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Where is the city of Ilhéus growing to? An analysis of recent urban transformations in the South Zone

Para onde cresce a cidade de Ilhéus? Uma análise das transformações urbanas recentes da Zona Sul

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Abstract
This article analyzes the urban expansion and landscape transformations of Ilhéus/BA between 1985 and 2023, with emphasis on the South Zone, which experienced intense growth and real estate appreciation. Satellite images from the MapBiomas project are used to characterize urban expansion, and photographs are used to record specific changes in the landscape. The comparison of photos from different decades highlights the magnitude of urban transformations and their visual impacts. The results point to significant urban growth in the South Zone, with particular acceleration in the last decade. The study reveals that the appreciation of the area fueled real estate speculation, altering the landscape. The visual analysis, combined with the images, allows us to understand the evolution of the territory, reinforcing the importance of urban planning to balance economic growth, environmental preservation, and quality of life in the city.
Keywords: urban transformations; urban development; urban landscape.

Resumo
Este artigo analisa a expansão urbana e as transformações da paisagem de Ilhéus, Bahia, entre os anos de 1985 e 2023, com ênfase na Zona Sul, que apresentou intenso crescimento e valorização imobiliária. Utilizam-se imagens de satélite do projeto MapBiomas para caracterizar a expansão urbana e fotografias para registrar mudanças específicas na paisagem. A comparação de fotos de diferentes décadas evidencia a magnitude das transformações urbanas e seus impactos visuais. Os resultados apontam para um significativo crescimento urbano na Zona Sul com especial aceleração na última década. O estudo revela que a valorização da área impulsionou a especulação imobiliária, alterando a paisagem. A análise visual, aliada às imagens, permite compreender a evolução do território, reforçando a importância do planejamento urbano para equilibrar crescimento econômico, preservação ambiental e qualidade de vida na cidade.
Palavras-chave: transformações urbanas; desenvolvimento urbano; paisagem urbana.

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1 Introduction

Increasing urbanization has emerged as a defining reality, marked by territorial, economic, and social transformations that reshape city dynamics (Gomes *et al.*, 2021; Santos Melazzo, 2019). In recent decades, urban expansion has been driven by the financialization of land and the growth of the real estate market, redefining the use and occupation of urban space (Fix & Paulani, 2019). These transformations have been observed in various urban contexts, including mid-sized cities, where peripheries are becoming strategic spaces for real estate capital (Duren, 2018; Tomé, 2021).

The Institute for Applied Economic Research (IPEA, 2023) noted that urbanization in Brazil is occurring at an intense pace, exhibiting diversity and heterogeneity across the national territory. Particularly noteworthy are the pronounced urbanization of economic frontier areas, the growth of mid-sized cities, the peripheralization of urban centers, and the formation and consolidation of both metropolitan and non-metropolitan urban agglomerations.

Consequently, urban expansion in Brazil, driven by the rural exodus and population growth, is particularly notable in large metropolises. In this context, Santos (2006) highlights the central role of state capitals, such as São Paulo and Salvador, in urban expansion, acting as hubs for intense demographic and structural transformations. This dynamism extends to mid-sized cities, as is the case of Ilhéus, in the state of Bahia, where urbanization is embedded within the broader context of national development [1], directly influencing local social and economic dynamics.

According to Lemos (2002), Brazilian mid-sized cities are fundamental to understanding the urbanization occurring outside large metropolitan centers, as they act as intermediaries in the flow of people, capital, and ideas. Analyzing this process can contribute to sustainable urban planning and provide valuable insights into the preservation of historical and cultural heritage in cities of similar size.

Indeed, Brazilian mid-sized cities continue to play a strategic role in the national urban network and are essential for the spatial redistribution of the population, economic flows, and urban development. For example, Scherer and Amaral (2020) demonstrate that population size alone does not adequately capture the position of these cities within the urban hierarchy, showing that many possess significant regional centrality despite not being metropolises.

Furthermore, Silva (2024) analyzes socio-spatial fragmentation in mid-sized cities such as Marabá (PA) and Mossoró (RN), highlighting the growth of peripheral residential "fortifications," new centralities, and socioeconomic inequalities—a phenomenon that directly impacts sustainable urban planning and the preservation of local heritage. Regarding the Brazilian Northeast, Santos Fernandes (2022) points out that urban restructuring in mid-sized cities offers opportunities to rethink policies for historical preservation and social inclusion, especially in the face of pressures from real estate expansion. Thus, analyzing contemporary mid-sized cities reinforces the importance of discussing both sustainable planning and the protection of cultural heritage in intermediate-sized urban centers.

This article seeks to examine the urban transformations in the South Zone of Ilhéus, Bahia, with a focus on the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood, addressing its economic, social, and landscape aspects. The research adopts a multidisciplinary approach based on

[1] A mid-sized city is understood as one that acts as an intermediary between large urban centers and surrounding small towns, exhibiting economic diversification and an coordinating role in regional trade and service networks (Sposito, 2001).

socioeconomic data, spatial analysis, and document and literature reviews, aiming to contribute to the debate on urban development and the regional economy.

2 Perspectives on Urban Growth and Real Estate Dynamics

Analyzing urban growth and real estate dynamics in Brazilian cities, such as Ilhéus, should be examined more deeply, drawing on the theoretical and empirical reflections found in specialized literature (Gomes *et al.*, 2021). In this context, Almeida, Monte-Mór, and Amaral (2017) address the relationship between the urbanization process and real estate market transformations, highlighting the concept of urban "implosion and explosion." According to these authors, the growth of contemporary cities is characterized by horizontal expansion in peripheral areas and vertical concentration in central zones.

Building on this analysis, Costa and Nascimento (2016) emphasize that the production of urban space is intrinsically linked to the real estate market, driven by factors such as land speculation and infrastructure availability. Their study on Mossoró, Rio Grande do Norte, reveals that urban growth is guided by economic interests—specifically, the actions of real estate actors, land appreciation, and infrastructure expansion—confirming the central role of economic factors in shaping urban space. However, the primary contribution of the Mossoró study lies in identifying the structural mechanisms of the production of space. It demonstrates that territorial expansion does not occur randomly; rather, it follows patterns associated with the actions of real estate developers, socio-spatial selectivity, and the reconfiguration of centralities.

From a different perspective, Duren (2018) analyzes housing expansion in peripheral areas of Latin America, noting that the decisions of real estate developers are motivated by the search for cheaper, less regulated land. Complementing this approach, Fix and Paulani (2019) discuss the role of urban land as a financial asset, analyzing how the financialization of the real estate market intensifies speculation. Similarly, Prada-Trigo, Aravena, and Barra-Vieira (2022) underscore the impacts of real estate dynamics on urban morphology. Based on a study in Gran Concepción[2], Chile, they observe that the proliferation of new housing complexes in peripheral areas alters the city's spatial configuration.

Santos Melazzo (2019), in turn, analyzes real estate dynamics in Brazil, highlighting the centrality of urban land in economic relations. Meanwhile, Tomé (2021) offers a comparative analysis of urban expansion in four mid-sized Spanish cities, emphasizing the role of new residential areas in growth processes.

Maricato (2001) broadens the understanding of urban dynamics by pointing out that the expansion of Brazilian cities is shaped by historical, social, economic, and environmental factors. Additionally, Pires *et al.* (2018) emphasize that the expansion of urbanized space occurs even in the absence of demographic growth, driven by economic processes and territorial occupation. Against this backdrop, Lencioni (2002) warns of the problems arising from uncontrolled urban growth, such as traffic congestion, pollution, a lack of green spaces, and unequal access to services. Finally, Santos (2005) highlights the negative impacts of unplanned expansion on rural areas, agriculture, and the environment, stressing the importance of integrated urban planning.

[2] ***Gran Concepción*** is an urban agglomeration in Chile that encompasses the city of Concepción and its surrounding communes, forming one of the country's main metropolitan areas.

Cristo and Gruber (2011) add that the use of coastal areas stems from historical processes associated with coastal occupation, which facilitated transportation and territorial expansion. From this perspective, the waterfront has historically constituted a strategic space for the siting of economic activities, especially those related to commerce, the circulation of goods, and, more recently, tourism and the real estate market. The concentration of infrastructure and service investments in these areas tends to intensify land appreciation and induce accelerated urbanization, promoting the functional and landscape restructuring of urban space.

Urban coastal areas tend to take on functions beyond the economic dimension—becoming hubs for leisure, tourism, sociability, and physical activities—which reinforces their centrality in urban dynamics and spatial transformation. The literature on *blue spaces* indicates that environments characterized by the presence of water are strongly associated with recreational and sports uses, influencing how the population appropriates the urban environment (Soriano-García, 2025). This diversity of uses enhances the appeal of these areas, thereby intensifying land appreciation and the restructuring of urban space.

Given this context, urban and land-use planning emerge as crucial instruments for the governance of Brazilian cities. As advocated by national laws, such as the City Statute (Federal Law No. 10,257/2001), public policies must promote integrated urban development, encompassing environmental preservation, urban mobility, decent housing, and social justice.

Considering the identified patterns of urban growth—marked by peripheral expansion, socio-spatial fragmentation, and pressure on environmentally sensitive areas—rethinking urban development models becomes imperative. Indeed, predominantly reactive planning models tend to deepen territorial inequalities and compromise urban sustainability (Harvey, 2014; Maricato, 2011; Acselrad, 2009).

In this regard, adopting participatory, intersectoral, and sustainability-oriented planning practices is recognized as a fundamental strategy to address the adverse effects of unplanned urban growth, particularly in Brazilian mid-sized cities (Rolnik, 2015). Such approaches allow for greater coordination among public policies, social inclusion in decision-making, and the rationalization of land use, a process currently heavily conditioned by real estate speculation and the financialization of urban land. Therefore, only through this institutional and territorial redirection can ongoing urban transformations be converted into a more balanced, inclusive, and resilient development process, capable of reconciling economic growth, socio-spatial justice, and environmental preservation.

In this regard, Maricato (2001) emphasizes that the economic growth of Brazilian cities—historically marked by segregation and a lack of effective planning—demands a reorientation of urban policies to ensure that territorial expansion is accompanied by socio-spatial justice and environmental preservation.

3 Methodology

3.1 Study Area Characterization

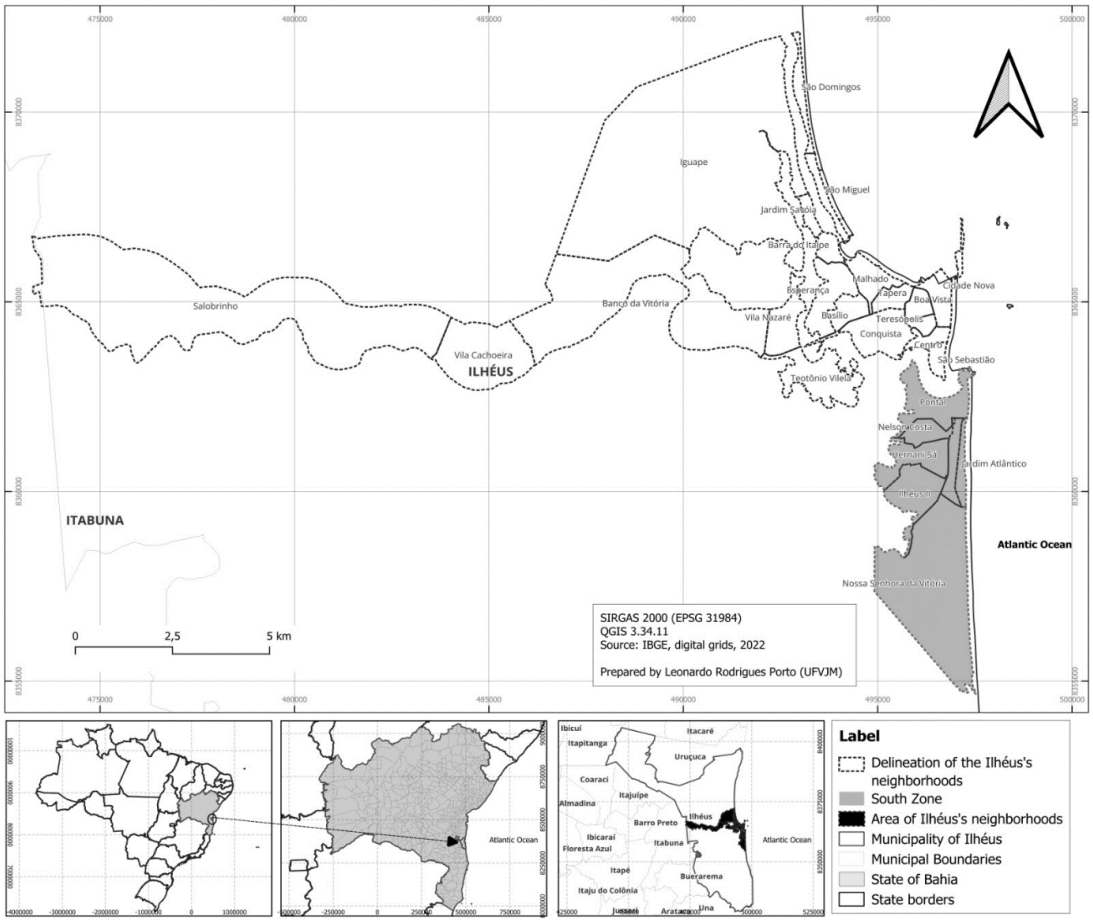
The municipality of Ilhéus is located in the Southern Bahia Mesoregion and is part of the Ilhéus-Itabuna Microregion. It covers a total area of 1,588.5 km², with a population density of 112.46 inhabitants/km², according to the 2022 Demographic Census conducted by the Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics (IBGE). The city has a population of 178,649,

comprising 52.12% (93,107) women and 47.88% (85,542) men, with a negative annual growth rate of -0.17% between 2010 and 2022. The municipality exhibits a high urbanization rate, with 90.6% (161,851) of its households residing in urban areas. Regarding education, 90.86% (130,852) of the population is literate, while 9.14% (13,167) lacks basic literacy.

The per capita Gross Domestic Product (GDP) recorded in 2021 was BRL 32,756, reflecting the importance of the service sector and tourism to the local economy (IBGE, 2023). Despite this economic potential, the Municipal Human Development Index (MHDI), measured in 2010, was 0.690, indicating a medium level of human development and highlighting the need for advancements in income, longevity, and education (UNDP, IPEA, & Fundação João Pinheiro, 2013). These indicators depict a city marked by a predominantly urban character and social challenges, aspects that are fundamental to understanding the process of urban expansion and its socioeconomic dynamics, especially in the city's South Zone.

Thus, this context provides a perspective for understanding the complexity of urban expansion in Brazil, connecting the rural exodus, population growth, and the evolution of cities within a broader geographic framework. This dynamic is particularly evident in the city of Ilhéus, more specifically in its South Zone (Figure 1), which stands out for the significant expansion of urban settlement, driven by high real estate appreciation and the demand for new residential and commercial developments (Anjos, 2023).

Figure 1. Geographic location of the Ilhéus municipal seat, Bahia, and neighborhood boundaries.



Source: Data geoprocessed using QGIS. Prepared by the authors (2023).

Located in the South Zone of Ilhéus, the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood stands out as a prime symbol of this growth, revealing economic, social, and landscape transformations. Its population size is particularly notable: data from the 2022 census recorded 14,600 inhabitants and 8,300 households, yielding an average of 2.7 residents per household within an area of 8.58 km². The reconfiguration of this territory reflects the impacts of the real estate market and socio-spatial segregation processes, which are characteristic of what has been termed extensive and accelerated urbanization (Almeida, Monte-Mór, & Amaral, 2017; Costa & Nascimento, 2016).

Ilhéus stood out as one of the main hubs of the cocoa cycle in Brazil, especially between the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Although officially founded in 1536, it was between 1890 and 1930 that the city experienced significant economic and social development, driven by the cocoa economy. Jorge Amado, in his portrayal of this phase in *Gabriela, Clove and Cinnamon*, describes Ilhéus as "the empire of the cocoa colonels" (Amado, 1958), highlighting the wealth and contradictions of the period, during which the city consolidated itself as a prominent urban center in Bahia.

In this context, Ilhéus established itself as a mid-sized city, notable for its infrastructure, regional importance, and colonial architectural heritage. The presence of one of the country's largest cocoa export ports contributed to the emergence of a local bourgeoisie and the formation of a distinct cultural identity (França & Cruz, 2025). As a mid-sized city, Ilhéus plays a strategic role in the organization of urban space and regional development, acting as "hubs of economic and social integration" (Santos, 2006).

In the 489 years since its founding and 142 years since its elevation to city status, Ilhéus has developed five master plans. The first was instituted in 1981, followed by a revision in 1986. In 1996, a new plan was adopted, which was revised in 2003. The 2006 Master Plan is the most recent document, with no new legal framework currently in force. This scenario highlights a legislative lag relative to federal requirements, posing challenges for the adaptation of Ilhéus to urban development guidelines. The revision of the Master Plan represents an opportunity to promote more effective, inclusive, and democratic growth, in alignment with the City Statute, the Land Use and Occupation Law, and local demands.

3.2 Procedures

The research adopts a multidisciplinary, qualitative, and descriptive approach, with an analytical emphasis on the urban growth process of Ilhéus, particularly in the South Zone and the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood. The study seeks to understand socio-spatial phenomena through the integration of secondary data and interpretive analysis. Procedures included a literature review, along with the analysis of public documents—such as master plans, urban laws, and IBGE census data. The investigation also relied on the interpretation of satellite images and thematic maps to identify patterns of land occupation, expansion, and landscape transformations that occurred in recent decades (1985–2023). This methodological combination allowed for a comprehensive reading of the territory, correlating socioeconomic indicators with growth dynamics that influence the urban development of Ilhéus.

The study also analyzed archival images of the city of Ilhéus, which provide a visual record of landscape and urban transformations over time. By combining these methods, the research sought to provide an overview of the urban growth dynamics in the city's South Zone. Maps were generated using QGIS software (Version 3.30.6). This step enabled the mapping of

urban growth and changes in land use, highlighting specific areas of transformation, such as the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood.

Data collection and organization were carried out between February and August 2024, encompassing iconographic records, statistical databases, and institutional documents. Historical and current images from the Ilhéus archive were examined with an emphasis on identifying morphological changes and recurring patterns of land use and occupation. This procedure made it possible to observe transformations associated with densification, road expansion, and the consolidation of new urban centralities. The integration of visual, cartographic, and documentary analyses ensured greater interpretive consistency and contributed to the triangulation of results, reinforcing the methodological robustness of the study.

Accordingly, transformations in land use and occupation in Ilhéus between 1985 and 2023 were investigated using data from MapBiomas Collection 7.1, which provides annual land cover and land use maps with a spatial resolution of 30 meters (MapBiomas, 2023). Focusing on the South Zone of Ilhéus, the study analyzed changes in the landscape and urbanization processes. The Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood received particular attention. Its population densification, combined with the unplanned growth characteristic of the South Zone's urban expansion, reflects social and economic dynamics that directly impact local infrastructure and quality of life, making the neighborhood an important subject of analysis in discussions regarding urban development in Ilhéus.

4 Results and Discussion

4.1 Urban Transformations in the South Zone of Ilhéus

The urban trajectory of Ilhéus, particularly in the South Zone, reveals a continuous process of transformation resulting from the interaction between human actions and natural processes. This process intricately links historical legacies, economic pressures, and recent territorial dynamics. From the initial occupation by the Tupinambá people to the peak of the cocoa cycle and the subsequent productive restructuring oriented toward the service sector, the territory has been shaped by successive waves of spatial appropriation and reconfiguration. These waves have often been marked by the absence of strategic planning and the reproduction of socio-spatial inequalities—a phenomenon that intensified particularly after the cocoa monoculture crisis and the need for regional economic restructuring (Mira, 2013).

Consequently, urban expansion, catalyzed by the construction of new residential and commercial developments, has led to substantial changes in land use and occupation. These urbanization processes not only reshape the physical space of the region but also influence local social and economic dynamics, reflecting a complex scenario of growth and transformation (Anjos, 2023).

The cocoa boom in the 19th century was a pivotal factor in the urban growth of Ilhéus, leading to the construction of infrastructure geared toward the production and export of this commodity. This phase of accelerated expansion redefined the city's structure, driving significant transformations in local demographics, architecture, and the economy. The cocoa cycle transformed Ilhéus into one of the main economic hubs of Bahia, shaping its urban and social structure in a process in which the dynamics of the export economy were directly associated with urban expansion and the strengthening of the service sector (França & Cruz,

2025).

Investments in infrastructure during the cocoa cycle, including roads and warehouses, had a lasting impact on the city's urban configuration, contributing to the development of an urban fabric that still influences the growth of Ilhéus today (IPEA, 2023). The transformation of the city is evidenced not only by physical changes in the urban space but also by its economic and social evolution, which was deeply shaped by the cocoa production cycle.

According to Andrade, Barbosa, and Costa (2021), amid the crisis in the cocoa sector in the 1990s, the decline of cocoa plantations—which had previously dominated the region—was accompanied by the growth of alternative productive activities, such as tourism and commerce, reflecting a significant reconfiguration of the urban and economic space. In the 2000s, the expansion of the Malhado Port led to increased cargo handling, generating new economic opportunities and encouraging urban occupation in the port region.

The cocoa cycle left deep marks on the urban structure and economic identity of the city, spurring significant population growth and the construction of infrastructure that still influences the current logic of expansion, since the cocoa export economy was directly associated with urbanization, the modernization of services, and the formation of a local elite that guided the urban development of Ilhéus (França & Cruz, 2019). However, the decline of this monoculture and the emergence of new economic activities from the 1990s onward led Ilhéus into a new cycle of urbanization. This cycle is characterized by unequal dynamics of growth and occupation, related to the process of regional productive reconversion and the restructuring of the economic bases of Southern Bahia after the cocoa crisis (Mira, 2013).

The South Zone, the focus of this study, represents the contemporary epicenter of urban expansion, hosting new residential and commercial developments, as well as areas with strong tourist appeal. Despite its significant real estate appreciation, this territory also faces the risks inherent in accelerated and poorly regulated growth, such as pressure on natural resources, real estate speculation, and the deterioration of public services in peripheral areas.

In Ilhéus, real estate expansion is occurring at an accelerated pace and remains disconnected from the guidelines of the Master Plan, reflecting an urbanization process guided by economic interests and the expectation of tourism-driven appreciation. The lack of updates to the urban plan and the growth of unplanned subdivisions have widened territorial inequalities and compromised local urban sustainability (Macedo & Baitz, 2023).

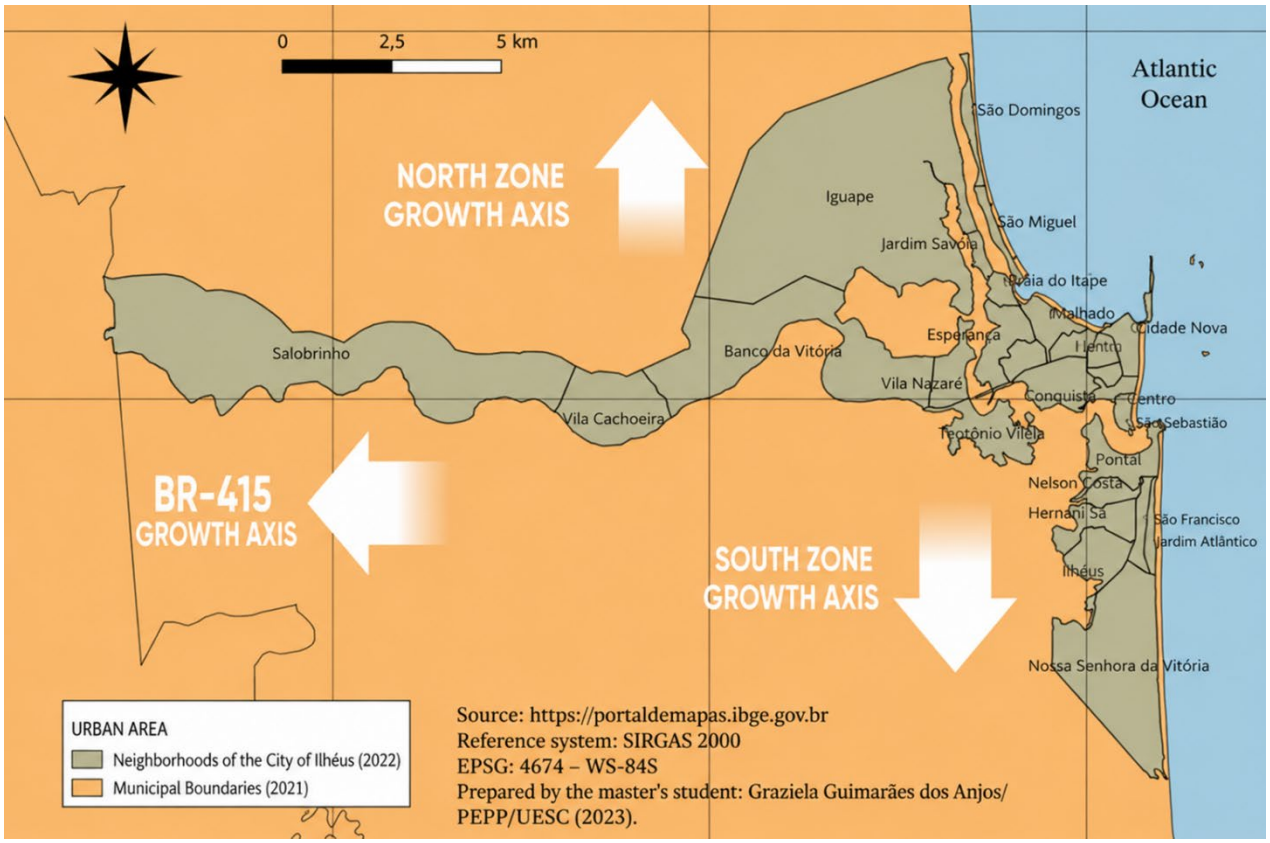
The city of Ilhéus is expanding along three main axes: the South Zone, the North Zone, and the Ilhéus-Itabuna highway, located west of the city center (Figure 2). The South Zone stands out as a region of considerable importance, encompassing residential, commercial, and tourist areas, with an emphasis on the presence of beaches and natural attractions. The North Zone, according to Silva (2017), has experienced slower growth and faces challenges regarding basic infrastructure, such as inadequate sanitation and poor public services.

The BR-415 highway, connecting Ilhéus and Itabuna, plays a significant role in the transformation of Ilhéus's urban landscape. As observed by Rangel and Thevenin (2018), the road corridor between Ilhéus and Itabuna takes the form of a "highway-city" (cidade-estrada), resulting from the concentration of industrial, commercial, service, and residential activities along the BR-415. This dynamic highlights a process of dispersed urban expansion, in which the road axis acts as a vector for the growth and reconfiguration of the city's urban landscape. In recent decades, however, there has been a surge in tourist, residential, and commercial developments along this axis.

The infrastructure provided by the highway has encouraged investments, resulting in accelerated urban development that has altered local socioeconomic dynamics. Proximity to higher education institutions, such as the State University of Santa Cruz (UESC) and the Federal

University of Southern Bahia (UFSB), has contributed to real estate appreciation and the diversification of economic activities in the region. The urban expansion observed along the Ilhéus–Itabuna highway follows recent trends identified in studies on Brazilian cities, which point to transportation infrastructure as one of the main vectors of territorial reconfiguration. Scherer and Amaral (2020) and Silva (2024) show that the availability and improvement of major roadways stimulate the occupation of new areas, accelerate land value appreciation, and favor the implementation of real estate developments in surrounding areas. Thus, the case of the Ilhéus–Itabuna highway does not constitute a local peculiarity but reflects a widely documented contemporary urban pattern, in which investments in regional mobility function as catalysts for the expansion of urban frontiers.

Figure 2. Growth axes of the city of Ilhéus



Source: MapBiomas, data geoprocessed using QGIS. Prepared by the authors (2023).

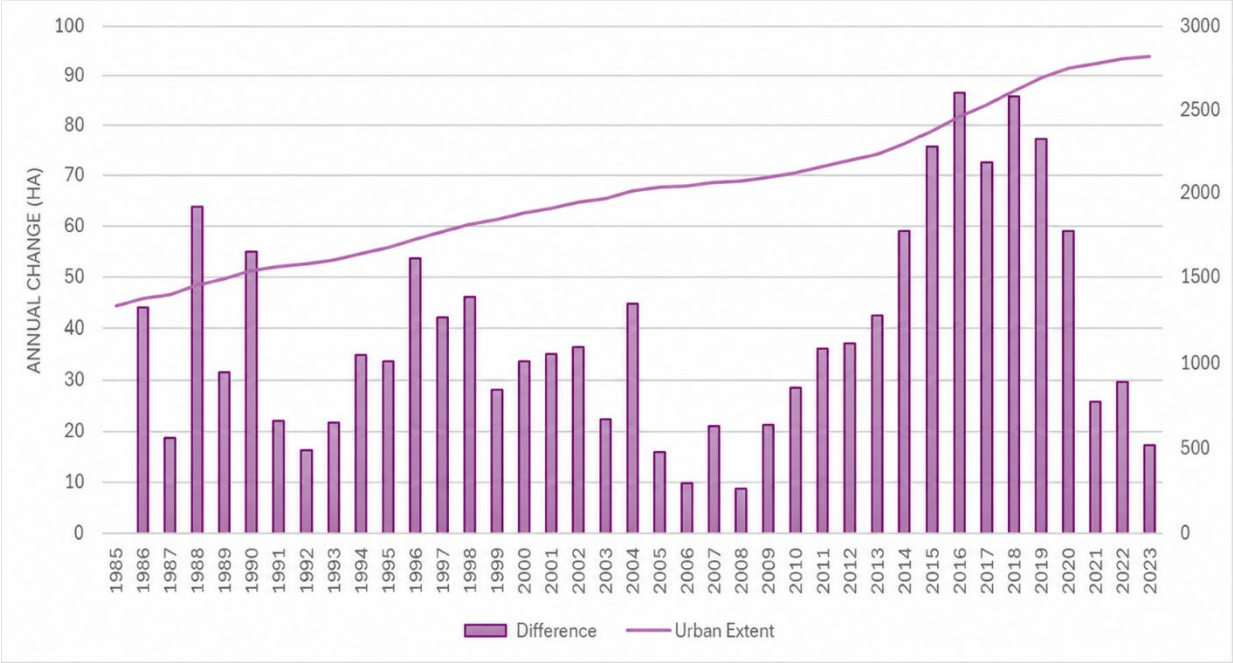
Graph 1 illustrates the expansion of the urbanized area[3] in the city of Ilhéus between 1985 and 2023. In 1985, the municipality's built-up urban area occupied approximately 1,328 hectares (ha), whereas by 2023, it had reached 2,819 ha. In contrast to this urban growth, the resident population of Ilhéus decreased between 1991 and 2022. According to IBGE (2023), the population, which stood at 223,750 inhabitants in 1991, fell to 222,127 in 2000, and to 184,236 in 2010. By 2022, the population settled at 178,649 inhabitants, reflecting a decline

[3] According to MapBiomas (2025), an urbanized area is considered to be "areas with a significant density of buildings and roads, including open spaces free of construction and infrastructure." Available at: https://brasil.mapbiomas.org/wp-content/uploads/sites/4/2024/08/Legenda-Colecao-9-Descricao-Detalhada-PDF-PT.pdf.

over the past three decades.

This demographic decline can be attributed to several factors, including the out-migration of residents seeking better living conditions in other regions, a decrease in local economic opportunities, and the social challenges faced by the city. Studies on the demographic and economic dynamics of Ilhéus indicate that the decline of the cocoa industry, coupled with regional productive restructuring, contributed to the population exodus and the stagnation of economic growth in recent decades (Silva, 2017; Santos & Andrade, 2020). These transformations, as highlighted by the authors, demonstrate a process of territorial reconfiguration in which the physical expansion of the city is not necessarily accompanied by an increase in the resident population.

Graph 1. Evolution of the urban footprint in the city of Ilhéus from 1985 to 2023 in hectares (annual variation and total growth).



Source: MapBiomas. Prepared by the authors, 2025.

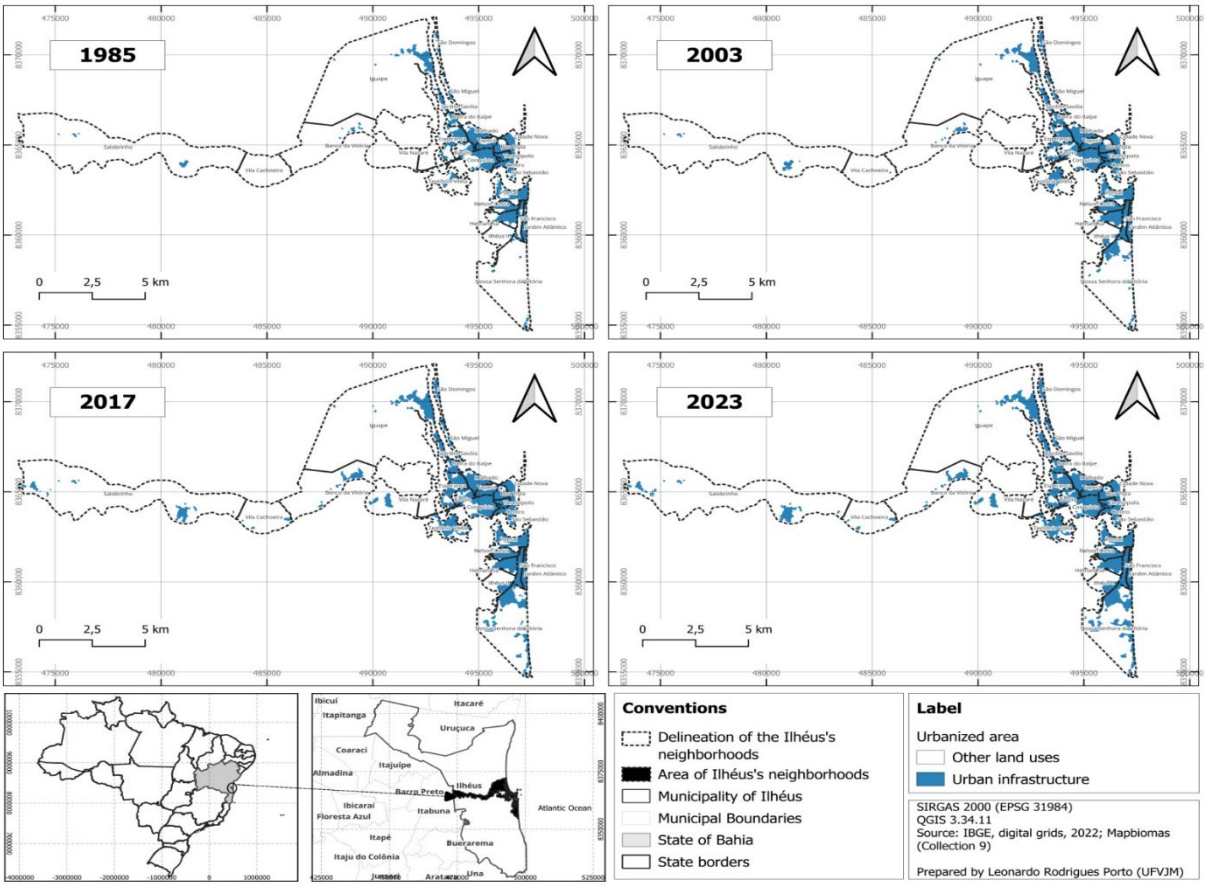
Furthermore, while significant, the expansion of the urban footprint (Figure 3) cannot be unequivocally classified as positive or negative, as its effects depend on planning conditions, infrastructure, and territorial management. The physical growth of cities can generate economic opportunities, but it can also exacerbate socio-spatial inequalities and environmental pressures when it occurs in an unplanned manner (Maricato, 2015). Thus, analyzing these impacts in Ilhéus requires considering both the potential benefits and the risks associated with contemporary urban expansion.

Consequently, sustainable urban growth requires the implementation of effective public policies aimed at expanding and maintaining urban infrastructure, thereby ensuring adequate living conditions for the population. In Brazilian urban contexts, recurring challenges—such as irregular water supply, limitations in basic sanitation, and inadequate solid waste management—tend to compromise quality of life and intensify socio-spatial inequalities (Maricato, 2015; Ferreira & Barbosa, 2020). Overcoming these difficulties requires strategic

investments and coordinated actions between the state and civil society to promote balanced and environmentally responsible urban development.

The lack of basic infrastructure in several areas exacerbates residents' living conditions, reflecting the precarious provision of essential services such as sanitation, healthcare, and education. In Ilhéus, only 65.9% of households are served by adequate sewage systems (IBGE/SNIS, 2022). This deficiency in sanitation not only compromises public health but also affects local water resources, leading to environmental degradation. The lack of infrastructure in Ilhéus is directly related to health problems, such as waterborne diseases and infections. A report by ISC-UFBA (2022) suggests that improving sanitation conditions and access to healthcare could reduce these incidence rates.

Figure 3. Evolution of the urban footprint in the city of Ilhéus (1985–2021)



Source: MapBiomas, data geoprocessed via QGIS. Prepared by the authors, 2023.

Figure 3 further illustrates the spatial evolution of the urban footprint in the municipality of Ilhéus. In the South Zone, for example, the urbanized area increased approximately 3.5-fold over nearly forty years, growing from 153.3 ha in 1985 to 534.8 ha in 2022. Of this increase, 141 ha were added after 2010, indicating that this area experienced the most significant post-2010 urban expansion, as shown in Graph 1. During this period, areas classified as a mosaic of

land uses[4] decreased by 296 ha, which were subsequently converted into urbanized areas. Meanwhile, forest areas decreased by 110 ha.

Consequently, accelerated urbanization in the South Zone of Ilhéus has led to the deforestation of environmental preservation areas, compromising local biodiversity and ecosystem services. Construction along the coastal strip exacerbates the fragility of the natural environment, as urbanization occurs in environmentally sensitive areas (Sampaio, Santos, & Silva, 2021).

Figure 4 illustrates the landscape transformation of the South Zone of Ilhéus between 1979 and 2015, based on photographic archives and official cartographic records. The top image, from 1979, shows a sparsely occupied area characterized by extensive vegetation cover. The bottom image, from 2015, demonstrates how the expansion of the urban fabric is marked by the establishment of residential, commercial, and tourist developments along the coastal strip. The contrast between the two images highlights the need for strategies that reconcile urban development with environmental preservation to ensure the region's sustainability.

Figure 4. Urban growth in the South Zone of the city of Ilhéus (1979, top; 2015, bottom).

Source: SOUB Assessoria.

[4] According to MapBiomas (2023), a mosaic of uses refers to agricultural areas where there is no exact distinction between agriculture and pasture via remote sensing.

Figure 5 illustrates the landscape evolution of the Hernani Sá neighborhood. The top image, dated 1991, shows the newly inaugurated housing complex[5], with units allocated to future residents through a lottery system. The neighborhood exhibits a linear configuration, with visible planning evidenced by a well-defined layout of streets and avenues. The bottom image, from 2023, indicates that the locality's orderly structure has been maintained. However, over the years, minor horizontal expansion has occurred while dwellings have been adapted and renovated to reflect the residents' economic realities, resulting in an urban environment that no longer resembles its original 1991 configuration.

Figure 5. Landscape evolution of the Hernani Sá neighborhood (Urbis) - 1991 (top) and 2023 (bottom).

Source: SOUB Assessoria (top image) and Google Earth (bottom image).

Figure 6 presents images of the construction of the Lomanto Jr. Bridge in 1966, which

[5] The Hernani Sá neighborhood, known as Urbis, corresponds to a housing complex implemented in the context of public policies for popular housing developed in Brazil from the second half of the 20th century, especially associated with the actions of Housing Companies (COHABs) and state housing production programs. These developments aimed to reduce the urban housing deficit, characterized by standardized projects, peripheral implementation, and rational spatial organization, with a regular road layout and prior definition of lots and residential units, frequently accompanied by selection or lottery processes for beneficiaries.

marked a significant moment in the urban history of Ilhéus. This bridge plays a key role in connecting the South Zone to the city center, transforming the landscape and facilitating mobility. Previously, crossings were made by ferry, limiting the flow of people. With the bridge, geographic barriers were overcome, integrating neighborhoods and facilitating access to the city center. Beyond its functionality, it became a symbol of modernity, incorporating itself into the landscape and the city's visual identity.

Figure 6. Inauguration of the Lomanto Jr. Bridge on August 15, 1966, and recent images from 2000 and 2025.

Source: Prepared by the author using Google's open databases.

In 1999, the Ilhéus II neighborhood exhibited characteristics indicative of its early stages of development (Figure 7). Unpaved streets, few commercial establishments, and a predominance of empty lots suggested a location with ample potential for expansion. The image depicts the evolution of the neighborhood's urban landscape over the past decades, reflecting the promise of an area seeking its identity. Infrastructure improvements triggered changes in the landscape, leading to the construction of residences and an active commercial sector, as well as green areas, highlighting preserved zones. The increase in the number of residences and the diversification of commercial options indicate population growth and greater economic

activity in the neighborhood[6]. Thus, the Ilhéus II neighborhood now stands as a vital and consolidated part of the urban landscape in the South Zone of Ilhéus.

Figure 7. Evolution of the landscape in the Ilhéus II neighborhood: 1999 (left) and 2018 (right).

Source: SOUB Assessoria

Figure 8 presents an image taken in the South Zone of Ilhéus in 2018, highlighting the transformations that have shaped the urban landscape. On the left side of the image, the airport runway stands out, symbolizing connectivity and economic growth. The airport infrastructure serves as an important logistical facility and a striking presence in the landscape, as the orderly geometry of the runway contrasts with the surrounding urban fabric. In the background, the Nelson Costa and Hernani Sá neighborhoods form an urban polygon intertwined with this facility.

Figure 8. South Zone of Ilhéus (2018).

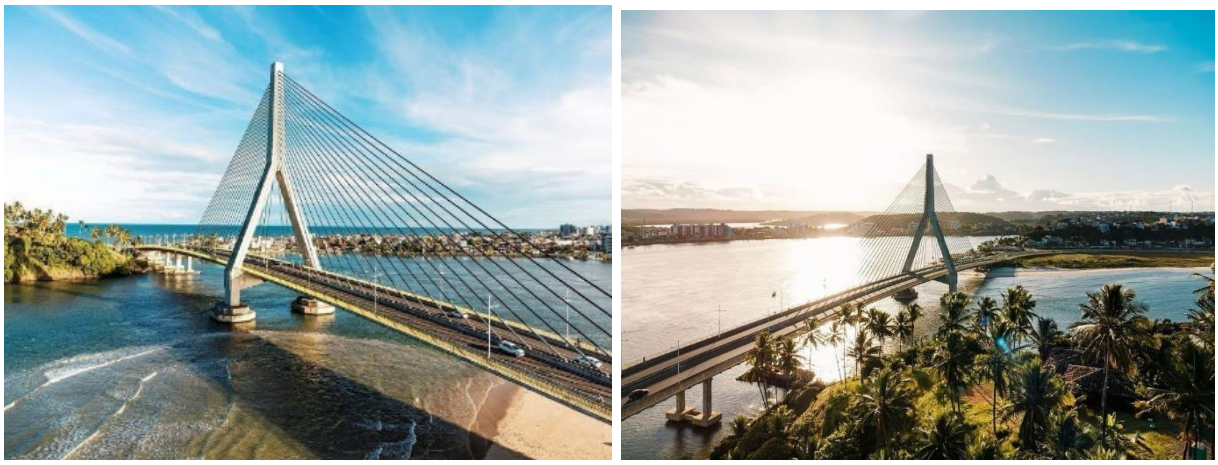
Source: SOUB Assessoria.

[6] This information is complemented based on a landscape reading that was carried out *in situ* in the year 2024.

The presence of the airport runway highlights the city's strategic importance as a regional hub. However, its presence within the urban grid imposes limitations on infrastructure expansion, flow of people and vehicles, and the growth of the airport itself, which is confined between the sea, the river, and the urban fabric.

Figure 9 illustrates the Jorge Amado Bridge, inaugurated on July 1, 2020, which represents a significant milestone in the region's urban development and infrastructure. Its inauguration transformed accessibility and integration within the city, specifically along the center-South Zone axis, providing an efficient route for residents and visitors. The Jorge Amado Bridge stands out for its modern design and integration with the urban environment, contributing to landscape enhancement and local economic development. The bridge not only brought practical improvements to transportation and mobility in the region but also became an architectural and tourist landmark, adding value to the area's historical and cultural heritage and strengthening local identity.

Figure 9. Jorge Amado Bridge – Center/South Zone – Ilhéus, BA (2023).



Source: Drone Lins.

Finally, Figure 10 presents three image excerpts of Ilhéus's most recent urban infrastructure: the first stage of the duplication of the BA-001 Highway (Ilhéus-Olivença direction)[7]. This new infrastructure improves mobility and drives the city's expansion toward the South Zone. Consequently, Ilhéus is experiencing socioeconomic transformation, real estate appreciation and speculation, and the expansion of urban services.

[7] The duplication work on the BA 001 Highway had its first stage completed and delivered in May 2021, corresponding to the stretch from the airport to the Ceplus neighborhood. In turn, a second stage was planned to extend the duplication towards Olivença, with a view to improving traffic in the south zone of Ilhéus. However, the works are paralyzed, with an estimated completion date between the end of 2025 and the beginning of 2026. Available at :https://www.bahiananoticias.com.br/v1/2024/11/11/duplicacao-da-ba-001-em-ilheus-obras-na-zona-sul-serao-retomadas-com-nova-empresa/

Figure 10. BA-001 Highway: Ilhéus-Olivença (2023).

Source: Drone Lins

Given this context, the South Zone of Ilhéus has established itself as one of the municipality's main tourist hubs, concentrating hotel developments, gated residential communities, restaurants, leisure infrastructure, and tourism-oriented services. This process has attracted private investments especially in hospitality, medium- and high-end real estate, gastronomy, leisure facilities, and tourism-associated services, boosting the generation of formal and informal jobs in the sector (IBGE, 2022; Ministério do Turismo, 2021).

4.2 The Nossa Senhora da Vitória Neighborhood

The emergence of the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood, located in the South Zone of Ilhéus (BA), was marked by conditions of poverty, with thatched-roof dwellings that gave rise to its former name, "Rua de Palha" (Straw Street). Initially composed of precarious housing, the neighborhood reflected the socioeconomic vulnerability of its residents. Soares (2008) noted that, in Ilhéus, neighborhoods like Nossa Senhora da Vitória were historically among the most populous and poorest in the city's southern region. They faced shortages of basic infrastructure and public services, which highlights the precarious housing conditions during the early phases of urban occupation.

Over the years, urbanization processes—such as street paving, the implementation of sanitation systems, and the expansion of public lighting—contributed to improvements in residents' living conditions. These structural changes fostered the expansion of small businesses, greater circulation of services, the strengthening of community networks, an increase in the area's real estate value, and the expansion of informal and formal work opportunities (Anjos, 2023).

Currently, the neighborhood is part of the real estate boom in Ilhéus. Modern vertical developments contrast with the densification of simple dwellings, revealing a mixed landscape

of buildings, commerce, and services, marked by diversity and urban polarization. For example, in Figure 11 on the left, a 1999 photograph of the old Rua de Palha, characterized by unpaved roads, empty lots, a lack of verticalization, and an unoccupied beachfront stretch; on the right, a 2020 photograph of the current Rua São Jorge (formerly Rua de Palha), depicts a scenario of greater densification integrated into the formal urban grid, now featuring paved roads, greater lot occupation, verticalized buildings, and, most notably, the occupation of the waterfront. The juxtaposition of these images documents the material progress of the territory and demonstrates the centrality of the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood in the contemporary urban structuring of Ilhéus. One can observe, for example, the progressive incorporation of material improvements, which result in the reconfiguration of daily practices.

Figure 11. Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood: the old Rua de Palha (1999) and today's Rua São Jorge (2020).

Source: SOUB Assessoria.

Figure 12 shows the waterfront perspective of the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood. Spanning a 15-year interval, the images reveal a transformation in the landscape and the urban environment. The first image captures the land that currently houses part of the Cidadelle Praia gated community and the Mar à Vista Subdivision, which in 2008 was covered

by a land-use mosaic and fragments of the Atlantic Forest. In contrast, the image on the right, dated 15 years later (2023), highlights the impact of development and civil construction activities. The land is currently occupied not only by the Cidadelle Praia gated community but also by wholesale supermarkets (Atacadão and Assaí) that have established themselves in the area.

Figure 12. Part of the Cidadelle Praia gated community and the established wholesale supermarkets, alongside the 2008 record (left image), where there was no construction.

Source: SOUB Assessoria.

With the rapid advance of urbanization and the intensification of public and private investments in the region, the possibilities for urban expansion have increased, "stretching" the city even further toward the South Zone. This movement tends to consolidate the area as a potential new hub of urban centrality in Ilhéus, reinforcing its strategic importance in the municipality's spatial reorganization.

4.3 Challenges to Public Policies for Urban Expansion

According to Santos (2006), urban policies must organize space to promote both economic growth and improved living conditions. In this context, the processing of the new Municipal Master Plan reveals a lag in public guidelines relative to the pace of urbanization.[8] Law No. 3,746/2015, which regulates land use and occupation in Ilhéus and was approved before the conclusion of the Master Plan, underwent changes in 2018 (Law No. 3,967/2018). However, these modifications did not comprehensively address the municipality's most current urban demands and guidelines. The 1988 Federal Constitution recognizes the Master Plan as a fundamental instrument for spatial planning, mandating public participation. The lack of integration between urban legislation instruments and strategic planning practices was highlighted by Maricato (2015) in her analysis of how the discontinuity between norms and urban policies produces socio-spatial inequalities in Brazilian cities.

The outdated nature of the Master Plan and its lack of integration with land-use legislation highlight limitations in the public sector's response to growing urbanization. This land-use law, without the backing of an updated Master Plan, favors real estate speculation and compromises housing and environmental preservation policies. In Ilhéus, the overlap between

[8] Indeed, the municipality of Ilhéus still relies on the 2006 Master Plan (Municipal Law No. 3,265/2006), and a new text has not yet been promulgated, even 10 years after its expiration.

urban and rural zones, together with deficiencies in spatial planning, reinforces the risk of inadequate land occupation and weak regulatory effectiveness (Macedo & Baitz, 2023). It is essential to align urban planning with legal guidelines to ensure sustainable development.

Indeed, the outdated nature of Master Plans and the lack of coherence between planning instruments and land-use laws result in processes of unplanned urbanization and real estate speculation. According to Maricato (2011), weak enforcement of the instruments established by the City Statute has perpetuated socio-spatial segregation in Brazilian cities. In the same vein, Santos Júnior and Montandon (2020) highlight that the periodic updating of Master Plans and their integration with housing and environmental policies are essential conditions for ensuring spatial justice and urban sustainability.

The analysis of the South Zone of Ilhéus demonstrates both advances and challenges. Infrastructure upgrades, such as paving and sanitation, have enhanced residents' quality of life. However, rapid and poorly planned urbanization has led to environmental impacts, such as the degradation of green areas and water pollution. Gentrification[9] and speculation have caused the displacement of low-income populations, exacerbating inequalities (Paradeda, 2024; Silva & Meneses, 2011; Santos *et al*., 2021).

This process stems from rising property values driven by infrastructure works and tourism. The replacement of low-income populations by higher-income groups alters socioeconomic dynamics and exacerbates segregation (Bourguignon, 2018; Harvey, 2017). Landscape transformations are also notable; Medeiros (2018) emphasizes that urban interventions alter the cultural identity of cities.

Thus, in Ilhéus, the construction of new roads and commercial areas has modified visual landmarks and urban perception (Anjos, 2023), which can lead to a loss of historical character. Specific urban interventions include programs such as the Sol e Mar housing complex—located in the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood—which is aimed at low-income families. Initiatives like Minha Casa, Minha Vida (My House, My Life) have contributed to reducing the housing deficit (Silva & Meneses, 2011), while improvements in squares and leisure areas promote social inclusion and community cohesion. Nevertheless, neighborhoods like Nossa Senhora da Vitória and localities like Couto and Teotônio Vilela continue to face deficiencies in sanitation, paving, and public spaces, requiring ongoing interventions.

When comparing Ilhéus to Bahian cities of similar size, such as Itabuna and Vitória da Conquista, common challenges are observed: population growth, expansion of the urban footprint, pressure on infrastructure, and the need for effective planning (Batista & Ferraz, 2021). Productive restructuring processes and the expansion of service circuits intensify socio-spatial inequalities in mid-sized cities in the Northeast (Reis, Santana & Muniz Filho, 2024). Conversely, successful experiences in Espírito Santo show that participatory urban planning strategies contribute to reducing conflicts between urban expansion and environmental preservation (Ramos & Ramos, 2022). According to Silva (2023), the effectiveness of urban policies depends directly on the capacity for coordination between the Union, states, and municipalities.

Consequently, the South Zone of Ilhéus faces numerous challenges arising from intense urban transformations. One of the main problems is the pressure on existing infrastructure, which often fails to keep pace with the accelerated rate of urban growth. These structural

[9] Gentrification is a process of urban transformation that occurs when previously devalued areas of a city undergo a process of renewal and requalification, generally attracting wealthier residents and investments; this phenomenon can result in significant real estate appreciation and improvements in the area's infrastructure and services, as well as pressure on environmental resources.

deficiencies are associated with serious urban consequences, such as sanitary risks, overburdened healthcare facilities, and inadequate basic services.

Despite these challenges, the South Zone of Ilhéus presents several opportunities for promoting sustainable and inclusive development. This region, due to its strategic location and geographic characteristics, offers significant potential for investments in urban infrastructure, ecotourism, and planned social housing. Capitalizing on these opportunities involves initiatives aimed at the sustainable use of natural resources, the inclusion of sustainable technologies in the urbanization process, and the promotion of public policies that encourage community participation in local planning.

Medeiros (2018) argues that the integration of sustainable urban planning practices can transform risk areas into spaces of opportunity, promoting social equity and environmental protection. The adoption of green technologies, such as rainwater harvesting and reuse systems, and the implementation of renewable energy sources can reduce the environmental impact of urbanization and improve the resilience of urban infrastructure.

Participatory planning, in turn, is a widely recognized tool in Brazilian urban management, seeking to empower civil society through the inclusion of diverse actors in decision-making processes (Silva, 2024; Demo, 1994).

Moving forward, it is essential to adopt an integrated and sustainable approach to public policies and urban planning in the South Zone of Ilhéus. It is recommended that a participatory Master Plan be drafted to address environmental preservation, sustainable economic development, and social inclusion. The implementation of continuous monitoring and evaluation systems can ensure the effectiveness of these policies and allow for necessary adjustments over time. Therefore, promoting partnerships among the government, the private sector, and civil society can mobilize resources and *expertise*, ensuring the efficient execution of urban projects and an improved quality of life in the region.

5 Conclusion

The social, economic, and landscape transformations observed in the city of Ilhéus between 1985 and 2023 reveal an accelerated urban expansion process, particularly concentrated in the South Zone. This growth, while significant and driven by complex dynamics such as rising property values, demographic shifts, and investments in infrastructure, has exposed striking contradictions between progress and planning. The South Zone has become the epicenter of this movement, experiencing profound changes in its urban configuration and social fabric. However, what at first glance appears to be development hides structural weaknesses that compromise the sustainability and equity of the region.

Revisiting the proposed objective, this study sought to examine the urban transformations of the South Zone of Ilhéus, focusing on the Nossa Senhora da Vitória neighborhood, by integrating economic, social, and landscape dimensions to understand the dynamics that shape local urban growth. The analysis revealed that the expansion of the urban footprint, although accompanied by investments, has not been supported by effective urban planning, which exacerbates inequalities and environmental pressures.

This study contributes to the field of urban and regional studies by offering a contemporary analysis of a mid-sized coastal Northeastern city outside the large metropolitan hubs, highlighting regional specificities and challenges that reflect the broader pattern of Brazilian urbanization.

The main contributions of this study lie at the interface between urban management and regional dynamics, demonstrating how spatial planning, when disconnected from housing,

environmental, and infrastructure policies, tends to reproduce inequalities and compromise sustainable development. By highlighting the need to update the Master Plan and foster greater integration among municipal management instruments, this article reinforces the role of local public administration as a strategic agent in building more inclusive and resilient cities.

Given this scenario, it is imperative that the urban development of the South Zone—and of Ilhéus as a whole—be guided by principles of socio-spatial justice, citizen participation, and ecological sustainability. The revision and effective application of the Master Plan, with a focus on controlling urban sprawl, protecting preservation areas, and promoting green technologies, are urgent measures. The creation of public spaces for social interaction and the strengthening of inclusion policies are equally crucial for promoting a fairer and more balanced city.

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