



Buen Vivir, Pacha Mama, and the Defenders of Mother Earth

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There was a time in human history, which saw, even in the lands of the dominators, nature in a different condition. The constructions respected nature, the art was inspired by nature, and science was no more than the level of knowledge derived from her.
Esperanza Martin ¹

Buen Vivir is a fascinating philosophy, adopted by imperfect societies, which have experimented with and dreamed of a way of life that would maintain their harmony with nature, and with economies based on autonomy and wholesome quality of life. It is a proposal, which differentiates itself from the so-called 'development' from a modern perspective of an occidental way of life. It is a term of the language and cosmovision of the indigenous peoples of the Andes and Amazon Basin of South America: 'The original peoples were the ones who in practice and on the terrain have questioned the fact that nature is considered an object contingent to the requirements of capital.'²

Thus, the term Buen Vivir originates from two languages in its broader translation: in Quechua, the co-official language in Bolivia, Peru, Colombia, Chile, Ecuador and Argentina, it is called Suma Kawsay. In Aymara, which is the co-official language of Bolivia and Peru, and which is spoken in parts of Argentina and Chile, Suma Qamana means 'to live and co-live in a good way'. It 'is the ideal which the Andean man and woman are searching for. It translates as plenitude of life, the social, economic, and political well-being, which the people desire. The full development of the people.'³

Imagination and reality have made us pause and consider Buen Vivir, because the appreciation and claim of this term has been embraced by indigenous peoples, peasant farmers, fisherfolk, environment protection groups, writers and social movements. All



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of them have analyzed in depth its importance and contribution in order to put it on the agendas of not only these groups but also in its transcendence at national and international levels.⁴

In the political and global context, it is important to study the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador in detail, and also the agenda of the United Nations to understand how we could have another form of development. A form that includes harmony with nature, its protection and respecting its rights as well as those of its defenders.

What makes Buen Vivir as a way of life special is that it is not an individual concept, but is interdependent with other concepts that seek to guarantee our planet's sustainability. For example the word Pachamama⁵ (Mother Earth) is tightly connected to Buen Vivir, as oxygen is for human beings. It is like a voice singing to the rhythm of Mother Earth. In this sense, this essay focuses on a Latin American context but without forgetting that Buen Vivir and Mother Earth have their meanings, one could say, in the ancestry of all living and extinguished cultures of our world.

Within the vivid cultures that survived extinction, which have suffered to the extreme the diminution of territory, we could mention the U'wa⁶ who insist: 'More than thousand times and in thousand ways we have told them that the earth is our mother and we neither want to nor could sell her.'⁷

According to oral knowledge, the earth is a living being and is seen as the mother in many Andean and Amazonian cultures. Also in the Quechua and Aymara languages it alludes to this concept. In the Andean cultural tradition, to talk about Pachamama is to be of accord with the idea that she provides for all the well being and she is the protector. Finally, on 22nd of April 2009, the General Assembly of the United Nations, opted for the idea to call our planet earth 'Mother Earth'. On 17th of June 2015, the earth was designated as the 'Common House' of all people by the Pope, based on the chants of Francis of Assisi: 'Be lauded, my Lord, through the sister, our Mother Earth'.⁸

It is for sure, that if we see her as mother, we live in the privilege of her endowments and gifts, with her generosity she is for all of us and we all interact in her. Curiously in the Greek culture, the earth was a deity called Gaia. It had the same connotation for the Romans: 'Terra mater'.

Obviously, words have different forms of expression in different languages, and in this case, referring to the two words mentioned above, in the special character of these and many more languages, there exists a philosophy of life as a whole. This is a logic, which originates off a cosmivision. It is also essential because in this moment it has converted into the necessary notion to begin understanding the decolonization of the concepts of the so-called 'development'. Particularly there we can see which type of life we want to carry on: a bad or a good life — mal vivir or Buen Vivir. But words just as people, have tight relationships, or they simply separate from one another and keep a distance and often do not communicate with one another. Effectively, we cannot deny that there exists universal languages, although every culture appropriates its own language. This is the case with the ancestral peoples, that have maintained their ways of expression through an ideology, a philosophy, a language, and a root and cultural identity, which is impossible to vanquish in time. At this point the question arises: Who came up with/conspired the theory of a developed, civilized world as opposed to a barbaric or primitive one? The first version tells us about development and a civilization based on numbers and letters, while the second version gives us a concept like Buen Vivir: quality of life and well-being. This way, the dichotomy between a civilized versus a primitive one was created, and with it the indigenous cosmivision was also underappreciated. Curiously, though, these cosmivisions entailed a source of wisdom

about the relation with the planet that is so necessary to reverse, if possible, the disaster of climate change.

Arturo Escobar⁹ writes: 'It was trusted in that almost by technological and economic order and thanks to something called planning, over night millennial and complex cultures would convert themselves in clones of the rational occidentals of the countries, that are considered economically progressive'.¹⁰ Those who followed this objective abused Buen Vivir and discriminated against the defenders of Pachamama in Abya Yala¹¹. The latter were called primitive, barbaric, not developed, poor, and inferior. But they were the inhabitants of enormous rivers, mountains, seas; all with a traditional food culture, with a great environmental and cultural patrimony and biodiversity, who managed to conserve their ecosystems. Still, they were called poor and backward, in accordance with the social system and the vision imposed on them by European colonists. This was justified with them being the saviors from so much poverty and ignorance, and that the rich needed to help the poor to become part of the unbridled consumerist system.

When we live our lives, we are who we are not only because we think we are so, but because sometimes others imagine us like that. Despite the extermination of cultures, the deep roots of ancestral cosmovisions persevered. Now they give space to other types of life, alternatives to development for agricultural communities, and even for urban areas, which have opted for another kind of relation with the territory.

In the occidental world, the idea of nature dominated by humans, has different expressions, one of which is related to a religious vision. It starts with the book Genesis 1:28, at the point when the Bible manifests: God blessed them and said, 'Be fertile, increase in number, fill the earth, and be its master. Rule the fish in the sea, the birds in the sky, and all the animals that crawl on the earth.'¹² From then on, mankind felt justified to subjugate and mistreat her.

Consequently, the so-called 'development', considered the only truth, a truth that still should be considered incorrect, began with the flagrant crime of killing new and uncommon forms of life and also of its defenders.

This essay would have been written in vain, if we would not remember and pay tribute to all those who always have struggled for the planet: 'More broadly, Latin America remained the most dangerous region for anyone wanting to protect rivers, forests, mountains and oceans, accounting for 60 of the global total of

killings of environmental defenders even though it is home to less than a tenth of the world's population.¹³

Let us remember Berta Cáceres, indigenous Lenca¹⁴ of Honduras, and defender of the rights of mother earth, who was assassinated in the year 2016. Her death and many more we need to know about and name; give evidence to the fact that mother earth is being violated in her rights and those who defend her face the destiny of being eliminated or silenced. There is still hope, though: in the words of Arturo Escobar, who speaks about collective action of the social movements in order to defend the Buen Vivir and the rights of mother earth. He also differentiates very clearly the concept of the so-called development, confronting it with alternative ways of development.

As I conclude this essay, I propose that in education, the concept of Buen Vivir and mother earth's rights, in its study and use, should be seen in its profoundness and it should not be trivialized. That both in Bolivia and Ecuador, indigenous and social movements struggled to ensure that the term 'good living' was adopted within their constitutions and that the United Nations (UN) later considered it important to consider good living on its agenda, shows the path to such a key way of living on mother earth.

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The children and young people of this planet should know about alternative forms of economy, which does not declare war on Pachamama or her defenders, but which comes from an understanding that all human beings are to be the defenders of life.

Notes

1. Esperanza Martin. (no date, page 1) 'Pachamama y Sumak Kawsay'; Acción Ecológica. <<http://www.comitesromero.org/sicsal/reflexiones/CentenarioProanhoEMartinez.pdf> > .
2. Los Derechos de la Naturaleza Nueva Arma de Lucha Frente a Las Actividades Petroleras en los Países Amazonicos. MAIPPA Articulacion por un movimiento de afectados por la industria petrolera en la Amazonía. (Undated). <<http://www.estudiosecologistas.org/documentos/reflexion/indigenas/derechosnaturaleza.pdf>>.
3. María Eugenia Choque Quispe is a member of the Centro de Estudios Multidisciplinarios de Aymara (Center for Multidisciplinary Aymara Studies) in Bolivia. Based on Choque: "2006. *La historia del movimiento indígena en la búsqueda del Suma Qamaña (Vivir Bien)*," (2006), this opinion was expressed in the text "Buen vivir: germinando alternativas al desarrollo", compiled by Eduardo Gudynas in *América Latina en Movimiento*, ALAI, No. 462, febrero 2011 <<https://www.alainet.org/es/active/48052>>..
4. Alberto Acosta and Esperanza Martínez, from Ecuador with their experiences propose, in the current use of this expression, an emphasis is placed on environmental protection and the display of solidarity. Cops. P. 25 *Revista Latinoamericana* <<http://journals.openedition.org/polis/260>>.
— Alberto Acosta y Esperanza Martínez (comp). 2009. *El buen vivir. Una vía para el desarrollo*. Santiago: Editorial Universidad Bolivariana. p. 184.
5. The word Pachamama is a word that comes from the Aymara and Quechua meaning: Pacha as a concept of earth, while mama is the mother. From then on, the word Pachamama is used as mother earth, and it is constantly paid tribute to.
6. The U'WA, which means 'intelligent people who know how to speak' are indigenous people whose language belongs to the macro-linguistic Chibcha family. They live in the northeast of Colombia and have been able to maintain firmly their ancestral culture, their language U'wajka (soul of the people), has three dialectal variants: Cobaria, Barronegro and Aguablanca <<https://latierrayelhombre.wordpress.com/2015/05/22/uwa/>>.
They are recognized as the main opponents of oil exploitation because they consider oil to be the blood of the earth.
See more <<http://www.semana.com/on-line/articulo/por-que-pueblo-uwa-niega-exploracion-petrolera-su-territorio/83954-3>>.
7. Pueblos U'WA. *Agenda latinoamericana año: 2000*. carta de los U'wa al mundo.
8. El Tiempo. 'El Papa de la Tierra. El Papa toca la responsabilidad de cuidar los lugares de gran riqueza biológica'. (17th of June 2015) <<http://www.eltiempo.com/archivo/documento/CMS-15965203>>.

9. Colombian anthropologist, professor at the University of North Carolina, recognized for his contributions in cultural, political and social aspects and the situation of Colombia. See: <<http://aescobar.web.unc.edu/>>.
10. Escobar, Arturo, *La invencion del Tercer Mundo*, 1996. *La invencion del Tercer Mundo Construccion y deconstruccion del desarrollo* Arturo Escobar© 1ra. Edicion Fundacion Editorial el perro y la rana, 2007. Translation from Diana Ochoa.
11. *Abya yala*, name that the Kuna-tule gave to América before the invasion of the Spaniards. It is a name of respect and appreciation for this land, and means roughly earth of the Great Mother <<https://www.ecoportel.net/temas-especiales/pueblos-indigenas/abya-yala-el-verdadero-nombre-de-este-continente/>>.
12. The concept of domination of mankind over nature is discussed by Eleonora Montuschi in "Order of man, order of nature: Francis Bacon's idea of a 'dominion' over nature", *Order: God's, Man's and Nature's: Discussion Paper*. (London, UK: Centre for *Philosophy of Natural and Social Science*, London School of Economics and Political Science, 2010).
13. The Guardian. 'Environmental defenders being killed in record numbers globally, new research reveals'. (13, 07, 2017).
14. The Lencas are a Mesoamerican ethnic group linked to Mayan culture. They occupy diverse areas that today are known as Honduras and El Salvador; during the Spanish conquest, the Lencas organized a war of resistance that lasted about ten years and ended with the death of Chief Lempira. The Lenca dynasty, however, never resigned and its lineage, according to oral tradition, dates back to ancient times. <<https://www.ecured.cu/Lencas>>.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Claudia Gimena Roa is a team-member of Fundaexpresión, a cultural and environmentalist NGO established in 2001 in Colombia.

Fostering participatory methodologies, intercultural dialogue and community exchanges between rural and urban localities are her main responsibilities.

She is also active in promoting reading, writing and communication processes with women and youth groups, using testimonial literature, story books, journals, press articles, videos and radio programs and case studies on food sovereignty and sustainable societies with organizations in Latin America.