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*Upfront*

# Development as *Buen Vivir*: Institutional arrangements and (de)colonial entanglements

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ABSTRACT *Catherine Walsh looks at how we can understand the emergence in the Andes Region and Ecuador of buen vivir, living well or collective well being, as the guiding principle for a new regimen of development. She asks if this really is a shift to new social and sustainable forms of development and what the experiment in the Andes suggests for today's rethinking of development institutions.*

KEYWORDS *human development; freedom; colonial power; modernity; capitalism; paradogma*

## Introduction

In a world long organized around the western capitalist principle of living better and its correlate: having more 'development' is a term and concept with a historically weighted significance. For many, it is, in essence, the 'paradogmatic' (not just paradigmatic) frame against which the Global South in general and Latin America in particular have both measured themselves and been measured. It is the developed West against and, at the same time, the model for the rest.

Such a framework has served not only to envelop humanity and the human condition in the lineal ideas of civilization and progress, but also to entangle modernity further with its underside: coloniality. That is, with a matrix of global power that has hierarchically classified populations, their knowledge, and cosmologic life systems according to a Eurocentric standard. This matrix of power has legitimized relations of domination, superiority/inferiority, and established a historical structural dependence related to capital and the world market (Quijano, 2000). In this sense, 'development' has always signalled more than just material progress and economic growth; it has marked a western model of judgement and control over life itself.

The central question I would like to pose is whether and to what extent this model and its institutional arrangements are in a process of transformation. Does the shift towards new social and sustainable forms of development break with and shrug off the past? How can we understand the emergence in the Andes Region and Ecuador in particular of *buen vivir*, living well or collective well being, as the guiding principle for a new regimen of development? In the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, this new regimen is defined as the organized, sustainable, and dynamic ensemble of economic, political, socio-cultural, and environmental systems that guarantee the realization of *buen vivir*.

What does such regimen suggest and afford for development's (de)envelopment? These are the guiding questions for what follows.

## Integral and sustainable human development

The last decade in Latin America has seen a shift in the notion of development from economic progress towards a more humanistic view focused on the individual and the quality of life. This new framework, most often referred to as 'integral and sustainable human development', finds ground in the perspectives of Manfred Max-Neef and Amartya Sen. It focuses on the interconnectedness of economics with the political, socio-cultural, and environmental spheres, as well as in the necessities, capacities, and potentialities of human beings. Human development – on both the individual and social scale – is seen as necessarily oriented towards satisfying these necessities, improving these capacities, and enhancing these potentialities in the present. Human development permits the increase in capacities and continuance or sustainability in the future. In contrast to previous lineal models, the focus here is systemic, subject rather than object based. It is concerned with recuperating the molecular dimension of the social and deepening democracy and citizenship from below. Equity, democracy, participation, protection of bio-diversity and natural resources, and respect for ethnic-cultural diversity serve as key elements of the framework.

At first glance, such shift in focus, frame, and perspective appears innovative and positive. It offers perhaps the possibility to challenge the development paradogmas of the past and their colonial, imperial, and dependence-based designs and aspirations. However, a closer look at the criteria and suppositions of this framework, and its ambitions and use on the national and transnational scale, need further scrutiny.[1]

Let us take, for example, the notion of the quality of life. Quality of life is understood in the sense of the possibility of satisfying basic needs. It refers to the well being of the individual according to ontological (being, having, doing) and axiological categories (subsistence, protection, affect, understanding, participation, creation, and leisure). Reaching this well being is the responsibility of the individual. The possibility of 'development' therefore, does not rest on society *per se* nor is it reliant on or related to the transformation of social institutions and structures; it depends on individuals. Social development depends on the manner in which people – particularly the poor – assume their life. When individuals take control of their lives, acting on their life conditions, then social development and progress occur.

These two principles – the individual and the quality of life – are sustained by four key criteria: liberty, autonomy, coexistence, and social inclusion. The first two encourage individual agency, willpower, and determination; the capacity of the individual to exercise control over her or his own life as central to both human development and the expansion of human liberties. As Sverdlick (2002) notes, these human liberties, understood as politics, the existence of opportunities for all to participate in the production, distributions, and consumption of goods, access to quality education and healthcare, among others, are central to the liberty or freedom of the market. They are the goals of development as well as the means that make development possible.

The strategic value of liberty and autonomy can be most clearly observed in Latin America in the present re-forming of education, from primary school to the university. Here education is being transformed into an individual and personal project, a consumer good in which competition – between students and among teachers – is the motor in the search for 'quality' and 'excellence'. 'Objective' and quantifiable indicators of quality and control, including exams, standards, and accreditation benchmarks, are converting educational institutions into enterprises where public space and social responsibility operate under a privatized logic. Social gaps, social injustices, and educational failure are seen as personal and family problems that can be individually overcome. In a world that once valued solidarity, fraternity, reciprocity, and collective community-based relations, individual stamina and initiative are quickly becoming the guiding principle and force.

Social inclusion and coexistence are complementary criteria that permit the linking of individual autonomy and liberty to the social. These criteria, present in national educational policies and reforms as well as in the humanistic perspectives, proposals, and policies of inter-transnational organisms such as UNESCO, the International Development Bank – (IDP) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), purport to anchor individual welfare and assure conformity within a social system that increasingly works to control cultural diversity and make it functional to the system. For UNDP, for example, 'it is the sensation of social cohesion based in culture and in the values and beliefs shared that molds individual human development. If the people live together, cooperate in a way that enables them to reciprocally prosper, they amplify their individual options' (Guiñazu, 2008, digital copy). Similarly for the IDP, 'integral inclusionary development could be the foundation of a new social contract for a more equitable and cohesionary society'.[3]

Of course, in a region characterized by social movement resistance, insurgence, and demands, social inclusion and coexistence are considered useful tools in preventing ethnic balkanization and controlling and managing ethnic opposition, the latter considered an increasing threat to (trans)national security. The application of these tools can be clearly witnessed in the emergent policies and programmes of public social institutions that recognize and include indigenous and afro-descendents peoples, their cultural practices, and even their knowledges without changing the dominant nature or structure of these institutions, what can be understood as functional interculturality.[2]

But they can also be observed in the projects and initiatives of multilateral and transnational institutions, which endeavour to maintain diversity in check in order not to threaten political and economic interests and stability. This was evident in the UNDP initiatives in 2007–2008 in Bolivia. Through published texts, a documentary film, and a television series that involved Left white-*mestizo* academics and interviews with indigenous intellectuals and leaders, the UNDP put forth the urgency of a new *sentido común* (common sentiment) grounded in social inclusion and cohesion. It was presented as a common sentiment as a nation that could surpass indigenous nationalisms and the apparent aims of the Constituent Assembly with the goal of keeping Bolivia under the dominion of the world market (Walsh, 2009).

As such, the new paradigm – paradogma? – of human development seems to envelop only further the human condition. On the one hand, it suggests the continued operation in Latin America of the multicultural logic of neo-liberal capitalism and its ability to condition modes of thought and conform to a common sense that legitimates the machines of power, making it increasingly difficult to search for alternatives (Torres, cited in Sverdlick, 2002). In this sense and despite its 'holistic' and 'integral' language, it is bound to the continuance of western modern-colonial imposition. The very idea of development itself is a concept and word that does not exist in the cosmovisions, conceptual categories, and languages of indigenous communities.

But while human development continues to reflect and reproduce a multicultural logic, this logic is not quite the same as that of the early 1990s. Then it was the (neo)liberal multiculturalism of the United States with its guarantee of the freedom to difference, its emphasis on tolerance, and its marketing of diversity that dominated the scene. Today, neo-liberalization and globalization are experiencing a process of European 'humanization' in which the European model of functional interculturalism and development is on the way to replace the multicultural hegemony of US neo-liberal development policy. The manifestation of this shift is clearly evidenced in the recently formed EUROsociAL, an alliance among the European Union, IDP, UNDP, and the Economic Commission of Latin America (CEPAL), with the support of the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. EUROsociAL describes itself as:

> … A plan of development for the European Union that seeks to make this region the most competitive and dynamic economy in the World, capable of generating a growing sustainable economy, respectful of the environment, with more employment and

> greater social cohesion. … [It is] the [European] ideal of what should be a dignified society …. A possible horizon for the politics of development in Latin America … . The incorporation of social cohesion in the agenda of Latin America is a product of the dialogue with Europe, using the academy, international organisms, and national governments to adapt the concept to the Latin American reality.[4]

In this description the envelopment of human development and its entanglement is clear. Indeed some warn that the real agenda of such policies is a re-colonization of lands-territories and their natural resources by means of new programmes of education, research, and development (Delgado, 2006). Yet there is another side to the problem which is the positing of integral sustainable human development as a regional, national, and even 'revolutionary' alternative. This is the problem to which I now turn.

## Human social development as (and versus) *buen vivir*

*Buen vivir*, roughly translated as 'living well' or collective well being, is the orienting concept of the new Ecuadorian Constitution passed in popular referendum in September 2008.[5] As the Preamble states: We decided to construct a new form of citizen coexistence, in diversity and harmony with nature, to reach 'el buen vivir, el *sumak kawsay*'.

In its most general sense, *buen vivir* denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. This notion is part and parcel of the cosmovision, cosmology, or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala but also, and in a somewhat different way, of the descendents of the African Diaspora.

In a country that has long exalted its *mestizo* character, favoured whitening and whiteness, and looked to the North for its model of development, the incorporation of *buen vivir* as the guiding principle of the Constitution is historically significant. Its new conceptualization as public policy is a result largely of the social, political, and epistemic agency of the indigenous movement over the last two decades. It responds to the urgency of a radically different social contract that presents alternatives to capitalism and the 'culture of death' of its neo-liberal and development project. But more than a constitutional declaration, *buen vivir* affords, as Alberto Acosta (2008) makes clear, an opportunity to collectively construct a new model of development. It is based according to Eduardo Gudynas (2009) in the generation of new equilibriums including quality of life, democratization of the State, and attention to biocentric concerns.

The grounds for this new model are evidenced in the triangular relationship that the Constitution constructs among the rights of nature, *buen vivir*, and what is referred to as the 'regimen of development'. As the Political Charter states: 'Nature or *Pacha Mama*, where life is reproduced and realized, has the right to the integral respect of its existence and the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes' (Art.71). It also has the right to reparation or restoration (Art.72).

*Buen vivir*, in addition to being the transversal axis, has its own 'regimen' with more than 75 articles that include water and food, nature, education, health, labour and social security, housing, culture, social communication, science, technology, ancestral knowledge, biodiversity, ecological systems, alternative energy, and individual and collective rights of historically unprotected groups, among other areas. What particularly stands out here is the social, economic, and epistemic significance given to *buen vivir* and the integral relation it constructs among beings, knowledge, and nature. Nature is broadly understood as the constitutive conditions and practices – sociocultural, territorial, spiritual, ancestral, ethical, epistemic, and aesthetic – of life itself.

The third and final point of the triangle is the 'Regimen of Development', described in the Constitution as:

> The organized, sustainable and dynamic ensemble of economic, political, socio-cultural, and environmental systems that guarantee the realization of *buen vivir*, or sumak kawsay'. […] *Buen vivir* requires that

> persons, [indigenous] nationalities and peoples, effectively enjoy their rights and exercise responsibilities in the frame of interculturality, respect for diversities, and harmonic co-existence with nature. (Art.275)

Seven objectives organize this Regimen: improvement in the quality of life; a just, democratic, productive and solidarity-based economic system with equal distribution of development benefits and dignified and stable work; the promotion of participation and social control including equitable representation of diverse identities in all areas of public power; the recuperation and conservation of nature and the maintenance of a sane and sustainable environment guaranteeing equal access; the guarantee of national sovereignty and Latin American integration; the promotion of an equitable, balanced, and articulated territorial ordering; and the protection and promotion of cultural diversity, social memory, and cultural patrimony.

The vision put forth in this Charter with regard to development is that of a new society based in equality, fraternity, solidarity, complementarity, equal access, participation, social control and responsibility. Its projection is towards a new social, political, economic, and nature-based mode of development that takes distance from capitalism and requires a major re-orienting from within.

The design for the realization and application of this project is detailed in the new National Plan of Development referred to also as the National Plan for *el Buen Vivir* 2009–2013 developed by the National Secretariat of Planning and Development (SENPLADES) and recently approved in November 2009 by President Rafael Correa. According to the director of SENPLADES, this Plan is 'the first step in constructing a National Descentralized System of Participatory Planning that has as its goal the decentralization and deconcentration of power and the construction of the Plurinational and Intercultural State'.[6] Here *Buen Vivir* is described as:

> A wager for change from the demands for equality and social justice; from the recognition, validation, and dialogue of peoples and their cultures, knowledges, and modes of life. *Buen vivir* seeks to achieve the satisfaction of necessities, the attainment of the quality of life and a dignified death, to love and be loved, the healthy flourishing of all, in peace and harmony with nature and the indefinite prolongation of human cultures. […] It recognizes the need for free time for contemplation and emancipation, and that real liberties, opportunities, capacities, and potentialities of individuals grow and flourish in the manner that they permit a simultaneous achievement of that which society, territories, diverse collective identities and each one –seen as both an individual and UNIVERSAL HUMAN BEING – value as the objective of a desirable life. It obliges us to reconstruct the public in order to recognize, understand, and value one another – as diverse but equals – with the goal of making possible reciprocity and mutual recognition, and with this, the self-realization and construction of a social and shared future.[7]

In the Plan and its 12 strategies of change and 12 national specific objectives, *buen vivir* and development are understood as interchangeable. Development is the realization of *buen vivir,* and the construction and realization of *buen vivir* is what enables this new vision of human and social development. It is precisely this signification that raises a number of critical questions and concern. For reasons of space, I will take into account only two here.

The first question and concern has to do with the very origins of *buen vivir.* Its inspiration, as mentioned, finds ground in ancestral philosophies and cosmologies of life and living where 'development' as a term and concept is nonexistent (Viteri Gualinga, 2004). By making *buen vivir* central in the reconstituting of the Ecuadorian State and nation, both the Constitution and Plan provoke an 'interculturalizing' unprecedented in the country as well as the Latin-American region. It requires the general populace to think and act 'with' ancestral principles, knowledges, and communities, assuming these principles and knowledges are valid for all. Yet this inspiration, it seems, is not the only one in operation. A closer analysis of the new Plan and its predecessor (2007–2009) makes evident that 'living well' also – and possibly to an even greater scale – takes meaning from the alternative visions of development emerging in the Western world. More specifically they come from the notions of integral sustainable human development we discussed

above. In this adaptation and hybridization of the concept and term, the conceptual rupture and intercultural potential appears to lose at least some of its radical force. The crucial question is whether *buen vivir* is becoming another discursive tool and co-opted term, functional to the State and its structures and with little significance for real intercultural, interepistemic, and plurinational transformation. Certainly such question and concern are warranted when we take into account government actions in the last months, including the approval of a mining law and the proposal of a water law that clearly contradict the tenets of *buen vivir.*

The second question and concern has to do with the meaning and orientation of development. In both the previous Plan and this most recent one, development is conceived in the context of the State; that is to say, development is the strategy by which state reform will occur, permitting the State to recuperate its capacities of management, planning, regulation, and redistribution (SENPLADES, 2009). In this sense *buen vivir* as development *is* the State. And it is the State that signifies in technocratic, economistic, and humanistic terms what is development and *buen vivir.* Two of the strategies for change make particularly clear the technocratic and economistic orientation: 'Transform the model of specialization of the economy through the selective substitution of importations for *el buen vivir*' and 'inversion for *el buen vivir*, through the connecting of savings and inversion in a sustainable macroeconomy'.

In the humanistic sense, the Plan takes much of its language and focus from the model of Integral Sustainable Human Development. Liberty, autonomy, inclusion, and social cohesion are key elements. Bettering the capacities and potentialities of the citizenry – understood as individuals and 'universal' beings –, improving their quality of life, strengthening democracy and participation, promoting the conservation and sustainability of bio-diversity and natural resources, and the affirmation and respect for diversity appear as criteria thought and signified from a western modernist framework. The possibility of 'thinking with' other philosophies, cosmovisions, and collective relational modes of life not centred in the individual and in 'capacities' and 'potentialities' is noticeably absent.[8] Missing as well is an understanding and positioning of the problem that goes beyond individual responsibility and a strong State, a problem that rests in the legacies, reproductions, and reconstructions of coloniality and of the modern-colonial-world system with particular manifestations in Latin America, the Andes, and Ecuador.

As such, we might critically ask: To what extent does this new binary *buen vivir*-development enable a de-envelopment of the developmentisms present and past? And, to what measure does the new paradigm (paradogma?) in Ecuador suggest a disentanglement of the colonial matrix of power? Or does all this rather suggest a new more complicated envelopment and entanglement?

## In closing

What I have endeavoured to show here is that the new institutional arrangements of human centred development in the America of the South, and particularly in Ecuador, are not without problems, inconsistencies, and contradictions. While the rest of the world may consider this case hopefully, as the dismantling of neo-liberal policies and the construction of endogenous development under a radically different life philosophy, the policies and practice emerging in the day-to-day indicate that the so-called 'citizen revolution' – if we can really call it that – has still some way to go.

But what I want to bring to the fore are even deeper concerns with regards to the new paradigm – or paradogma – of integral sustainable human development. The universalizing of this model, enabling it to travel without question – or visa – to the Souths of the world, recalls the geopolitics of development in the past. Such recollection, however, is easily shrouded by this new humanistic face and agenda.

It seems that the European push to humanize capitalism and its neo-liberal project is having effect. In this new scenario, we must be evermore vigilant of the institutional arrangements and the colonial entanglements.

## Notes

1 My interest as such is not with a critique of the authors associated with this new paradigm or their work, but rather with the paradigm's interpretation and application.
2 Functional interculturality can be understood as part of an institutional strategy that seeks to promote dialogue, tolerance, coexistence, and inclusion without necessarily addressing the causes of inequality; it makes diversity 'functional' to the system (Tubino, 2005). This contrasts with what I have referred to as 'critical interculturality', which initiates with a profound questioning of this system and seeks its major transformation in social, political, epistemic, and existential terms. That is, a new ordering of structures, institutions, and relations (Walsh, 2002, 2009).
3 http//:www.iadb.org/news/detail.cfm?language=Spanish$id=2214.
4 http//:www.programaeurosocial.eu.
5 It is also a central component of the Bolivian Constitution, passed in popular referendum in January 2009.
6 See http:/www.senplades,gov.ec/index.php?option = com_content&view = article&id = 596:.
7 See http:/www.senplades,gov.ec/index.php?option = com_content&view = article&id = 596:.
8 See Escobar (2009) for a similar critique.

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