

Rethinking the World from the Perspective of Buen Vivir

About the authors and their positions

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1. What is the key idea of Buen Vivir?

What is Buen Vivir?

„We will never create a perfect world.

And we should be aware of that.“

Carlos Taibo, 2015

This article outlines the scope and limits of Buen Vivir, which can be translated as ‘good life’ or ‘good living’. This ‘good life’ has always been a pluralistic concept, namely ‘buenos convivires’: different ways of ‘living well together’. This is therefore not about opening the gates to a single, homogeneous, unrealisable good life but far more about people living well together in a community, different communities living well together, and individuals and communities living well with nature.

The good life should be considered as something that is undergoing a constant construction and reproduction process. It is not a static concept, and certainly not a backward one. Buen Vivir is a central element of the philosophy of many societies. From this perspective, it is a design for life that has global potential despite having been marginalised in the past.

In some indigenous communities, there is no concept analogous to the ‘modern’ Western concept of development. There is no concept of a linear life with a former and subsequent state (in this case underdevelopment and development). Nor are there concepts of wealth and poverty based on the accumulation or lack of material goods.

As such, Buen Vivir entails a world view that differs from the Western world view in that it has community and not capitalist roots. It breaks both with the anthropocentric view of capitalism as the dominant civilisation and with the different manifestations of socialism to date. The latter must be rethought from a socio-biocentric position and cannot be updated by simply changing the name.

The good life entails a process of decolonisation, which should also involve depatriarchalisation (see Kothari et al 2015). This necessitates a profound process of intellectual decolonisation on political, social, economic and cultural levels.

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Ultimately, Buen Vivir is highly subversive. It is not an invitation to return to the past or to an idyllic but otherwise non-existent world. It should also not become a kind of religion with its own commandments, rules and functions, including political ones. We can understand Buen Vivir to be persons living in harmony with themselves, with other people in the community, harmony within the community and between humans and nature.

Reciprocity practices in the Andean and Amazonian regions

There are many examples of economic practices involving reciprocity, solidarity and responses based on social action in the Andean and Amazonian region. Without asserting their transferability or generalisability, the following is a brief list of some forms of economic relations in indigenous communities:

- *Minka (minga)*: A mutual aid institution in the community setting. It guarantees labour that serves the common good and meets the collective needs and interests of the community, for example, in the execution of projects, such as the construction and maintenance of an irrigation canal or road. It is thus a form of collective work.
- *Ranti-ranti*: Unlike the specific one-off barter economy found in the economic systems of some mestizos, here barter is part of a chain that leads to an endless series of transfers of value, products and work days. This is based on the principle of 'giving and taking', without delimiting this to time, actions or space, and is linked to certain ethnic, cultural and historical values in the community.
- *Uyanza*: This is a call for communities to live together and in unity. Uyanza also offers the opportunity to thank Mother Earth for her ability to regenerate and provide humans with her produce. It is also an institution of social aid, including families who have made their labour available on loan.
- *Uniguilla*: Bartering to supplement food and useful objects. This enables improved nutrition, with products from other regions and different ecological niches.
- *Waki*: In a person's absence, his agricultural land is allocated to other communities or families, who cultivate the land. The produce is divided between the two families or communities. This system is also used for animal care and breeding.
- *Makikuna*: A form of support that involves the whole community, extended family, friends and neighbours. It is a type of moral support at the time a family requires it most, particu-

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larly in unexpected situations and emergencies.

2. Who is part of Buen Vivir, what do they do?

Buen Vivir: Indigenous movements fighting for alternative ways of life

The origins of Buen Vivir

The thoughts surrounding Buen Vivir have only recently entered public discourse, particularly in Ecuador and Bolivia; their emergence can be explained by the battles of indigenous communities, which particularly gained strength at the end of the 20th century. Associated values, experiences, practices and world views in general already existed before the arrival of the European conquistadors. However, they were silenced, marginalised or openly opposed. One should not forget that the good life is not unique to Latin America but has been practised in many different epochs and regions of Mother Earth.

The best-known linguistic references to the good life take us back to the original languages of Ecuador and Bolivia: in the former, there is 'Buen Vivir' (Spanish) or 'Sumak Kawsay' (Kichwa) and in the latter 'Vivir Bien' (Spanish) or 'Suma Qamaña' (Aymara), 'Sumak Kawsay' (Quechua), 'Ñande Reko' or 'Tekó Porã' (Guarani). Similar notions exist in other indigenous cultures, such as those of the Mapuche in Chile, the Guarani in Paraguay, the Kuna in Panama, the Shuar and Achua in the Ecuadorian Amazon, and the Maya in Guatemala and Chiapas (Mexico). The African term 'ubuntu' ('sense of community') and the Indian 'swaraj' (radical ecological democracy) are other examples.

This diversity has resulted in numerous movements that further the ideas of the good life. However, one cannot speak of a single good life movement as such. Some groups, despite favouring, defending, articulating and promoting Buen Vivir, do not fly the Buen Vivir flag. Moreover, this is about experiences, values and practices that already exist in different parts of the planet and about gaining strength from different perspectives. There has so far been no effort to organise these processes in a more institutionalised way, in order to avoid rigid dogmatic visions and proposals, which ultimately suffocate the creativity needed to construct buenos convivires. In Bolivia and Ecuador, the concept of Buen Vivir has constitutional status, being included in the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, and the 2009 Constitution of the Plurinational State of Bolivia.

The Ecuadorian constitution contains several fundamental ideas that emerged simultaneously and in a unique way in this small country: for example, the recognition of the rights of nature and of the fundamental right to water, which bans any form of privatisation of this essential resource, and the idea of leaving crude oil in the Amazon below ground. The constitution's

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preamble sets out the aim of building a ‘new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living, the *sumak kawsay*.’

At the same time, we must be wary of falling into the ‘trap’ of accepting Ecuadorian and Bolivian official propaganda on the good life. At the government level, this concept has been compromised by being ranked below demands for concentrating power and disciplining societies, while capitalism has been modernised.

Buen Vivir in the context of Latin American history

Understanding the good life requires an understanding of the history and current situation of indigenous peoples and nations, fundamentally a process based on the principle of historical continuity. *Buen Vivir* is part of a long quest for alternative lifestyles, forged by the passionate battles of indigenous peoples and nations. What is remarkable about these alternative proposals is that they come from groups that have long been marginalised, excluded, exploited or even destroyed. Their long-disregarded proposals invite us to break with a number of concepts that have been taken for granted until now.

The proposals of *Buen Vivir* are gaining traction in a moment of crisis in the Latin American oligarchic national State, which is rooted in colonialism and neoliberalism, thanks to the growing organisational efforts of indigenous and other grassroots movements. The idea of being in harmony with nature, characterising *Buen Vivir*, promotes discussion on environmentally friendly alternatives.

The indigenous community in the broadest sense is pursuing a collective project for the future. The utopias of the Andes and the Amazon are currently shaping discourse, political projects and social, cultural and economic practice. This approach should not be exclusionary, however, and should not result in dogmatic visions. It must be expanded with perceptions from other regions of the world, connected to one another spiritually, and potentially also politically, in their fight for a transformation of civilisation.

Yasuní-ITT Initiative – on the difficulty of achieving global utopias

In addition to theories regarding large-scale change, there are also concrete examples, even at a global level. The Yasuní-ITT Initiative’s proposal to leave oil under the ground in the Ecuadorian Amazon was and remains an excellent example of global action that was started by the civil society of a small country. It should not be forgotten that the Ecuadorian Amazon region has been impacted by oil extraction for decades. Consequently, many indigenous people living in voluntary isolation have left the extraction regions for the last remaining forest areas. The indigenous population is concentrated and increasing in an ever smaller area that has already lost some of its original biodiversity. This has led to increasing resistance from these groups to oil ex-

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traction, which, in turn, has stimulated growing support from other movements in Ecuador and around the world.

In view of the highly complex situation, the Yasuní-ITT initiative has four aims: 1. To protect the land and thus the lives of the indigenous peoples who live in voluntary isolation; 2. To preserve the national park's unique biodiversity (the Yasuní National Park has the highest biodiversity recorded on the planet); 3. To protect the global climate by not exploiting large amounts of crude oil, thus avoiding 410 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions; 4. To take a first exemplary step toward a post-fossil fuel era in Ecuador.

And that is not all. In addition, there could be a fifth aim: That we humans find concrete solutions to the critical global problems resulting from climate change caused by us, and worsened by the latest period of global capital expansion.

In return for the Yasuní-ITT initiative Ecuador expected a financial contribution from the international community, with other countries, especially the more prosperous societies, taking on their share of the responsibility, depending on the environmental destruction they had caused. This was not conceived as compensation for continuing to act in line with the traditional concept of development (*desarrollismo*). Instead, the payment was meant to be the starting point for the creation of a new scenario in which the severe global imbalances caused by extractivism and economic growth would be stopped and reversed. Unfortunately the initiative has failed because rich countries have not shouldered their responsibility and Ecuador's government did not respond sufficiently to the revolutionary challenge from civil society (see Acosta 2014a and b).

Nevertheless, one legacy of the initiative should be underlined: The emergence of a strong social movement of young people committed to defending Yasuní, who were well organised and united in their call for a transformation of civilisation.

Currently, there are many concrete alternative proposals, not to be discussed here for reasons of space. What is important is that these ideas have spread considerably in recent years, even beyond national borders¹, and that this dissemination is part of the long and complex emancipation process of humanity

¹The following examples should be highlighted among many others: In Ecuador, the different groups who joined forces in the Unidad Plurinacional de Izquierdas (Plurinational Unity of Left Wing Groups) proposed a governmental plan on the basis of Buen Vivir or Sumak Kawsay. See here: Acosta 2013 and the programme RAIZ — *Movimiento Ciudadanista* in Brazil, 2016: Carta Ciudadanista Estatuto, www.raiz.org.br.

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3. How do you see the relationship between Buen Vivir and Degrowth?

Furthering degrowth's horizons with Buen Vivir

Degrowth in the Global North, post-extractivism in the Global South

We now face the essential challenge of ending the frenzy of economic growth or even achieving degrowth, particularly in the Global North. On a finite planet, there is no room for permanent economic growth. If we continue down this path, we will reach a situation that is no longer environmentally sustainable and is increasingly socially explosive. Overcoming this creed of economic growth, particularly in the Global North, must be accompanied by abandoning extractivism in the Global South. This means that we must develop and pursue post-extractivist strategies.

The relation between these two processes of degrowth and post-extractivism in the global context is obvious: If economies in the North are no longer to grow, demand must fall. In this case, it would no longer make sense for countries in the South to base their economies on exporting raw materials to the North. For this reason, and many others, it is important for poor countries to also take on degrowth in a responsible manner.

However, the convergence of the visions and actions in post-extractivism and degrowth does not mean that poor countries should sacrifice an improvement in their living conditions in order that rich countries continue their unsustainable level of consumption and waste. Not at all.

Criticism of capitalism as a common denominator

The common denominator in these two perspectives is a severe criticism of capitalism, which involves the increasing commercialisation of societal fabric and nature. Exponents of both degrowth and Buen Vivir agree that the fundamental problem is the way in which progress, development and economic growth are understood and implemented. Both approaches complement each other conceptually: degrowth is a 'missile word', destructive, not constructive, while Buen Vivir is constructive at its core (see Unceta 2014).

A move away from capitalism involves transition through a variety of alternative practices. There are many such non-capitalist practices around the world. These include examples with utopian objectives that call for the harmonious co-existence of humans and the environment, combining the good life with degrowth efforts. This is ultimately about abandoning the failed attempt to pursue production-oriented development as a mechanistic one-way street of economic growth, a global mandate and a straight line. This is a radical change. It is not about implementing examples that have allegedly been successful in industrial countries in the Global South. Firstly, this is impossible. Secondly, these examples have not in reality been successful (see Tortosa 2011).

4. Which suggestions do they have to each other?

Achieving a utopia in the indigenous world

The indigenous world was a victim of the conquista and colonisation. These exploitative and repressive processes continue to impact the current situation, colonial and capitalist influence still being evident in many different forms, precluding the possibility of a romantic approach to indigenous reality. The good life, as the sum total of practices that oppose colonialism and its consequences, encourages a certain way of life in indigenous communities - particularly in those that have not been absorbed by capitalistic modernity or that have decided to isolate themselves from it. There are also elements of Buen Vivir in communities that have 'succumbed' to modernity. Even in regions that are not directly connected to the indigenous world, community lifestyles are being developed that promote harmony among members and with nature.

In politics, or rather, in political decision-making, a different form of governance is being practised with Buen Vivir at community and ayllu level in broad areas of the Andean and Amazonian region with the aim of creating a horizontal society². This requires direct democracy, direct action and self-management instead of new forms of top-down and, even more importantly, instead of an individual 'enlightened' leader. With broad and participative debates, a consensus is reached by the community.

A key element here is that the solution is not the State, and even less the market. Rather, another type of State is needed –a plurinational State as proposed by the indigenous movements in Bolivia and Ecuador– which is not hierarchical or authoritarian, and which is controlled from below at the community level³. The big question that now arises is how politics can be regained as a dynamic space within society.

Our democracy can learn a lot from these experiences.

Buen Vivir in the urban space

Buen Vivir is not restricted to the countryside, although it originated there. However, today's urban spaces are very far from dealing with the environment respectfully and with solidarity. One of the greatest and most complex challenges is to conceptualise the good life for and in cities.

In this respect, it should not be forgotten that many migrants living in cities maintain close ties to their original communities. One such example can be seen in the groups that have joined forces to [re]construct forms of Buen Vivir in the Bolivian city of El Alto. In other areas of the world, there are also many interesting practices and approaches. An example from the growing

²Ayllu refers to the entirety of families by blood or by marriage.

³Bolivia has not come far in this regard, and Ecuador even less so.

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number of alternatives is transition towns, the aim of which is to hand control to communities in order to survive the challenge of climate change and create a post-fossil fuel economy. This movement is active in many countries and has much in common with Buen Vivir.

5. Outlook: Space for visions, suggestions or wishes

Buen Vivir: An inspirational and diverse approach

Buen Vivir integrates various humanist and anti-utilitarian approaches from different regions (at least in theory). Since the beginning of the 21st century in particular, increasing and diverse protest movements opposing the classical understanding of development have gained momentum. The growing environmental movement should be highlighted here in relation to environmental destruction and the signs of exhaustion in nature (see Acosta 2012).

Buen Vivir approaches from the indigenous Andean and Amazonian region can be combined with other approaches to community life, for example, those of the Zapatistas or Kurds, as well as those of feminist, farming and environmental struggles. They all have many things in common with the flourishing degrowth movement.

The primary lesson is that there is no one true approach. Buen Vivir is not a synthetic, monocultural proposal. Rather, the good life takes on contributions and knowledge from other cultures that question the implications and requirements of the dominant form of modernity. It thus does not reject modern technologies as long as these are compatible with the creation of harmonious community relations with respect for nature.

Solidarity with both nature and the community is needed

New ethics are needed to organise life in self-managed community spaces without power relationships. The emerging society should be horizontal, open and non-sectarian. An economy based on these ethics will promote the reproduction of life and not capital, will secure the existence of all creatures and move beyond the current human-focused reality, in which humans are the rulers of the universe, in all its variants.

If we are moving beyond the exploitation of nature for the purpose of accumulating capital, there are even more reasons to stop exploiting human beings. We will have to recognise that human beings are creatures that are not individuals by nature but rather part of a community, and that we are that community. These communities, peoples, nations and countries should live in harmony with one another.

This dual solidarity - with nature and within the community - requires that we take the civilising step of recognising applicable human rights and the rights of nature without restrictions.

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