

Buen Vivir: A Concept on the Rise in Europe?

Article by Gustavo Hernández, Henkjan Laats

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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](#) was formally passed in Brussels on the Europe-Latin America position on issues related to climate change.[1] This agreement was the fruit of a joint initiative between civil society and the European Green Party, and was passed just one week before the second Presidential Summit of the European Union and the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC). The resolution highlights the importance of finding a “new paradigm of human well-being that reconciles the twin challenges of fighting climate change and enhancing equality and social cohesion”. It directly references strengthening bi-regional exchange through the use of concepts such as *buen vivir* (Spanish for “living well”) and issues related to managing the transition towards 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. 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.

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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 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 crisis”. [2] This turn seeks to break away from the anthropocentric stance of modernity and assign new meaning to the environment by looking beyond the separation of nature and culture to recognise their connectedness. As a result, 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, such as from local knowledges.

Tensions between *buen vivir* and the green economy

After the concept was outlined in the Bolivian and Ecuadorian constitutions (in 2009 and 2008 respectively)[3], 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 to include a mention of limits to growth and to establish the green economy as a source of policymaking options rather than a rigid set of rules.

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over development.*

Another relatively prominent concept in Europe, the Green New Deal, is inherently conceived as an “investment plan” and emphasises productivity. It can thus be considered a form of green modernisation. This renders any dialogue between *buen vivir* and the Green New Deal problematic, given that their basic assumptions are fundamentally different. As a concept, *buen vivir* is intrinsically pluralistic, open to different interpretations and practices; the Green New Deal, on the other hand, is guided by a single logic and the notion of linear progress. However, they do have one crucial thing in common: the intention to question development understood as material accumulation, and the search for better ways to manage resource use.

Announced in 2019, the EU Commission’s European Green Deal upholds yet again the centrality of economic growth, though this is “decoupled from resource use”. Commission president Ursula von der Leyen has dubbed the European Green Deal “our new growth strategy”, and the deal has faced criticism from civil society for failing to establish clear or adequate goals for problem areas such as climate change, biodiversity loss, ozone depletion and water pollution. As with the Green New Deal, the Green Deal’s focus on productivity is ultimately not compatible with *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*.

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” and other green-sounding policies to defend cutting back the state. In Germany, trade unions and Chancellor Angela Merkel used the equivalent phrase in German, *gutes Leben*, to promote an alternative to the deterioration of labour conditions for the working classes. However, at the heart of this version of the good life lies a paradox: on the one hand, the discourse seeks to change the status quo; on the other, it implies a reinvention of unions as social movements but fails to see nature as a partner in human development.[4]

The first formal acknowledgement of *buen vivir* in Europe came with the approval of the 2015 EuroLat urgent resolution. As well as recognising the importance of including a component of “ancestral knowledge”, the resolution calls for a review of valuable contributions made in other corners of the world, including the concept of *buen vivir*. However, the resolution has not been implemented in any tangible way and, since 2015, there has been no further mention of *buen vivir* in the frame of the EU’s formal relationship with Latin America.

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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 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 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.

Footnotes

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

[2] 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.

[3] In Bolivia, the same concept is denominated *vivir bien*.

[4] 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.



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.

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