

Buen Vivir: A Concept on the Rise in Europe?

Gustavo Hernández and Henkjan Laats

The concept of *buen vivir* has gained visibility in Latin America in recent years. Rooted in indigenous worldviews, *buen vivir* rests on an understanding of humanity's relationship with nature that is fundamentally at odds with the anthropocentrism of modernity. Gustavo Hernández and Henkjan Laats trace the concept's rising trajectory and its influence and echos in Europe. While *buen vivir's* inclusion in formal bi-regional dialogue and its resonance with local initiatives emerging around Europe are promising, much more can be gained from further knowledge exchange.



In June 2015, an Urgent Resolution on the position of Europe and Ibero-America on issues related to climate change was formally approved in Brussels.¹ The legislative session that gave rise to this agreement took place at the Euro-Latin American Parliamentary Assembly - EUROLAT, a parliamentary institution of the Bi-regional Strategic Partnership in the framework of the Presidential Summits between the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The resolution was the result of a joint initiative of civil society and the Greens political group in the European Parliament.

Adopted just a week before the second Presidential Summit of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States, the Resolution stresses the importance of finding a "new paradigm of human well-being

¹ ↪ This agreement emerged from the EuroLatin American Parliamentary Assembly (EuroLat), a parliamentary institution of the Bi-Regional Strategic Partnership.

that reconciles the double challenge of combating climate change and improving equality and social cohesion". The Resolution makes a direct reference to strengthening bi-regional exchange by making use of concepts such as "*Buen Vivir*" and issues related to managing the transition to resilient, low-carbon societies.

A Rising Concept

Buen vivir encompasses a set of ideas that question the dominant logic of development. A key aspect is how we interpret and value nature. In several of its incarnations, *buen vivir* breaks away from the traditional anthropocentric worldview and invites the possibility of constructing an alternative order based on the coexistence of human beings across the spectrum of diversity and in harmony with nature.

The origins of the concept can be traced back to the indigenous communities of South America. However, *buen vivir* became increasingly prominent in the region in the wake of political debates at the beginning of the 21st century, in particular its inclusion in constitutional discussions in two Andean countries: Ecuador and Bolivia. Alliances between a transnational indigenous movement and other social and governmental actors also contributed to the concept's growing visibility.

Within just a few years, *buen vivir* spread rapidly within Latin America and beyond, especially after its formulation in the Constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009)². In the World Social Forum held in Belém, Brazil, in 2009, *buen vivir* was one of the main topics, with three South American presidents mentioning the concept in their public addresses. In the words of the Ecuadorian president Rafael Correa, "21st-century socialism has adopted the concept of 'good living' or 'living well', which derives from the tradition of our native peoples, and means to live with dignity, in harmony with nature, and with respect for all cultures". Today, several universities and think tanks across Latin America, North America and Europe debate the concept (for example, the Böll Foundation, the Latin American Centre for Social Ecology, and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill). It has even entered the discussion in Asia in countries such as China and the Philippines.

The meaning of *buen vivir* stems from the indigenous Quechua and Aymara traditions, though variations can also be found in the experience of communities in the South American Amazon and activist movements in Central and North

any approach to the "environmental question" must overcome the binary between human and nature, animate and inanimate, inviting dialogue with other ways of thinking about citizenship

America. The concept has philosophical similarities with Buddhism and Taoism, as well as the South African notion of Ubuntu – "life as mutual support and caring for nature". *Buen vivir* is also linked to the creation of a framework for the rights of nature – Ecuador was the first country in the

world to recognise the rights of nature at the constitutional level – as well as the European debate on happiness, well-being and the critique of economic growth that even draws on the spiritualities and world views of indigenous communities.

Looking at its many forms and linkages, *buen vivir* can be understood as both a critique of development understood as infinite economic growth, and a discursive turn that seeks to transcend modernity. Ongoing debates about welfare, quality of life and "the environment" have, according to the Uruguayan ecologist Eduardo Gudynas, taken on new meaning in a "biocentric turn", what French philosopher Bruno Latour refers to as departure from "environmentalism in

² ↪ Although in the case of Ecuador and Bolivia different nomenclatures are used ("*Buen Vivir*", "*Vivir Bien*"), the allusions in the Political Constitutions of both countries refer to the same concept.

crisis”.³ This turn seeks to break with the anthropocentric stance of modernity through a relational understanding of identity in which 'nature' is constitutive and constitutive of society itself, namely a vision in which legal order and politics are compatible with the non-separation of nature and culture. Consequently, the approach to the "environmental question" overcomes the duality between the "human" and the "natural" - between the animate and the inanimate - favouring dialogue with other ways of thinking about citizenship based on local knowledge.

Tensions Between Buen Vivir and the Green Economy

After the concept was outlined in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions (in 2009 and 2008 respectively)⁴, it was almost a decade before *buen vivir* was integrated into an official document within the context of the European Union's relationship with Latin America. The Santiago Declaration of the CELAC-EU Summit held in Chile in June 2013 states: "We recognise that planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home and that 'Mother Earth' is a common expression in a number of countries and regions and we note that some countries recognise the rights of nature in the context of the promotion of sustainable development". Although there is no explicit reference to *buen vivir* in the Santiago Declaration, its formulation and negotiation suggest certain tensions and contradictions between two world views.

The Declaration established the green economy as its dominant concept. Closely tied to the EU's Europe 2020 strategy (a 10-year economic strategy proposed by the European Commission in 2010), the concept of the green economy was purported to represent a great business opportunity for Europe. In response to challenges to the EU's advantage as a pioneer in green solutions (notably from China and North America), Europe and Latin America reaffirmed their association under the banner of the Alliance for Sustainable Development.

However, the guiding concept of the green economy did not go entirely uncontested, and on at least two occasions (according to leaked letters to the EU) the Plurinational State of Bolivia sought to amend the wording of the Santiago Declaration. The first questioning of the Green Economy concept took place on 14 August 2012, in a letter from the Plurinational State of Bolivia to the European Union. In this letter, the following wording was proposed to be included in paragraph 42 of the Declaration: "it is therefore essential to recognise that growth has limits, and that the pursuit of limitless growth on a finite planet is unsustainable". A second challenge came shortly afterwards, on 4 September, in another letter in which the Bolivian diplomatic corps proposed adding the following to paragraph 40 of the Declaration: "[the green economy] could provide options for policy formulation, but should not be a rigid set of rules". This addition was eventually included.

Parallel to the government-to-government discussions, a civil society forum entitled Good Living and Green New Deal: Are they equivalent concepts for Europe and Latin America? took place.⁵ The discussions concluded that the Green New Deal constitutes a programme of 'green modernisation' and, as such, would reinforce the conventional sense of modernity with its preaching of economic growth. Inherently conceived as an 'investment plan', the Green New Deal attaches importance to productivity and is thus seen as a new form of modernisation. Any dialogue between *Buen Vivir* and the Green New Deal is thus problematic because their basic assumptions are fundamentally different. On the one hand, *Buen Vivir* is inherently pluralistic, open to different interpretations and practices; the Green New Deal, on the

³ ↪ With the suggestive phrase "political ecology has nothing to do with nature", Bruno Latour argues that mainstream environmental movements (i.e. Green parties in Europe) are doomed to fail so long as they envision political ecology as inextricably tied to the protection and management of nature through conventional political methodologies and policies.

⁴ ↪ In Bolivia, the same concept is denominated *vivir bien*.

⁵ ↪ Fundación Boll. Event Report. Boll Lunch Debate, November 13th, 2012.

other hand, is guided by a single logic and vision of progress. There is, however, an important common element: the intention to question development understood as material accumulation, and the search for better ways of using natural resources.

The recently announced "European Green Deal" (2019) - a set of policy measures adopted by the European Union with the aim of making Europe climate neutral by 2050 — maintains the centrality of economic growth, but seeks to "decouple" from the exploitation of natural resources. In the words of European Commission President Ursula von der Leyen, "it is our new growth strategy, for growth that gives back more than it takes away". However, the European Green Deal has been criticised by civil society organisations for lacking clear targets and indicators for the problem areas of climate change, biodiversity loss, ozone depletion, water pollution, urban stress, waste production and so on. As explained above, this critique couched in terms of productivity alone is not compatible with the fundamentals of *Buen Vivir*.

Buen Vivir in the European Debate

Since the days of Plato and Aristotle, almost all the great philosophers have mused about what constitutes a "good life". What differentiates the notion of the good life from *buen vivir*, however, is the importance of the relationship with nature. While *buen vivir* considers human beings to be an integral part of the fabric of Mother Earth or nature, modern philosophy creates a degree of distance through the instrumental rationalism of John Locke and René Descartes which sees nature as a means to achieve human ends. Although philosophers like Michel de Montaigne and Jean-Jacques Rousseau stress the importance of nature for human beings, the instrumental approach permeates modern philosophical ideas of the good life and much of current politics. In modern European philosophy there are, of course, several efforts to depart from this, the most well-known being James Lovelock's Gaia hypothesis as described by Bruno Latour. Nevertheless, recent influential philosophical texts on the good life by writers such as Martha Nussbaum, Amartya Sen, Simon Blackburn, Robert Skidelsky and Fernando Savater uphold an anthropocentric approach which stands in clear contrast to the biocentric turn posed by *buen vivir*.⁶

The notion of the good life surfaced in the 2015 parliamentary elections in the UK, described in terms of movements such as home-grown or locally based food, compost-fuelled cars and renewable energy. The term featured in the Conservative Party candidate David Cameron's electoral campaign championing ideas of vested localism, "big society" — which then led to Brexit — and some 'green' policies to justify cutting back the state. In Germany, trade unions and Chancellor Angela Merkel used an equivalent phrase in German — *gutes Leben* — to refer to an alternative to the deteriorating working conditions of the working classes. Recent studies reveal, however, the paradox of these versions of welfare. They are, on the one hand, discourses that advocate a change of the status quo, while, on the other hand, they imply a reinvention of the actors while maintaining the instrumental approach to the relationship between labour and environmental concerns.⁷

The first formal recognition of *Buen Vivir* in Europe came with the adoption of the 2015 EuroLat Emergency Resolution. In addition to recognising as important the inclusion of an 'ancestral knowledge' component, the Resolution calls for taking into account the valuable contributions elaborated in other corners of the world, such as the concept of "*Buen*

⁶ ↪ See Sen, A (2005). Skidelsky, R (2013). Blackburn, S (2001). Nussbaum, M (2011), Savater, F (1991).

⁷ ↪ Unionists do not talk about labour and nature as equally necessary sources of wealth. "Nature and the environment was conceptualised as something that provides quality of life, well-being and health for workers; it was not understood as a partner in the production process". Räthzel, N. and Uzzell, D. (2011). "Trade Unions and Climate Change: The Jobs versus Environment Dilemma". *Global Environmental Change*, 21, pp. 1215–1223.

Vivir". The Resolution also calls on both regions to rethink the Yasuni-ITT Initiative launched in 2007 by the Ecuadorian government, which consists of preserving, without exploiting, approximately 856 million barrels of oil in the ecological reserve of the same name. The Resolution, however, has not been implemented in a tangible way and, since 2015, there has been no further mention of *Buen Vivir* in the framework of the EU's formal relationship with Latin America.

At the political level, governments in both Latin America and Europe encounter several obstructions when it comes to understanding and implementing the principles of *buen vivir*. This can be attributed to the fact that the instrumental relationship between humans and nature is firmly rooted in modern culture. Bruno Latour has noted the challenges facing Europe in this regard, alluding to a "political disorientation" – while the Social Democrats wait for economic growth to resume, the Greens, caught in the clutches of capitalism and losing sight of their own history, are forgetting that "ecology" has less to do with "nature" and more to do with our own sustenance and livelihoods.

Transition Movements in Europe

While the process of incorporating *buen vivir* at governmental level in Europe is proving problematic, at the local-level processes that reflect the concept's logic are emerging. Recognition of the need for transitions – from food to agriculture and from education to economy – is becoming mainstream in Europe, though it remains to be seen whether at the level of policymaking these processes will keep within the classic paradigms of economic growth and infinite technological "progress".

Emerging ideas and initiatives that appear to be related to post-developmental notions of *buen vivir* include, for example, the Dutch city council of Noardeast-Fryslân's recent granting of special rights to the Wadden Sea and the appointment of an independent governance authority. In July 2020, the Spanish municipality of Los Alcázares, Murcia, recognised the Mar Menor, the largest saltwater lagoon in Europe, as a subject of rights. In Sweden in October 2019, a parliamentary motion was presented by the Green Party to include the rights of Nature in the Constitution.

The focus here is not only on the advancement of Earth-centred law but also on aspects such as the social economy, open knowledge, transition towns, commons, urban agriculture, and cooperative housing, among others. These ideas come out of local transformation projects in sectors like energy, transport, food and social care. They differ from the majority of hegemonic proposals in the sense that they are not mega-discourses operating according to a single logic (as in the discourse of "progress"). The fact that they are open to interpretation and able to adapt easily to external, local factors means that they favour greater intercultural dialogue.

Over the last decade, particularly in the countries most affected by the 2008 economic crisis – such as Greece and Spain – there has been a rise in practical experiences and political proposals related to the concept of *buen vivir*, such as

The concept of buen vivir is gaining ground in Europe, the product of dialogue between ideas that cast a critical eye over development.

agroecological farming, the use of local currencies, the promotion of local markets and products, and direct democracy. This comes at a time of high anxiety about the situation of the planet. These initiatives receive political

support, particularly in places with a Green local government. In Amsterdam, for example, a good living plan with a commons perspective was proposed by business owners and inhabitants of Czaar Peterstraat, and was positively received by the local community and the city council.

Growing Space for Alternatives

The concept of *buen vivir* is gaining ground in Europe, the product of dialogue between ideas that cast a critical eye over development. Yet not all ideas that criticise development are linked to *buen vivir*, since many remain rooted in an

The exchange of knowledge between Europe and Latin America could function as a catalyst for the construction of buen vivir, both as a theory and political practice.

economic growth model. Other notions that cannot claim to be related to *buen vivir* are the hegemonic mega-discourses centred on social progress, with their limited scope for interpretation.

However, emerging experiences in Europe which are connected to *buen vivir* express an interest in recovering the local and

transforming key areas such as food, education, social care, transport, energy production and, more recently, health as a result of the coronavirus crisis.

Despite the fact that the concept of *buen vivir* has been (directly or indirectly) introduced in official dialogue between the European Union and Latin America, it is overshadowed by the hegemony of a discourse that repeatedly circles back to the conventional sense of modernity with its fixation on economic growth. Perhaps the 2015 urgent resolution was ahead of its time, since the adoption of *buen vivir* has put practice before the need for theory. The exchange of knowledge between Europe and Latin America could function as a catalyst for the construction of *buen vivir*, both as a theory and political practice. With this in mind, it is clear to see that the successful local experiences in Europe – where participants see themselves as an integral part of the land rather than its owner – are increasingly seeking to create an alternative “sense of order” based on a reconsidered relationship with nature. With cities like Amsterdam already beginning to discover the concept of *buen vivir*, it is possible that this trend will start to spread throughout the European Union.

Related links:

- The Jus Semper Global Alliance
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Transitioning to Geocratia: the People and Planet and Not the Market Paradigm — First Steps](#)
- Álvaro J. de Regil: [Marketocracy and the Capture of People and Planet](#)
- John Bellamy Foster: [Capitalism Has Failed — What Next?](#)
- Reinhard Olschanski: [After Industrialism: Reviving Nature in the 21st Century](#)
- Erald Kolasi: [Energy, Economic Growth, and Ecological Crisis](#)
- John O’Neill: [Life Beyond Capital](#)
- Paul Burkett: [An Eco-Revolutionary Tipping Point?](#)
- Víctor M. Toledo: [What are we saying when we talk about sustainability?](#)
- Jonathan Rowson: [Bildung in the Twenty-First Century – Why sustainable prosperity depends upon reimagining education](#)

- ❖ **About Jus Semper:** The Jus Semper Global Alliance aims to contribute to achieving a sustainable ethos of social justice in the world, where all communities live in truly democratic environments that provide full enjoyment of human rights and sustainable living standards in accordance with human dignity. To accomplish this, it contributes to the liberalisation of the democratic institutions of society that have been captured by the owners of the market. With that purpose, it is devoted to research and analysis to provoke the awareness and critical thinking to generate ideas for a transformative vision to materialise the truly democratic and sustainable paradigm of People and Planet and NOT of the market.
- ❖ **About the authors: Gustavo Hernández** is co-director at Cross Cultural Bridges. He is a representative of the Latin American Association of NGOs to the EU and a senior consultant to the Heinrich Böll Foundation's EU Office. **Henkjan Laats** is a director at Cross Cultural Bridges, a network of activists and experts that facilitates the balanced transfer and exchange of practice, knowledge and values with an emphasis on transfer from the Global South to the Global North.
- ❖ **About this Brief:** Buen Vivir: A Concept on the Rise in Europe? was originally published by [Green European Journal](#) in December 2020. This paper has been published under Creative Commons, CC-BY-NC-ND 4.0.
- ❖ **Quote this paper as:** Gustavo Hernández and Hekjian Laats: Buen Vivir: A Concept on the Rise in Europe? — The Jus Semper Global Alliance, December 2021.
- ❖ **Tags:** capitalism, democracy, Buen Vivir, sustainability, ecology, limits to growth, development, productivism, Mother Earth, climate change, labour.
- ❖ The responsibility for opinions expressed in this work rests only with the author(s), and its publication does not necessarily constitute an endorsement by The Jus Semper Global Alliance.



Under Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 License
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

© 2021. The Jus Semper Global Alliance
Portal on the net: <https://www.jussemper.org/>
e-mail: informa@jussemper.org