

Systemic Alternatives

VIVIR BIEN

Notes for the Debate



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Notes for the Debate

Vivir Bien / Buen Vivir

*Let's walk with our backs toward the future and our eyes on the past
so we can find our way to utopia.*

What is *Vivir Bien*?

Is it an idea that reclaims ethical principles and knowledge? A practice or proposal of the Andean indigenous peoples? A philosophy? A paradigm for civilization? A “cosmic ethics”? A cosmovision?

After reading and exchanging views with several indigenous leaders, academics and politicians, perhaps the most appropriate way to approach *vivir bien* is by thinking of it as a concept or a space that is under construction and disputed among different actors ranging from indigenous peoples, social movements, intellectuals, politicians and governments.

Vivir bien (Bolivia) or *buen vivir* (Ecuador) is a Spanish term that emerged in the late 20th century to refer to the practices and/or visions of indigenous peoples of the Andean region of South America. The Aymara say *suma qamaña*; the Quechua, *sumak kawsay*; the Peruvian Amazonian groups, *ametsa asaiki*; the Guaraní, *ñandereko*. The Spanish translation of *suma qamaña* or *sumak kawsay* is still under discussion, and some suggestions include: “plentiful life,” “to know how to live,” “the good life,” “the sweet life,” “living well,” “harmonious life,” and sublime life.” One point of agreement is that *vivir bien* does not mean living according to Western notions of what is “good.”

The Core Elements of *Vivir Bien*

*It's not about returning to some idealized past, but rather, facing the problems
of contemporary societies based on learning from our roots.*

Several authors have emphasized different aspects of this concept or space that is under disputed and under construction. The most prominent are:

The Earth Community

A central element is the assumption that human beings are part of nature, that we must overcome the anthropocentric (or human-centered) view of the world, because people

are one component of a larger community that is Mother Earth, the *Pachamama*, in which everything is alive.

[Pablo Dávalos] *Buen Vivir* expresses a different relationship between human beings and their social and natural environment. *Buen Vivir* incorporates a human, ethical and holistic dimension into the relationship between human beings and own history as well as with nature.¹

[Josef Estermann] Everything has life, nothing is simply inert matter. ... the universe, or *Pacha*, is not a machine or a giant mechanism that organizes itself and moves simply by mechanical laws, as stated by the modern European philosophers, especially Descartes and his followers. *Pacha* is rather a living organism in which all parts are related to one another, in constant interdependence and exchange. The basic principle of any “development” should be, then, life (*kawsay, qamaña, jakaña*) in its totality, not only that of humans or animals and plants, but of the whole *Pacha*.²

Coexisting

In Spanish, the verb *convivir* – to coexist or live in community – comes from the words for ‘living’ (*vivir*) and ‘together’ (*con*). *Vivir bien* is *convivir* – to know how to live in community with everyone and everything. The vision of living well does not deny the existence of the individual, but rather, places her always in the context of the community. A person is an individual in so much as she works for the common good of the community to which she belongs. The individual cannot come before the community. This community is not limited to human beings, but also includes nature.

Pluri-culturalism and Decolonization

Vivir bien proposes an intercultural encounter between different cultures on an even playing field. There is not just one way to live well. Living well is rooted in diverse ecosystems, histories, identities and cultures. For pluri-culturalism to flourish requires the decolonization of western thinking (European and American) that promotes a homogenizing vision.

[David Choquehuanca] *Vivir bien* is to recover the experience of our people, restore the Culture of Life and reclaim our lives in complete harmony and mutual respect with mother nature, with the *Pachamama*, where everything is life, where we are all *uywas*, the children of nature and the cosmos. We are all part of nature and there is nothing that is separate, and we are brothers with everything, from the plants to the mountains.³

[Alberto Acosta and Eduardo Gudynas] *Buen vivir* is a plural concept, both

for its cultural context and also because of the need to adjust it to different environmental frameworks.⁴

Complementarity and Solidarity

Between humans and communities we must complement one another to form a whole. Everything and everybody needs one another. This complementarity should be based on solidarity, mutual support, a kind of exchange that takes the other into account, rather than competition at the expense of others and nature.

[Rafael Puente] *Vivir bien* is to prioritize complementarity, which postulates that all living beings on the planet complement each other. In the communities, the child complements the grandfather, man complements woman, etc. That's why man should not kill plants, because they complement our existence and help humanity survive.⁵

[Xavier Albó] Nobody becomes a fully realized person (*jaqi*) if they not form a partnership: this is the smallest unit of coexistence, and also the source of new life. That's why getting married is called *jaqichasiña*, "becoming a person," and these couples – who are now a family – constitute the basis of every community organization. The *Aymara* concept of *chacha-warmi* (*man-woman, husband-wife*) also highlights that this coexistence has some differences and complementarity between those that learn to live together.⁶

The Integrality of Life

Material life is just one part of life, and cannot just be reduced to the accumulation of things and objects. Exchange value can never take precedence over use value. *Vivir bien* is to know how to eat, to share, dance, play, serve a community, care for the elderly, protect nature and practice your own beliefs. Spiritual life and material life are part of an inseparable whole.

[Pablo Mamani Ramírez] If a person does not have the material and spiritual conditions necessary to live, he will not share what he has, what he has built during his lifetime.⁷

[National Development Plan: Living Well and Democratic Bolivia Digna, Sovereign, Productive] *Vivir bien* basically means complementarity between access to and the enjoyment of material goods and affective, subjective and spiritual realization in harmony with nature and in community with human beings.⁸

The Search for Equilibrium

Harmony between the different elements that make up the whole is essential to *vivir bien*. It is not only about equilibrium between human beings, but also between humanity and nature, between material and spiritual life, between knowledge and wisdom, between cultures, between different identities and realities.

For *vivir bien*, linear growth without limits does not exist. Death is part of life. Everything moves cyclically in the shape of a spiral. The goal is not to reach a static equilibrium that is perfect and without contradiction. That doesn't exist. Equilibrium is always dynamic. It is a point of arrival and departure for new imbalances and balances, for new and more complex contradictions and complementarities. *Vivir bien* is not an ideal state or a paradise, but rather, a constant search in which the universal is faced with the individual, in which the growth of one part cannot undermine the others and the whole. The challenge is not to be or have more, but to always seek balance between the different parts of the Earth community.

[Josef Estermann] Man is not the measure of all things, but a *chakana*, a mediating bridge that helps build and restore universal harmony and balance. *Vivir bien* is a way of living in balance with all other elements of *Pacha* (the universe), according to the basic principles of the Andean *pachasofía*, which are the principles of relatedness, complementarity, correspondence, reciprocity and cyclicity. *Vivir bien* is neither wealth nor poverty. It's not waste nor shortage, nor deficiency nor luxury, but a life in harmony with all other beings, a type of coexistence that is intercultural, intergenerational and inter-biotic. The dominant conception of the Andes is not linear, but cyclical (a spiral shape), and the goal of development as part of *vivir bien* (*allin kawsay*; *suma qamaña*) does not necessarily lie ahead, in an unknown future, but could be back in a past we have yet to conquer.⁹

Cosmivision and Philosophy

The Andean world anticipates what science is confirming: That the planet is a living organism and that a subatomic particle can be in two places at once.

[Josef Estermann] The Andean concept of *vivir bien* can only be fully understood as the expression of a cosmivision and philosophy that is completely different from the dominant Western way of thinking, and not as an economic, ecological or cultural recipe.¹⁰

[Javier Medina] I understand civilization as the result of how humanity generally conceives of pairs or opposites (creator-creature, good-bad, matter-energy,

space-time, subject-object. life-death, etc.). If it is thought of in an exclusive and dualistic way – George W. Bush’s “empire of good against an empire of evil” – then that is like Western Christian Civilization. If the pairs are thought of in an inclusive way, as a dual unity or non-duality, that is like Eastern civilization, or in our case, the animist Amer-Indian. This first approach has the advantage of being simple: the West means exclusion; Indian-ness means inclusion. But this approach is murky because it does not speak to the mediations that are behind either characterization.¹¹

[Rafael Bautista S.] Globalization is not a recent phenomenon. It is inherent to an accumulation model that needs to develop on a global scale to achieve its identity without contradiction. If Hegel’s philosophy of history is a theodicy, it is because it unconsciously recognizes that the (Eurocentric) globalizing claim is a drama of a supernatural character. Modern science and philosophy come loaded with this mystification of reality: the expansion of modern Western civilization is the manifestation of the absolute spirit. So its realization cannot be particular, only totalizing. If it pursues its identity without contradictions – the same becomes the same – then what is set in motion is not motion but eternal permanence of the same in the same. The logic expressed by this apparent movement cannot be dialectic, but formal; the thinking that is produced is not critical, but conservative. To want to be like God leads to a paradoxical situation: an identity without contradictions is an empty identity that is beyond human contingency. To try to do that is to make contingent the contingency itself, the devaluation of the utopian into utopianism. So the modern project is blind, and what its style of development is producing is the suicide of humanity.¹²

[Josef Estermann] The Andean *pachasofía* takes the principle of “totality” or “universal” in a very core and strict sense: the only economic, social and political measures that are good are those that contribute to the betterment of all human beings (the principle of universalizability) and that are compatible with life in general, including future generations (the principle of the trans-generational).¹³

[Pablo Mamani Ramírez] In this sense, life and death are not two different moments, but a totality, or an “existential completeness.” In the Aymara way of thinking, there is no death, as understood in the West where the body disappears into hell or in heaven. Here, death is just another moment of life, because you live again in the mountains or in the depths of the lakes or rivers. In reality, the dead are transformed into grandparents-grandmothers *achachilas-abuichas*. The *achachilas-abuichas* are high mountains, or underwater mountains (*achachila-abuicha ch’ua*). The dead are co-habiting with the living, and have the ability to protect their children-daughters, their *ayllu-marka* (territorial units of social organization in the Andes), or their people (*jaki*) from dangers so that they can send punishment in the form of lightning or hail when we forget them.¹⁴

[Josef Estermann] *Suma qamaña* or *allin kawsay* reflects a non-anthropocentric or biologicistic conception of life, but instead, one that is a cosmocentric and holistic. This means that, for indigenous worldviews and philosophies, there is no separation or dichotomy between what is alive (“living beings”) and what (according to West) is not (“inert bodies”). The cosmos or *Pacha* is like a living organism whose “parts” are intimately interrelated and interdependent, so that life or “liveliness” are defined by the degree of balance or harmony between them. Therefore, this differs fundamentally from the Western paradigm of individualism or atomism that departs from the self-sufficiency of a particular “substance” and affirms – in capitalist economic theory – a conflictive and competitive anthropology.¹⁵

[Javier Medina] This conception of “the sweet life” is possible because the Andean worldview is not anthropocentric or Newtonian; it is ecological and quantum. In this sense, it anticipates what is to come; because no person educated in the Western scientific technical paradigm is an exception to the evolutionary process of life. The sciences of the XXI century are no longer dualistic, anthropocentric and mechanistic. Public policies must accelerate their pace to march *pari passu* (side by side) with the existing science.¹⁶

[Josef Estermann] Human beings are not owners or producers, but rather, “caretaker” (arariwa), “cultivator” and “facilitator.” The only strictly productive force is the Mother Earth, *Pachamama*, and its various aspects such as water, minerals, hydrocarbons and energy in general. Human beings do not “produce” or “create,” they cultivate or raise that which the *Pachamama* can produce. Humans “transform” elements and processes that do not depend on them.¹⁷

[Javier Medina] The “sweet life” doesn’t aspire to perfection, but to mutual nurturing among all forms of life. They want everything to live. From the Andean perspective, man is not treated as *homo faber* (created in the image and likeness of his *Deus faber*) but as *homo maieuticus*: he who helps give birth to Mother Earth.¹⁸

[Josef Estermann] The axiom of Western modernity that what is coming should always be “better” than what came before (metaphysical-historical optimism) is not valid for the Andes. The past may be “better,” more perfect, in balance, than what is coming. The West doesn’t have a monopoly on “modernity.” Indigenous peoples have their own model of “modernity” that is not opposed to “tradition,” and that is not seen as the last stage in a process that is moved through and then left behind. The past is present in our daily life, and the future is an ideal that is already realized, but still there to re-conquer. We must deconstruct the fundamental principles of Western “modernity” as monocultural and Eurocentric,

such as strong individualism, absolute secularization, the mechanization of nature, anthropomorphic and androcentric and exaggerated rationalism.¹⁹

[Rafael Bautista S.] To recover our horizon of meaning is not to return to the past, but to recover our past and give meaning to the present, and empower the past as an active memory. The discourse of linear time in modern physics does not work for us anymore; that is why we require a revolution in the way we think as part of the change. The past is not what is left behind and the future is not what is still to come. The more you are conscious of the past, the more likely you are to have a future. The real issue of history is not the past as past, but as the present, because the present always needs to have a future and a past.²⁰

***Vivir Bien* and Development**

One of the central issues in the debate about *vivir bien* is its relationship to the concept of development. For some, “living well” is an alternative of development, for others it is an alternative to development.

An Alternative of Development

All proponents of *vivir bien* agree that development has not delivered on its promises and argue that economic growth has generated more inequality, a greater concentration of wealth in the hands of a few, and the destruction of nature. However, not all agree that *vivir bien* constitutes a total rupture with the past and a new path to overcome and replace the concept of development. Several have instead put forth *vivir bien* as a new type of development in the face of “conventional development,” “developmentalism” or traditional neoliberal development models.

The constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador adopt *vivir bien* and *buen vivir* as an alternative of development and a development goal. Article 313 of Bolivia’s 2009 Constitution states that “to eliminate poverty and social and economic exclusion, to achieve the good life in its many dimensions [requires] productive industrialization development of natural resources.”

Similarly, Ecuador’s 2008 Constitution has an entire section devoted to the “Regime of Buen Vivir” with a number of provisions to ensure the “rights” to “living well.” According to Article 3: “It is a primordial duty of the State... to plan national development, eradicate poverty, promote sustainable development and equitable distribution of resources and wealth, to access *buen vivir*.” Under Article 385, the State must “develop technologies and innovations to stimulate national production, elevate efficiency and productivity, improve the quality of life and contribute to the achievement of *buen vivir*.”

Bolivia's National Development Plan explains that *vivir bien* is a new pattern of development that is more humane, pluralistic, collective, supportive, and complementary, and part of an "integral democracy" seeking to replace the raw materials export pattern of development with another productive scheme to strengthen the domestic market, generate surpluses, contribute to internal accumulation and distribute wealth equitably.

Meanwhile, Ecuador's current "Buen Vivir National Plan" – now no longer called a "development plan" – says that *buen vivir* "is not a new development paradigm," because it goes beyond just addressing desirable economic growth to incorporate distributive and redistributive patterns. The plan notes the impossibility of infinite economic growth and states the intention to "move from an economy based around finite natural resources toward an economy sustained by infinite resources through the scientific, economic and industrial appropriation of knowledge to allow for the strengthening of the capacities of the Ecuadorian population."

The Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia

Vivir bien has gained national and international attention because it has been incorporated into the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia. But it is important to note that not all the core elements of the concept are included in these constitutions.

In the 2008 Constitution of Ecuador, *buen vivir* is essentially a set of rights. The chapter on "The Rights of Buen Vivir" includes the rights to water and food, a healthy environment, communication and information, culture and science, education, habitat and housing, health, and work and social security. Along with the "Rights of Buen Vivir" and under the same title of "Rights" is a chapter on "Rights of Nature."²¹

The Constitution of Bolivia incorporates *vivir bien* as a set of ethical principles. Under Article 8, the State "assumes and promotes as ethical-moral principles of plural society: "*ama qhilla, ama llulla, ama suwa* (do not be lazy, do not lie, do not steal), *suma qamaña* (living well), *ñandereko* (harmonious life), *teko kavi* (good life), *ivi maraei* (land without evil) and *qhapaj ñan* (path or noble life)."

[Eduardo Gudynas] The plurinational dimension is stronger in the Bolivian case than the Ecuadorian. Inversely, environmental issues are more substantive in the Ecuadorian formulation, where the rights of Nature are recognized.

The references to *vivir bien* or *buen vivir* in these constitutions are important milestones, but they omit key elements mentioned above. They reflect the balance of forces, the contradictions at that moment, as well as the evolution and construction of the concept of *vivir bien/buen vivir*, which has followed a process not lacking in contradictions and disputes.

Ha-Joon Chang, a leading heterodox economist invited by the government of Ecuador to comment on their National Plan, says: “The document is firmly rooted in recognizing the importance of the increase in production capacity in the economic development process... At the same time, it doesn’t locate itself in the other extreme, which affirms that growth is development.”²²

Despite their different discourses of development, the national plans of Ecuador and Bolivia both seek to:

- a) reduce dependence on raw materials exports,
- b) increase exports of manufactured goods (Bolivia) and services (Ecuador), in particularly those with higher value added,
- c) increase productivity or industrialization
- d) strengthen the role of the state in promoting development

The National [Development] Plans

BOLIVIA: “National Development Plan: Bolivia with Dignity, Sovereign, Productive and Democratic for *Vivir Bien*, 2006 – 2011”

In Bolivia’s last national development plan, *vivir bien* appears as a demand to humanize development such that cultural diversity ensures accountability and social responsibility in the performance of public administration. In this way, development becomes a collective process of decision-making and action by an active society, rather than vertical process of receiving directives from above. Thus, *vivir bien* is about access to and enjoyment of material goods and one’s effective intellectual and spiritual realization in harmony with nature and among the human community.

The new development proposal is rooted in cultural plurality and the exchange and complementarity of knowledge with the objective of ending the myth of linear progress that attempts to divide cultures into categories of “modern” and “primitive.”

According to the plan, *vivir bien* seeks to “include in development human values such as complementarity, solidarity and reciprocity, that have multiple expressions in Bolivian social life that must be rescued, affirmed, revalued and strengthened.”

The plan uses the concept of “pattern” instead of “model” of development”as as part of its objective of shifting the focus away from raw materials exports. This goes along with the conviction that in a diverse, multicultural and multilingual country, development must be a pluralistic and collective process that is attentive to diversity and expressed in different languages and in terms of different worldviews.

In this sense, *vivir bien* corresponds to integral, plurinational and diversified patterns of development and democratization where both of the two are equally important. There is no development without democracy, without broadening social participation in political, economic and cultural actions and decisions.

A productive Bolivia will transform, integrate and diversify its productive framework under the new pattern of development, occupy the whole of its territory and achieve the development of integral productive processes. It will also create distinctively Bolivian products (both material and intellectual), industrialize its natural resources and increase the value added of exports with support from the State as the main promoter and protagonist of development. This State, with productivist policies and a strengthened national market, will generate surpluses, contribute to domestic accumulation, and distribute wealth equitably.

ECUADOR: Buen Vivir National Plan for 2013-2016

In Ecuador's national plan, *buen vivir* appears as a mobilizing social idea which goes beyond the concept of development according to Western tradition and is associated with a broader notion of progress. This is not a new development paradigm, but a liberating social alternative that promotes other priorities for social organization besides the simple economic growth implicit in the old paradigm. Economic growth is desirable in a society, but so are distributive and redistributive patterns.

Buen vivir offers alternatives with which to build a more just society. It goes beyond the limits of conventional visions of development that reduce the concept to just economic growth. These concepts have guided international institutions and national public policies in the Post-war period, and although they have generated some positive results, the structural limits of this perspective have been revealed.

Buen vivir is a way of life that allows for the enjoyment and maintenance of cultural and environmental diversity. It is about harmony, equality, equity, and solidarity – not seeking wealth or infinite growth. The objective of this strategy is to move from an economy based on finite natural resources toward one that draws on the scientific, economic and industrial potential of the population. A new society requires a different State, one that breaks the structures and power relations inherited from the past.

The role of the state as a promoter of development is affirmed in this plan. In contrast to orthodox discourse that suggests that foreign reserves and foreign investment are the main mechanisms for financing development, the government has prioritized national capital and domestic savings as a means to boost national development. Public investment is directed to “sowing the oil” (reinvesting oil revenues) and harvesting a productive framework with which to build a “knowledge society.”

An Alternative to Development

We can't and we won't aspire to "development," but rather, decolonization. It's not about imitating or emulating the countries that have colonized us, but liberating ourselves from them so that we can be ourselves.

In general terms, development is the act or process of growth, advancement or progress – a particular stage of evolution or maturity. Development implies a value judgment about who is “advanced” and who is “behind” (underdeveloped or developing). According to the logic of development, one must pass through different stages of progress and maturity.

Development, then, involves directionality (from lower to higher), an ideal that must be achieved and that is defined by those who are the most “advanced.” Those who defend *vivir bien* as an alternative to development make these three assertions:

- The development of the so-called “developed” countries is causing the crisis of the entire Earth system. The point at which “development” is achieved is the point at which humanity and nature are plunged into chaos.
- To get away from the logic of development is to decolonize. It is to see how much we can to learn and recover from indigenous peoples and other cultures that have been labeled “primitive.” It also means that there is a lot to be unlearned and discarded from the so-called “developed” societies.
- There is not just one direction in which to move, but multiple directions. Dynamics are cyclical and complex and the notion of advancement or progress is always relative. There is a need to abandon the concept of economic growth as the main issue and also to question the pursuit of progress and replace those two goals with a search for dynamic equilibrium.

In this sense, *vivir bien* is not a version of development that is simply more democratic, non-anthropocentric, holistic, humanizing or in harmony with nature, but a new paradigm that breaks with the very essence of development.

[Rafael Puente] This concept, proposed and imposed by the North, sees development as an unstoppable economic growth that leads us toward ever higher levels of material prosperity and consumption, especially energy consumption. So they propose to compare our level of development with that of other countries, either to celebrate approaching the “First World” (or, in the case of Bolivia, to prove that we will never escape from underdevelopment). This focus leads to “developmentalism.”²³

[Alberto Acosta] It is therefore inappropriate and highly dangerous to apply the paradigm of development – at least as it is conceived of in the Western world. This paradigm isn't just some synonym for the wellbeing for the collective, it's putting the survival of humanity at risk. On the other hand, *buen vivir* goes beyond just the satisfaction of needs and access to goods and services. In this regard, from the perspective of the philosophy of *buen vivir*, we need to question the traditional concept of development based on the classical notion of progress, because the continuous accumulation of material goods has no future. And so the much-hyped sustainable development should be taken as, at most, a phase of transition toward a paradigm different from capitalism with the intrinsic qualities of equity, liberty and equality, including environmental sustainability.²⁴

[Pablo Davalos] The way out of underdevelopment is not development, because that wouldn't be a way out, but rather, an entrance into modernity. What we need to change, and radically, is not underdevelopment, but the discourse and practice of development as a whole. In other words, we must take the development as a pathology of modernity. What we need to take and transform, then, is the while civilizing project in which the "North" firmly believes.²⁵

[Josef Estermann] *Vivir bien* radically questions the Western ideology of "developmentalism" and the neoliberal ideological principles of "unlimited growth." The real "progress" does not consist of a quantitative increase in consumer goods and production, or increased earnings for a company, but an increase in the level of fair and equitable distribution of existing wealth and the wise and "pachasófico" (according to holistic cosmos order) use of natural and human resources. There is no "progress" or "advancement" if some are left behind, or even worse, are considered "leftovers." The crazy race of "economic growth" and unbridled consumerism at all costs does not lead to more "progress," but to an inevitable "regress" of life, causing a catastrophic deterioration of the cosmic balance – according to the Indigenous worldview, a *pachakuti*, or a cosmic revolution of "apocalyptic" dimensions.²⁶

[Eduardo Gudynas] It is not enough to try "development alternatives," because they maintain the same rationale for understanding progress, the use of Nature, and human relations.²⁷

Is *Vivir Bien* Anti-Capitalist?

Almost all proponents of *vivir bien* present this option as anti-capitalist, non-capitalist or post-capitalist. Meanwhile, the governments of Ecuador and Bolivia put themselves forth as anti-capitalist. Ecuador's National Plan says that its 2008 Constitution "is contrary to the principles of capitalism." And according to Bolivia's 2012 Framework Law

of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well, *vivir bien* “is the civilizational and cultural alternative to capitalism on the horizon.”

The conclusion of the book *Vivir Bien: A non-capitalist paradigm?* – which has more than 20 contributions and 437 pages – is that “the challenge of *vivir bien* will be to move the plural economy, currently dominated by capitalist logic, toward a post-capitalist mode of production and consumption, toward a social and sustainable economy, and the strengthening of productive structures characterized by solidarity.”²⁸

However, the debate is much deeper.

[Alvaro Garcia Linera] Our energies are geared mainly toward putting on place a new economic model that I have called, provisionally, “Andean-Amazonian capitalism.” That is, building a strong State that regulates the expansion of the industrial economy, controls the surplus and transfers it to the community level to enable forms of self-organization and of mercantile development that are uniquely Andean and Amazonian.²⁹

[Pablo Estefanoni] Far from encouraging class struggle in the Marxist sense, Evo Morales updates the cleavages mentioned – nation/anti-nation, people/oligarchy – and actually promotes a new “class alliance” – without using that term, which is reminiscent of the 1950s. An alliance that includes the “patriotic businessmen” and “nationalist military” to build a “productive and modern country” thanks to the benefits of natural resources “recovered by the State.” The essence of the government’s economic program is that is based on the modernization/industrialization of a backward economy under the direction of a strong State to replace a nonexistent national bourgeoisie.³⁰

[Alvaro Garcia Linera] The State is the only thing that can unite society, the only thing that gathers the synthesis of the general will; it plans the strategic framework and is the engine of the locomotive. The second is Bolivian private investment; third is foreign investment; fourth is small business; fifth is the rural economy; and sixth is indigenous economy. This is the strategic order in which the country’s economy has to be structured.³¹

[Eduardo Gudynas] They are defending a benevolent capitalism, where central elements of the production processes are preserved with a greater State presence and a network of focused mechanisms of social compensation. The idea of an “Andean-Amazonian capitalism” based on good intentions, but focused on a State to transfer to the surplus to communities (in García Linera’s version from 2006), ends in a Lilliputian version of *vivir bien*. This type of strategy requires capturing resources, and therefore it encourages and promotes extractivism. This creates a vicious cycle because that same extractivism generates huge social

and environmental impacts, curtailing quality of life and the environment. For these reasons, benevolent capitalism is incompatible with *buen vivir*.³²

As a result of an avalanche of criticism, the vice president of the Plurinational State of Bolivia stopped talking about “Andean-Amazonian capitalism” and began to use the concept of the “New National Model of Production.”

In the view of several of its proponents, *vivir bien* is an alternative to capitalism, developmentalism and modernity. According to this position, it is not possible to say that *vivir bien* is anti-capitalist while adhering to proposals of integral development, sustainable development or modernity. *Vivir bien* is an alternative to these three concepts, which are closely connected.

[Raúl Prada] (Critiquing Bolivia’s Framework Law on Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well) We have left behind the Tiquipaya resolutions which conceive of *vivir bien* as an alternative to capitalism, modernity and development. We are only left with the first alternative (anti-capitalism), opting to remain on the horizon of modernity and development. They don’t understand that capitalism has modernity as its cultural framework and that development is the temporality defined by capitalism and modernity.³⁴

World People’s Conference on Climate Change and Rights of Mother Earth (2010) Tiquipaya, Cochabamba, Bolivia

Capitalism as a patriarchal system of endless growth is incompatible with life on this finite planet. For the planet, every alternative for life must necessarily be anticapitalist. But not only this; it must be more than anticapitalist. The Soviet experience has shown us that a predatory production system with devastating conditions that make life similar to that of capitalism was possible with other ownership relationships. The alternatives must lead to a profound transformation of civilization. Without this, life on planet Earth cannot continue. Humanity is faced with a huge dilemma: continue down the road of capitalism, patriarchy, ‘Progress’ and death, or embark on the path of harmony with nature and respect for life.

The division of the globe into “developed” and “developing” or even “under-developed” countries reflects paradigms that have now been relegated to history. Today, in the face of climate change and the persistent degradation of the environment, our principal need is not to achieve a state of “permanent development” where consumerism is constantly growing.³³

[Eduardo Gudynas] The current progressivism does not discuss the conceptual foundations of development. On the other hand, they celebrate economic growth and defend raw materials exports as if they were advances in development. It is true that in some cases there is a rhetoric denouncing capitalism, but in reality, we still have economies inserted in it many times see “macroeconomic seriousness” or lowered “country risk” as achievements.³⁵

Critiques of the anti-capitalist discourse of these governments that defend *vivir bien* mainly focus on their practices, on what they do rather than what they say. These governments have departed from the logic of neoliberalism where everything was left to market forces and the role of the State was minimal. They have sought to strengthen the State, increase public investment, and renegotiate the terms foreign and domestic private investment. They want private firms to act as “partners, not bosses.” This renegotiation can be good or bad, but in the end there is no break with private capital. Based on the facts, can we say that the governments who speak of *vivir bien* are advancing toward form a plural economy that doesn’t revolve around the logic of capital?

[Arturo D. Villanueva Imaña] In this regard, it is important to note that apart from the nationalization of hydrocarbons, no transformations have been undertaken in the mining sector nor the ultra-liberal code that remains in force and that determines an extractivist logic that favors transnational interests. Nor have there been changes in the financial system and the national banking system, which have obtained enormous profits never before seen in our neoliberal history. Expectations of replacing the law of value and competition with another way of life based on harmony between humans and nature were belied by the [government’s] message of building a road “whether you like it or not” and way they addressed the conflict over TIPNIS doesn’t comply with the constitutional mandate of free, informed and good faith consent. One also thinks of the presidential proclamation of the so-called Patriotic Agenda, which formulates developmentalists principles, or the constant insistence on promoting the construction of various mega projects that are the opposite of the paradigm of living well in harmony with nature, but rather, are fully in line with the interests of transnational corporations. Therefore, to what extent can we speak of a real transformation of the existing structures?³⁶

[Alberto Acosta] [In Ecuador] the main economic activities are concentrated in a few companies: 81% of the soft drinks market is in the hands of one company, 62% of the market for meat is also in the hands of one company, five sugar mills (with just three owners) control 91% of the sugar market, two companies control 92% of the oil market, two companies control 76% of the market for hygienic products, and we could go on... The profits of the 100 largest firms increased by 12% between 2010 and 2011, and they are close to a staggering \$36 billion. It should be noted that the profits of business groups in the period 2007-2011 grew by 50% over the previous five years, which was the neoliberal period.³⁷

The defenders of the official line of *vivir bien* argue that poverty has declined, several social indicators have improved, and there is more income redistribution through a series of bonuses and social programs.

Many do not deny these aspects, but analyze them in the context of what might be called be a new version of state capitalism in South America, rather than beginning of a transition to *vivir bien*.

[James Petras] While progressive governments have launched anti-poverty programs and have had some successes in reducing the poverty level, they do so as a result of economic growth, not through the redistribution of wealth. In fact, the progressive governments have not implemented redistributive policies: the concentration of capital and land, with high levels of inequality, remains intact. In reality, the hierarchy of the class structure has not been altered, and, in most cases, has been strengthened by the inclusion of new candidates for the middle and upper class. Among them are many former leaders and activists of the middle and working class that have entered the government as well as “new capitalists” who benefit from state contracts under the progressive government.³⁸

Is *Vivir Bien* Socialist?

The government of Ecuador mentions a *Socialismo del Buen Vivir* (“*Buen Vivir* Socialism”) that implies a radically fair society with opportunities for creative and liberating work, emphasizing equality, self-realization, empowerment, autonomy, solidarity, harmony with nature, excellence, pluralism, participation and self-determination.

[Ecuador: *Buen Vivir* National Plan] *Buen Vivir* Socialism questions the hegemonic pattern of accumulation; that is, the neoliberal way to produce, grow and distribute. We propose a transition to a society in which life is the supreme good. It implies a deep democracy with permanent popular participation in the public life of the country. It is identified with the common good and individual happiness, rather than accumulation and excessive consumption.

To achieve *Buen Vivir* Socialism – especially in a society that until recently was neoliberal – it is necessary to take preliminary steps to implement this transition, not just by changing the relations of production, but primarily the mentality of citizens.

It is necessary to empower society, not to empower the market, as in the past, or the State, as in “real socialism.” Enhancing society means promoting the development of freedom and the critical, reflective and cooperative capacities of each individual, town, and collective.

In the case of Bolivia, the government talks about *socialismo comunitario* (communitarian socialism). This concept was defined in the “Ten Commandments to Save the Planet” as follows:

[Bolivia: Ten Commandments to Save the Planet] Indigenous peoples of the world believe in Communitarian Socialism in harmony with nature. Socialism based on people and communities, not the state bureaucracy that puts their privileges before those of the society as a whole.

Communitarian socialism is about putting the interests of the community above the privileges of a powerful few. Communitarian socialism is thinking of the common good rather than individual gain. Communitarian socialism is fighting for human rights, for economic, social and cultural rights.

The communitarian socialism we preach is unlike other models that failed in the past. It thinks not only in humans but also in the nature and diversity. The goal is not to follow a single developmental model of industrialization at all costs.³⁹

Writers like Marta Harnecker of Cuba incorporate *vivir bien* in their formulations of 21st Century Socialism as follows:

First, it puts people at the center and therefore is guided by solidarity-based, humanistic logic that is oriented toward satisfying human needs and not profit-making.

Second, it respects nature and fights against consumerism. Our goal should not be “living better,” but “living well.”

Third, it establishes a new dialectic: production-distribution-consumption based on: a) social ownership of the means of production; b) social production organized by workers c) satisfying the needs of the population.

Fourth, it is guided by a new concept of efficiency that respects nature and seeks full human development.

Fifth, it uses the available natural and human resources in a more rational way thanks to a decentralized participatory planning process that is the opposite of the hyper-centralized Soviet bureaucratic planning process.⁴⁰

There are, however, differences and tensions in official circles in relation to these approaches to *vivir bien* and socialism. On one side are those who argue that *vivir bien* is an option distinct from capitalism and socialism, as both are imbued with a

developmentalist, materialist and productivist logic. In this context, it is necessary to decolonize our thinking in order to embrace a different model.

[David Choquehuanca, Foreign Minister of Bolivia] It doesn't mean that we subscribe to a socialist development model that seeks to compete with the capitalist model, but rather find our own path, because "for those who belong to the culture of life the most important thing is not silver or gold, but life." We aspire to be what the Aymaras call *qamiris* (people that live in harmony) or the Quechuas call *qhapaj* (people who enjoy a wellbeing that is not economic but is humane/natural), or the Guaraní call *Iyambae* (people who have no master).⁴¹

In Choquehuanca's version, the short-term aim is not to seek socialism.

[Alvaro García Linera, Vice President of Bolivia] The victory of MAS [*Movimiento al Socialismo*] opens up the possibility of a radical transformation of society and the State, but not from a socialist perspective (at least in the short term), as suggested by some on the left. Currently, there are two things that prevent us from seeing a socialist system in our country. On one hand, there is a proletariat that is a minority demographically and politically nonexistent, and you don't build socialism without a proletariat. Second, the rural and urban communitarian potential is very weak. In the last 60 years, we have seen a decline in productive communitarian activity and an erosion of community ties. Community remains, but it has imploded internally in family structures. The communitarian potential that would foresee the possibility of a communitarian socialist regime needs in any case to revive and enrich the small communitarian networks that remain. This would allow us, in 20 or 30 years, to think of a socialist utopia.⁴²

[Francois Houtart] There is a distrust of socialism in the positions of indigenous advocates of *sumak kawsai* as well as certain non-indigenous interpretations. These actors criticize the "materialistic" aspect of socialism, something that sees nature as a unit of value and exchange (Eduardo Gudynas, 2011, 9). They accuse it of subscribing to the same rationality of modernity as capitalism and promoting only "development alternatives" and not "alternatives to development" (ibid., 3). Simon Yampara of Bolivia goes even further, stating that "the Aymara man is neither socialist nor capitalist" (Eduardo Gudynas, 2011, 9). David Choquehuanca adds that he distances himself from socialism "because it seeks to meet the needs of men" and disregards nature (in David Cortez and Heike Wagner, 2011, 9).⁴³

What About Nature?

[Eduardo Gudynas] There are ecological references in some presidential speeches, and in certain chapters of development plans, and they even invoke the *Pachamama* (Mother Earth). But if we are honest, it should be recognized that in general the environmental requirements are perceived as obstacles to economic growth that slow the reproduction of the apparatus of the State and economic assistance for the needy. Progressivism is most comfortable with measures like campaigns to stop using plastic or replace light bulbs, but resists environmental controls on investors or exporters... The bosses feel that environmentalism is a luxury that only the rich can have, and that it is not applicable in Latin America until poverty is overcome.⁴⁴

[Rafael Puente] I dare say [nature] has been reduced to just talk. It's talk that gets attention on international stages. I rejoice that at the major world summits, our government expresses the belief that the rights of Mother Earth are more important than human rights. But in practice, here in our country, I don't know of a single case where the rights of Mother Earth have been privileged and respected by the State. In all cases that have to do with mining, hydrocarbons, hydroelectric mega-dams, the expansion of the agricultural frontier at the expense of forests... in all these cases the loser is Mother Earth, and its defense remains just talk. It seems to me this is very grave and it is one of the great tasks that we have pending. The bottom line seems to be: we denounce the abuse of Mother Earth by developed countries before the world, but we reserve for ourselves the need also to mistreat Mother Earth for a while until we achieve a minimum level of development, and that is absolutely contradictory.⁴⁵

[Evo Morales, President of Bolivia] Integral Development to Live Well with respect for Mother Earth is not an ecological economy for poor countries, while rich countries increase inequality and the destruction of nature.⁴⁶

What is the Future of the Debate on *Vivir Bien*?

Debates over the theory and practice of *vivir bien* have been changing over the years. On the one hand, the concept has spread beyond the Andes of South America, awakening thoughts on its projection as an alternative at different levels. On the other hand, in the Andes, the discussion has become more concrete, polarized and sometimes virulent. The main questions in Bolivia and Ecuador are: What is being implemented by governments that will lead us to *vivir bien*? Has *vivir bien* become a mere rhetorical mask for "progressive" policies that do not break with capitalism, developmentalism, modernity and instead are launching a new cycle of extractivism?

Those in power argue that *vivir bien* is about plurality, and that means coexistence and complementarity between all sectors, capitalist and non-capitalist, with a strong State at the top. They do not claim to have achieved *vivir bien*, but argue that they are moving toward that goal and harshly criticize those who do not share their opinion, accusing them of being environmentalists, NGOs and intellectuals whose criticisms only help U.S. imperialism that is ready to take advantage any internal contradiction.

The debate about *vivir bien* is now not mainly theoretical, and has become more a discussion around policies and projects. The TIPNIS controversy in Bolivia and the YASUNI issue in Ecuador are the most well known, but not the only projects that have generated much polemic and debate around *vivir bien*. The discussion is now about “on the ground” realities. What are the projects or policies that go against *vivir bien*? What are the parameters to accept or reject these projects? And most importantly, what should be the specific initiatives for a real transition to *vivir bien*?

Living Well Beyond South America

The essence of *vivir bien* is not limited to the Andes of South America. Several of these elements are present not just in the Aymara and Quechua indigenous peoples, but in much of the world’s indigenous peoples. The Kuna in Panama call it *Balu Wala*, meaning tree of salt, which refers to the preparation of a new relationship between Mother Earth and humans.

[Fander Falconi] The notion of *buen vivir* has been present in the original peoples of the whole world and also in Western civilization. Its essence is universal; it has been a constant aspiration of humankind.

The concept of Earth Community and belonging/caring for Mother Nature through rituals and expressions appears in all ancient cultures. In India, home to one of the world’s largest indigenous communities, the word *adivasi*, or “original inhabitants,” refers not only to humans but also forests, rivers, animals, wind and water.

Likewise, the role and importance of the community is an essential component of indigenous cultures on all continents. The same is true for the articulation of the material and spiritual world. The indigenous view has different names and emphases. In the Philippines, they use the words *hayahay*, *hamugaway*, *gumpi-a katubo*, that refer to a “simple life,” where one has enough to enjoy life.

The vision of coexistence among members of the community and with nature transcends the Andes region. Other aspects of *vivir bien* like the cyclical notion of time, the search for equilibrium and multiculturalism are also present elsewhere, though often distorted by processes of colonization.

Unfortunately, in this new phase of the debate, the stakes are not only arguments and reasoning, because governments have resorted to the use of power in all its forms to weaken, divide and isolate those who question their “implementation” of *vivir bien*.

In the Andean region, the different positions on *vivir bien* are more in confrontation than ever. *In this context, what is the future of vivir bien?*

The theoretical debate needs to be closely linked to concrete practices, policies and projects. If the discussion of *vivir bien* does not make this leap, it will remain a proposal that was limited to the realm of ideas and, like many others, was altered and reduced to mere talk in order to pursue other purposes. This involves discussing and building proposals for a transition to *vivir bien*. Some themes that can be further discussed in this debate include:

Employment, Industrialization and Extractivism

What should be a policy to create jobs in line with the vision of *vivir bien*? Is it through industrialization, the expansion of the service sector, or a totally different logic that favors the restoration and reparation of Mother Earth? Why, despite available public resources, has it been impossible to achieve significant industrialization in the countries that promote *vivir bien*? How to leave extractivism behind and generate sufficient income to satisfy the basic needs of the population?

Capital Value in Use and Redistribution

How to move toward plural economies that are not dominated by the logic of capital? What are the measures that should apply to the real redistribution of capital and not only of income? How to make a reality the proposal that use values should take precedence over exchange values?

Urbanization and Nature

How to practice *vivir bien* in large cities where contact with nature is limited? How to rebuild the relationship with Mother Earth in large cities? How to reduce excessive consumerism and worsening waste?

Power, Democracy and Social Movements

What structures of power and governance are required for a transition to *vivir bien*? Are the constitutional reforms introduced in the case of Bolivia and Ecuador correct and sufficient? What is the role of the “bosses”? How to decolonize the armed forces? How can social movements take power and avoid being taken over by power?

Feminism

How to achieve *chacha warmi*, a balance between female and male, strengthened not only in the discourse but also in the practice of *vivir bien*?

Regionalism and Globalization

In the 21st century, is *vivir bien* possible in any one country? What are the regional policies that are essential for a transition to *vivir bien*? How to advance *vivir bien* in the current context of globalization? What are the key elements of globalization that must be subverted in order to achieve *vivir bien*?

These themes and questions are only an approximation of some of the issues that need to be addressed in the proposal of *vivir bien*. Obviously, the answer to many of these questions cannot be found just by looking to the cosmovision of *vivir bien*. It is necessary to complement this proposal with others (eco-feminism, de-globalization, degrowth, etc.) that have other origins or precepts so that we can advance in the construction of alternatives.

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Systemic Alternatives is a initiative that aims to build an interactive dialogue to deepen the analysis and strengthen the alternatives that are being developed by grassroots movements and thinkers to overcome the capitalist system. Our goal is to compile information about key alternatives such as vivir bien ("living well"), the commons, degrowth, deglobalization, ecosocialism, the solidarity economy, ecofeminism, food sovereignty and others, and to produce a constructive debate about their strengths, weaknesses, limitations and contradictions. We examine systemic alternatives in a holistic way, focusing on various dimensions, including: the environment, economy, inequality, cultural diversity, gender, and discrimination.



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