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## BUEN VIVIR

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The term 'Buen Vivir' (living well) originates in South America and signifies critiques of and alternatives to conventional ideas about development. It brings together a diverse set of questions and alternatives, ranging from the more superficial to deeper ones concerning the conceptual and practical bases for **development**.

The direct precursors of Buen Vivir are to be found in diverse concepts among some Andean indigenous groups. The first references with meanings similar to the present appeared in the 1990s, particularly in Peru, and became much more significant in Bolivia and Ecuador in the years after.

Three uses of the label Buen Vivir can be recognised:

- A generic use. This is employed in generic criticisms of different forms of conventional **development**. It has been used in questioning the practice of corporations (for instance, blowing the whistle on companies that pollute), or as a slogan to characterise alternative projects by progressive South American governments (for example, classifying as Buen Vivir the construction of pedestrian zones in the city of Quito or social support policies such as cash transfer programmes for the poor in Venezuela).

- A restricted use. This corresponds to more complex criticisms of contemporary **capitalism** that call for another, post-capitalist type of **development**. Most such criticisms are linked to the socialist tradition and the questioning posed is profound and involves a debate about different kinds of desirable **development**. Although this use does not necessarily question the goal of **economic growth** or the utilitarian use of Nature, it does convey specific views on the ownership of resources and the role to be played by the State in the allocation of such resources. The best-known expressions in this stream involve Buen Vivir as 'republican bio-socialism' in Ecuador, or as 'integral development' in Bolivia.

- Substantive use. This relates to a radical criticism of all forms of **development** at their conceptual foundations, and a consequent defence of alternatives that are both post-capitalist and post-socialist. These alternatives draw from indigenous knowledges and sensibilities, as well as critical Western strands of thought. Substantive use is a plural and intercultural set of ideas still under construction. This was the original formulation of Buen Vivir, whereas the two former formulations are more recent.

Buen Vivir corresponds most closely to the concept of degrowth in its substantive use, since other positions express positions that are more accurately described as ‘development alternatives’ – that is, instrumental arrangements that do not question fundamental ideas, such as the need for industrialisation, the myth of progress or the duality that separates society from Nature. In comparison, Buen Vivir, in its substantive sense, constitutes an ‘alternative to **development**’ (in the sense of Escobar 1992).

If Buen Vivir in its substantive sense is a plural field under construction, already there exist key consistent elements. Buen Vivir radically criticizes different types of conventional development, foundations both conceptual and practical, as well as its institutions and legitimising discourses. In particular, Buen Vivir rejects the idea of a predetermined historical linearity in which ‘development stages’ must be followed by all nations (imitating industrialised nations), but rather defends the multiplicity of historical processes. It does not accept the concept of progress and its derivatives (particularly **growth**) or the idea that welfare depends only upon material consumption.

In its substantive sense, Buen Vivir defends the diversity of knowledges. The dominance of Western ideas is replaced by a promotion of ‘interculturality’ under which Western ideas are not rejected but seen as one among many options. The separation of society and nature is not recognised and is replaced by a notion of expanded communities, which may also include different living beings or elements of the environment in territorial contexts. Buen Vivir is only possible within communities of extended or **relational** ontologies. This involves recognising intrinsic values in Nature, thus breaking with the prevailing Western anthropocentric position in which humans are the only subjects of value. Furthermore, Buen Vivir rejects the instrumentalisation of Nature by humankind.

This and other factors make Buen Vivir a non-essentialist perspective, relative to every historical, social and environmental context. Such a characteristic also accounts for the plurality underlying the term.

This plurality can be appreciated in its different variants. One of the best-known forms is the category *suma qamaña*, expressing the sensibility of some *aymara* communities in Bolivia. It is a notion of wellbeing, or a fulfilled life, which can only be achieved by deep relationships within a community. In turn, the sense of ‘community’ is extended as it integrates other living beings and elements of the environment located within a territorial framework (*ayllu*). A sense of fulfilment is only possible within the framework of these kinds of amplified rationalities and sensibilities.

The idea of *sumak kawsay*, from Ecuador, is also well known. This concept is similar to the previous one and highlights a welfare system that is not only material but that is also expressed within extended communities, both social and ecological. Unlike *suma qamaña*, *sumak kawsay* does not contain a concept like the Bolivian *ayllu*.

Several indigenous peoples have analogous concepts, such as the *ñande reko* of the Guaraní people, the *shiir waras* of the Ashuar in Ecuador or the *küme mongen* of the Mapuche in southern Chile.

Buen Vivir is also based on critical thought within the Western tradition. The two most important sources are **environmentalism**, which proposes the rights of Nature, and new feminism, which questions patriarchal centralities and claims an ethic of **care**.

Thus, Buen Vivir represents the confluence of knowledge of different origins, and it cannot be restricted to be an 'indigenous' idea. This is because there is no such thing as an indigenous knowledge in the singular, as this is a colonial category. Thus, Buen Vivir incorporates some concepts and sensibilities of some indigenous groups, as each one has a specific cultural background. The *suma qamaña* posture of Buen Vivir among Aymara communities is not the same as *sumak kawsay* of the kichwas in Ecuador. These are positions pertaining to each social and environmental context, which, furthermore have been affected, hybridised or mixed in different ways with present-day or modern thought, even though they have no relationship with ideas like the 'good life' in the Aristotelian sense or in any of its Western derivatives.

Buen Vivir is not a return to the past; rather it confronts current situations with an eye to the future. This occurs in an intercultural context and even generates reciprocal challenges (for instance, for Western critical knowledge, the challenge of understanding the visions of extended communities regarding non-human aspects, and for some indigenous views, dealing with male chauvinism). An example of this involves the explorations of a transition from **environmental justice**, based upon third-generation human rights (quality of life or health), to ecological justice, specifically based on the rights of Nature (those independent from human appraisals).

Buen Vivir should be interpreted as a shared platform or field in which different positions converge in a criticism of **development** in particular and of Modernity in general. Buen Vivir proposes alternatives that also present complementary senses.

Buen Vivir is not presented as a unit or an academic discipline or a plan of action. It is a set of ideas and sensibilities deployed on another level, which could be said to be located in 'political philosophy', to use an available Western term, as occurs with ideas such as participation or equality.

Buen Vivir in its original radical sense influenced the drafting of the new Constitutions of Bolivia and, in particular, of Ecuador. In both these countries, however, there have been political decisions and new laws or resolutions that limit the components of the radical criticism of **development** inherent in Buen Vivir. This has been displaced by a new form of acceptable **development** (this is the case of 'integral development' in Bolivia) or, in a restricted sense, by a socialist option sui generis in Ecuador (Gudynas 2013).

As Buen Vivir in its substantive sense does not accept the conceptual bases of the different types of contemporary **development**, links with degrowth can be established. This is especially true with regard to Buen Vivir's criticism of growth or consumerism. In any case, Buen Vivir displaces the discussion of growth to that of social and environmental fulfillment. Thus, in a Latin American context some sector must be downsized and consumerism rejected, but the improvement in other sectors, such as education or health, may result in economic growth. From this perspective it could be said that degrowth is one of the possible consequences in certain contexts and not an objective in itself. Unlike degrowth, Buen Vivir, due to its intercultural perspective, follows more ambitious objectives placed in changing present-day cosmovisions of humans, society and Nature.

## Bibliography

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NOTE: In this version an error was corrected (in red): relational ontologies instead of relative ontologies (p 202).