

The Concept of “Living Well (Buen Vivir)”

A Bolivian viewpoint

We should live in a simple way for others to be able to live as well.
Mahatma Gandhi

He who is richer is not who has more, but who needs less.
Zapotec saying, Oaxaca, Mexico

We suffer the severe effects of climate change, of the energy, food and financial crises. This is not the product of human beings in general, but of the existing inhuman capitalist system, with its unlimited industrial development. It is brought about by minority groups who control world power, concentrating wealth and power on themselves alone.

Concentrating capital in only a few hands is no solution for humanity, neither for life itself, because as a consequence many lives are lost in floods, by intervention or by wars, so many lives through hunger, poverty and usually curable diseases.

It brings selfishness, individualism, even regionalism, thirst for profit, the search for pleasure and luxury thinking only about profiting, never having regard to brotherhood among the human beings who live on planet Earth. This not only affects people, but also nature and the planet. And when the peoples organize themselves, or rise against oppression, those minority groups call for violence, weapons, and even military intervention from other countries.

Living Well, Not Better

Faced with so much disproportion and wealth concentration in the world, so many wars and famine, Bolivia proposes Living Well, not as a *way to live better* at the expense of others, but an idea of Living Well based on the experience of our peoples. In the words of the President of the Republic of Bolivia, Evo Morales Ayma, Living Well means living within a community, a brotherhood, and particularly completing each other, without exploiters or exploited, without people being excluded or people who exclude, without people being segregated or people who segregate.

Lying, stealing, destroying nature possibly will allow us to *live better*, but that is not Living Well. On the contrary, Living Well rather means complementing one another and not competing against each other, sharing, not taking advantage of one's neighbor, living in harmony among people and with nature. It is the basis of the defense of nature, of life itself and of all humanity, it's the basis to save humanity from the dangers of an individualistic and highly aggressive, racist and warmongering minority.

Living Well is not the same as *living better*, living better than others, because in order to *live better* than others, it is necessary to exploit, to embark upon serious competition, concentrating wealth in few hands. Trying to live better is selfish, and shows apathy, individualism. Some want to live better, whilst others, the majority, continue living poorly. Not taking an interest in other people's lives, means caring only for the individual's own life, at most in the life of their family.

As a different vision of life, Living Well is contrary to luxury, opulence and waste, it is contrary to consumerism. In some countries of the North, in big metropolitan cities, people buy clothes they throw away after wearing them only once. That lack of care for others results in oligarchies, nobility, aristocracy, elites who always seek to *live better* at other people's expense.

Nobody says : I will only take care of myself

Within the framework of Living Well, what matters the most is not the individual. What matters the most is the community, where all the families live together. We form part of the community as the leaf forms part of the plant. Nobody says: I will just take care of myself; I don't care about my community. It is as absurd as if the leaf said to the plant: I do not care about the community; I will only take care of myself. It is just as preposterous as if the leaf would tell the plant: I do not care about you, I will only take care of myself.

We are all valuable, we all have a space, duties, and responsibilities. We all need everybody else. Based on complementing each other, the common wealth, organized mutual support, the community and the community life develop their ability without destroying man and nature.

Work is happiness

Not working and exploiting our neighbors will possibly allow us to *live better*, but that is not Living Well. When one is living well, work is happiness. Work is learning to grow up, melting into the fascinating reproduction of life. It is an organic action such as breathing or walking. Within the Living Well framework, work is general, for everyone and everything, from a child to a grandfather. It's for men, women and even nature itself. Among us, nobody lives to benefit from the work of others. Private accumulation is unknown and unnecessary. Community accumulation always fills the warehouse.

In our communities we do not seek, we do not want anyone to live better, as development programs tell us. Development is related to *living better*, and all the development programs implemented among different States and governments, starting from the church, have encouraged us to *live better*.

Development depends on an ever-increasing use of energy, primarily oil. We have been led to believe that development is the salvation of mankind and that it will help us to live better, but without oil there is no development. And for us, with or without oil, sustainable and unsustainable development means anti-development, which is the cause of major disparities in nature and between people.

Development can be a disaster

Consequently, Living Well is contrary to capitalist development and goes beyond socialism. For capitalism, what matters the most is money, making a profit. For socialism, what matters the most is the man, because socialism tries to meet the increasingly growing needs of man, both material and spiritual.

Within the Living Well framework, what matters the most is neither man nor money; what matters the most is life. But capitalism does not care about life, and the two development models, the capitalist and the socialist, need rapid economic growth, causing a dissipation of energy and an insatiable use of fossil fuels to boost growth.

Therefore, development has proved to be a failure, as evidenced by the crisis of nature and the severe effects of climate change. It is now the leading cause of global crisis and the destroyer of planet Earth, because of the exaggerated industrialization of some countries, addicted consumerism and irresponsible exploitation of human and natural resources.

The industrialization and consumerism of Western "civilization" threatens Mother Nature and the subsistence of the planet, to such a degree that it must not be spread to the whole of humanity, because natural resources are not enough for all of us nor renewable at the same pace in which they are being exhausted.

Living Well in the Global Crisis

The most important crises are:

- The exponential increase of human-induced climate change affecting all regions of Earth;
- The water crisis, where urbanization, industrialization and increased use of energy is lowering the level of groundwater resources;
- The crisis in food production by the impact of climate change and the increasing production of biofuels;
- The imminent end of the era of cheap energy (we are reaching the peak of oil production). In the lapse of 100 years we are finishing fossil energy created over millions of years, and this is bringing about dramatic changes in all the theories about the operation of society;
- The significant depletion of other key resources both for industrial production and for human welfare, including fresh water, genetic resources, forests, sea and wildlife, fertile soils, coral reefs, and most of the local, regional and global elements we have in common.

Unless they are reversed, this combination of dangerous tendencies may soon bring global environmental and social crises up to an unprecedented scale, and they may also cause the collapse of the most basic economic and operative structures of our society.

On the verge of catastrophic change

Climate chaos and global warming threaten the loss of much of the world's most productive lands, physical upheavals in many places caused by storms and rising waters, desertification of many agricultural lands,

and economic and social tragedy that will last for long in the future, with very severe problems for the most impoverished nations and peoples.

Without having found alternative sources of energy that can replace inexpensive oil and gas supplies in the amounts to which we have become accustomed to (and alarming new evidence regarding the limits of accessible coal), Peak Oil threatens the long term survival of industrial nations and industrialism itself, at its present scale. Long distance transportation, industrial food systems, complex urban and suburban systems, and many commodities basic to our present way of life —cars, plastics, chemicals, pesticides, refrigeration, etc— are all rooted in the basic assumption of an ever-increasing inexpensive energy supply.

Other scarce resources — fresh water, forests, agricultural land, biodiversity of many kinds, are dramatically decreasing in number due to the overuse of industrialized nations that every year surpass 30 percent of the resources that the Earth can regenerate, rendering the survival of humans and other species far more difficult than at any other time throughout the history of mankind. We also face the possible loss of 50% of the world's plant and animal species over the next decades.

So the planet's ecological, social and economic systems are on the verge of catastrophic change, and very few societies are prepared for this. Efforts by governments to respond to the impending emergency are thus far grossly inadequate. Efforts by corporations and industries to reform their behaviors remain largely enclosed by structural limits that require continued growth and profit above all other standards of performance.

Living Well Life to counteract against the Global Crisis

In this Global Crisis, all the problems have the same structural base, and can be faced using the same structural changes. *The solution for each one is the solution for all.* All the new models must begin by accepting there are fundamental limits to the capacity of the Earth to sustain us. Within those limits, societies must work to set new standards of universal economic sufficiency and a Living Well conception that does not depend on the excessive use of the planet's resources.

The construction of a Living Well vision to counteract Global Crisis in this era of climate chaos and diminished resources in our finite planet, means ending consumerism, waste and luxury, consuming only what is necessary, achieving a global economic "power down" to levels of production, consumption and energy use that stay well within the environmental capacities of the Earth.

It also means stopping energy dissipation, i.e. bringing about a rapid withdrawal from all carbon-based energy systems, and rejecting large-scale so called "alternative" energy systems designed to prolong the industrial growth system. These include nuclear energy, "clean" coal, industrial scale biofuels, and the combustion of hazardous materials and municipal waste, among others.

Equally important is a dramatic increase in the practices of energy conservation and efficiency, i.e., powering down, decreasing the personal consumption in countries where it has been excessive, and reorienting the rules of economic activity — trade, investments, norms. It is also important to modify all of society's main activities that are related to those norms (transport, manufacture, agriculture, energy, building design, etc). Our current dependence on export-oriented production, enormous amounts of long distance transportation, ever-expanding use of resources and global markets, cannot possibly be sustained in a finite planet.

Local production for local consumption

In order to adapt ourselves to the true reality of a post carbon era, we will have to satisfy our fundamental needs such as food, housing, energy, production, and means of support, from local systems and resources. This means encouraging regional and local self-sufficiency, sustainability and control; economic localization and community sovereignty, local production for local consumption, local ownership using local labor and materials.

Thus Living Well means redesigning urban and non-urban living environments, the restitution of the local, regional and national communal goods, and a quick transition towards renewable energy at a small scale, that must be oriented to the locality and also owned by the local community, without hampering the natural balance, and including wind, solar, small scale hydro and wave, local biofuels.

Living Well also means promoting an orderly reconstruction of the countryside and the revitalization of communities by way of an agrarian reform, education and application of eco-agricultural microfarming

methods, based on our cultural and communal practices, the wealth of our communities, fertile land, clean water and air. All of these approaches are in preparation for the inevitable de-industrialization of agriculture, as cheap energy supply declines.

Furthermore, Living Well means reallocating the trillions of millions destined for war in order to heal Mother Earth who is injured by the environment issue.

Less will be more

Our Living Well proposal emphasizes on harmony between humans and with nature, and the preservation of "natural capital" as primary concerns. It is well known that the protection and preservation of balance in the natural world, including all its living beings, is a primary goal and need of our proposal, and that mother nature has inherent rights to exist on the Earth in an undiminished healthy condition.

Living Well also means unplugging the TV and internet and connecting with the community. It means having four more hours a day to spend with family, friends and in our community, i.e., the four hours that the average person spends watching TV filled with messages about stuff we should buy. Spending time in fraternal community activities strengthens the community and makes it a source of social and logistical support, a source of greater security and happiness.

For societies that now accept the images of "the good life" widely promoted in the media, this "good life" is based on hyper consumption of commodities, the new strategies to use less resources, to accumulate less, and to be ruled by modest standards of living also become arguments for greater personal fulfillment. Driving less and walking more is good for the climate, the planet, and our health. Buying less means less pollution, less waste, less time working to invest in shopping. Less stress, more time for the family, friends, nature, creativity, recreation and leisure which are activities on which people spend little time nowadays.

Among presently over-consuming societies, *less really will be more*. Basic compliance with Living Well conditions include sufficient food, shelter, clothing; good health and the values of strong community engagement; family security; meaningful lives; and the clear presence and easy access to a thriving natural world.

We are part of Mother Nature

In this context, Living Well means living a sovereign and communal life in harmony with nature, where we can work together for our families and for society, sharing, singing, dancing, producing for the community. It means living a modest life that reduces our consumption addiction and maintains a balanced production.

Rather than eroding the Earth, depredating nature and within 30 or 50 years ending with gas, oil, iron, tin, lithium and all other non-renewable natural resources required for a *living better*, Living Well guarantees life for our children, for the sons and daughters of our children and for those that will come after them, saving the planet using our rock, our quinoa, potatoes and cassava, our beans, broad beans and corn, our mahogany, coconut and coca.

In the construction of Living Well, our economic and spiritual wealth is tied directly to a high regard for Mother Earth and a respectful use of the wealth that she gives us. The only alternative for the world in this Global Crisis, the only solution to the crisis of nature, is that human beings acknowledge that we are part of Mother Nature, that we need to restore the complementary relationships, the mutual respect and harmony with her.

Boosting community energy with creativity and collective action

For this new experience of facing global crisis, for this new experience of Living Well to be successful, it will be necessary to boost local and international actions. We should follow the example of the millions of people on this Earth who are not waiting for official recognition of the global crisis, we should follow the example of the uncountable numbers of people and communities across the planet who, with creativity, enthusiasm and joint action are already actively trying to create or update a great variety of alternative practices at local, community and regional levels, in both rural and urban contexts.

Out of our own initiatives in our communities and also with help from governments that boost Living Well, with a broad unity of forces and social movements, we have to wake up community energy, boost community energy in our communities, which is the main capacity we've got to transform society and build

a Living Well vision. We have to follow the example of these people and communities, starting to rebuild our communities and nations OURSELVES, with our own hands, our own hearts and our own brains, starting to take responsibility for the building of a Living Well Life for all within the limits of nature. We cannot rely only on governments and international movements to solve our problems.

Powering down

Out of our own initiatives in our communities and also with help from our governments, let us begin to regain our ancestors' harmonious living, strengthen our own way of life, the identity and spirituality in our communities. Let us begin to organize our productive and community life in the countryside and in our neighborhoods, making education work, as well as communication and health, let us build our schools and roads, resolve between all of us our internal relations and the issues of land and territory, water, forests, and so on.

Let us build a Living Well vision and the sovereignty of our communities within the balance between man and nature, where we can rebuild our bonds, respecting everyone's right to consultation when making our own decisions, where we can freely determine our own aims, our forms of organization, the joint planning of our communities, the designation of our authorities, all based on the knowledge we have of ourselves and with full awareness of the responsibility that this entails.

To start powering down, we can reduce significantly our energy use: driving less, flying less, turning off the lights, buying local seasonal food (food takes energy to grow, package, store and transport), wearing a jumper instead of turning on the radiator, use a clothesline instead of a dryer, going on holiday closer to home, buying second hand things or borrowing them before buying new ones, recycling.

We can also nurture a Zero Waste culture at home, within our school, workplace, church, community. This means developing new habits, such as using both sides of the paper, carrying with us our own mugs and shopping bags, making compost out of food leftovers, avoiding bottled water and other over packaged products, repairing and mending rather than replacing...

Our own health, learning and communication

Out of our own initiatives in our communities and also with help from governments that boost a Living Well vision, let us start to run our own health system taking after the ways that have always kept us healthy, where the health of the community is as important as that of our own body and where abundant healthy food free of chemicals is our medicine. Faced with the growth of increasingly manipulated consumption, let us rebuild the healthy domestic food production. Let us prevent diseases instead of looking for drugs to cure them, and let us use our own natural medicine which will not cure a disease by creating another.

Let us start to run our own education, or rather our own communication, learning in the way that we have always taught our children in our communities as part of the community practices and responsibilities, i.e. through community learning, through which we create communal energy and learn through daily work, within the social school that would be the community, where we learn that we cannot live outside of communal life. Rather than education, let us re-establish our own communication; strengthen the real communication between father and son, between students and teachers.

Let us protect our own seeds

Let us defend the women, traditional defenders of the seeds and food safety, custodians of natural variety and of local and quality food for our families, whose life revolves around fertility, child care, countryside, seeds, the care of water, trees and other resources, and whose farming practices in the communities are part of communal life in harmony with nature.

We do not solve world hunger with Terminator seeds from agricultural business, but bringing back and protecting our rich ancestral seeds, storing them and fighting against their usurpation by large transnational corporations that defend themselves through intellectual property, patents and the use of transgenic seeds having as an excuse productivity increase.

Let us protect the life of indigenous country communities, which allows the cycle of seed and inputs to be closed within the very same communities, freeing us from the need to import them. Let's practice a small-scale production, which will protect natural resources for the present and future generations, and give us all healthy and varied food.

Let us build a Living Well vision, retaking our own appropriate technologies, which are not expensive and can be managed through community administration, monitoring and control, using our own funds from our own savings banks or credit unions. We can do our own self-training, which can mature if we bring together researchers and professionals who have a vision of sympathy, support and respect for reorganization processes of the communities and the peoples.

To strengthen all our procedures...

Living Well means giving back fertility to the planet, now in the hands of sterile corporations, reforesting the world, living a modest life close to soil in communities or small family farms, which are those that have preserved the trees and the harmonic variety of species, that have more water at their disposal and survive better.

Waking up the ethical and moral values of our peoples and cultures, we can make this new millennium, a millennium of life and not of war, a millennium for Living Well, for balance and complementarity. Together we can build a culture of patience, the culture of dialogue and fundamentally the Culture of Life, a way of life that is not dependent on excessive consumption of non-renewable energy that emit greenhouse gases but is based on the harmonious relationship between man and nature.

In order to strengthen all the procedures that may lead us to Living Well, we encourage a broad discussion and debate regarding this proposal, so we can find a common approach that will lead to a fundamental change in the way societies operate, and how we live, as communities, families and individuals.

Published in 4 languages in :

International Newsletter on Sustainable Local Development
#69, June 1st 2010