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# **Discourses and practices in local development models: case studies in Spain**

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### **Discourses and practices in local development models: case studies in Spain**

*Abstract:* Given its complexity, the study of local development can be approached from different perspectives. This paper presents a proposal for the study of local development models at the level of their conception (discursive level) and their implementation (level of practices or strategies). Two theoretical models have been identified in the literature, the economic-competitive and the social-sustainable, the former being hegemonic. The aim of this paper is to explore the possibilities of alternatives to this model and to investigate the importance of governance mechanisms and the territorial context in shaping the translation of these theoretical models to the cases studied. To this end, case study research is presented, using a qualitative approach that combines the use of interviews with key actors and the use of documents to analyse the role of these factors in the articulation of the discursive level and the local development strategies implemented. The results point to the predominance of the economic-competitive model, with variations resulting from the particular configuration of actors, spaces of interaction and local structures of interest exchange.

*Key words:* local development design, local development implementation, governance, territorial context.

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## IDEAS CLAVE / HIGHLIGHTS / IDEES CLAU

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|--|---|--|
| 1. El desarrollo local puede ser estudiado desde los discursos y desde las prácticas.                | 1. Local development can be studied from discourses and from practices.                     | 1. El desenvolupament local es pot estudiar des dels discursos i des de les pràctiques.              |
| 2. Los modelos de desarrollo local se encuentran entre la competitividad y la sostenibilidad social. | 2. Models of local development are between competitiveness and social sustainability.       | 2. Els models de desenvolupament local es troben entre la competitivitat i la sostenibilitat social. |
| 3. El desarrollo local de un territorio depende de los mecanismos de gobernanza en él.               | 3. The local development of a territory depends on the governance mechanisms in it.         | 3. El desenvolupament local d'un territori depèn dels mecanismes de governança.                      |
| 4. El contexto territorial articula los actores y los espacios de interacción en un territorio.      | 4. The territorial context articulates the actors and spaces of interaction in a territory. | 4. El context territorial articula els actors i els espais d'interacció en un territori.             |

## EXTENDED ABSTRACT<sup>1</sup>

In this article, we explore the application of theoretical models of local development in two case studies and the factors that characterize them, how these factors are interconnected, and the effects of this interconnection on the conception (discourses) and implementation (practices) of these theoretical models in the studied cases. The analysis also pays special attention to the role of employment in the selected cases.

The study of local development experiences in the European context allows us to identify a hegemonic model with a fundamentally economic character, which we call the “economic-competitive model”. Under this model, the aim is to make companies more competitive in a particular area, and it promotes an economic conception of the territory in terms of making it competitive in a market where the units of competition are the territories themselves. Given the hegemony of this model, we wonder about the possibilities for alternatives to this model. These alternatives involve addressing needs and demands beyond the strictly economic, focusing on the local community and the environmental aspects of the territory. Here, we face an alternative theoretical model which we call the “social-sustainable model”. These theoretical models need to be contextualized within the framework of the European Union, where the European Employment Strategy—with the European Social Fund as an “economic resource bank”—emerges as a source of discourse generation. These discourses also align with the hegemony of the economic model of local development, incorporating certain social aspects as complements.

Assuming the premise that different aspects of these theoretical models of local development can be applied in different territories, it is worth considering the factors that influence them. Among these factors, governance mechanisms and territorial context (i.e., sociopolitical structure) stand out as possible explanatory factors for the models of local development applied, both in terms of discourse (how they are conceived) and in terms of practices (the implementation of actions or initiatives). Therefore, the local development experiences that are articulated are radically different depending on the development model, the type and level of cooperation among the actors in the territory, and the existence of local community leadership. These two theoretical models of local development also differ in terms of the role that employment plays in them.

The analysis presented is part of the results of a PhD thesis on local development experiences in the period prior to the economic crisis of 2007-2008 in the European context. The two cases studied are two capital cities in the province of Barcelona, Catalonia. The methodology used is qualitative, combining semi-structured interviews with key informants from relevant institutions in each case and document analysis. Key informants are categorized into four profiles: public administration, business sector actors, unions, and other relevant actors (local non-economic entities, etc.). Interviews were also conducted with political actors at the supralocal level (regional level). The data obtained were analyzed through qualitative content analysis.

The analysis done show the dominance of discourses and practices related to promoting the competitiveness of businesses in both cases. There is also a limited cross-cutting and

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<sup>1</sup> Traducción exclusiva de los autores / Authors' exclusive translation.

integration of objectives, demonstrating difficulties in connecting the social and economic aspects when defining strategies. Regarding the role of employment, it is seen as secondary in both cases, serving as a means to achieve social inclusion for vulnerable groups. On the other hand, local development in the case of Manresa seems to have a higher level of internal cohesion compared to the case of Sant Feliu de Llobregat. This is related to aspects as the territorial configuration and the type of governance in both cases. In this way, common spaces are observed where the limited cross-cutting nature present in both cases is reduced, with an improvement of cooperation relationships. In some of these spaces, common interests are shared, especially in the case of Manresa, but with initiatives promoted from the side of economic actors.

It is important to highlight that these interaction spaces depend largely on the territorial configuration and governance in terms of the types of actors present, how they interact, and the level of coordination or fragmentation of the territory (and the actors that comprise and manage it).

Another finding is the identification of established actors when it comes to implementing strategies and developing discourses on the local development model. Thus, when economic actors take the lead, the logic of economic competitiveness extends to other decision-making actors in the territory. The importance of territorial structure in both cases studied is also noteworthy. In the case of Manresa, the centrality of the city in the region amplifies the importance of existing common spaces and relationships among local actors. The boundary between the local and regional levels becomes blurred within initiatives where local actors share interaction spaces, interests, and discourses with regional-level actors. The internal coherence of discourses is strengthened as a result. In contrast, in the case of Sant Feliu de Llobregat, the fragmentation of local economic actors is compounded by the fragmentation and complexity of the regional level, making it difficult to find valid interlocutors with a significant impact on the municipality's local development model. This reinforces the role of the local public administration as a discourse generator with a greater presence of social objectives but with limited capacity to transmit discourses to other actors in the territory.

The results highlight the importance of studying models of local development, focusing on the level of discourse and practices. As mentioned earlier, this analysis is based on data from before the Great Economic Recession. It is also necessary to study the application of these theoretical models of local development during periods of crisis or economic recession. Given the economic impact of recent crises (COVID-19, the war in Ukraine, etc.), it seems necessary to explore new approaches (both discursive and implemented) that redefine the hegemonic theoretical model of local development. These new approaches go beyond the traditional model of economic growth and seek to complement it with alternative initiatives that are viable from economic, social, and environmental point of view. The goal is to achieve "competent territories" (rather than "competitive territories") by making better use of the resources of the territory and the actors and synergies within it in order to go beyond the traditional economic schema of local development.