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# **Buen Vivir: an Opportunity to Re-think the Development and Sustainability Model**

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# Buen Vivir: an Opportunity to Re-think the Development and Sustainability Model

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## Abstract

As written in 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, the unsustainability of the current development model, not only on the environmental level but also on the economic and social one, is leading critical theory to deeply revise these models theorized by Western modernity. If prominent authors have already extensively questioned the risks of advanced modernity (Beck 1986 Bauman 1991; Quijano 1992; Santos 2002; Escobar 2011;), nowadays becomes necessary to extend and integrate the debate with a counterhegemonic literature. Sustainability could be considered as a central topic to understand how to reorientate the relation between nature and society, but also to become aware of the diversity of social experience in the world in this field. The case of Ecuadorian and Bolivian Constitution is remarkable in that, for the first time in a constitution, they attribute rights to nature, overcoming the western-centric way of knowing according to which nature is a considered merely as a natural resource. According to Indigenous Cosmovisions, Mother Earth is a living entity that does not belong to us, rather human beings belong to her. Over the last few years, the idea of buen vivir seems to be a valid alternative to expand the gaze on the debate on sustainability, proposing a non-anthropocentric, but rather biocentric, perspective (Monni, Pallottino 2015), without any distinction between nature and culture. Investigating the above-mentioned concepts of sustainability and buen vivir as alternative visions of society and experiences of struggle and resistance for the preservation of harmony between nature and community, through the framework of Epistemologies of the South's literature, can allow for the realization of "the sociology of the possible" (Pellegrino, Ricotta 2020a), a sociology where a divergent vision can emerge.

JEL codes: Y8

Keywords: Development, Sustainability, Buen Vivir, Cosmovision, Nature

## 1. Introduction

In the past decades, the term sustainability has been increasingly incorporated in the agenda-setting and used by politics, finance, mass media and many civil society organization. Sustainable development was the answer given by the Western countries, to prevent the depletion of natural resources in order to maintain an ecological balance. Nevertheless, the urgency to find a solution for a society that has been defined as an "ecological risk" (Becker 2011), urges to consider the limits and alternatives to the development model, and to investigate sociological accounts

from the epistemic South that hold the precious knowledges of indigenous people living in harmony with nature. Buen Vivir, originally based on the cosmovisions of Andean indigenous communities, is a decolonial stance and call for a new ethics balancing quality of life, state democratisation and a concern with biocentric ideals. The article is structured into two parts. The first one offers a review of the literature accounting for how development is a result of Western modern economy, analyzed through the theoretical framework of the post-colonial studies. The second part is dedicated to the concept of Buen Vivir and its socio-political proposal.

## **2. Literature Review**

### **2.1. Agenda 2030 and criticism of Western modernity**

The international community has responded to global problems with 2030 Agenda for sustainable Development, approved in 2015 by all the member states of United Nations (UN). The 2030 Agenda is a continuation of the UN Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015) and their action-plan to improve people's lives and the planet, encompassing the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, addressing global challenges, such as poverty, inequality, climate change, environmental degradation, peace and justice.

In addition, the Agenda 2030 stressed the unsustainability of the current development model, not only at the environmental level, but also at the economic and social one. These Agendas are not a novelty in the international debate, that have seen several conferences involved in discussing about environment since the mid-twentieth century. One of the most important was the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development in 1992, better known as the Rio Conventions, where three treaties were been signed: the United Nations Convention on Climate Change, the United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification. The Rio Declaration enshrined the idea of development as sustainable when it "meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs", recognizing that human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. It is also worth mentioning the Kyoto Protocol adopted in 1997 and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development of Johannesburg, that adopted a political declaration and implementation plan which included provisions covering, in order to achieve the development goals in respect for the environment. This Summit resulted in decisions related to water, energy, health, agriculture, biological diversity and other areas of concern. Some of the most important international development and environmental organizations (such as the Asian Development Bank, the World Bank and the United Nations Environment Programme) promoted what became one of the concepts universally embraced by the same governments that promoted sustainable development: the green economy and growth strategies. This new economic horizon had so much importance and popularity that the 2012 Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development recognized the green economy within the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication as one of the point of the international political agenda (Wanner 2015). Green economy and growth strategies are based on the same principles that inspire the sustainable development. The economy is green because is resource efficient, socially inclusive, adopts a low carbon emission reducing the pollution and prevents

the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services. The United Nation explained that “the notion of green economy does not replace sustainable development, but creates a new focus on the economy, investment, capital and infrastructure, employment and skills and positive social and environmental outcomes across Asia and the Pacific” (United Nation, 2023).

However, considering the actual state of environmental crisis affecting the entire planet, the above-mentioned conventions had a limited result. Without doubt, some changes have been introduced by the policies adopted by institutions and governmental bodies, civil society has promoted the growing of a global awareness and the issue of development is now broadly discussed. But these results are still extremely far from a global cooperation for the protection of human beings and the Planet Earth.

From a sociological point of view, the concept of sustainability questions many paradigms, such as modernity and post-modernity, the relationship between society and environment, and the possible risk deriving from an unbalanced relationship between them. Generally, the globalization phenomenon and, at the same time, the collapse of socialism, led critical theory to revise the models theorized by Western modernity paradigm (Ricotta 2019). The criticisms of Western modernity have been highlighted by scholars fundamental in sociological theory. Modernity has been defined as being based on a process of rationalization, in favor of the progress of technology and the domination of human being over nature. This process leads human being to progressively move away from nature, and to consider it only for utilitarian purposes (Weber 1919). Karl Marx’s theory of metabolic rift written in 1860, had already highlighted the estrangement of human beings from the nature and in the other side a capitalization of nature: «capitalist production in agriculture is unsustainable and unable to maintain those necessary condition for the recycling of the constituent elements of the soil, because the modern application of the chemistry fertilizer changes the nature and soil» (Foster, 1999, 385).

If in classical industrial society nature and society were separated, in advanced industrial society, nature and society are deeply intertwined, and contemporary changes in society affect the natural environment, and those changes, in turn, affect society because nature is society and society is also nature (Ritzer, Stepnisky 2018).

Furthermore, modernity rests on a world-economy rooted in a capitalist system that is destroying the environment and its energy resources, that can lead to two different directions: “either to an even more hierarchical and exploitative system, or to a collective choice of a more democratic and egalitarian system” (Wallerstein 2011). Advanced modernity has generated both unprecedented risks and unprecedented efforts to deal with those risks (Beck 1996). The modern society becomes the risk society where “the process of modernization, the productive forces have lost their innocence (...) the growth of technical-economic progress is increasingly overshadowed by the production of risks” (Beck 1996). Risk is constantly debated by mass media and, as a result of globalized society, becomes global and there is «a boomerang effect of a certain model of economic and social development» (Ricotta 2022, 30).

Society has been interpreted as an “ecological risk” because in the contexts of the ecological crisis, not just the resources of the ecosystem are overload and depleted, but also those of the social functioning system (Becker 2001). Again, Marx quote had already denounced that «the development of civilization and industry in general, has always shown itself so active in the destruction of forests that everything that has been done for their conservation and production is completely insignificant in

comparison» (Foster 1999, 385). The consequences of the risk society often affect the most economically and socially fragile contexts, as shown by the unequal impacts of the recent Covid-19 pandemic (Ricotta 2022). This can bring to the increase of social inequalities, as well as to some authoritarian tendencies, as we have often observed in the last decades in Europe.

## **2.2. The colonial experience as a breaking point with the ecosystem**

The impact models of economic growth and development applied in the last 40 years had on ecosystems has pushed for their questioning, together with the solutions offered by the deliberations of various international summits. Growth and development have been theorized by Western culture, which is the result of the consolidation of a series of historical events: the Liberal State in Europe and North America, industrial revolutions, capitalism and colonialism (Santos 2002). Colonialism can be seen as the phenomenon determining the beginning of what has become a slow and dangerous transformation of the balance between ecosystem and society (Quijano 1992, Santos 2002, Esteva 2009, Escobar 2011, Acosta 2016, Lang 2016, Susen 2020).

The intentions of the Spanish Crown were immediately revealed with the arrival of Columbus in 1492 on the shores of the continent that became the America, an expansionist expedition, aimed at conquering native's lands and commercializing not only the various commodities but also of inhabitants, often converted into slaves of the Crown. The image of the European civilized white man superior to the primitive was imposed, and a centralized power emerged (that of the colonists) that took various forms: a territorial, economic and cognitive coloniality, establishing domination over nature and conceiving the idea of race (Fanon 1952, Quijano 2000, Santos 2007). A history that has profoundly marked the following centuries until contemporary modernity in which, however, the same logics of colonialism are reproduced. Even though political colonialism has been abolished, "due to the persistence of colonial relations of power, processes of devaluation of several groups and populations holding different world-views and conceptions of sociality, continue to take place" (Pellegrino, Ricotta 2020b p.808). The relation between the historical invasion of the America and modernity seems deeply consequential: «modernity refers to a specific historical experience that began with America, when new material and subjective and intersubjective social relations have been produced, alongside the emergence of the new Euro-centered, capitalist, colonial world power structure» (Quijano 1992, 12).

At the cognitive level this domination produced an Epistemology of the North, which considers valid only Western scientific thought, where the reason is "lazy": time is seen as linear and follows the one worthy direction, which is that of progress, modernization, development and globalization in an ever-expanding future (Santos 2002).

The thought is "abyssal" (Santos 2007) because is based on a presumed ontological and epistemic superiority, causing an ethnocultural inferiority and epistemicide (Ricotta 2022). All that is not devoted to progress and development is ignored or devalued, the abyssal thought marks an abyssal line with those groups thus considered not contemporary in the contemporary (Ricotta 2019). The lazy reason interprets and knows reality through the dichotomy, and therefore creates and justifies an order of hierarchies: science opposed to tradition, the masculine to the feminine, the civilized to the primitive, developed to the underdeveloped, rich to the poor, white to black, culture to nature, the North to the South, the West to the East (Quijano 1992, Santos 2017, Ricotta 2019). In this dichotomic reading, nature is

inevitably seen as a source of extractable resources. Western rationality adopts a Cartesian interpretation of nature, whereby this is seen as a simple mechanistic system and it is thus legitimate to dominate it. In a productivism logic, nature does not possess rights like human beings, but it is at their service, and any vision of sacredness disappears (Santos 2017, Hanafi 2021). Some scholars from political science or critical geography, recognized a process that has neoliberalised the nature, where the nature is subject to the logic of the market. The sell-off of mineral resources, the privatization of the water, rivers or land are just some example of this commodification. The market for them becomes «a specific and contentious way of distributing life's goods and bads among multifarious actors who differ in their sociogeographic location, their available assets, and their needs and wants» (Castree 2008,143).

In any case, development process or objectifying nature, have been justified by the initial promise of the development of science, technology and civilization, as something that would uplift man from the primitive state (Acosta 2016)<sup>1</sup>. People on the other side of the abyssal line can emancipate themselves only by adopting policies bringing a status of modernity and development, which became the justification of the economy success and also its proof (Quijano 1992). Over the last decades global society has been guided by a developmentalist idea which has multiplied its cultural declination and spread to new contexts from the origin core, while the Western leadership of neoliberal globalization has seen its centrality weaken (Pellegrino, Ricotta 2020a, Arboleda 2020).

### **2.3. Development as a result of Eurocentric rationality and the need to integrate the Epistemologies of the South**

To properly understand the concept of development, it's fundamental to distinguish it from that of growth to which it has been often associated. The aim of growth is that of improving welfare in contexts that have already established social institutions and policies. Development deals with governance issues, social and economic policy choices that can affect social, cultural and political life. Specifically economic development is concerned with how to improve those systems where the level of output per capita is relatively lower (Oman C., Wignaraja G., Boccella 2005). During the 1900s, the theory of economic development had adopted several approaches. Until the 1960s, growth and development pursued the same goals, as there was a belief that the benefits of economic growth could be distributed to the entire population, reducing poverty. Similarly, policies focusing on capital formation focused on borrowing, public and private aid and investment (Monni, Pallottino 2015). In this way, development had become the global goal: for the Western countries, for the Soviet bloc and also for the African and Asian countries participating at the Bandung Conference and declaring themselves not aligned with the neocolonialist policy of the USA and the USSR (Acosta 2016, Santos 2018). At that time, the most widely used index was the GDP, mirroring the historical context between the Great Depression and World War II, where heads of states chose to focus on promoting welfare and development. But the results of development policies in most cases did not bring the expected results, due to the persistence of extreme poverty. As a consequence, the idea that growth could coincide with

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<sup>1</sup> Alberto Acosta is an Ecuadorian economist. He is a well-known companion in the struggles of social movements, a University professor and author of several books. He was the Minister of Energy and Mines (2007), the President of the Constituent Assembly (2007-2008) and the Candidate for the Presidency of the Republic of Ecuador (2012-2013).

development was overcome and other targets in addition to GDP growth, such as reduction in poverty, distribution of income, protection of the environment and individual freedom were included (Monni S., Spaventa A. 2013). Some indicators expanding the reading of development were proposed, such as: the Human Development Index (HDI) - theorized by Amartya Sen in 1990, combining life expectancy, education or access to knowledge and income or standard of living, and capturing the level and changes of the quality of life; the Measure of Economic Welfare (MEW), proposed by Nordhaus and Tobin in 1972, measuring not only GDP but also assessing the value of leisure time, the amount of unpaid work in an economy and the value of the environmental damage caused by industrial production and consumption; the Gross National Happiness (GNH), coined in 1972 by Bhutan's fourth Dragon King, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, as a way to measure collective happiness in a nation based on four pillars: sustainable and equitable socio-economic development, environmental conservation, preservation and promotion of culture, and good governance. It was observed that «these indicators generally aim to give information, however raw, approximate, or imperfect, on how a given community (usually a nation) performs in a given period of time in the pursuit of fixed, externally defined goals» (Monni, Spaventa 2013, 228). Basically, there was a change of focus, from simple economic growth to the perspective of human development, and for this reason also the Millennium development goals (MDGs), the basis of the Millennium Declaration between 2000 and 2001, were identified. One of the first steps in this direction was the Meadows Report, also known as "The limits of growth" written by the Club of Rome in 1972, which recognized the limits of development and stated that "assuming that the line of growth had continued unchanged in the five key sectors (population, industrialisation, pollution, food, production, consumption of natural resources) humanity would reach the natural limits of development within the next hundred years" (Meadows, Randers, Behrens 1972).

Following this trend, since the 1980s, sustainable development was used to define the possibility of having a development that would ensure «meeting the needs of the present generation without compromising the possibility of future generations to realize their own», as proposed in the report "Our Common Future" published in 1987 by the World Commission on the Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission) of the United Nations Environment Programme. The concept of sustainability is thus strictly linked to the compatibility between the development of economic activities and environmental protection.

Certainly, these multi-criteria assessments and scientific reports enriched the debate on quality of life and environmental issues. However, a part of literature maintains that they didn't overcome the capitalist root of development, hidden through the addition of adjectives such as sustainable, social, human, gendered and others (Gudynas 2013, Acosta 2016, Lang 2016, Santos 2018). Furthermore, it has been argued that «the age of development that guided emerging nations on their journey through post-war history, is coming to an end (...) four decades later, governments and citizens are still staring at this light, which now sparkles as far as ever: every effort and every sacrifice justify themselves to reach the goal, but the light continues to drift away in the darkness» (Sachs 2020, 64).

In the words of Gustavo Esteva<sup>2</sup> (2009, 445), «underdevelopment began on January

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<sup>2</sup> Gustavo Esteva was a Mexican activist, defining himself as a "deprofessionalized intellectual", and the founder of the Universidad de la Tierra in the Mexican city of Oaxaca. He was one of the best-known advocates of post-development.

20, 1949. On that day, 2 billion people became underdeveloped. In fact, since then they have ceased to be what they were, in all their diversity, and become an inverted mirror of the reality of others: a mirror that despises them and sends them to the end of the queue, a mirror that reduces the definition of their identity, That of a heterogeneous and diverse majority, to the terms of a small homogenizing minority». Esteva, with this consideration referred to the President Harry Truman's speech, which in the context of his second mandate inauguration in the Congress, stated some changes he believe were needed for some countries of the world:

*«we must embark on a new program that provides the benefits of our scientific advances and our industrial progress for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped regions. (...) Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a ballast and a threat to both themselves and the more prosperous regions. (...) Our purpose would have to be to help the peoples of the world so that, through their own efforts, they produce more food, more clothing, more materials for their homes and more mechanical power to relieve their loads.(...) It must be a global effort to achieve peace, fullness and freedom. With the cooperation of companies, private capital, agriculture and labor of this country, this program can increase industrial activity in other nations and substantially improve their living standards. (...) The old imperialism - exploitation for foreign benefit - has no place in our plans. What we see is a development program based on the concepts of a clean and democratic relationship» (Acosta 2016, 44).*

Development can be seen as a new form of imperialism, that has catalogued countries as developed, developing and underdeveloped, creating the first the second and third world (Esteva 2009, Acosta 2016, Santos 2018). Truman's words show a clear hierarchy between who is developed and who is underdeveloped: «If before we used to talk about colonies versus central countries, which had a right to plunder because of their supposed biological and cultural superiority, now we started talking about aid and development cooperation against poverty (...) the real aim of the development is extending in others territories the capitalist market model, transforming others populations in consumers and natural goods in commodities» (Lang<sup>3</sup> 2016, 26-27). Thus, development was imposed by industrialized nations as the only path to follow for those nations considered backwards, and the world assisted to the introduction of programs, theories and methodologies, as well as the constitution of governmental, non-governmental organizations and financial institutions aimed at supporting this new paradigm.

In the same way some scholars found in the green economy and growth strategies analyzed before, the same contradiction identified in the idea of development: “green growth is a continuation of the belief in ‘world without end’ where economic growth can continue forever and is seen as the solution to all economic, social and environmental problems. This ‘green growth- mania’ also means that the relationship between humans and nature is not questioned or altered. In this light, nature remains a resource or ‘natural capital’ for capitalist-driven exploitation, with the recognition of humans as apart from the environment, with intrinsic value of nature, cast aside” (Wanner, 2015).

The expression “Maldevelopment” was coined in the 1990 by Samir Amin who examined the failure of development from a political point of view, and called for a radical reform of the idea of development. «The world needs to be remade on the basis of an alternative social system that is national, popular and based on South-South cooperation and that delinks the South from the North. This could lead to a

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<sup>3</sup> Miriam Lang works as an associate professor for Environmental and Sustainability Studies at Universidad Andina Simón Bolívar, Ecuador. Her research focuses on development critique, systemic alternatives and the territorial implementation of Buen Vivir.



genuinely polycentric world that provides Asia, Africa and Latin America with real scope for development» (Amin 1990, 58). What Amin maintained in economic realm, can be found in the Epistemologies of the South at 360-degrees. The need to listen to the ways of knowing the South, socio-economic, cultural, and more generally cognitive proposals from the South Epistemics: «places of anti-hegemonic ideas that can come true in the South as in the North of the world, in the East as in the West» (Pellegrino e Ricotta, 2020b, 117). The goal therefore is to present counter-discourses in response to those advocating for the paradigm of development and progress, which has brought so many risks on a global scale (resource depletion, pollution, epidemics, climate change just some of these). An alternative to the epistemologies of the North, which have produced a totalizing knowledge, imposing itself during the last two centuries in the Western world (Pellegrino, Ricotta 2020a). Thought becomes “post-abyssal” (Santos 2002), for example, when it seeks solutions regarding a sustainable way of life, considers knowledge of the native Andean and Amazonian peoples committed to living harmoniously with nature, despite being characterized by a history of violence and marginalization. The monoculture of scientific knowledge can be overcome in favor of a “cosmopolitan” reason (Santos 2002), evaluating a greater number of alternatives now available and possible outside Western culture. Cosmopolitan reason makes visible other forms of knowledge, giving voice to the discourses and knowledge of those groups normally excluded and achieving a kind of cognitive justice (Santos 2002). The opportunity to integrate the experiences of the peoples of the epistemic South becomes almost a duty to imagine an alternative to development and not an alternative development: «we look at subordinate conditions that – precisely because they have never been developed and precisely because they risk dying «because of» development – do not experience our burning disillusionment before the disasters of development, do not have a political imaginary which is annihilated like ours» (Pellegrino 2021, 241).

In the last decades, from the epistemic South has emerged the concept of Buen Vivir, as a possibility to re-think development models imposed by Modernity, and look at the richness of the experiences of the indigenous people, living in deep accord with nature and not having the need to question themselves about a sustainable life.

The productivist economy is questioned to give space to alternative systems of production, self-managed and self-determined of community inspiration (Solon 2019<sup>4</sup>).

### 3. The Buen Vivir Concept

#### 3.1. Buen Vivir: a Conscious Proposal

“Buen Vivir” is a Spanish expression of a concept framed in noncolonial language, with roots in indigenous cosmovision of Latin America, which emerged in the socio-political debate in recent decades: *sumak kawsay* in Quechua or *suma qumaña* in Aymara, and *Pachamama* (Esteva 2009, Acosta 2016, Lang 2016, Santos 2018, Solon

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<sup>4</sup> Pablo Solón is currently the Executive Director of Fundación Solon. He is an activist, researcher and policy analyst in the areas of water, climate, the environment, trade, finance and systemic alternatives. He was the Ambassador of Bolivia to the United Nations from 2009 to 2011. He is mostly known for championing the rights of nature and the fight for climate justice in the international climate negotiations when he was Chief Negotiator of Bolivia.

2019, Hanafi 2021). Focusing on the expression Quechua, *sumak* can be translated into beautiful, excellent, precious and *kawsay* into life (Acosta 2016, Santos 2018, Solon 2019). Hence, the translation *Buen Vivir* refers to an extremely broad philosophy still developing, but that surely has as a main aspect the importance of a life in balance between human beings and the environment. The *Buen Vivir*, rooted in ancestral knowledge, encourages living in community and cooperative economy, breaking with Western Modernity thought. The name *Pachamama* is translated into English as Mother Earth since *Pacha* is a word in Quechua and Aymara meaning earth, cosmos, universe, time, space and *mama* means “mother”. The expression *buen vivir* has emerged following the celebration of the 500 years of resistance to colonization in 1992, in a context of criticism of capitalist globalization (Monni, Pallottino 2015), as a response to environmental crisis and as a recognition of indigenous peoples as “equal” citizens, respected for diversity and for their values. Later, these expressions were also inserted in the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, thanks to the impact of the experiences of resistance and struggle of the indigenous peoples of these countries. In this way, for the first time it was established the existence of rights guaranteed to nature by a modern Constitution, where the concept of the rights of nature combines the Western notion of right and the indigenous vision of nature (Santos 2018). In April 2009, the United Nations General Assembly proclaimed April 22 to be International Mother Earth Day, with the Bolivian President Evo Morales and the Bolivian delegation leading the presentation of the proposed resolution to the UN General Assembly. At the same time, *buen vivir* is discussed in debates of the Global Social Forum, the annual meeting of civil society organizations, one of the most significant movements of globalization against hegemony and cosmopolitanism subaltern (Santos 2007).

*Buen Vivir* is a project combining the experiences of struggle, resistance and proposals for change of some indigenous groups and it is presented as a plural concept, thanks to its recognition of the multiculturalism of humanity and the diversity of ecosystems in nature, including the different notions of time and space (Gudynas, Acosta 2012, Monni, Pallottino 2015). The essential aspects of *buen vivir* have been identified in his holistic vision of the Earth or *Pacha*, in multipolar coexistence, in the search for balance, in the complementarity of diversity, in the decolonization (Solon 2019). The holistic vision refers to the fact that human beings, who mostly live in organized societies, are always part of a whole that is the Earth, the *Pacha Mama*, a living and conscious organism, that is not motionless but it is constantly evolving and includes humans, plants, animals, the spirit world, as well as planets and stars, and it is interconnected (Solon 2019).

This idea has also been described as «biocentric equality according to which all species have the same importance and therefore deserve to be protected in the same way» (Acosta 2016, 123) and contributes to rebuild the balance between human beings and the ecosystem. An holistic vision was promoted by Bruno Latour with the *Gaia* hypothesis (conceived by James Lovelock in the late seventies) where the oceans, atmosphere, Earth's crust and geophysical components of the Earth are maintained in good conditions thanks to the action of living organisms, plants and animals. According to Latour, *Gaia* breaks into the center of the stage and calls together the human sciences to solve the damage that the applied sciences have created in the two and a half centuries following the Industrial Revolution (Latour 2020).

The development model is overcome, the economy is seen as a social science at the service of the ecology and, thus, of the well-being of the Planet, where the resources decide the limits of economic activity, in favor of a proposal for harmonious

coexistence with nature, «where there is definitely no place for capitalism» (Acosta 2016, 202). The monoculture of linear time, that follows the trajectory of progress and the development of modernization (Santos 2002, Esteva 2009, Acosta 2016, Ricotta 2019, Solon 2019), is replaced by a cyclical vision where the primitive/modern dichotomy falls because time is seen as a spiral where past and future meet, in continuous transformation. Multipolar coexistence values the relationship between the individual and the community as two poles of the same part, emphasizing the importance of organizing society from communities, the basic unit where there is a horizontal exercise of power. The State becomes plurinational, incorporating various nationalities with equal rights and always guaranteeing protection and rights to Nature, promoting a new pact of social and environmental coexistence. Buen Vivir promotes a sustainable society, with institutions ensuring life and cohesion between different social experiences (Solon 2019), without a dominant knowledge but seeking an open and equal dialogue between the possible knowledges, just as proposed by cosmopolitan reason and post-abyssal thinking (Santos 2018). A critique of development in defense of diversity was proposed by Wolfgang Sachs in 1982, who posed the central question: «it is not the collapse of development that we must fear but its outcome (...) what would a fully developed world look like?», the result would be a terrible loss of diversity and homogenization of society (Acosta 2016, 81). Finally, decolonization is a fundamental step and comes even before the possibility of looking at other socio-political and economic proposals with a sense of equality. If colonialism has given rise to a model of trade based on the extractivism of natural but also human resources, a model of patriarchal society with racial and gender discrimination, «decolonization means dismantling those powers that have allowed all this, at the political, economic and socio-cultural level to promote self-management and self-determination» (Solon 2019, 32), breaking with capitalism and socialism because they both promoted an economic model based on progress and development (Acosta 2016). Sustainable development is seen as a transitional step, leading to a redistribution of resources so as to ensure equal choice among people, without having to adopt development programs by other countries. In particular, buen vivir advocates underline the non-sustainability of extractive economies based on the primary commodities exporting sector, and the need for a decommodification of nature.

### **3.2. The constitutional experiences of Ecuador and Bolivia and the Plurinational State**

A fundamental step in the strengthening and dissemination of buen vivir was its formal inclusion in the Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador. At first, was the Bolivian Constitution that defined the plurinational character of its nation and recognized the rights of indigenous peoples. Subsequently, the National Constituent Assembly of Ecuador approved the draft of the new Constitution of Ecuador, a project supported by Ecuadorian people through a referendum aimed at re-establishing Ecuador as a plurinational state. The presence of the *sumak kawsay* or *suma qamaña* within the Constitution stands for the «recognition of the historical heritage of the Andean peoples, social actors traditionally invisible and delegitimized by the elites of power, who claim their recognition and participation thus advocating respect for the difference of non-Western thought» (Avendaño 2009, 1). In this sense, the recognition of rights to nature is a radical step in face of the global climate crisis, granting eco-systems a stronger protection, in the same way as human rights safeguards people.

The wording of the article 71 and 73 of the Ecuadorian Constitution are significant for the explicit protection given to Pacha Mama and the duties of the State. Art.71: Nature, or Pacha Mama, where life is reproduced and occurs, has the right to integral respect for its existence and for the maintenance and regeneration of its life cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes; Art. 73: The State shall apply preventive and restrictive measures on activities that might lead to the extinction of species, the destruction of ecosystems and the permanent alteration of natural cycles. The introduction of organisms and organic and inorganic material that might definitively alter the nation's genetic assets is forbidden.

In this way, it is possible to lay the ground for ecological justice, as it has been observed that Nature Rights can give birth to a new form of citizenship, a meta-ecological citizenship, which is grounded both in civil rights and in environmental rights. Meta-ecological citizenship improves traditional citizenship, which nowadays faces constraints, such as a limited protection of the right to environmental quality, a right seriously compromised by neo-liberal reforms which resulted in the surge of environmental conflicts (Gudynas 2009).

Buen vivir needs to be based on a different economic system in order to realize its alternative to development, promoting a transition to a post-extractivist society and abandoning the unsustainable extraction of resources with high environmental impact. This transformation is necessary to reduce the weakening and emptying of traditional and indigenous communities, to reduce dependency on oil and mineral extraction, to realize an equitable distribution of resources, to use technologies to recover local activities and avoid losing traditional practices (Acosta 2016). In place of modern extractivism, descending from the colonial experience, it has been proposed People-centered development, shaped as a political-economical organization reinforcing communities and adopting a strategy to detach itself from global market, developing endogenous productive forces, in a political context which allows full participation to civil society (Acosta 2016). One of the most innovative proposals of Buen Vivir, present also within the constitution of Ecuador and Bolivia, is the plurinational state where groups of people that differ for ethnicity, culture and tradition are fully recognized: «the plurinational state is a combination of the modern Western civic nation with an ethnocultural nation which calls for an asymmetrical, non-monolithic, and intercultural administrative structure (...) the social and solidarity economy can express the various forms of a grassroots, peasant, indigenous, and communal economy and the kinds of property associated with them, different among themselves but, as a rule, anti-capitalist and anticolonialist (and often also antipatriarchal), based on principles of reciprocity and relationality at the antipodes of capitalist and colonialist logics» (Santos 2018, 10).

Even though the case of Ecuador and Bolivia is specific for the presence of Andean peoples and indigenous communities of the Amazon forest, their experience can represent an example for all those nations where different nationalities and ethnicities coexists historically or more recently, following immigration. Plurinational state's official recognition of indigenous autonomy (as well as of their language, justice system, land) implies also the valorization of their way of living with nature, and giving more visibility to this experience in the academic, political and institutional debate and bringing forward their model of life in non-capitalist communities, parallel to social struggles already existing. The realization of buen vivir does not require a strong state, because «society must self-determinate to contrast the perverse dynamic of neoliberal State» (Solon 2019, 47). Buen Viver is a proposal that should be built in the society, to integrate knowledges and cultures of those groups living in balance with ecosystems, the last aware guardians of Nature on Earth. In

light of this, here-after is further quoted the definition of Buen vivir, in the original language quechua e aymari, through the words of Tatiana Roa Avendaño<sup>5</sup> (2009, 1):

*«the Suma Qamaña of the Andean peoples of Bolivia or the Sumak Kawsay of the kichwas that inhabit Ecuador, implies a close relationship with the land, with the farms where life and food flourishes, with the care and upbringing of animals, with the party in the collective work, in the minga. Andean sumak kawsay is associated with community life; the sweet life or beautiful life of the Andean peoples offers us an austere and diverse world, in balance with nature and the spiritual world. The Amerindian peoples, the peasant peoples and in general the peoples linked to the land, do not seek to transform the world but to understand it, they aspire to the mutual upbringing between all forms of life (Medina, 2006: 108). Therefore, living well does not exclude anyone and incorporates a diversity of elements of the worldview of indigenous peoples: vision of the future, knowledge and knowledge, ethics and spirituality, relationship with the pacha mama. Hence, indigenous peoples conceive the processes of learning and socialization in the chakra, in its relationship with the land. It is through her that we are taught to love and love her».*

## Conclusion

Deforestation, pollution, desertification, and the extinction of species, represents some of the environmental catastrophes observed in the last 40 years as a result increased urbanisation and industrialisation, and caused by models of economic growth and development promoted by Western Modernity. In light of this, numerous scholars have proposed to theorize models of sustainable development through the adoption of indicators alternative to GDP, such as Human Development Index, Measure of Economic Welfare, Gross National Happiness. Countless international summit have been held in the last decades, with the purpose of find a cooperation on environmental issues between governments. Therefore, the difficulty in achieving pragmatic and operational policies for sustainable development on the one hand, and the decision to declare the unsustainability of the current development model into the 2030 Agenda on the other hand, confirms the post-colonial vision during which after five centuries of arguing to be providing solutions for the world, Europe seems incapable of solving its own problems (Santos 2018). As stressed, a group scholars sustained a radically opposite perspective, according to which development has been imposed by industrialized nations as a new form of imperialism (Quijano 2000, Esteva 2009, Gudyanas 2013, Acosta 2016, Lang 2016, Santos 2018, Solon 2019). Thus, sustainability could be considered as a crucial topic to understand how to reorientate the relation between nature and society, but also to became aware of the diversity of social experience in this field, building a counter hegemonic discourse that include Epistemologies of the South. One of this proposal is the Buen Vivir, that emerged as an evolving discourse with political, social and economic implications based on the knowledges belonging to indigenous communities. Buen Vivir for sure requires a post-extractive transition and new policies that consider the importance of recognizing rights to the nature, following the paths of the Equadorian and Bolivian Constitutions. Plurinational

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State, meta-ecological citizenship and people-centered development are some of the changes proposed by Buen Vivir, reinforcing communities and the participation of civil society. Buen Vivir accepts and supports different ways of living, valuing positively cultural diversity, interculturality, plurinationality and political pluralism. Diversity, that neither justifies nor tolerates the destruction of Nature, nor the exploitation of human beings, nor the existence of privileged groups at the expense of the work and sacrifice of others.

Without doubt this is an advanced proposal that requires a practical approach to realize a concrete implementation in the realm of social policies, and, as history has shown us, the important socio-political change has to pass through movements of resistance and social struggle. “History is a prophet who looks back: because of what was, and against what was, it announces what will be”- Eduardo Galeano.

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