

See discussions, stats, and author profiles for this publication at: <https://www.researchgate.net/publication/241764771>

# Buen Vivir: Today's Tomorrow

Article in *Development* · December 2011

DOI: 10.1057/dev.2011.86

---

CITATIONS

301

READS

1,983

1 author:



[Eduardo Gudynas](#)

Centro Latino Americano de Ecología Social (CLAES)

109 PUBLICATIONS 2,170 CITATIONS

[SEE PROFILE](#)

## Buen Vivir: Today's tomorrow

**EDUARDO GUDYNAS** *ABSTRACT* Eduardo Gudynas looks at the main trends of the discourse around Buen Vivir in South America. He looks at the rich and multiple discourses around Buen Vivir, as a political platform for different visions of alternatives to development. The paradox that development can be declared defunct and yet in the next step promoted as the only way forward is deeply embedded in modern culture. Therefore, any alternative to development must open paths to move beyond the modern Western culture. Buen Vivir, he argues gives that opportunity.

**KEYWORDS** *modernity; Latin America; visions; alternatives; indigenous; politics*

Buen Vivir or Vivir Bien, are the Spanish words used in Latin America to describe alternatives to development focused on the good life in a broad sense. The term is actively used by social movements, and it has become a popular term in some government programs and has even reached its way into two new Constitutions in Ecuador and Bolivia.

It is a plural concept with two main entry points. On the one hand, it includes critical reactions to classical Western development theory. On the other hand, it refers to alternatives to development emerging from indigenous traditions, and in this sense the concept explores possibilities beyond the modern Eurocentric tradition.

The richness of the term is difficult to translate into English. It includes the classical ideas of quality of life, but with the specific idea that well-being is only possible within a community. Furthermore, in most approaches the community concept is understood in an expanded sense, to include Nature. Buen Vivir therefore embraces the broad notion of well-being and cohabitation with others and Nature. In this regard, the concept is also plural, as there are many different interpretations depending on cultural, historical and ecological setting.

### **Development as a zombie category**

The classical Western idea of development has been declared dead several times in the last decades, but it persists. Critical positions that counter the myth of development have been repeated several times over the last 40 years. There are countless reactions from social movements against the negative effects (both social and ecological) of many 'development projects'. But most of the reactions were at a superficial level, attempting to repair or fix what was considered inappropriate applications of classical development.

## Development 54(4): Thematic Section

This resulted in Western development being declared deceased and then at the same time being resuscitated. It became a zombie concept, dead and alive at the same time. Even the recent global economic and financial crisis did not offer a clear solution, but a deepening of this paradox. While many industrialized countries are sunk in a deep multidimensional crisis, their main discussion is still at the level of the financial and instrumental levels. While a series of socialist, progressive or new left governments are found in the Global South (ranging from China and Vietnam, to Brazil and Venezuela), they present themselves as emerging economies that defend classical growth strategies, some exporting cheap goods, others trading natural resources.

The paradox that development can be declared defunct and yet in the next step promoted as the only way forward is deeply embedded in modern culture. Therefore, any alternative to development must open paths to move beyond the modern Western culture. Buen Vivir gives that opportunity.

### Buen Vivir emerges in South America

Early formulations of the Buen Vivir emerged in reaction to classical development strategies, either due to its negative social or environmental impacts, or the debatable economic effects. Many critiques highlighted the shortcomings and negative impacts of development projects implemented by governments and multilateral development banks in Latin America in the last decades. In the early 2000s, it was clear that instrumental fixes or economic compensation to balance the negative effects of current development strategies, were inadequate, and the classical development idea had to be abandoned.

That approach resembles the post-development questioning, along the line of Arturo Escobar's (1992) key distinction between 'alternative developments' and 'alternatives to development'. Although most of the early formulations of the Buen Vivir were produced independently of those post-development questions, there are strong similarities, because they represent a radical deconstruction of the cultural base of development,

its legitimating discourses, its applications and institutional frameworks.

Such radical questioning was possible within several indigenous traditions in South America, which culturally lacked concepts like development or progress. The contribution of indigenous knowledge to Buen Vivir therefore continues to be a critical thread.

One of the most well-known approaches to Buen Vivir is the Ecuadorian concept of *sumak kawsay*, the kichwa wording for a fullness life in a community, together with other persons and Nature. More or less at the same time that *sumak kawsay* become spoken about in Ecuador in Bolivia a similar aymara concept of *suma qamaña* emerged.

These concepts received widespread attention, and in a short period of time received broad social, cultural and political support. They offered valuable pathways to overcome the obsession with the word 'development', and explore alternatives within a pluricultural setting.

### Constitutional adoption of Buen Vivir, Vivir Bien

This growing consensus ended in the incorporation of the ideas of Buen Vivir in the new Constitutions of Ecuador (approved in 2008) and Bolivia (approved in 2009). Both cases were part of a political process that started, first with a reaction to the neo-liberal market reforms in the late 1990s and early 2000s (which included a strong critique of classical development strategies), and second, with the election of governments of the Latin American new left or progressivism, that allowed the expression of indigenous knowledge and traditions that were oppressed, minimized or subordinated over centuries.

Nevertheless, the concept was handled in quite different ways in these two constitutions. In the Bolivian case, is presented in Spanish as 'Vivir Bien', and is included in the section devoted to the ethical and moral principles describing the values, ends and objectives of the State. The approach is multicultural, and Vivir Bien is referred to the aymara concept of *suma qamaña*, but also to the guaraní ideas of the harmonious

living (*ñandereko*), good life (*teko kavi*), the land without evil (*ivi maraei*) and the path to the noble life (*qhapaj ñan*). These ideas come from different cultures but all are presented together at the same level, without hierarchies. They are part of a major set of principles linked to other well-known principles, such as unity, equality, dignity, freedom, solidarity, reciprocity, social and gender equity, social justice, responsibility and so on. Furthermore, all the ethical–moral principles, including *Vivir Bien*, are linked to the economic organization of the State. The Bolivian Constitution introduces an economic plural model (in the sense of diverse cultural origins of economic activities), and its objectives are to increase quality of life and ensure the *Vivir Bien*.

In the new Constitution of Ecuador the conceptual framework is different. Although *Buen Vivir* is referred to an indigenous concept, the *sumak kawsay* of the kichwa, is described as a set of rights, which include those referred to health, shelter, education, food, environment and so on. Thus, *Buen Vivir* is not an ethical principle for the State as in Bolivia, but a complex set of several rights, most of them found in the Western tradition, although fitted in a different framework. These are in the same hierarchy level with another set of rights, that include, among other, those of freedom, participation, communities, protection, and also the rights of Nature (one of the other striking innovations in the Ecuadorian text). These sets of rights should be fulfilled in an intercultural framework, respecting their diversity, and in a harmonious coexistence with Nature.

Along a parallel pathway was the adoption of *Buen Vivir* based on rights in the Ecuadorian Constitution that brings together a ‘*Buen Vivir* regime’ with a ‘development regime’. This leads to a development program or strategy needing to be articulated and functional within the framework and objectives of *Buen Vivir*. This formulation is impressive, because it move away from the classical approach where a classical development strategy determines and limits economic and social life (Walsh, 2010, for further analysis). In contrast, the Ecuadorian approach requires that the economic, political, social, cultural and

environmental areas should be arranged to guarantee the *sumak kawsay*.

As indicated, there are differences between the two constitutions. While the Bolivian one is focused on *Buen Vivir* as an ethical principle, that of Ecuador offers a stronger approach because the concept is conceived as a plural set of rights. The Bolivian formulation offers more options for cultural diversity than the Ecuadorian, but does not include *Buen Vivir* as a right. The Ecuadorian text clearly stated that development in line with *Buen Vivir* is required to fulfil the rights of Nature or Pachamama (with a biocentric posture that recognizes intrinsic values in the environment). The Bolivian text does not recognize intrinsic values in Nature, and the environment is presented within the classical third generation human rights (quality of life and protection of the environment).

### A plural endeavour

The presentation of *Buen Vivir* in the Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador are good examples of present day debates in South America. In both the contributions of indigenous knowledge are key elements in these endeavours, particularly those based on the aymara, quechua and kichwa Andean traditions.

But *Buen Vivir* is not limited to those framings, there are similar or analogous frameworks found in many other cultures. Besides the *guaraní* (as mentioned in the case of Bolivia), other examples are: the idea of the good life, *shiir waras*, of the shuar of Ecuador, or the harmonious living, *küme mongen*, of the mapuches of Chile. These and other understandings of *Buen Vivir* have existed for centuries, but are only now being drawn into the debate around development.

These approaches to *Buen Vivir* are distinct from Western knowledge rooted in the modernity. In fact, most of them have emerged as expressions of a decolonial efforts, attempts to strengthen cultural identities. Nevertheless, *Buen Vivir* should not be understood as a return to a distant Andean past, pre-colonial times. It is not a static concept, but an idea that is continually being created.

### Fluid knowledge: *suma qamaña*

The Bolivian idea of *suma qamaña* is an excellent example of this powerful process. Although extremely popular, both inside and outside Bolivia, there is strong evidence that *suma qamaña* is not found in the every day life of aymara rural communities, but that the terms were a recent creation, by the aymara sociologist Simón Yampara. His work offers a detailed and sophisticated elaboration of traditional knowledge that responds to the present challenge imposed by classical development (Yampara, 2001, and personal interviews in La Paz, 2011).

Yampara understands that the *suma qamaña* is not restricted to material well-being, as expressed in the ownership of property or consumption at the heart of capitalist societies, but is a harmonious balance between material and spiritual components, which is only possible in the specific context of a community, which is social but also ecological. This social and ecological conception of community is linked to the Andean concept of the *ayllu*, where well-being encompasses not only persons, but also crops and cattle, and the rest of Nature. The classical Western dualism that separates society from Nature vanishes under this perspective, as one contains the other, and they are not separable.

Following this path, some ideas of Buen Vivir in the highlands of Bolivia and southern Perú, could be also formulated as a 'common germination of a good life'. This is because features described in Western terms as quality of human life, should be cultivated and nurtured in a social–natural continuum.

### Buen Vivir as a multilayered political process

As *suma qamaña* is a recent formulation, it is also an example of powerful cultural innovations and capabilities rooted in the indigenous knowledge and traditions, to face current development strategies. Therefore, Buen Vivir expresses a process, that is now underway which offers new answers to post-development questions, while reinforcing

cultural identity and promoting alternatives to Western Modernity.

All these different ideas of Buen Vivir are specific to each culture, with its own language, history, specific social and political contexts, and placed in diverse environments. Thus, the Ecuadorian *sumak kawsay* is not identical to the guaraní *ñandereko*, and these two are different from all the others. There is no room for an essentialist position. Furthermore, is not possible to identify one idea of the Buen Vivir as the best one that became a standard reference to be followed by all others indigenous groups in Latin America. As an example, the *suma qamaña* position is only possible in the cultural and ecological landscapes of the Andes. There is no sense in trying to apply the concept to other regions; other cultures will have to explore and build their own Buen Vivir. The term Buen Vivir is best understood as an umbrella for a set of different positions (Gudynas, 2011).

### Buen Vivir in the borders of modernity

Buen Vivir is not restricted to indigenous postures. Similar approaches are found in other mixed or multicultural settings. A good example is the 'quiet life' of the 'cambas' of the forest at northern Bolivia, resulting from more than 150 years of mixing and hybridization of different ethnic groupings. Their defense of the well-being, security, happiness and identity in tropical forests, is the result of a today's cultural mix.

Other approaches to the Buen Vivir came from some small, usually marginalized or neglected, critical positions within modernity, which are critical of classical development and its deviations. I would like to mention three cases that give examples of different possible linkages with the indigenous traditions. The first one, are the critical studies on development in general, and post-development in particular such as those around the work of Escobar. In this case, most of the relations are of mutual reinforcement with ideas like *suma qamaña* or *sumak kawsay*.

The second one, are radical environmental postures, particularly deep ecology and other biocentric approaches (Naess, 1989). They reject the anthropocentric perspective of modernity,

and their recognition of intrinsic values in the environment is analogous to postures found in several indigenous perspectives of Buen Vivir, particularly from the indigenous nations at tropical forests.

The last position comes from feminist perspectives, with their radical view of gender roles and its links with societal hierarchies but also domination over Nature (Saunders, 2002). In this case, the relation of learning and openness to other views is reversed, as most indigenous traditions have a difficult time acknowledging gender inequalities and the importance of recognizing women's agency and power, so this critical Western approach offers valuable insights to them.

These and other examples shows that Buen Vivir should not be conceived as a position limited to non-Western knowledge, but as useful concept that can support and enhance critical traditions looking for alternatives to development. The critical approaches to development can complement the indigenous traditions, and vice versa.

### **The core of common ideas**

Although Buen Vivir is a plural endeavour, there is a set of common ideas that provides unity to the perspective and allows us to draw some borders around the concept. First of all, Buen Vivir can be considered as a platform where critical views of development are shared. All positions consider alternatives not as an instrumental fixing of current strategies, but as a replacement of the very idea of development. Therefore, this is a platform also in a literal sense, because it provides the ground to move towards alternatives to development.

All positions promote ethical perspectives that are grounded in values. They are a reaction against the conventional domination of utilitarian values, particularly expressed in the reductionism of life to economic values and the subsequent commoditization of almost everything. Buen Vivir acknowledges that there are several ways to give value, such as esthetic, cultural, historical, environmental, spiritual and so on. The omnipresence of capital categories (such as human capital or natural capital) are resized to be just one way to

give value and included within broader frameworks (usually based on the idea of patrimony). Last, but not least, intrinsic values are recognized, and Nature becomes a subject; human beings as the only source of values are therefore displaced.

The vision promoted by Buen Vivir strongly supports the need to explore alternatives to development beyond conventional Eurocentric knowledge. Thus, decolonization is a component within Buen Vivir proposals (including the work by indigenous intellectuals, but also incorporating ideas promoted among others by Walter Mignolo). This decolonization opens the doors to different sets of understandings, rationalities and feelings of the world.

But on the other hand, the Buen Vivir also respects its internal plurality of conceptions, without hierarchies. The classical liberal approach of multiculturalism is insufficient to this purpose, so an intercultural position is followed. Buen Vivir is more than a simple coexistence or juxtaposition of different cultures, because they interact in dialogue and praxis focused on promoting alternatives to development.

Buen Vivir promotes the dissolution of the Society – Nature dualism. Nature becomes part of the social world, and political communities could extend in some cases to the non-human. These include, as examples, the proposals of the biocentric environmental perspective, but also indigenous positions that recognize that the non-human (either animals, plants, ecosystems or spirits) have will and feelings. Thus, the polis is expanded, and the concept of citizenship is widened to include these other actors within environmental settings.

Buen Vivir moves away from the prevalence of instrumental and manipulative rationality. It rejects the modern stance that almost everything should be dominated and controlled, either persons or Nature, so as to become a means to our ends. Furthermore, the Buen Vivir does not endorse the classical understanding of a unidirectional linear progression of history, following a precise path, as several directions are possible.

Lastly, the Buen Vivir as a platform is not restricted to a material dimension, as it is also a common dimension of Buen Vivir to share feelings

## Development 54(4): Thematic Section

and affections. Buen Vivir is expressed in the experiences of happiness and sadness, in rebellion and compassion, as illustrated in the experiences of many social movements.

### Controversies and overlaps

The Buen Vivir has been the target of heated criticism. Critics see Buen Vivir as a mystical return to an indigenous past, lacking any practical strategy. This is not the case, in some contexts, Buen Vivir presents precise proposals and strategies. These include reforms in legal forms, introduction of environmental accounting, tax reforms, dematerialization of economies and alternative regional integration within South America. These proposals show that many different and even complex instruments can be handled under the Buen Vivir framework. In a very simple example, the Buen Vivir will not stop building bridges, and will not reject the use of Western physics and engineering to build them, but the ones that it will propose may well have different sizes and materials, will be placed in other locations, and certainly will serve local and regional needs and not the needs of global markets.

As Buen Vivir rejects growth as the mean of development, it could be assumed that are wide overlaps with the ideas of the 'degrowth' movement. To deal with this, it is important to recognize that there are at least two main perspectives of degrowth: one follows Latouche (2009), presenting degrowth as a political slogan; the other is more restricted, and propose a 'sustainable degrowth' strategy (Martínez-Alier *et al.*, 2010).

In the first case, there are several coincidences with Buen Vivir, as both reject growth as the main objective of development, and there is a shift to an austere life style, oriented to the quality of life. Nevertheless, other differences remains in place, particularly because Buen Vivir gives a strong attention to different ethical settings, incorporates spiritual positions, and is strongly intercultural.

The second approach, although more detailed, still moves around the 'growth' criteria. So some Buen Vivir components like the dissolution of the duality with Nature or the recognition of intrinsic

values, are not incorporated. Words are not innocent, and the insistence to use degrowth is problematic in the Global South. A first reaction is to interpret degrowth as a call to reduce the consumption and means of life of the poor. Buen Vivir is broader category, where degrowth is not an objective, but a consequence.

Other related overlaps are found between Buen Vivir and some ideas of the socialist tradition. As the Buen Vivir moves in a post-capitalist direction, it is common for many people to assume that it is a new type of socialism or that there is a socialist trend towards the Buen Vivir. Nevertheless, present day formulations of the 'XXI century socialism' are still within the modern tradition, and do not incorporate a strong environmental component, and are not intercultural.

A 'socialist *sumak kawsay*' has been proposed by René Ramírez, planning secretary of Ecuador, described as bio-social, republican and egalitarian (Ramírez, 2010). His approach is to present a series of conditions and reformulations of the socialist tradition, such as the 'bio' component (referring to the rights of Nature) or 'republican' one (addressing the need for an institutional state framework). On the one hand, the number of modifications leads to the question of whether his proposal should still be considered socialism. On the other hand, some of his conditions are compatible with the Buen Vivir perspective, as the rights of Nature, still other tensions remains. This is because Buen Vivir also departs from other key positions present in the socialist tradition, which is part of the modern rationality, such as, for example, its faith in progress and its materialist perspective.

The Buen Vivir perspective is, in this sense, not only post-capitalist, but also post-socialist. As a platform to explore and build alternatives beyond European modernity, it is moving away from Eurocentric political thought. But, Buen Vivir did not imply a complete rupture with those traditions, but a selective adoption of some critical positions rather than others. Thus, there is a bridge to the Buen Vivir expressed social justice positions, which is not possible with the conservative or neoliberal positions. To put it simply, we will not be able to move beyond modern thought from the

right, because the exit towards alternatives to development is on the left.

### Beyond modernity

Following this trait, when Buen Vivir criticizes development, it also questions the very foundations of modernity, causing tensions at a deeper level: the world views or ontologies. Following Blaser (2010), ontologies are world representations (both discursive and non-discursive), which determine what is inside or outside those worlds, what is true or not, and how we interact with this world. Modernity is a particular ontology that in the last centuries determined the division between nature and society, a colonial distinction between modern and non-modern indigenous peoples, the myth of progress as a unidirectional linear path, and a strong confidence on Cartesian science.

All these assumptions are under critical review by the Buen Vivir platform. Buen Vivir offers a common ground where critical perspectives on development, originated from different ontologies, meet and interact, is a new space for dealing with other alternate ontologies. But is also a politically oriented platform, as its actors pushes for alternatives to development, such as being relational (recovering a strong interlinkage between nature and society) or the expanded interpretation of political communities.

In recognizing that development is a zombie category, the increasing understanding (and feeling) in South America is that the modernity project is exhausted, and this is an opportunity to make visible, understand and promote alternative worldviews to move away from what we yesterday called development, and tomorrow will be replaced by Buen Vivir.

### References

- Blaser, Mario (2010) *Storytelling Globalization from the Chaco and Beyond*, Durham: Duke University Press.
- Escobar, Arturo (1992) 'Imagining a Post-Development Era? Critical Thought, Development and Social Movements', *SocialText* 31/32: 20–56.
- Gudynas, Eduardo (2011) 'Buen Vivir: Germinando alternativas al desarrollo', *América Latina en Movimiento* 462: 1–20.
- Latouche, Serge (2009) *Pequeño tratado del decrecimiento sereno*, Barcelona: Icaria.
- Martínez-Alier, Joan, Unai Pascual, Franck-Dominique Vivien and Edwin Zaccai (2010) 'Sustainable De-growth: Mapping the context, criticisms and future prospects of an emergent paradigm', *Ecological Economics* 69: 1741–7.
- Naess, Arne (1989) *Ecology, Community and Lifestyle*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Ramírez, René (2010) 'Socialismo del sumak kawsay o biosocialismo republicano', in *Los nuevos retos de América Latina. Socialismo y sumak kawsay*, pp 55–74, Quito: SENPLADES.
- Saunders, Kriemild (2002) *Feminist Post-Development Thought*, London: Zed Books.
- Walsh, Catherine (2010) 'Development as Buen Vivir: Institutional arrangements and (de)colonial entanglements', *Development* 53(1): 15–21.
- Yampara, Simón (2001) 'Viaje del Jaqi a la Qamaña, El hombre en el Vivir Bien', in Javier Medina, comp. (ed.) *La comprensión indígena de la Buena Vida*, pp 45–50, La Paz: GTZ and Federación Asociaciones Municipales Bolivia.