduces the very inequalities it was intended to address. The lesson is clear: decentralization can serve as a tool for local development only if it is accompanied by criteria of equity, interterritorial solidarity, and coordinated planning.

From a critical perspective, Caamaño (2022) reclaims popular municipalism as a political strategy aimed at transcending centralism not only in its administrative dimension but also in its epistemological and cultural forms. Inspired by social struggles, feminism, and environmentalism, popular municipalism advances a democratic reorganization of life from the territory, where citizen participation is not confined to voting or consultation but is transformed into everyday collective action. This vision diverges from traditional municipalism, which functions as an appendage of the central state, and instead conceptualizes the territory as a space of both symbolic and

material contestation. From this standpoint, local socioeconomic development cannot be imposed from above nor managed solely through technical criteria; rather, it must be constructed from the needs, values, and knowledge of local communities.

Rodríguez-García & Navarro (2016) propose a comparative analytical framework for local governance based on three dimensions: institutional, relational, and functional. This framework enables an understanding of how governance forms vary according to local capacities, formal and informal rules, and actor interactions. In centralist contexts, the local level often lacks the competences, resources, and legitimacy required to act autonomously. Moreover, the disconnection between government levels and the absence of intergovernmental coordination exacerbate the challenges of implementing effective public policies. Strengthening the institutional capacities of local governments demands clear legal frameworks, sufficient resources, and professionalization processes.

On the other hand, Mazzola (2019) introduces a patrimonial dimension to this debate, demonstrating how centralism also operates in the cultural sphere. Using the case of Tarapacá in Chile, he shows how state-led heritage policies exclude local memories that do not conform to official canons. This imposition of a homogeneous narrative of the past reinforces structures of exclusion and delegitimizes cultural diversity. Symbolic centralism thus becomes a barrier to the recognition and participation of communities in the construction of their identity. Counter-heritagization, understood as bottom-up cultural resistance, reveals the transformative potential of the territory when it is acknowledged as a subject rather than merely an object of intervention.

Finally, Lykke & Haase (2023) challenge the view of peripheries as lagging spaces and instead propose a “multiple capital” approach that acknowledges their economic, cultural, relational, and symbolic dimensions. They argue that centralist policies render these local capacities invisible, and that territorial justice requires effective decentralization endowed with resources, competences, and symbolic recognition. From this perspective, peripheries should not be understood as problems but as territories with genuine potential for development.

In light of the foregoing, it is argued that centralism, far from being merely a form of state organization, constitutes a matrix of power that reproduces territorial inequalities, excludes local knowledge, and undermines democracy. For local socioeconomic development to be genuinely sustainable and inclusive, it requires not only administrative decentralization but also the democratization of power, cultural recognition, fiscal justice, and participatory planning. Territories must be conceived as actors endowed with agency, capacity, and the right to shape their own destinies. Only through a situated, equitable, and multilevel governance (Quispe, 2013) will it be possible to reverse the consequences of centralism and advance toward a genuinely territorialized and sustainable model of development.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The study is grounded in the principles of the qualitative methodological approach, oriented toward a deep understanding of social phenomena from the perspective of the actors involved (Denzin & Lincoln, 2018). In line with this logic, the grounded theory approach developed by Glaser & Strauss (2006) was adopted, characterized by the inductive and systematic generation of theoretical categories from empirical data. This methodological approach facilitates the construction of theory based on the lived experience of subjects rather than on preconceived theoretical frameworks (Corbin & Strauss, 2015).

As the central methodological strategy, the constant comparative analysis was employed, a key tool in grounded theory that enables the establishment of meaningful relationships between similar or divergent data through their continuous comparison. This strategy facilitates the identification of patterns or subcategories that emerge from systematic analysis, allowing for a progressive, theoretically coherent, and increasingly refined coding process (Charmaz, 2006). In this regard, coding constitutes the fundamental process of organizing and labeling data, leading to the generation of analytical categories integrated into an interpretive theoretical framework of the phenomenon under study (Estrada-Acuña et al., 2021).

For data collection, two complementary qualitative techniques were employed: the semi-structured interview and documentary review. Both were applied at different yet interconnected stages of the research process. In the first stage, documentary review was conducted to gather secondary data related to the process of neoliberal intergovernmentality in the national context, as well as specialized literature linked to the research problem. As an auxiliary instrument, a bibliographic record sheet was used to synthesize and organize the relevant information, identified through content analysis (Bardin, 2002).

In the second stage, a semi-structured interview guide was applied, targeting local political actors, primarily provincial and district mayors from the Puno region. The selection of these participants followed criteria of socio-political representativeness, considering both the territorial relevance (demographic, economic, and political) of the areas they represent and their political influence at regional and national levels. The interview requests were formally submitted through official communication. In total, 20 interviews were conducted: five with provincial

mayors and fifteen with district mayors. In some cases, interviews initially planned as semi-structured evolved into in-depth interviews due to the richness of the dialogical exchange (Kvale, 2011).

The analysis of the empirical data obtained through the interviews was conducted in four sequential phases. In the first phase, the research team applied the technique of qualitative content analysis (Sánchez-Gómez et al., 2017), employing the qualitative data analysis software Atlas.ti to examine five interviews with the greatest informational density, in terms of citation frequency and depth of discourse. This initial review allowed for the identification of emerging subcategories, understood as significant behavior patterns of the actors, which served as the basis for coding the remainder of the available data.

The second phase involved the systematic application of constant comparative analysis. Through this process, the researchers identified and reached consensus on a total of 524 relevant quotations, which were classified into four main categories and multiple emerging subcategories. These subsequently served as coding axes for the remaining primary documents (Strauss & Corbin, 2002).

During the third phase, the emerging subcategories were applied to the entire set of interviews and primary documents using Atlas.ti v8 software. This analysis made it possible to quantify the frequency of actors' interventions (groundings or quotations) within each subcategory, thereby providing empirical evidence of the patterns of interpretation and action present in the interviewees' discourse (Barquín et al., 2022; Quispe-Mamani et al., 2022).

The fourth phase consisted of interpretive analysis and the discussion of findings, integrating qualitative content analysis and discourse analysis techniques. This phase allowed for the empirical linking of coded data with emerging theoretical categories, thereby reinforcing the internal validity of the conclusions (van Dijk, 2014).

To ensure the methodological rigor of the study, three principles of qualitative scientific validity were applied. First, a combination of grounded theory and the technological use of Atlas.ti software was employed, enhancing the precision of the analysis (Rojano-Alvarado et al., 2021). Second, methodological triangulation was implemented, utilizing different data collection techniques (interviews and documentary review) to address the phenomenon from multiple sources and perspectives (Flick, 2014). Finally, investigator triangulation was incorporated, with at least five experts participating in the analytical process, fostering a more reliable and shared interpretation of the findings (Llanos-Contreras et al., 2021).

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Center-periphery Power Relations

In the context of the IGN, the results of the empirical field research revealed the emergence of several analytical subcategories (see Figure 1), which enable an understanding of the dynamics of power relations between the central government and local governments in Peru, as presented below.

The strong dependence of local governments on the central executive for the implementation of development projects (E=66) constitutes the first analytical subcategory, reflecting a hierarchical mode of governance characteristic of the persistent centralism in Latin America (Pérez-Medina, 2023). Testimonies from local actors indicate that they must continuously submit official requests to various ministries for their initiatives to be considered, thereby evidencing a unidirectional and subordinated flow of management. Within the context of neoliberal intergovernmentality, this situation reinforces the arguments of Bouza & Oleart (2023) y Quispe (2013), who warn that subnational governments are mere executors of policies designed at the central level, with limited deliberative capacity. Consequently, the vertical logic prevents the exercise of autonomous local planning and reproduces a dependent relationship that restricts territorial sovereignty and undermines democratic governance.

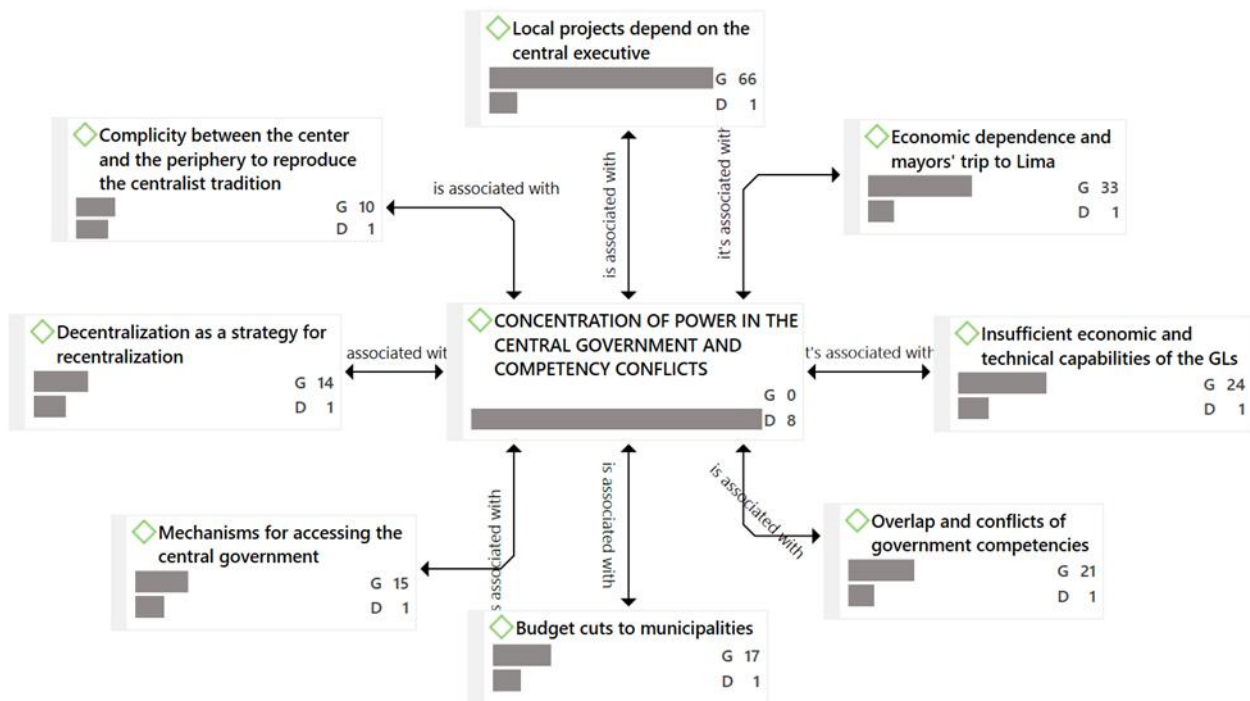


Figure 1. Concentration of power in the central government and competency conflicts

Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti

The second analytical subcategory, closely related to the previous one, concerns the economic dependence and the practice of mayors traveling to Lima (E=33). In Peru, this dynamic reproduces the historically entrenched clientelist and centralist nature of intergovernmental relations. Mayors are compelled to travel to the nation's capital to secure funding, which represents not only a loss of time and resources but also a clear manifestation of territorial inequity in access to the state (Bouza & Oleart, 2023). This practice exposes an informal recentralization of public management, where budget allocation depends on geographic, political, or relational proximity to the center, thereby reinforcing what Nazarchuk et al. (2025) describe as functional domination and technocratic control exercised by concentrated networks of power. In this context, mayors are reduced to “brokers of favors” (Quispe, 2013).

The dynamics of power relations revealed by the previously discussed analytical subcategories appear to stem from the limited economic and technical capacities of local governments (E=24). In other words, local governments lack sufficient financial resources and technical expertise to manage projects effectively, leading to a duplication of functions with other entities such as regional governments. This deficiency reflects a form of empty decentralization, whereby responsibilities are delegated without the provision of adequate means for their implementation (Juliá & Pérez, 2021). According to Useche & Pérez (2019), such functional precarization reinforces the biopolitical logic of state control, in which local life is regulated by external bodies while territorial entities lack effective autonomy. Institutional fragmentation thus becomes a structural condition that constrains local socioeconomic development.

The fourth emerging subcategory of analysis concerns the overlap and conflicts of governmental competences (E=21), where tensions, disputes, and individual protagonism among different levels of government hinder the construction of collaborative governance. As Daher (2017) points out, centralism generates a “decision-making anarchy,” in which regulatory overlap and the absence of coordinating mechanisms lead to the disarticulation of the public management system. Testimonies collected indicate that each actor seeks to “shine,” referring to a competitive and fragmented context that runs counter to the principles of subsidiarity and intergovernmental cooperation that should guide a decentralized model rooted in the territory (Garretón, 2014).

With a tendency to deepen inequities in public management, the reduction of municipal budgets (E=17) constitutes one of the manifestations of structural inequality that weakens local governments and makes them even more dependent on central power. This situation reflects the neoliberal logic of austerity and rationalization of public spending (Bouza & Oleart, 2023), in which subnational governments face significant cuts that undermine their capacity to respond to social demands within their territories. According to Quispe (2013), this results in a form of covert recentralization: although competences are formally maintained, underfunding prevents their autonomous exercise. The impact is twofold: local authority is delegitimized, and territorial inequality is exacerbated.

In this way, given the problem of inequities and the dependence of local governments on the center, a series of mechanisms of access to the central government (E=15) are established, primarily based on informal relations. Access to resources and support from the central government depends on personal connections or informal networks, which reveals a form of patrimonialist and weakly institutionalized governance. As one testimony denounces, knowing “someone” is crucial for obtaining support, generating an opaque, inefficient, and discriminatory system. This practice reinforces the technocratic control and democratic exclusion highlighted by Nazarchuk et al. (2025), wherein governance mechanisms are structured around hierarchical power relations rather than clear and transparent rules. Such dynamics contradict the principles of administrative justice and territorial democratic governance (Hernández, 2019).

In line with the foregoing, formal experiences of decentralization have effectively become strategies of recentralization (E=14). The case of the National Educational Infrastructure Program illustrates how decentralization is employed as a tool for reinforcing central control. Although regional offices exist, substantive decisions remain concentrated in Lima, thereby sustaining the centralist logic. This dynamic confirms the argument of (Valenzuela-Van Treek & Vaca, 2020), who warn that many decentralization policies conceal a reconfiguration of control from the center, under new, subtler, and more efficiency-oriented forms. Decentralization under a neoliberal framework has thus operated as a covert strategy of recentralization (Quispe, 2013). This process does not entail a loss of power for the central state but rather a functional reconfiguration, whereby political and financial control is retained while operational responsibilities are shifted to municipalities.

With respect to the category of analysis concerning center–periphery complicity in reproducing the centralist tradition (E=10), the testimonies reveal that certain regional governments lack both the technical capacity and the political will to effectively manage decentralized resources, thereby perpetuating centralist practices from within the periphery itself. This structural complicity, according to Daher (2017) functions as a mechanism of centralism’s reproduction, wherein subnational elites preserve their own power quotas. In this way, center–periphery complicity constitutes a structural barrier to the transformation of the model, as it obstructs alternative governance initiatives such as the “counterweight cities” proposed by Valenzuela-Van Treek & Vaca (2020), which advocate for horizontal networks of territorial collaboration.

Depressed and Proactive Areas in the Context of Centralism

The analysis of territorial inequalities in the context of centralism is developed on the basis of five emergent subcategories identified during the process of empirical field research (see Figure 2). These five subcategories illustrate how centralized state policies, operating from a homogenizing logic, disregard the specificities of territories and perpetuate structural exclusion.

Territorial fragmentation through districtization (E=52) constitutes the category of analysis with the strongest empirical grounding, insofar as the creation of new districts, rather than empowering territories, deepens their fragmentation and fiscal weakness. This practice, often promoted as a decentralization strategy, results in an illusory autonomy that is not accompanied by an effective redistribution of resources or institutional strengthening. In this regard, Schweitzer & Arancio (2023) argue that districtization, absent redistributive mechanisms and the enhancement of technical capacities, reproduces structural inequality and reinforces the centralist model. Furthermore, Pires (2017) emphasizes that processes of symbolic decentralization perpetuate asymmetric power relations between the center and the periphery.

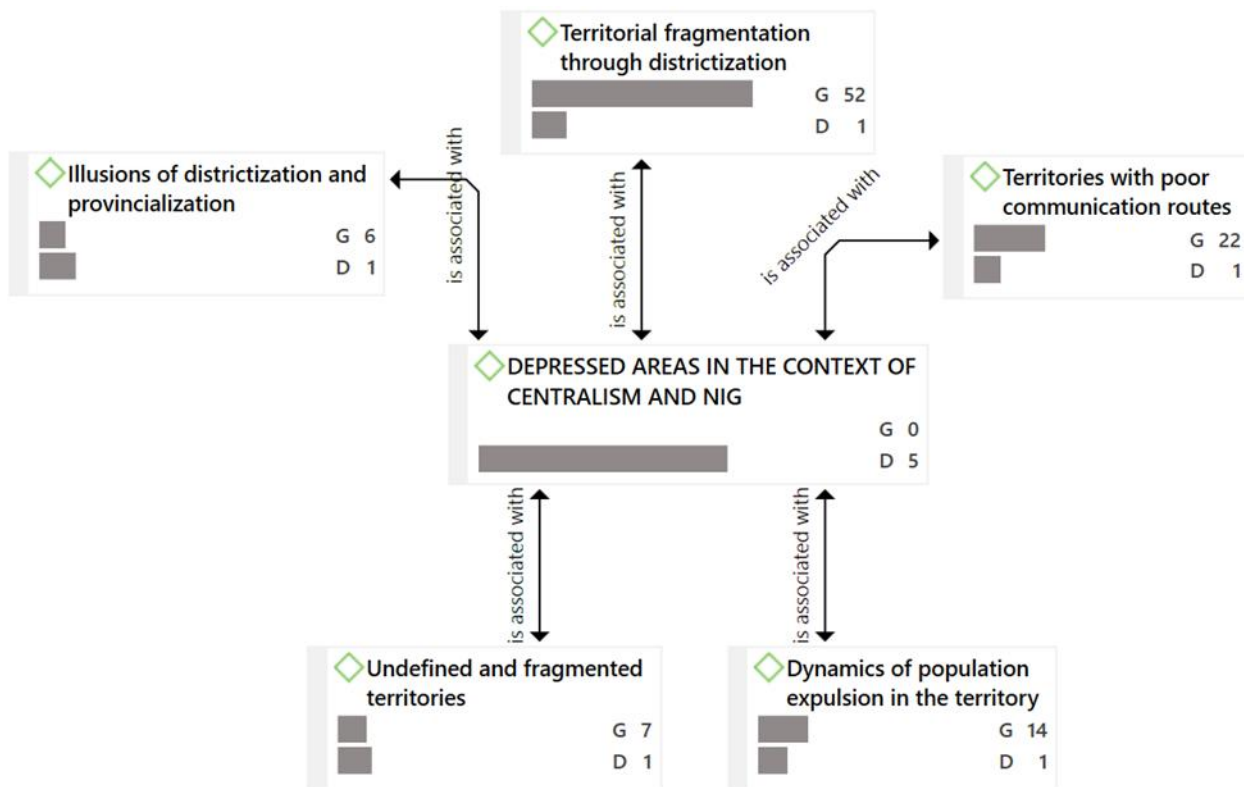


Figure 2. Depressed areas in the context of centralism and the NIG
Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti

As an expression of such territorial fragmentation, territories with deficient communication routes are configured (E=22). In this regard, the testimony concerning the abandonment of a regional road Project “they laid the first stone [...] but did not allocate a budget for the following years. It is abandoned” (Quote 1:49), illustrates how centralism manifests itself in the structural postponement of peripheral infrastructure. Although projects are publicly announced, their execution remains suspended, generating citizen disillusionment and territorial isolation. In the words of Catalán & Valenzuela (2021), intermittent territorial intervention reinforces a logic of “extraction by dispossession,” in which territories are reduced to exploitable resources without receiving permanent benefits or genuine integration. For Andersen et al. (2020), territorial cohesion requires sustained investment, multiscalar planning, and institutional articulation.

Given the situation of disconnection and geographic and socioeconomic fragmentation of territories, dynamics of population outmigration are consequently generated (E=14). This reality is corroborated by the testimony: “a school that used to have 1,200 students now has only just over 500” (Quote 8:30), which reveals a process of accelerated depopulation as a result of state neglect. This reduction in school enrollment not only reflects a demographic phenomenon but also indicates that basic services are unable to retain the local population. This form of “demographic marginality,” according to Vecchio (2022), is an expression of the centralist model’s inability to address the population crisis in rural areas. In turn, Herrera (2021) argues that centralized policies perpetuate territorial exclusion by imposing decontextualized solutions. Schweitzer (2020) refers to this situation as structural spatial hierarchization, in which certain territories are systematically stripped of social and political value.

The phenomena of exclusion, disintegration, and dynamics of expulsion are conditioned by the persistence of undefined and disintegrated territories (E=7). In other words, the lack of territorial delimitation hinders adequate planning, generates administrative disputes, obstructs the implementation of effective public policies, and weakens the decentralization process. In many cases, territorial disintegration is exploited by centralism to impose decisions without consultation or local participation (Casademont et al., 2023). In this context, according to de Neergaard et al. (2020), effective territorial governance requires legal certainty, clarity of competences, and recognition of the territory as a political, cultural, and administrative unit. Without these conditions, territories remain in a state of functional indefiniteness and subordination.

Despite the series of persistent difficulties in local contexts, actors continue to nurture their aspirations for districtization and provincialization (E=6): “my district dreams of becoming a province in the coming years [...] it has also been proposed that three population centers become districts; that is already underway” (Quote 7:32). This testimony reflects the territories’ desire for political-administrative recognition, which can be interpreted as a demand for autonomy; however, it may reproduce dynamics of territorial fragmentation if not accompanied by technical capacities, resources, and comprehensive planning. In this regard, Pires (2017) and Schweitzer (2020)

caution that such demands often emerge as symbolic responses to state neglect, yet without altering the power structures that perpetuate territorial inequality. For Herrera (2021) and Quispe (2013), genuine decentralization is not achieved through a mere change in nomenclature, but through institutional strengthening, budgetary allocation, and community participation.

In contrast to the depressed territorial dynamics, the following section addresses proactive areas where, despite the pressures of the State's centralist model, experiences of local socio-economic development have been set in motion. These experiences can be analyzed, understood, and interpreted through four subcategories of analysis, which are presented below (see Figure 3).

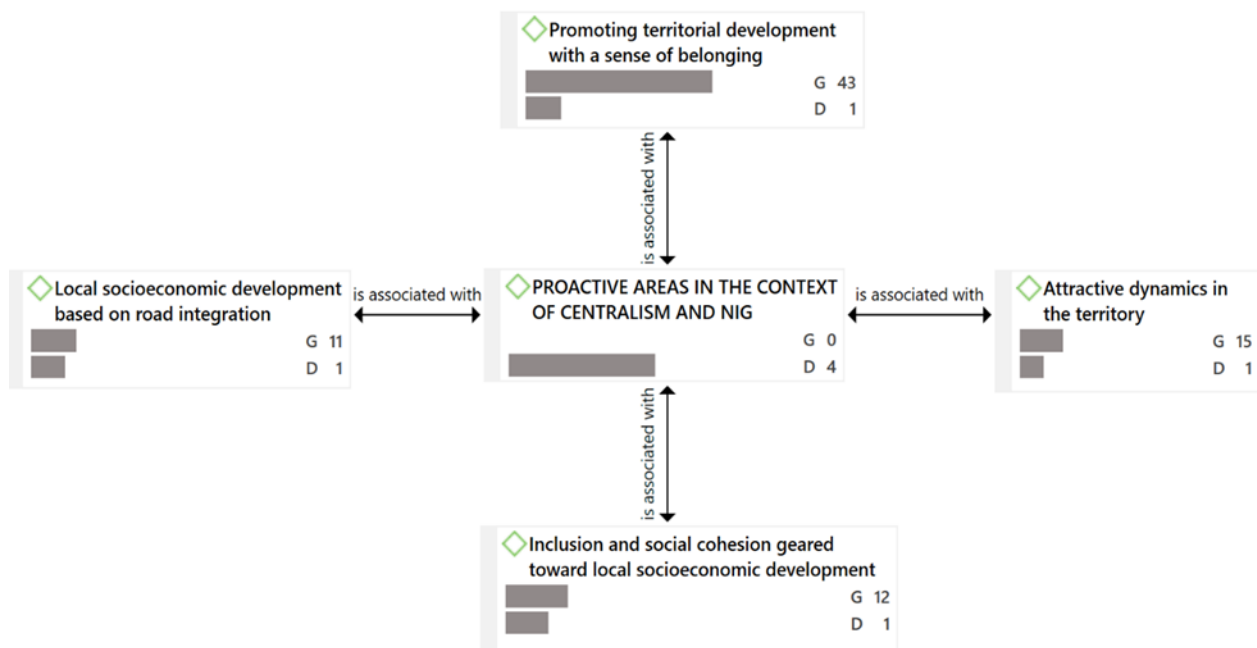


Figure 3. Proactive areas in the context of centralism and the NIG

Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti

With regard to the subcategory of analysis, “promotion of territorial development with a sense of belonging” (E=43), local actors clearly testify to how they have undertaken productive projects based on their own territorial resources, such as dairy processing plants, pasture improvement, and genetic enhancement in livestock. This reality reflects a strong productive identity and local organization, whereby communities take ownership of their development processes with a sense of belonging and recognition of the value of their knowledge and resources. This dynamic aligns with the position of Schweitzer & Arancio, (2023), who argue that authentic territorial development is strengthened when local actors are protagonists in the design and implementation of their strategies. The promotion of development from within, grounded in the cultural, social, and economic environment of the territory, challenges the centralist and passive logic assigned to the regions. Consequently, Pires (2017) emphasizes that territorial inequalities are not merely the result of local shortcomings, but rather of the type of relationships established between territories and the State.

As an expression of significant social transformation, evidence emerges of attractive dynamics within the territory (E=13). That is, the return of migrants to their places of origin as a result of the implementation of solid productive chains, such as dairy processing and the establishment of cheese plants: “It is evident that brothers who had migrated elsewhere are now returning [...] a productive livestock chain project worth 26 million soles have been implemented [...] construction of cheese plants” (Quote 9:24). This phenomenon stands in contrast to the dominant trend of territorial outmigration and constitutes evidence of a reevaluation of rural space. Vecchio (2022) conceptualizes it as a reversal of the pattern of demographic marginality, while Andersen et al. (2020) view these dynamics as part of resilient processes, wherein the territory is reconstructed based on its internal capacities. These locally managed initiatives, when adequately governed, can generate sustained attraction effects, improve living conditions, and activate the local productive fabric.

The other emerging subcategory of analysis is inclusion and social cohesion oriented toward local socioeconomic development (E=12): “What is right is that they associate around a common interest [...] to commercialize products and to consolidate their production [...] to receive training and information in order to link with a good market” (Quote 5:47). Here, the actors emphasize that coordinated work not only increases productivity but also constitutes a concrete pathway to foster territorial cohesion and access to better market opportunities. In this regard, Casademont et al. (2023) and de Neergaard et al. (2020) argue that processes of social

inclusion, when led by the territorial actors themselves, generate greater legitimacy and sustainability. Social cohesion thus becomes a driving condition for local development, particularly in contexts where state action remains centralized.

Finally, it is necessary to highlight local socioeconomic development based on road integration (E=11), as some local governments have begun to implement development strategies articulated with territorial planning, productive potential, and tourism, with an emphasis on road connectivity. Testimonies in this regard reveal a strategic territorial vision that recognizes the role of road infrastructure as a lever for economic and social development. Nevertheless, Catalán & Valenzuela (2021) criticize that centralism continues to keep peripheral territories isolated from economic circuits, and despite numerous limitations, the testimonies demonstrate that local efforts are being made to generate functional internal connections. As Quispe (2013) argues, sustainable socioeconomic development must integrate road infrastructure, productive capacities, and tourism in a coordinated manner.

Local Socioeconomic Development in the Context of Centralism

In the context of neoliberal intergovernmentality, as illustrated in Figure 4, centralism negatively impacts local socioeconomic development initiatives through practices such as the excessive bureaucratization of public administration (E=27): “We constantly submit official requests to the Ministry of Education, Housing, and Transport, with copies to the PCM and the presidency...” (Quote 1:23). This testimony reveals how centralist bureaucracy forces local governments to engage in multiple parallel administrative procedures, delaying their decisions and rendering governance inefficient a phenomenon explained by Martínez & Escobar (2024) as part of a “project-based governance,” in which territories become execution spaces subordinated to vertical and centralist planning.

In order to overcome the emerging situation described in the preceding dynamics, local actors demand intergovernmental relations based on municipal associativity (E=24). In other words, they seek to influence public policies through municipal networks such as REMURPE or AMPE: “These bodies can open audiences and dialogues, but they are not decisive” (Quote 6:11). This testimony underscores that municipal associativity remains weak in shaping structural decisions. Consequently, Rodríguez-García & Navarro (2016) argue that without clear rules and real bargaining power, the participation of local governments in intergovernmental governance becomes merely symbolic or consultative, lacking the capacity for effective transformation.

Given the limited political influence of local governments, the subcategory of excluded district economies based on temporary employment (E=20) emerges. Specifically, the exclusion of district municipalities from national programs such as *Reactiva Perú*, combined with underemployment and labor informality, confirms the precariousness described by Peña et al. (2022), who warn that without fiscal justice, decentralization results in the reproduction of inequalities. Municipalities, lacking adequate resources and competences, are only able to implement short-term labor relief measures.

The precariousness of local contexts has compelled actors to value tourism and handicrafts as the only attractive resources (E=19) within the territory. This hyperdependence on tourism-oriented identity, centered on icons such as Lake Titicaca, reveals how symbolic centralism reduces the value of the territory to mere economic instrumentalization from a metropolitan perspective. Consequently, Mazzola (2019) questions this extractive vision of culture, which obscures other economic, social, and productive dynamics with the potential for inclusive development.

The exclusion and vulnerability of territories have been conditioned and adversely affected by the phenomenon of corruption permeating local investment projects (E=18): “At the MEF you need a sponsor [...] otherwise, many times procedures are not expedited” (Quote 2:12). This logic of informal intermediation perpetuates patrimonialist relations, in which access to financing is regulated through clientelist networks. In light of this situation, Pérez et al. (2020) warn that when transparency and regulatory equity are absent, decentralization becomes captured by corrupt practices that reinforce territorial inequality and institutional exclusion.

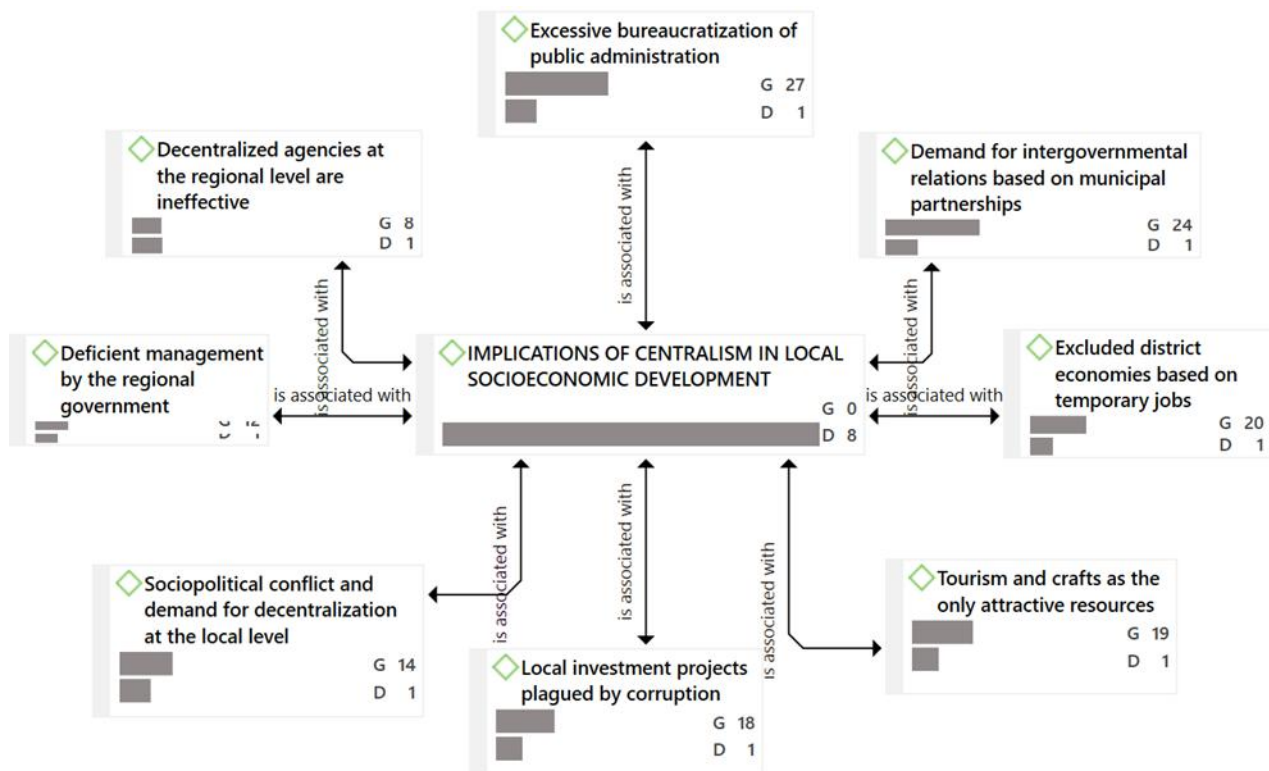


Figure 4. Implications of centralism for local socioeconomic development
 Source: Own elaboration in Atlas.ti

In the face of the series of structural barriers that have produced territorial fragility, local actors identify sociopolitical conflict and the demand for decentralization at the local level (E=14) as a potential solution to the problems of territorial inequality. As Caamaño (2022) proposes, popular municipalism constitutes an alternative for overcoming territorial tensions and inequalities by restoring real power and autonomy to local governments through mechanisms of self-management and community legitimacy. This dynamic emerges as a response to the deficient management of the regional government (E=12), since its inability to execute its budget reflects not only technical limitations but also a lack of coordination with local dynamics. This reinforces the notion that decentralization has been more formal than substantive. In light of this situation, Cruz & García-Bengochea (2020) emphasize the need for situated planning, whereby regional actors work on the basis of concrete socio-spatial linkages.

Finally, to close the defective cycle of centralism and neoliberal and NIG in local spheres, decentralized agencies at the regional level prove to be inoperative (E=8), as they systematically block local investment projects. In other words, they become technocratic obstacles that reinforce the model of administrative recentralization under the guise of functional decentralization. In this regard, Lykke & Haase (2023) argue that territorial justice requires, in addition to resources, the recognition of the relational and symbolic capacities of territories. In Quispe's (2013) proposal, only a transformative multilevel governance framework can counteract the structural effects of centralism and pave the way toward genuinely inclusive and territorially grounded development.

FINAL THOUGHTS AND CONCLUSIONS

The centralist structure of the Peruvian State keeps local governments subordinated to hierarchical and clientelist dynamics, preventing genuine autonomy. Excessive bureaucracy, budgetary dependence, and informal dealings with the central executive reveal a neoliberal intergovernmentality of domination (Bouza & Oleart, 2023; Quispe, 2013). This situation reinforces what (Daher, 2017) terms “decisional anarchy,” thereby weakening the democratic system and institutionalizing territorial inequality as the norm.

Districtization initiatives, far from correcting inequities, have instead produced territorial fragmentation and socio-economic and political disintegration, disproportionately affecting the most peripheral areas. Lacking connectivity and comprehensive planning, these territories become expulsive spaces, deprived of political and budgetary priority. As Schweitzer (2020) argues, planning from the center reproduces spatial hierarchies and legitimizes exclusion, reaffirming centralism as a structural mechanism of territorial invisibilization.

Nevertheless, despite centralism, some territories mobilize endogenous capacities, foster migratory return, and articulate sustainable productive initiatives. These community-driven actions generate social cohesion and a sense

of belonging, thereby challenging the State's vertical planning. According to Schweitzer & Arancio (2023), such experiences constitute models of authentic territorial development, wherein local actors are able to transform their environment through their own agency and social capital.

The dynamics of local development are obstructed by an exclusionary institutional system, rooted in bureaucracy, corruption, and the political capture of resources. Formal decentralization without fiscal autonomy perpetuates the marginalization of subnational governments. In this context, proposals such as popular municipalism (Caamaño, 2022) and situated planning (Cruz & García-Bengochea, 2020) suggest a necessary shift: to build from below a territorial model grounded in justice, local sovereignty, and sustainability.

Finally, the implementation of a multilevel territorial governance (Quispe, 2013) with effective political autonomy, fiscal justice, and context-specific planning is proposed. This transformation requires empowering local governments, strengthening their institutional capacities, and recognizing their knowledge and associative networks. As Caamaño (2022) y Cruz & García-Bengochea (2020) argue, only through democratic and participatory decentralization will it be possible to reverse structural centralism and build an inclusive, equitable, and territorially grounded development.

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