

# Buen Vivir as a model for state and economy<sup>1</sup>

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Since the late 1990s, indigenous groups have been looking at the etymology of the words “development” and “progress” in order to translate them as accurately as possible into their native languages. This is not for the sake of linguistics, but because they seek to understand the incompatibility of two different world views: on the one hand, the policies described as “development” by the state and the international aid community, which have had a negative impact; and on the other, the indigenous “cosmovision” of co-existence with nature as a new view of development. Development project designers’ expectations and those of the target population were clearly incompatible and led to misunderstandings. The words “development” and “progress” had no equivalent in any indigenous language that reflected this Western sense of growth through the possession of material goods.

Several words were suggested as approximations: the Aymara *suma qamaña*, the Quechua *sumak kawsay* and the Guarani *ñandereco*, although they clearly represented a perception that was wholly different from, and even the opposite of, the concept of *development*. There are fundamental differences between various indigenous languages, but it is interesting to note that they all share a concept of an *ideal life*. The concept does not split mankind from nature and has an inseparable interconnection between the material life of reproduction and the production of social and spiritual life. Men and women, together with nature, are part of the Mother Earth and there is a communion and dialogue between them mediated by rituals in which Nature is understood as a sacred being.

This cosmocentric thought has some practical consequences: if Nature is sacred, then people should take from her only what is necessary to live, since Nature is understood to be alive and also possesses the will to withhold from communities the sustenance they need if she is badly treated<sup>3</sup>. As these cosmocentric concepts establish a relationship with Nature, which is mediated by the community, it is understood that men and women are not bereft of relationships or community networks. Reproduction is only possible when links of mutual interdependence are established, in which the ideal is posed in terms of a life of reciprocal relationships and solidarity.

The study affirmed the existence of two visions of civilisation: the indigenous and the capitalist and socialist. It is not by chance that it was the Minister of Foreign Affairs, David Choquehuanca, a knowledgeable participant in the debate, who revived the topic while designing and formulating the National Development

Plan 2006-2011. For the first time, this put the issue of *Buen Vivir* at the forefront of public policy, and went on to become the overarching objective of the five-year plan, which a year later, was endorsed in the Constitution.

*Buen Vivir*, for indigenous and Andean peoples, expresses a sense of satisfaction in achieving the ideal of the community by feeding and nourishing itself through its own production. Not just nutrition in the sense of food consumption, but through the equilibrium between the living forces of Nature and the commonwealth of the community. This allows energies to flow so that life and reproduction can follow: water, weather, soil and the ritual blending of humans and their surroundings. Work and production are collective acts of celebration (work and community festivals are inseparable); well-being is enjoyed collectively, as is the use of the resources which make it possible for life to be reproduced. The principles of this plenitude are:

1. Social solidarity, with the presupposition that human beings can only achieve such plenitude together with their fellow human beings, in other words, in community.
2. Production, the result of the interaction of communal work.
3. The reproduction of the work force and the care of the family is the responsibility of the family and the collective.
4. Complementarity, the underlying premise of the interdependence between different human beings - who have different abilities and attributes - which enriches interaction and is the foundation for common learning.
5. Production and work is done with respect for and in harmony with nature.
6. Nature is sacred and pacts with it are renewed through ritual<sup>4</sup>.

However, two dimensions of *Buen Vivir* have to be distinguished: experience and practice, along with ethics and politics. From the former, it is impossible to extrapolate one single concept or line of interpretation because experience is linked to Bolivia's regional, social and cultural plurality. But it is possible to move from the ethical and political dimension to build another view of society which, while being diverse and enormously plural, establishes some minimum

agreements regarding common and socially-shared well-being. This dimension perceives the collective (which is not the sum of individuals) as part of Nature – our home – and that without a relationship with it, we will not be able to reproduce our lives. *Buen Vivir* thus construed implies a common cultural construction on the basis of respect for life.

The Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador have adopted the concept of “*Buen Vivir*” as a state and government objective. This is a profoundly decolonising act: it acknowledges firstly that the source of this concept is the indigenous cosmivision, and secondly inspires and establishes a plurinational direction for our cultural, political, economic and social co-existence. *Buen Vivir* in these terms strives to become a meeting place, a *taypi*<sup>5</sup> of minimum agreements; it does not attempt to standardise and is neither ethnocentric, nor androcentric: it sets out plural alternatives for life in accordance with each community’s own cosmivision and culture.

*Buen Vivir*, as the principle and goal of public policies and the foundation for both the model of the state and the economic model, is inspired by the indigenous ideal of a harmonious relationship between living beings that ensures diversity, life and the equality of redistribution.

*Buen Vivir*, beyond the expectation of meeting certain needs, involves social change: the state is expected to guarantee the basic conditions for the reproduction of the life of its population without jeopardising the regeneration of the natural biodiversity. It involves exchanging the market system for one that vindicates the right to life (sustenance, reproduction and subsistence) and subjects the economy to social and political criteria.

Despite the radical shift towards the concept of *Buen Vivir*, the word “development” is still a powerful myth: full of glowing and apparently praiseworthy ideas, both desirable and even “necessary”. It is associated with a series of markers: progress, modern life, evolution, industrialisation, technology and, more generally, ideas of advancing forward, and the uninterrupted growth towards a civilisation in the image and likeness of the countries of the North.

The policies adopted to reach this “ideal” model were similar throughout the American continent, even if they were applied unevenly. These measures included the incorporation of modern technology into industry; transition from agricultural production to agro-industry; the stimulation of urban development and – in politics and education - the encouragement of cultural standardisation which would lead to citizenship. This implied the uniformity of an individual

behaviour that was disciplined for consumption and favourably disposed to representative democracy. In other words, apolitical social movements. To summarise, it is a discipline which completely ignores the country's cultural diversity: development projects have never considered the indigenous people as development actors.

In a country with vibrant indigenous cultures, both this development model and the perspective of the future it proposed were not only unviable but profoundly unequal: unviable because the Bolivian business class was never committed to industrial development or able to become a genuine modern bourgeoisie; unequal because only a few were linked to the international market and enjoyed the benefits of globalisation. One of the greatest obstacles that the Bolivian bourgeoisie were unable to recognise or surmount was precisely their status as a nobility. They were modern in some respects, but profoundly backward in that they did not create universal citizenship. In other words, they had the use of indigenous labour while showing no interest in developing "citizenship". The state was used as a channel for capital, embarking on a host of projects which were supposedly 'modernising', but which ended in failure. In other words, the road towards modernity was basically oligarchic: land concentration, the personal use of cheap labour and the concentration of power and privilege.

Acknowledging these historical shortcomings, it is impossible to continue believing in the development project. While the bourgeoisie have been unable to respond to these challenges, the opposition and direct action of social movements and civil society have moved to take the lead in building another kind of state and another direction for development.

*Buen Vivir* as the ideal development objective (or even as an "alternative to development") is a new perspective for looking to the future, guiding it and imagining it. It is not just a change in semantics or discourse. Let us look at the conceptual and programmatic implications of *Buen Vivir*:

- Development is no longer single or universal but plural: it is understood to be comprehensive, able to address situations that are not homogenous, and to incorporate social, political, economic and cultural aspects.
- Development is no longer merely a quantitative aim: it is a qualitative process that must consider the community's enjoyment of material goods and subjective, spiritual and intellectual realisation. Non-utilitarian trends and meanings

thus come to the fore in unison with access to services: collective enjoyment, the capacity for intercultural dialogue, cultural identity as a fundamental element for understanding what is “common”.

- The accumulation of wealth and industrialisation are no longer the aims of a desirable future, but are means for attaining the harmonious co-existence between communities, and between communities with nature.
- The focus on the individual gives way to co-existence, interaction and intercultural dialogue. Co-existence between human beings becomes primary; well-being does not depend on exploiting others, less still on the cultural exclusion of the indigenous peoples.

*Buen Vivir* is a different way of seeing the world (moving from anthropocentrism to cosmocentrism); it is critical of modernity and capitalism. Does this deny the need to generate wealth, or minimise the economy? No, but the objectives change radically: objectives such as the calculation of efficiency, utility and maximum profit lose relevance, and give way instead to the survival of human beings, seen as natural, interdependent beings – not detached from nature or the community. *Buen Vivir* is an axiological principle (i.e. production geared to values) which aims not only at meeting the material needs of the production of use-value, but other values of emancipation. Above all, it is freedom - not reduced to a Western negative freedom - that links human beings to politics and the ability to have a direct influence on decisions that affect their lives, their natural and community contexts. This is cultural plurality in the broadest sense.

## **The plurinational state and the institutional revolution**

The plurinational state involves building a new state based on the guiding principle of respect for and defence of life. The new Bolivian Constitution recognises and incorporates fundamental rights- including those of the indigenous peoples - and is constantly charged with promoting, protecting and respecting them in order to achieve equality and justice.

The necessary institutional revolution must go beyond simply redesigning the government apparatus towards the support of plural government structures: some more modern, rational and bureaucratic, based on distrust and audits; and others more community- and consensus-based, depending on trust, community

meetings and public accountability. This involves devolving the administration of local activities in accordance with local customs and, in the framework of autonomous processes, of commissioning government departments to deal with that which they themselves cannot manage, organising government at the regional level.

This is a hugely significant revolution because it supersedes the view that state government spheres are the primarily channels for public management, returning to society its capacity to solve its problems. This is essential, because the authorities and civil servants will not easily relinquish the state machinery or mechanisms, which continues to reproduce the old oligarchic, despotic, egotistical, racist and paternalist practices, which have led to the current government inertia and its inability to solve people's real problems.

At present, public administration and policy decisions are not managed centrally by social movements, but instead preserve the existing relations of power and privilege. New community-based forms of organisation and policies are needed to ascertain and meet collective needs in harmony with the environment.

The colonial state ruled through a central structure of command and control. The independence movement failed to change this kind of relationship between governed and governors. It was only towards the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century that governments started to decentralise administration throughout the region and began a process of delegation to lower levels of the administration.

However, the plurinational state makes an 180-degree turn in the way the state is structured: by creating local and regional government levels, the conditions are given for forming institutions from the bottom up, where some of the public goods and services are supplied through community organisations and others delegated to local government. Government in a plurinational state is restructured into a two-way process: first, transferring competencies from central government to the departments, municipalities and autonomous indigenous territories; and second, by transferring competencies from the bottom up, from community organisations to the regional authorities. The quality of the new plurinational state will depend on the amount of work done at the local level and the way government departments at all levels reflect the plural ideas of the local organisations within their jurisdiction. This is a substantial step towards the deconstruction of colonial state structures and the incorporation and recognition of the community principles in state administration, complementing Western, modern and technocratic processes and practices with indigenous and community processes.

The formal recognition of the indigenous autonomous territories already means that in practice their customs are being incorporated into government administration, but this also needs to be matched by recognition on equal terms of both organisational styles - the modern/rationalist and the community based. The modern, technocratic system and style is more geared to complying with specific government-sector competencies. While the community system aims to build qualitatively-deeper, consensus-based networks, producing forums for discussing problems and problem-solving, motivating collective action and building reciprocal networks.

There also needs to be a rethinking of territorial and sectoral areas of government. Sectoral offices have been shown to be inefficient when trying to solve particular problems since they do not operate at a territorial level. The plurinational state must build new administrative entities to respond to the territorial demands of the various regions of the country in tandem with sectoral entities that think of the best solutions, monitor progress and challenge the community with innovations from their sectoral perspective.

The *intercultural character of the state* is expressed in environmental policies and the law of Mother Earth, which appreciates the cultural diversity of knowledge and practices concerning Mother Earth. The state institutes *shared responsibility* with territorial community organisations, to care for Mother Earth and manage natural resources responsibly. While the problems faced today –such as pollution and climate change – are new to the indigenous cultures, the environmental crisis of the planet makes it imperative to maximise efforts and resources to find and apply solutions. By fostering various peoples’ traditional knowledge and practices for caring for the Mother Earth and their responsible use of resources, the state also promotes the development of the necessary science and technology through a “knowledge dialogue”, so that intercultural alternatives and solutions can emerge.

## **Towards the social and community economy**

The fourth chapter of the Constitution covers the state’s economic organisation and reveals the wealth and complexity of the new economic model. It starts by describing the plural economy, composed of various forms of economic organisation – community, state, private and cooperative. The model is geared towards *Buen Vivir*, complementing individual interests with collective well-being that are aimed at constructing a social and community economy.

How do we build this social and communal economy? According to the

Constitution, the state will recognise, respect, protect and promote the community economy, which encompasses the systems of production and the reproduction of social life, founded on the principles and vision proper to the original indigenous peoples and nations (Art. 307).

A second aspect that stands out in the process of formulating the new economic model is the role attributed to the state, which - and we should never forget - is another kind of state. The function of the new state is to lead social and economic planning, with public participation and consultation, as set out in some detail in the Constitution. The state is expected to:

direct and monitor the economy - particularly the strategic sectors - and regulate production, distribution and the marketing of goods and services; participate directly in the economy to promote social and economic equality; integrate the various forms of economic production, while promoting the industrialisation of renewable and non-renewable natural resources, and at the same time respecting and protecting the environment; promote equitable production policies for the country's wealth and economic resources, determining which productive and commercial activities are considered indispensable and may become the monopoly of the state; regularly formulate, through public participation and consultation, the general development plan; manage economic resources for research, technical assistance and technology transfer for promoting productive activities and industrialisation; and regulate aeronautical activities (Art. 316).

How can this state function be understood in a plural economy? Is this a state in transition creating the economic, social, political and cultural conditions for the development of a social and community economy? This state function must be deciphered by understanding the form of state economic organisation that covers state companies and other state-owned economic entities. This form of economic organisation has the following objectives:

to administer in the name of the Bolivian people the property rights over natural resources; to exercise the strategic control of the productive chains and industrialisation processes; to administer the basic services of potable water and sewerage; to produce goods and services directly; to promote economic democracy and food sovereignty; and to guarantee



participation in and the social supervision of its organisation and management and workers' participation in decision-taking and benefits (Art. 309).

The system of government is participatory democracy, with social participation and control, including the exercise of direct democracy, delegated democracy and community democracy. This distinguishes the process from the experience of the nationalist governments that tried to industrialise the country and substitute imports, in what was called 'state capitalism' in Latin America.

As mentioned above, the new economic model proposed by the Constitution is complex and proposes a period of transition full of contradictions. There are clearly tensions between the interests of 'development' and those of the community, and between the strategy of the industrialisation of natural resources and safeguarding the environment. These all pose problems for various forms and levels of economic organisation. There are a number of questions to be asked in this transition period: how can we move from the plural economy – whose structure is shaped by the hegemony of the capitalist mode of production and from a context determined by the capitalist world economy – to a social and communal economy? And how is this facilitated? What is the scope of the state economy and how is it articulated with the other forms of economic organisation? What is the scope of the coverage and composition of the productive model? Does it repeat or go beyond the paradigm of the industrial revolution? How does it uphold fundamental rights and meet the aim of food sovereignty? How can we respect Mother Earth and achieve environmental equilibrium? Understanding this is a process of transition, in what way can we – from the outset – create the conditions for *Buen Vivir* to become historically and culturally possible?

While the transition process entails phases and stages, it can be directed from the start towards the pre-established goals. From the perspective of the economic organisation of the state, the new economic model has to abandon the structure imposed by the international market -being a country devoted to raw materials exports- and must start shaping a productive model which includes the stated industrialisation of the strategic natural resources. The Constitution declared Bolivia's wealth of minerals and hydrocarbons to be strategic resources, as well as evaporitic sediments, lithium and brine; and it describes the forest, water and energy resources as strategic wealth - except that, in this case, they are not only destined for industrialisation but also for protecting the environment. The problem lies in understanding what the industrialisation of the natural resources means: Is it to be understood in the terms of the paradigm of the industrial revolution followed by 'industrial' countries; or is there another epistemological

perspective which combines technological revolution and the recovery of traditional technologies?

Another key question is how this economic model can open up to the third wave of social revolutions that was set in motion by the indigenous movements. Indigenous opposition has already led challenges to 'free trade' agreements, corporate globalisation and the forms of privatisation and dispossession entailed by neoliberal policies.

One possible way forward – which tackles the perennial problem of unjust terms of exchange between dominant and periphery countries in the capitalist economy – is the strategy of *disconnection*: focusing economic development on strengthening the domestic and regional markets. Disconnection also means opting for food sovereignty, meeting the basic needs of the population and directing economic policy to *Buen Vivir*.

### **The scope of the plural economy: the transformation of the productive matrix**

One of the objectives of the plural economy is to transform this productive matrix (mode of production) in harmony with nature, where renewable natural resources are exploited with consideration for the constraints of the environment; where surpluses are invested in the development of community economies and in the conservation of the forests and quality of the environment. The plural economy model has six pillars:

1. The expansion of the “interventionist” state, so that it takes an active part in the productive apparatus. Because it is the chief generator of economic surplus, there should be state intervention over the productive chain of the strategic sector of hydrocarbons
2. The industrialisation of natural resources in order to overcome the dependence on raw materials exports.
3. The modernisation and technological upgrading of small and medium rural and urban production and the community economy.
4. The state as a “redistributor and reinvestor” of the economic

surplus, with guarantees that the wealth remains in the country, to promote the community economy, support small- and medium-scale production and strengthen state intervention to the benefit of the population.

5. Priority is given to satisfying the domestic market, and only subsequently the export market.

6. Recognition and promotion of those involved in the community economy as being credit-worthy and subjects of rights.

The plural economy is put into practice through combining three domains: public, mixed (public-private) and private-cooperative-community, with the state participating actively as a protagonist.

The first domain is comprised of the strategic public companies of the hydrocarbon, mining and food sectors that engage in the production, marketing and export of products that have a major effect on job creation and income for Bolivians, and that generate and redistribute wealth for the benefit of local community stakeholders across the country. The strategic public companies must become the drivers of a productive network integrated into various geographical regions, producing manufacturing products that fuel other strategic productive sectors.

The second domain is comprised of the mixed companies given priority at sub-national level (departments, regions and municipalities), and organised with public and private capital in which local community organisations act in partnership with the local state in production, transformation and agro-industrial marketing and other strategic manufactured products to increase production and income generation. These mixed companies should act as key links in the productive networks for the benefit of private-community business ventures and guarantee the creation of alternatives for a high percentage of value-added in final products.

The third is composed of private-community ventures and the agro-industrial, artisanal, manufacturing and industrial cooperatives in rural and urban areas. The private and community business ventures must promote the production of goods and services by taking part in making a final product. Private-community ventures will receive support via urban and rural financial and non-financial services.

The plural economy functions with an expanded role for the state, which participates through state companies in mining, industry, food and services, controlling the industrialisation of natural resources to overcome dependence on raw materials exports, achieve food sovereignty and transform the productive matrix (mode of production) in harmony with nature. It is envisaged that the state will create territorial productive complexes (gas in the Chaco, iron in Pantanal and lithium in the salt flats) that develop a series of links with other mixed and private-community-cooperative services and ventures connected to these strategic resources.

This will be complemented by regional productive complexes that will bring together community, private and mixed companies and organisations to produce primary goods for local markets and high added-value goods for national and international markets.

### **The political, economic, social and cultural project of the social movements and indigenous peoples**

Did the protests of 2000-2005 produce a political project? Undoubtedly yes, particularly after the country passed a Constitution that defines the state as plurinational, community-based and with regional and indigenous autonomy. This is the project: a new state, and a new relationship between state and society that takes the form of decolonisation. It recognises forms of community that have succeeded in surviving throughout the colonial and the republican eras and which today have become forms of resistance to capitalism, even if they are also caught up in the circle of commerce, money and capital and are drawn into capitalist relations. In the Constitution, communities, community forms and community pluralism become an alternative. This is the political interpretation of Buen Vivir defined in the Constitution, as an expression from the constituent assembly of the social struggles against capitalism and the indigenous struggles against colonialism.

The horizon opened up by social struggles is a transition to the goals proposed, as well as a shift in the forms, practices and institutions of society, and hence also of values. It recognises the inherent strength of peoples, their creative power to institute and constitute and their radical imagination. Buen Vivir in Bolivia and Ecuador are political translations of *suma qamaña* and *sumak kawsay*; they are intentional interpretations that play with the cycles of time, coming back to renewed interpretations of indigenous cosmovisions to open the way for new critiques of capitalism and modernity, and discern the grave

consequences of the environmental crisis.

How can *Buen Vivir* or 'living well' be attained? The key is in the shape the transition takes; how it is guided. In other words, how the relations and corresponding structures of the capitalist world economy are transformed, and how the nexus between production and reproduction is broken. First, socially reproducing the symbolic difference from capitalist meanings; second, advancing towards the conformation of other relations of production. That is why it is so important to strengthen cultural resistance, and restore opportunities for community experience.

This can lay the ground for a transition from the dissociative, fragmentary, dependent, extractivist and export-based situation in which we live towards a comprehensive, biological, social and psychic ecology that also makes possible all-round sovereignty - food, technology, energy, economic and financial. Bolivia could then return to the market with other codes, neither mercantilist nor capitalist, but codifying the market with symbolism that values the synergy of diversity - the meeting of worlds, peoples, cultures and organic beings - in the perspective of the fullness of life.

## Notes

1. This text contains parts of the "Plurinational Plan for Living Well, 2010-2015," a document drafted collectively under the direction of Raul Prada in 2010, who was the then Vice-minister of Strategic Planning. The plan was approved by the cabinet in September of the same year but was not implemented due to political decisions by the Bolivian government. *Buen Vivir* is a term in Spanish that can be translated as "living well," but with a distinctive meaning in the Latin American and particularly indigenous context. We feel that the conceptual work on *Buen Vivir* presented here is important and should be included in this book .
2. Former Vice-Minister of Strategic Planning of the Plurinational state of Bolivia and former member of Bolivia's Constituent Assembly. Professor in Political Theory at the San Andrés University. Member of the Comuna research collective. Adviser to the social organisations of the Unity Pact during the drafting of the Mother Earth Act.
3. "We are neither owners nor lords of the earth: the Jichis of the lakes, the lords of the forests in the low lands require us to ask permission to take their elements; the Andean Pachamama expects to be fed and have offerings to be made to her if she is to reciprocate": Luz María Calvo (quoted in the Plurinational Plan for Living Well, 2010-2015).

4. “The land is a fecund mother, as a place to live, like the fields, the orchard people tend for their food, nature lavish in water and in air. So the concept of nurturing is fundamental: people, like the other creatures on the Earth, are all together members of a community of life; so the quality of fecundity explains this unique ability of cherishing a community of life, a community that constantly bears fruit again and again”: Carlos Mamani (quoted in the Plurinational Plan for Living Well, 2010-2015).

5. Taypi refers to the middle or central place, where the antagonistic halves of the dualist system meet. This is where two elements meet: awqa (enemy, opposite), in other words the place where differences can flourish (Beltrán, 2003: 77).