



**COLLANA DEL
DIPARTIMENTO DI ECONOMIA**

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BUEN VIVIR AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO CURRENT PARADIGMS**

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ISSN 2279-6916 Working papers

(Dipartimento di Economia Università degli studi Roma Tre) (online)

Working Paper n° 172, 2013

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Copie della presente pubblicazione possono essere richieste alla Redazione.

esemplare fuori commercio
ai sensi della legge 14 aprile 2004 n.106

REDAZIONE:

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**Beyond growth and development:
Buen Vivir as an alternative to current paradigms**

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Abstract

The aim of this paper is to investigate to what extent buen vivir ("good life"), Latin America's new concept for collective well being, can be considered a way forward beyond current paradigms related to economic growth, development, ideology and state building, with its strengths and potential weaknesses or just a new version of political discourse. In order to answer this question, we will briefly review the literature that can help to trace the buen vivir origins in the cosmovisions of latinoamerican indigenous peoples, and to connect it to reflections made in different areas of social, economic and political sciences, trying to identify the areas in which divergences arise using established approaches and frameworks. In the conclusions we'll also try to look at the added value brought by the buen vivir towards a renewed understanding of political, social, economic objectives of the associated life.

Keywords: *Buen Vivir, development policy, Latin America, plurinational state, socialism, state building.*

Jel: B059, O020, O054, P040

1. Introduction

Over the last few years, *buen vivir* has brought a wave of freshness to the debate on alternative development, a debate that has been renewed in connection with the international crisis of recent years, since orthodox models of development have shown all their weaknesses. *Buen vivir* has also been expressed at political and institutional level in countries such as Ecuador and Bolivia, thus contributing to the opening of a positive perspective in social categories that had long been marginalised. Based on heated critique of the neo-liberal global order and mainstream development paradigms¹, *buen vivir* seems to avoid two opposing

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¹ It is actually within the context of 'hard sciences' that the idea of 'paradigm' had been conceived by Thomas

weaknesses often associated with ‘alternative’ approaches: one is that it is weak in proposing a viable ‘positive’ practical perspective and the other, that it is based on ‘praxis without a theory’. The three elements (critique, a comprehensive strategic approach to social change and praxis) are inextricably linked in *buen vivir*, with the distinctive feature of being translated into real political and institutional arrangements. *Buen vivir*, as known, studied and practised, is therefore a blend of rather diverse elements such as a concept of ethno-development arising from the experience of indigenous peoples, the idea of a plurinational² state, a relational understanding of the ways different societies enter into a process of transformation, a form of humanistic socialism, the idea of multiculturalism and a concept of local development. Most of these elements have already emerged in the history of thought as well as of practice, with a wide range of outcomes that represent in some ways the context to which *buen vivir* has to be related, once it is separated from the specific situation in which it originates.

The following pages will trace some of the main points of the debate on development that appear to be relevant to *buen vivir*. We will also show how the relation between the different levels in which *buen vivir* is rooted (indigenous cosmovision, political program, ideology, institutional arrangements) needs to be considered and scrutinised.

2. Beyond growth

Although the theory of economic development was created together with economic science, economic development has long been considered synonymous with economic growth and only became a distinct topic in its own right after the Second World War (De Muro, Monni and Tridico, 2005). Until the mid-Sixties, the focus was on the process of capital formation. The idea was actually quite simple: an increase in the capital stock would lead to an

Kuhn in 1962's 'The Structure of Scientific Revolutions', and later modified by the same Kuhn, that ended up by preferring other words/concepts. The idea of ‘paradigm’ is widely used in these pages following the consideration that its use is commonly accepted for discussing the issues object of this paper. However, it is also necessary to point out a number of caveats. It has to be noted that the notion of paradigm is usually seen as 'loose', and not very precise for what its meaning is concerned; its main flaw has to be identified precisely in the assumed distinction between the object and the observer, which would allow to the latter an ‘epistemological break’, independently from his/her own position vis-à-vis the object observed. In this wake, Nederveen Pietersee (1998) criticises the possibility of using the notion of paradigm in the field of development, arguing that reflexive and constructivist social science is in nature post- or no-paradigmatic. In more theoretical terms, see also the criticisms to the idea of paradigm developed by Bourdieu (2003:27-31). See also the interesting notion of ‘para-dogma’ introduced by Walsh (2010) while discussing the human development approach linking the latter to a more prescriptive dimension than that embedded within the notion of paradigm.

² In the definition proposed by Walsh (2008) “In its most basic form, and in the context of South America, plurinationality is a term that recognizes and describes the reality of a country, where peoples, nations or nationalities, indigenous and black - whose roots predate the national State - live with white and mestizos. Thus virtually all countries of the region are plurinational countries, even if they do not acknowledge it”.

expansion of consumption in the future. This concept was already present in Marx (1848) and Smith (1776), and has remained the focal point for many models of economic growth, first of all Harrod (1939) and Domar (1946). The policies adopted during the Fifties and Sixties were therefore the result of models emphasizing capital requirements, that could be responded to through loans, aid and private investment. The idea was thus to compensate the gap of savings, issue typically arising in the economies of developing countries as well as in the immediate post-war period in Western countries³.

During this period, although no longer synonymous, the goal of economic development therefore coincided with economic growth. In fact, there was a widespread view that the benefits of growth were later distributed to all of the population, reducing poverty and allowing even the weaker sections of society to improve their own destiny (“trickle down effect”). But the persistence of poverty even in the presence of high rates of economic growth then began to raise some doubts as to the validity of these policies among its strongest supporters. In the early Sixties, these doubts were concretised in the writings of Schultz (1961), Becker (1964) and Mincer (1974) who began to shift the focus from the accumulation of physical capital to the concept of investment in human capital, with its implications for development policies. They began to realise that the development of individuals through the acquisition of better health and better nutrition as well as an increase in capacity could increase total factor productivity. In the mid-Sixties a new expression, "social development", appeared in the theoretical debate⁴. The attention paid to this “magic” word was the starting point for a new and increasingly deep criticism of the idea of development as economic growth that had dominated the theoretical scenario up until then. First, Seers (1969) who underlined the mistakes made in the previous twenty-five years, and then the battle carried out by the ILO since 1970 (ILO, 1976) against the use of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per capita to measure development, marked the “beginning” of a campaign of ideas that revolutionised theories and policies in the following years. In this period, the idea that economic growth coincided with development was overcome and the view gained ground that development consisted in economic growth accompanied by much more complex social change, change that included other targets in addition to simple GDP growth such as a reduction in poverty, an equitable distribution of income, protection of the environment and individual freedom. These theories started to go beyond economic growth. In these years,

³ i.e. the Marshall Plan as a typical example of this kind of intervention.

⁴ Due to the contribution of, among others, the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development directed by Sir Hans Wolfgang Singer.

scholars like Georgescu-Roegen (1971, 1976, 1977), through a radical critique of neoclassical models, tried to open up economic theory to contributions from biology and thermodynamics. Georgescu-Roegen in particular attempted to reformulate economic theory as “bioeconomics” (1977). Other scholars (Nordhaus and Tobin, 1972) focused their attention on the inadequacy of GDP to measure development aspects and started to develop new indicators to measure the progress of a society. Policies were adjusting to the new mainstream. Among these new theories, the Basic Needs approach was the most developed response in this sense, providing new concepts and tools to define and measure poverty (World Employment Conference, 1976, 1977; Stewart, 1985; Streeten, 1979,1981, Streeten and Burki, 1978). This approach had among its main features the desire to explain, in a straightforward manner, the problem of meeting basic needs and proposed essentially to define the characteristics of a development policy that would address the issue of basic needs of the most vulnerable groups as a priority. The acceptance of this new theoretical approach also entailed the implementation of policies that were designed to ensure the expansion of production possibilities of income for the poorest sections of the population on the one hand, and on the other, the development of production and supply of public services that were more able to reach the most needy groups effectively. The effective integration of these objectives was intended to provide an economic base and social order capable of ensuring that all citizens were able to satisfy their basic needs in much less time than had historically occurred in other contexts or might be expected through the use of economic growth or the subsequent expansion of personal income. After the Basic Needs approach, a further step to integrate the concept of development and go beyond growth was given by Amartya Sen. Amartya Sen (1979; 1983) introduced the Capability Approach, a theoretical framework (1979; 1983) for the evaluation of individual well-being and social arrangements and the design of policies for social improvements (Robeyns, 2005). Amartya Sen’s contribution has helped to shift further attention towards issues that do not simply concern economic growth. In particular, he integrated the concept of the satisfaction of basic needs with ensuring positive rights, that is, improving the ability of individuals to exercise their rights of freedom in different spheres, including social, political and economic ones. These freedoms constitute reference variables, i.e. spaces within which the various personal positions must be compared. Equality in terms of income may therefore differ from equality determined by referring to one of these freedoms. Sen also pointed out that there are other elements that can be used to measure living standards such as ethics and values that affect capabilities (Sen 1985; 1999). In essence, the assessment of well-being cannot be separated from an evaluation of its "operations". Amartya Sen’s work is crucial to a

better understanding of the new concept of development that has been spreading since the early Nineties, thanks to the publication in May 1990 of the first annual UNDP (*United Nations Development Programme*) report which introduced the theoretical concept of "human development" (Fukuda Parr, 2003; Fukuda Parr - Kumar, 2003). The objective of the UNDP was intended, through the introduction of this new paradigm, to place people at the centre of development. The main objective of human development is to create an enabling environment for people to enjoy long, healthy and creative lives. It is concerned both with building up human capabilities and with using those human capabilities fully (ul Haq, 2003). In this context, income and economic growth are both a means to development and not an end in itself (Costantini and Monni, 2005). The main insight of the UNDP when the first Human Development Report was brought out (UNDP, 1990) was to answer the question of how economic growth transfers or fails to transfer into human development (Costantini and Monni, 2005). The focus on the development process, which adopted a human development perspective, was a shift from economic growth to people and how development enlarges their choices. These choices can be infinite and change over time (ul Haq, 2003).

The basis of this new concept is the belief that the human dimension of development has been neglected in the past due to an excessive emphasis on economic growth and a lack of attention to issues such as knowledge and the right to a long and healthy life. Within this fruitful line of research, in recent years a specific interest in the possibility of extending the concept of human development to sustainability issues has also been developed (Costantini and Monni, 2005, 2008a, 2008b). Millennium Development Goals (MDG), identified on the basis of the Millennium Declaration between 2000 and 2001 are in a certain sense, an attempt to move the new economic paradigm from theory to practice. The MDGs are the outcome of a composite process and embed elements deriving from different theoretic sources, with a synthesis that closely recalls however, in its underlying economic principles, orthodox approaches to economic growth and free trade (Darrow, 2012). They consist in eight objectives, further elaborated into several quantifiable indicators⁵: eradicate extreme poverty, achieve universal primary education, promote gender equality, reduce child mortality, improve maternal health, combat AIDS, ensure environmental sustainability and develop a global partnership for development. An important aspect underlined by the MDG is the sharing of responsibilities

⁵ Many scholars argue that the process through which the objectives were identified suffered important flaws: too technocratic, top-down, and donor driven. Other criticisms point at the insufficient analytic and statistical ground of many of the quantifiable targets. (Darrow, 2012, Waage et al., 2008). A lively debate is currently ongoing in the perspective of 2015, when the MDGs will find their term, and a new globally shared perspective will possibly be adopted.

between rich and poor countries, identifying new regional and global policies to start growth and reduce poverty. Once again, the importance of all dimensions of human development such as nutrition, health and education and protection of the environment is therefore stressed, although issues related to power, rights and equity appear very lightly accounted for, in the framework of the MDGs.

In recent years, especially in Latin America, parallel to the reflection recalled above, other contributions were proposed, exploring the idea that markets could be seen as ‘means rather as masters’ (Khan and Christiansen, 2010) and that it was possible to find a plausible alternative to neoliberalism using a relatively traditional set of conceptual tools. Building on the long structuralist theoretical tradition (Bresser-Perreira, 2011, Jameson, 1986), a ‘neo-developmental’ orientation was developed by different scholars (Bresser-Perreira, 2003, 2004a, 2004b, 2007, 2009, 2011; Sicsú, de Paula, Michel, 2005a, 2005b, 2007), emphasizing the state’s role in overcoming structural bottlenecks and in playing a lead role in promoting economic development (Boschi and Gaitán, 2009).

The different approaches recalled above revolve around the relation between economic growth and development, and more generally speaking, about the centrality of the economic dimension in the reflection about development. As we’ll see next, the need of introducing other concerns and concepts rooted in other disciplines soon arose in the debate, pushing the reflection to a further level of complexity.

3. Beyond development

The Eighties can be seen as a real turning point in the general perception of development: a general feeling of optimism, that was rooted in the reconstruction processes of the post-WWII period and had progressed with the ‘developmental state’ during the decolonisation era, was fading away with the ongoing international financial crisis; in its place, a much darker feeling arose about the possibilities of easily promoting a change in the conditions of the world’s poor masses, a disenchantment that was rooted in multiple factors: the deteriorating macro-economic environment, but also the controversial outcomes of many of the development initiatives undertaken so far (Amin, 2011; de Haan, 2009).

The criticisms that at first had pointed to the ‘development-as-growth’ idea soon developed into a wider reasoning, tackling the shortcomings that arose in the way development was promoted. While some critics pointed at the malfunctioning of development initiatives, trying to identify ways of improving them (Gow and Morss, 1988), other scholars developed a different perspective, based on the idea of trying to ‘reform’ the old development concepts in

order to respond to the contradictions and the shortcomings that had been highlighted (Hettne, 1995). This kind of debate reached a key milestone in 1987 when the Brundtland Report (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987) introduced the concept of 'sustainable development': the idea of a trade-off between economic development and the stock of natural resources, that had been popularised by the Club of Rome (Meadows *et al.*, 1972), then found a relatively optimistic solution: development, it was argued, could be pursued in a 'sustainable' way, that is by keeping on pursuing an objective of economic development according to modalities that would not endanger environmental sustainability. In the same period, concerns arising from the social effects of the structural adjustment programmes, the 'de facto' standard in macroeconomic development policies, prompted reflection about an 'adjustment with a human face' (Cornia *et al.* eds., 1989): social sustainability was there entering into the picture, calling for renewed attention to social and human dimensions (World Bank, 1990; Tommasoli, 2001). The idea of reviving development by 'adjectivising' it ('sustainable', 'human', 'gendered', etc.) became extremely popular as a way of incorporating some of the criticisms that were seriously challenging its authoritativeness within a somewhat abused conceptual framework (Escobar, 1995, Latouche 2005). As Nederven Pietersee (1998) highlights, this may have represented a major flaw of alter-development approaches: while trying to highlight alternative ways of pursuing a set of goals broadly similar to those defined within orthodox thinking, alternative development has become '... less distinct conventional development discourse and practice, since alternatives have been absorbed into mainstream development'

It was therefore increasingly clear that the discomfort with which the term 'development' was used could not be completely overcome with these adjustments. The recognition of 'mal-development' (Amin, 2011) prompted a reflection on the need for a radical reform of the way the very idea of development was understood, as seen in the previous paragraph. As Tommasoli (2001) remarks, a number of theorists had already started exploring alternative ways of understanding the social realities that were behind the development efforts. While further reflection is needed to ascertain the extent to which these attempts contributed to inform new policies, they witnessed the possibility of establishing alternative ways of thinking on matters on which 'orthodox thinking' was apparently leaving very little room for innovation: this is the case with the reflection developed by Manfred Max-Neef (1992), on the debate concerning the needs to be addressed in the transformation of societies. With this distinction between needs and satisfiers, the acknowledgement of different level of needs (individual/group) and the recognition of the interrelation between different needs, Max-Neef

(1992) urged a more ‘systemic’ reflection than the segmented, linear and individual-based approach on which the mainstream consensus was based as well as other positions developed from a more critical stand such as the ‘basic needs’ approach described in the previous paragraph⁶.

Between the Eighties and the Nineties, a number of criticisms (Schuurman, ed., 1993) started to focus on the link between the practical failures of development initiatives and a major impasse in theoretical terms, thus paving the way for even more radical positions. Several issues were highlighted in a very rich and somehow chaotic debate. Some scholars (Escobar, 1995) highlighted the idea of development as having the power to ‘set’ the scene, through a global narrative of how the world is, or rather how the world should be. This power is extended through ‘lower level’ narratives, used to give a somehow agentive representation in each specific situation (Pallottino, 2013a). These narratives are often presented as technical and neutral: in some sense ‘valueless’ (that is not promoting any particular ‘cultural’ value, but simply the well-being of any human being), but promoting an idea of ‘development’ and ‘well-being’ based on a number of pre-conditions.

The promotion of a set of ‘implicit’ and universal values plays an important role, in making global representations acceptable to all. Among these ‘implicit’ values, for example, there is the idea that what matters is primarily the improvement of living conditions of individuals (De Marzo, 2009), a point that radically contradicts an approach where the well-being of individuals has to be related to the context of the community and where the ‘whole’ is much more important than the ‘part’. In this line of thought, also the new focus on individual’s needs and liberties represented as means and goals of development, brought about with the human development approach recalled in the previous paragraph, was seen as precisely the tool for re-establishing the legitimacy of the neo-liberal project. Al Walsh (2010) recalls, “[i]n a world that once valued solidarity, fraternity, reciprocity, and collective community based relations, [...] individual stamina and initiative are quickly becoming the guiding principles and force”. Serge Latouche (1989) describes the process of promoting ‘development’ essentially as a way of ‘westernising’ the world, through the destruction of cultural diversities: ‘development’ postulates the convergence of models towards what is (implicitly or explicitly) considered the ‘right’ one, and assumes that progress towards that model is linear and measurable. This perspective is proposed not so much as the outcome of a process made up of choices and negotiation among social actors, but as the unavoidable outcome of the trends ‘as they are’:

⁶ Not insignificantly, Max-Neef is often quoted among the main forerunners of the buen vivir approach.

the somewhat mechanistic product of what Latouche (1995) calls the ‘*mégamachine infernale*’ or the domination of techno-scientific knowledge. This idea of modernisation, where the domination of economic thinking has a key role in defining the ways the society ‘has to’, or ‘shall’ develop, is based on the dualistic traditional/modern approach where ‘traditional society’ is inexorably doomed to disappear.

Contemporary mainstream development (including the ‘neo-developmental’ expressions briefly mentioned in the previous paragraph) reveals distinctive features about the way the consensus regarding the final objectives of the transformation process is presented. If the final objective of social development is assumed as known and clear, the diagnosis of what is wrong may consist in a technical, rather than a political exercise (Ferguson, 1990). Within such a framework, it is not surprising that disagreement and tensions are considered as limited to a phase where, since the final end is clear and agreed, discussions may only be raised on how and how fast to get there. As a result, through appropriate involvement of all actors concerned, and on the strength of a form of teleological optimism, agreement about the fundamentals should not be lacking (Pallottino, 2007). All sorts of asymmetries, powers, conflicts and disagreement are concealed behind the tranquillising and somewhat narcotic rhetoric of consensus and agreement.

In order to generalise such an approach and make it applicable to all societies, what is needed is a conceptual framework which can be used for all sorts of different situations, with the maximum of indefiniteness in terms of semantic content. Such a framework should be at the same time able to communicate a ‘convincing’ content: something that everyone would find acceptable when used to explain social facts. The idea of development is a way of knowing the world and societies and their transformation by applying a set of concepts and meanings that are able to offer a consistent representation. Most of the concepts used in connection with the idea of development therefore share most of the same qualities: a sort of a-contextual strength that makes them useful for ‘homogenising’ rather different contexts, thus concealing wide underlying differences (Perrot, 2002).

Finally, as we have seen, ‘development’ does not consist of a pure representation, but it exists insofar as it manages resources, powers and people. This mixture of textual/discursive devices and powers can, and has been represented in various ways, highlighting one particular aspect such as its force in establishing the control of knowledge, within an ‘epistemic community’, like the ones described by Holzner and Marx (1979), with all the implications that the control on knowledge organisation has in society or its force in establishing an ‘orthodoxy’ through the enforcement of a ‘truth’ spelled out by some kinds of ‘high clerics’, in a framework very

similar to that of a religious organisation (Rist, 1997). The ‘development set’, has also, more secularly, been described as an industry (de Haan, 2009). Its bureaucracies and practical arrangements, where development theory is put into practice and ‘digested’, can be observed from an ‘institutional ethnographic’ perspective. (Escobar, 2012; Mosse, 2005), whether they are national development agencies, the United Nations, International Financial Institutions or the international ‘civil society’. Whatever the metaphor used to describe what moves around the word ‘development’ in conceptual and practical terms, the endless going to and from its analytic and normative elements remains a key feature, making it increasingly difficult to establish a clear borderline between theory and practice: the representation of ‘problems’ is done in a way that embeds the solution (presented as the only possible solution), thus setting pre-conditions that effectively impact on reality (the use of the resources that are supposed to transform that reality, and the organisational arrangements that are supposed to produce those results).

‘Development’, as a way of representing, defining and promoting a given kind of social change, is contextual and embedded in our modernity. The criticism and the textual deconstruction of development, brought with the idea of building a post-development perspective, is therefore closely linked to a similar critique to modernity itself: an intellectual operation whereby it becomes easier to dissect concepts, representations, devices, than building-up alternatives. As Nederven Pietersee (1998) argue, “[p]ost-development parallels postmodernism both in its acute intuitions, and in being directionless in the end, as a consequence of the refusal to, or lack of interest in translating critique into construction.” More recently, Escobar (2012) examines the critiques raised on post-development views, proposing the idea of ‘transition discourse’ in the wake of highlighting existing experiences and perspectives towards what he calls a “radical cultural and institutional transformation – indeed, *a transition to an altogether different world*”.

The variety of positions that revolve around the idea of development represents the theoretical context to which the idea of *buen vivir* has to relate when moving away from the purely philosophical perspective of the indigenous cosmovisions in which it is rooted. Away from traditional ‘developmentalism’, several elements based on the neo-, alter-, anti-, post-development reflection offer grounds for linking the principles rooted in *buen vivir* to a practice of social transformation.

4. From principles to practice

The scholarly and theoretical debate briefly recalled above represents the context to which the

emergence of *buen vivir* has to be related, including the process that has translated some of its principles into institutional arrangements and has led it to be seen by many as an alternative to the so-called ‘mainstream development’. The *buen vivir*, the Spanish translation of the Quechua *Sumak Kawsay* is, above all, rooted in the cosmovision of the indigenous peoples of Latin America (de la Cadena 2010), that have entered in the political struggle and found a formalised expression in recent years through the introduction of some of its principles to the new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia.

As Albó (2012) recalls, the long process through which indigenous cosmovisions and identities became legitimate elements in the contemporary political debate went through several stages; until a more recent representation whereby the distinctive ethnic identity, coupled with a self-consciousness of the need to preserve its values, as well as to establish a common ground for a dialogue ‘ad extra’, became the basis for revitalisation of the indigenous political initiative. The celebrations for the 500 years of resistance, in 1992, were a milestone in the process that found a further opening with the generalised ‘turn to the left’ that took place in many Latin-American countries at the beginning of the Millennium. This was when the indigenous discourse was able to fully enter the political debate, at different levels. All that implied a translation of the innovative potential of *buen vivir* into the wider debate on social change, ‘development’, its limits, and the need of going beyond its assumptions and implications (Gudynas, 2011). Such a translation, although unavoidable in some sense, bears the risk of representing the first betrayal of the ‘otherness’ in which indigenous cosmovision is rooted.

The ancestral principles of *buen vivir* are peculiar to each indigenous people, defined, as summarised by Albó (2012), through the continuity of its socio-cultural institution since the time preceding colonisation (or the *conquista*), and the collective self-consciousness among those belonging to it. At the same time, *buen vivir* recalls a shared *ethos*, based on the harmonious coexistence of human beings and nature. This is the basic principle from which several consequences derive. Within a perspective that is not ‘anthropocentric’ but rather ‘biocentric’ (De Marzo 2009), any distinction between nature and culture, where human beings are given a sort of primacy among other living beings, is not accepted: the reference to the *Pachamama* (‘Mother Earth’) is the key element of the socio-cultural identity of indigenous peoples. Interestingly, the very idea of ‘development’ is not at all part and parcel of *buen vivir* at this stage: there is no reason to ‘develop’ anywhere, the point is rather to preserve (or regain) that sort of state of harmonious living of all peoples and living beings. As many scholars have recognized (Rist, 1997), ‘development’ is a generic word that describes

the need for a transformation in the human societies, but, as such, with a semantic implication of ‘change’ that is, as we have noted elsewhere, somewhat extraneous to the contexts and meanings on which *buen vivir* is originally based (Deneulin, 2012).

The concern for the economic aspect of associated life (production, consumption, exchange) is all but central to the cosmovisions rooted in *buen vivir*, and the way human needs have to be considered as an objective of associated life is very different from any development paradigm, including those that are considered to have substantially innovated the orthodox mainstream, such as the human development approach (Deneulin, 2012), although some of its wording can be easily referred (someone would probably say improperly and instrumentally) to a generic environmentally and socially sustainable concept of development. As recalled in the previous paragraph, the ‘human development approach’ clearly departed from a form of economic reductionism, enlarging the area of legitimate ‘development’ objectives to issues such as health or education; these, however, remain essentially linked to the measurable well-being to human individuals, where the needs to be addressed are conceived as independent one from the other, and hierarchically organised (De Marzo, 2009). The understanding of the social life that emerges from the *buen vivir*, would recall a very different perspective, where, first of all, no primacy is due to human needs (as compared to those of other living beings and those of *Pachamama* itself, since no distinction is possible between nature and human societies), and where the individual’s needs would be much less important (or rather ‘out of focus’) than the ‘living well’ within the community as a whole, conceived in ‘relational’ rather than individualistic terms (Deneulin, 2012).

Full legitimisation of the indigenous discourse in the national debate does not take place without tensions. Seen from an institutional point of view, it entails a redefinition or at least a readjustment of some basic concepts. In the 25 or 30 years in which the indigenous discourse has gained a standing in the political arena, the affirmation of ethnic identity has been brought forward in terms of the right of being at the same time recognised ‘equal’ as citizens and respected for diversity. This process implied a ‘politicization’ of ethnic and indigenous identities, that, as Yashar (2005) argues, went together with the restructuring of citizenship regimes, challenging even those local enclaves where the state itself had not been able to penetrate; this opened the space for a debate that ended up with the recognition of collective rights of ethnic communities in the new Constitution of Ecuador (República del Ecuador, 2008). It is an interesting evolution of the concept of citizenry that implies conceptualisation of the link between the ancestral principles of indigenous cosmovisions and contemporary debate on the model of the society to be pursued. This is not without contradictions: the

indigenous, firstly aggregated and included in the political interaction as ‘farmers’ found the space to enter in the political arena as ‘indigenous’, thereby asking to be citizens of Ecuador ‘their own way’ (Deneulin, 2012, Yashar, 2005).

Unavoidably, the translation of the principles of *buen vivir* into the political arena (rather than simply in the ‘development debate’) implies a certain degree of ideologisation, that may be needed in order to define a political perspective at the price of introducing a level of rigidity. This point involves, among other things, identifying through which level of conceptual mediation the dialogue with other political cultures, those enrooted in the European as well as in the previous and contemporary Latin American tradition, has to take place. If *buen vivir* can be labelled with a generic ‘leftist’ connotation, it may become more difficult to qualify it in a more accurate way: the ‘non materialistic’ nature of *buen vivir* marks a clear boundary with classical Marxism, including its interpretation of the class struggle that, as Albó (2012) recalls, was also instrumental in undermining the key elements of the indigenous identities (by framing them into ‘class’ patterns). A closer degree of conceptual kinship can be traced in forms of humanistic socialism such as that popularised by the Portuguese theorist Boaventura de Sousa Santos (2010a), who has also been very close to the ‘Global Forum’ movement, which has played a key role in the emergence of *buen vivir* at international level. The element of critique of capitalistic globalisation is a strong element arising from global social movements which matches the same thrust from the radical political movements in Latin America.

The reference to a specific form of Latin American socialism is peculiar to the Ecuadorian experience of *buen vivir*. Ricardo Patiño (2010) identifies the key elements of this 21st century socialism in the foundation of a new participatory citizenry which includes all the social and ethnic minorities without imposing a process of cultural homogenisation. On the contrary, the social and economic model proposed in this line highlights the values expressed by specific indigenous institutions such as the ‘community property’ or the *minga*⁷. The interest of the community above that of the individual is another key element in a framework that is promoted through the primary engagement of the state and where the idea of freedom, considered one of the core values of the socialism, is considered strictly linked to that of participation (in opposition to the idea of freedom promoted by the liberal or neo-liberal thinking).

The political processes that have shaped the contemporary experience in countries such as

⁷ A form of communitarian effort or initiative.

Bolivia and Ecuador can be looked at from the viewpoint of the complexities and the peculiarities giving birth, in each specific case, to a distinct ‘country vision’ (de Sousa Santos, 2010b); or to refer to it in tighter ideological terms. Looking at the roots of this form of socialism from a historical perspective, Borón (2010) finds the need for a more systematic view that explicitly recalls historic materialism, including the definition of the orthodox features for genuine socialist praxis. Although promoting the overcoming of ‘economism’, it still appears to be linked to the systematic pattern typical of 20th century ideologies, re-framed in accordance to the need to establish a clear opposition to global capitalist orthodoxies. Here, the growing role of the state is justified in terms of the need for opposing contra-revolutionary forces.

The risk of a totalitarian state as the possible outcome of the process that brings ideological principles into practice is acknowledged, and the idea of self-organisation of popular forces is proposed as the main form of protection against it. There seems to be more than a nuance between the representation of ‘humanistic socialism’ and that of a more ideological one,. However, they share a belief in the “incontestable ethical superiority of socialism” (Borón, 2010), and a mobilising appeal for the ‘revolution’ that is intended to transform society. In both interpretations, beyond a rather generic recognition of the importance of the differences and the need for debate in the public arena, the issue of ‘dissenting opinion’ is not very clearly tackled, except as an expression of the opposition between revolutionary and contra-revolutionary forces.

However articulated, the political expression of *buen vivir* has to explore the way those principles may become viable solutions to the problems of the contemporary world: solutions that are sometimes difficult to identify and through more ideological (i.e. more systematically structured) approaches can be more easily evoked, although, perhaps, less effective in practice than they appear. Undoubtedly, *buen vivir* appears to many activists to be a powerful support to a renewed struggle on issues such as the common goods, the need for a new relation with nature, the push for a real rebuilding of citizenry (De Marzo, 2011) with a connotation of Utopia, but strongly rooted in territories and in the concrete struggle of those resisting capitalistic globalisation. This is the process theorized by Deneulin (2012), when speaking about ‘*buen vivir* social movements’ as the way of widening up the perspective from that of a purely indigenous movement to that of a social movement “...structured by a specific vision of what is to live well, of what a good society is about, [that seeks] ... to embody that vision in a specific set of practices”. Here, the issue to be looked at, is that of the diversity of the indigenous cosmovisions and the actual possibilities of reducing them to a set of relatively

consistent principles and practices; this implies a sort of ‘de-indigenization’ of the *buen vivir* discourse, insofar it has to transcend the purely local and ethnic dimension in order to embrace a much larger and more diverse cultural, social, political and economic realities.

In order to fully achieve its political dimension, *buen vivir* needs to be represented as a radical departure from existing models: an horizon for a ‘change of era’ rather than for an ‘era of change’ (Escobar, 2011). Ideology offers a framework that appears historically weaker if compared with the freshness of *buen vivir* principles: in this sense, socialist and neo-marxist reflection draws nourishment from *buen vivir* much more than the other way round. And as Gudynas (2011) remarks, the *buen vivir* is, in this sense, not only post-capitalist, but also post-socialist: moving away from Euro-centric political thought, not through a complete rupture but selectively adopting – adapting and transforming – critical positions and perspectives rooted in that political tradition.

Buen vivir entails interesting processual and methodological principles that may help individuals and communities to widen up their political space. In order to establish a global dialogue on key and vital points in a post-paradigmatic and post-development context, this implies for *buen vivir* to be extracted from the ideological framework in which, in some cases, it has been placed; that is, accepting the absence of that ‘global answer’ that more or less consciously we are looking for, in order to counter global neo-liberal domination. It is perhaps through practice that theory has to be assessed, at the same time supporting the possibilities offered by *buen vivir* as an alternative framework, but without losing the capacity to mediate its potentials in and through different contexts, pointing at the questions raised rather than at the answers offered by an all-encompassing explanatory framework.

A further step of the perilous transition from principles to practice is accomplished when *buen vivir* is incorporated into the formal constitution, with an attempt to affirm this ‘otherness’ in concrete and practical terms. In the case of Ecuador, the Constitution of Montecristi (2008) is the outcome of this process, trying to make a synthesis between three elements: the ‘rights of nature’ (or *Pachamama*); the *buen vivir* regime, where the main elements concerning the values to be promoted in the social fabric; and a ‘development regime’, meant to serve as guidelines in the establishment of concrete policies (Acosta, 2010; Walsh, 2010), although with tensions between the most progressive positions with regards to the protection of the environment, the indigenous rights and the sexual rights, and a more conservative position represented by the President Correa (de Sousa Santos, 2010b). The outcome of a process is a complex constitutional architecture, where the incorporation of a certain number of innovative principles and a form of institutionalized cultural diversity are distinctive features.

Taking the complexities of indigenous cosmovisions into a homogeneous institutional arrangement is far from easy. The solution adopted is that of the plurinational state, where the ‘civic nation’ is built from different ‘cultural nations’, where the idea of self-government does not imply any claim for an independent state, but brings in a number of other implications: new institutions, a renewed territorial organisation, a form of juridic pluralism, new public policies, new criteria for citizen participation (de Sousa Santos, 2010b).

As other experiences of plurinational states show⁸, however, each set of locally defined institutional arrangements cannot be abstracted from underlying socio-political values, and easily brought to a level of wider generalisation: if this process takes place, unavoidably the original institutional arrangements need to undergo a certain extent of mediation, that implies transformation. The solution adopted in the Ecuadorian case seems to resolve the issue of diversities, building the idea of a plurinational state on relatively abstract ground. That leaves some questions still unanswered, including that of protection of the minorities, whenever their stand may introduce a trade-off between the process of expressing and defining local priorities and the need for a quick policy decision. How is it possible, or even necessary, that measures for the protection of the minorities must be established within a framework that declares it is based on the diversity of minorities? It has to be noted, however, how the concrete application of the plurinational state principles encounters a problem of unity in the national political process. It may therefore easily, and paradoxically, end up in further pushes towards centralisation, such as in the case of Ecuador, as documented by Martinez Novo (2013), as well as in other cases (Pallottino, 2013a). The issue of internal discontinuities and diversities within *buen vivir* plurinational states still remains, and can hardly be solved by a purely normative prescription even if reflected within constitutional arrangements.

In any case, the ‘constitutionalisation’ of *buen vivir* represents something ‘historical’ in the sense highlighted by several scholars since it effects a socio-political innovation that really transforms our world: an alternative way of conceiving society and its transformation, that may be called, according to Walsh (2008) an ‘epistemic insurgency’. It is also ‘historical’ in the sense of placing this innovation in a specific historical period and set of constraints. The narrative it puts in practice is used at the same time to direct social interaction towards a well-defined model of society and ‘predict’ what will happen with a pattern that ends up recalling the teleological optimism underlying, for example, the idea of ‘governance’. If the Constitution of Montecristi, through the principles of the *buen vivir* inscribed in it, is

⁸ For example, Abbink J. (1997), on Ethiopian case.

acknowledged for being both a mean and an end for structural transformation (Acosta, 2010), the expected and somehow unavoidable hiatus between the ‘planned’ and the ‘implemented’, so clearly apparent in what have been termed ‘neo-developmental’ regimes, becomes somewhat ‘impossible to be conceived’: the concretisation of *buen vivir* ends up being defined as the mere establishment of the institutionalised *buen vivir* as such (Walsh, 2010).

An empirical analysis of the policy reforms promoted under a *buen vivir* perspective shows however that the hiatus is there. In the case of the *National Plan of Buen Vivir* (SENPLADES, 2009) in Ecuador, examined by Deneulin (2012), the translation of the *buen vivir* principles fail in substantially challenging current economic, social and political (neoliberal) structures, ending up in a relatively harmless set of social targets. The *buen vivir*, in spite of the complex set of meanings it introduces, risks here to come to light only as a rhetoric, a political discourse, functionally used to reach the power but devoid of the strength needed to bring about a real transformation in policies as well as in institutional arrangements. The process of de-politicization of the *buen vivir* along neo-developmental lines is carried on by keeping some ‘revolutionary’ wording, but translating it into a mildly reformist practices. It is not easy to identify clearly to what extent the *buen vivir* keeps the potential for more radical transformation, as Acosta (2010) seems to believe, and under which condition could this potential be expressed. The stand of the social actors that supported a renewed approach to policy in the perspective of the *buen vivir*, seem to witness a number of critical elements, and as Martinez Novo (2013) recalls, the experience of contemporary Ecuador speaks of an increasing distance between the indigenous organisations and the government.

These developments have a rather paradoxical implication: while the idea of development is often used (as we have noted in the previous paragraph) in order to propagate a technical and neutral perspective of social change, (Ferguson, 1990) the emergence of *buen vivir* in the public debate is clearly marked by a much different claim, linked to the struggle of indigenous peoples, and is therefore much more ‘political’ in nature. The change sought by introducing the idea of *buen vivir* in the political arena is, from this point of view, clearly inscribed within a perspective of voice and liberation of the indigenous communities rather than mere improvement of the livelihood of the individuals: a mild ‘reformist’ approach does not seem to be consistent this original thrust.

The historicization, that makes *buen vivir* something that can be seen as a ‘real’ alternative to mainstream development both in its concrete forms and in its claim to be a global alternative, can therefore also be seen as a potential source of weakness, in at least three directions; first, it implies identification with formal institutions seen as a direct expression of the values of

buen vivir, blurring the dialectical relationship between state and civil society; second, by directly entering socio-political interaction, it becomes a political position that needs to be defended as such, because of its ability to catalyse the interests and action of different social actors rather than (or in addition to) its ability to give a credible interpretation of society. Third, when the *buen vivir* is said to directly inspire a set of policy initiative, it may end-up in much less than expected revolutionary reforms: the *buen vivir* risks then to become a pure affirmation of rhetoric, and its ‘revolutionary’ potential risks to be diluted into a mild, although commendable, kind of reformism. As Walsh (2010) puts it, “[t]he crucial question is whether *buen vivir* is becoming another discursive tool, and co-opted term, functional to the State and its structures and with little significance for real intercultural, interepistemic, and plurinational transformation”.

5. Concluding remarks

The debate on the way the future will be built for the benefit of all human beings and in full respect of global eco-systems is perceived as an increasingly vital one and the traditional answers offered by different ‘development related’ views have only demonstrated limited effectiveness in providing viable alternatives. *Buen vivir* brings a substantially new approach to this debate and shows important potential for elaboration whereby concrete experiences inscribed into a consistent *ethos* may help to discover, or rediscover, foundations and strategies for the common good.

However, different elements are compounded under the *buen vivir* label: an indigenous cosmovision, a political program of liberation of subordinate sections of the society, a new understanding of citizenry, a concrete institutional form, a possibility of inscribing public policy formation processes within a renewed social agenda. The way *buen vivir* relates with each of these elements risks instrumental exploitation by neo-developmental discourse, by an ideological approach and by a given institutional/constitutional set-up: in each one of these cases the risk for the *buen vivir* is to be selectively understood: that is, taken in a form where only some elements are excerpted and highlighted, to the detriment of a fuller understanding of its implications.

The question to be asked is: in what the *buen vivir* will be able to contribute to the global debate and to a renewed understanding of political, social, economic objectives of the associated life, and to a more ‘just’ world in the sense considered by Deneulin (2012)? What can be seen as a weakness of *buen vivir* (the presence, under the same label, of different elements, that require a difficult mediation if put in relation the one with the other) may also

lead to highlight its specific strengths. Three elements deserve to be pointed out.

Firstly, the *buen vivir* makes us more aware of the dangers of any sort of reductionism. When discussing about the objectives to be set within any policy formulation process, a narrow view of the reality is often represented; this is in some sense unavoidable, however it should be clear in our minds that although relatively narrow objectives are needed for an effective policy design, the inherent complexity of human life requires a much more holistic view point, taking into the pictures its political, economic, social, cultural, religious facets. The trade-off between these aspects is oftentimes overlooked.

The second element is the strength of the *buen vivir* in witnessing the possibility of an alternative look at the world, beyond commonly accepted mainstream, and also beyond much 'alternative' understanding of development and social change. In this, the *buen vivir* truly recalls the idea of 'transitional experience' in the sense highlighted by Escobar (2012). In this wake, the idea of '*buen vivir* social movements' (Deneulin, 2012), anchored in the recognition that 'agency matters' (Nederven Pietersee, 1998) and that people's subjectivity can give a contribution beyond overarching structures and institutions, may represent a visible facet of this alternative. The transition between the indigenous understandings of the *buen vivir* and a somehow 'de-indigenized' *buen vivir* social movement is, however, far from simple, in conceptual and practical terms.

The third element that the *buen vivir* may help us to better grasp, is the persistent danger arising, as the international community is in the process of setting a 'global development perspective'. The setting of common goals represents on one side a strengths for fostering a coordinated thrust at global level; however, the generalization of an understanding of society and social change may not fully take into account the complexities on which priority setting takes place within different societal settings. This is the case of the Millennium Development Goals, and now, of the process leading to a renewed framework for the post-2015 (the time limit set for the MDGs' validity). In spite of the attempts of building the new framework through an open and participatory process, the recognition of diversities within a global framework is still an open challenge (Pallottino, 2013b).

There is no doubt that the *buen vivir* represents something new, and it has a big potential in contributing to a truly renewed approach in the theory as well as in the practice, in policy making as well as in citizen activism, at local/national level as well as at global level. This load of expectations should not however lead scholars, activists, politicians to lock it within a definite and consistent framework such as a theory or an ideology, or even a 'new paradigm'. Indigenous people are the only owners of their different cosmovisions; and they hand over to

a wider audience a stimulus that is deeply rooted in the diversity: to say it with Nederven Pietersee (1998), “how could a single paradigm encompass such a diversity of development paths, needs and circumstances? [...] While a paradigm shift implies a revolution in relation to past work, it means normalisation in relation to future work. ... In view of the diversity and flux of the development field such routinization may precisely *not* what is desirable”.

The *buen vivir* potential seem to lead us towards a post-paradigmatic horizon. We still may adopt the *buen vivir* in terms of a new ‘standard’ for benchmarking public policies (Deneulin, 2012), or as a sort of all-encompassing practice/theory for social movements (De Marzo, 2009). The analysis of the different real life cases will tell us how the unavoidable contradiction arising from the complex interactions between practices, policies, theories, ideologies, will be, if at all, resolved.

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