

A SUMMARY OF THE DIFFERENCES, SIMILARITIES AND POSSIBLE ARTICULATIONS BETWEEN ‘BUEN VIVIR’¹ AND THE ‘GREEN NEW DEAL’

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November 2012. egudynas@ambiental.net*

Brief presentation of ‘Buen Vivir’

Some basic aspects of ‘Buen Vivir’ (BV) will now follow, comparisons and commentaries will be alternated in reference to the ideas contained in the Green New Deal (GND)². Comparisons are schematic and are primarily intended to highlight some examples.

Let’s start by making it clear that BV is a diverse collection of criticisms and alternatives to development. The BV label is currently used in at least three ways:

1) *Generic use.* Used as a label both to criticise contemporary development, and to support endeavours that progressive governments consider innovative. The clearest examples of this are different general criticisms of development plans where, over and above use of this label, the issues are classic. Or rather, the label is used almost as a slogan for endeavours like Bolivia’s housing programmes, the bus stops in Quito or the plastic social welfare card in Venezuela (cédula del Buen Vivir³), all of which are steps that, whilst they might be positive, do not reflect any essential alternative vis-à-vis contemporary development.

2) *Restricted use.* Is found in more specific criticisms of development, focused on contemporary capitalism, but where the alternatives are based on defending other types of development. The clearest example of this is to label as BV, criticisms of capitalism that advocate alternatives inspired by socialist tradition, or its use to describe the actions of current progressive governments, (the clearest case of this is the ‘republican biosocialism’ defended by some in Ecuador).

3) *Substantive use.* The BV is as much a criticism of conventional development as it is a proposal to move beyond this, and one which is made up of several strands, some of which can be qualified as “western” and other, very important ones, which respond to elements which originate from the knowledge of indigenous peoples.

¹BUEN VIVIR: Translates into English as: ‘GOOD LIVING’

² The concepts on ‘Good Living’ are based on ongoing work from the CLAES in South America; for example Gudynas, *Buen Vivir: : today’s tomorrow*, Development 54 (4): 441 – 447, 2011; Buen Vivir - Das gute Leben jenseits von Entwicklung und Wachstum. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Analyzen, pp 5-33, 2012. The concepts on the New Green Deal are based on the information available on the website: <http://greennewdeal.eu>; and on The Green’s Book, Policy papers of the Greens in the European Parliament, Greens/EFA, 2009; P. Schepelmann et al., A Green New Deal for Europe. Towards green modernization in the face of crisis. A report by the Wuppertal Institute for Climate, Environment and Energy. Green/EFA, Brussels, 2009; The New Green Deal in the European Parliament, Greens/EFA, 2012.

³ Cédula del Buen Vivir: Venezuelan Social Welfare card: literally "card for good living"

These alternatives seek to reach beyond development, in any of its diverse forms, making demands and discarding for example beliefs in material progress, and they also go a few steps further towards questioning Modernity. This is a stance that despite perhaps taking on some elements characteristic of modern political movements does not identify with these, (hence, there is no ‘Socialism of ‘Buen Vivir’⁴, as in the previous case).

This is the use that corresponds to the original Buen Vivir debate, and which best reflects its historical background.

This paper emphasizes this third use. In these cases, the BV is a plurality constructed both multiculturally and interculturally, with a basic idea level approach. To put it another way the BV expresses a set of criticisms of development focused on the concepts, institutionalities and practices, common to the different varieties of development. In other words, it is a criticism of what could be described as an ideology or cultural aspect of development. In turn, this task of criticising is accompanied by a series of proposed alternatives that are also expressed in an abstract conceptual field, redefining or repositioning broad categories (such as welfare, rights, justice, etc.)

By contrast, the GND offers much more concrete proposals, similar at times to a national and continental economies’ reform “plan”, there is no clear cultural hybridization, and it is therefore, far closer to experts’ knowledge.

This means that whilst the BV includes a debate and alternatives in the political arena, in the broader sense, the GND has a more instrumental focus, addressing management and administration. Put this way, the BV is expressed more in the field of “*politics*”, while the GND attaches great importance to “*policies*”.

In fact, the BV discusses the basic ideas that underpin contemporary development, including some of its foundational myths such as the need for economic growth or the access to material consumption in order to achieve wellbeing. Therefore, it’s as much a criticism as it is a deconstruction of the very idea of development, of ideas of progress, welfare, justice etc. From a conventional point of view the debate on BV can be positioned in what is traditionally understood by political philosophy.

The BV is an idea under construction and a plural one. This first aspect, (under construction), indicates that it is a reflection currently underway, especially in South America, with a strong heuristic value, but one which is still in its early stages. The second aspect, (plural), recognises that different approaches coincide under the BV label. Indigenous peoples’ notions of goodliving, such as those of the *el sumak kawsay* of the kichwas of Ecuador, or the *suma qamaña* of the aymara of Bolivia are amongst the most well-known of these approaches. In turn, there are other components that make up BV from a western critique point of view.

It could be argued that these conditions, (that of being a concept under construction and that of its plurality), generate too many uncertainties as regards how to define BV. Conversely, the GND would appear to be a much more organised and precise body of proposals. In response, it should be noted that albeit a plural concept, the BV does include a set of shared ideas and sensitivities and definition criterion for the acceptance or exclusion of proposals.

For example, a common element in almost all of its expressions is the defence of another relationship with Nature resulting from a substantial change of ethics. BV recognises the existence of intrinsic values in Nature, and hence acknowledges that it should have exercisable rights. This explains, for example, the acknowledgement of the rights of Nature in the new Constitu-

⁴ No socialism of ‘Good Living’

tion of Ecuador. This ethical change not only implies recognition of this new status given to the natural world, but has far more radical implications, expressing a rupture with classical anthropocentrism, where values were only possible through human mediation.

The consequences of these types of changes are important when set against the back drop of the different political-philosophical movements. Indeed, BV implies a questioning and departure from conservative and liberal political strands (including the neo-conservative and neo-liberal versions of these). This is explained by its rejection of the instrumentalisation of social and environmental relationships, expanded commercialisation, (that leads to the prevalence of economic valuation and hence of a utilitarianism), the insistence on materiality, etc. Consequently, BV is a post-capitalist alternative; under contemporary capitalism it is not possible to attain this status. Nevertheless, the BV is, in turn, post socialist; in so much as it deviates from the key elements of socialist tradition, such as its restriction to an ethic within which only humans can assign value, its adherence to progress, its materialistic stance, etc. For example, ecosocialist stances that proclaim the retracing of the path of Nature's exchange valuation, to return to a value in use, and even those stances that place human work within the natural environment, fall nonetheless, within a biocentric ethic.

BV, intrinsically attaches importance to new sensitivities and spiritualities. In its alternatives dualism dissolves with the natural environment and the elements of the non-human world can be overlaid with expressivity, will, sensitivity, emotions etc. BV should not be understood as a form of religiosity or mystical position, but it does hold that sensitivities and spiritualities determine relationships with humans and the environment. It should be noted that the GND does not approach this dimension.

This said, BV should not be interpreted as an indigenist proposal either, and in particular it should not be understood to be an Andean project, or a call for a return to a pre-colonial past. There are, undoubtedly, relevant insights to be gained from the Andean world views, and especially from recent developments from intellectuals and social leaders from Ecuador and Bolivia. Nevertheless, in various cases these expressions represent new time amalgams, even recent ones, where traditional elements are linked together with other new elements; this is not an act of restoration but rather an act of creation to deal with current and future problems.

In turn, BV also draws upon critical traditions that we could call western, the best examples of which are embodied by some of the environmentalist movements (such as deep ecology) and critical feminism (as discussed below).

Lastly, BV can be interpreted as a shared platform, where ideas and sensitivities from different backgrounds coexist, sharing a criticism of development and key elements regarding the alternatives they put forward. Amongst the most relevant shared components in those alternatives, it is worth mentioning the following: a biocentric ethic in the recognising and assigning of values, a decommercialisation of social relationships and Nature, decolonisation of knowledge, rupture with the rationalities of manipulation and instrumentalisation of people and Nature, dialogue and meeting between sources of knowledge, expanded relationships with Nature, including communities extended to the non-human, etc.

Differences and divergences

These examples show that BV explores alternatives in the shape of other types of relationships between society and its surroundings, advocating substantial changes as regards how people understand themselves, the valuations assigned to the non-human and concepts of welfare. This means that BV is as much a criticism, of, as it is an alternative, to, development.

These types of discussions are not obvious when it comes to the GND. It is clear that the GND advocates criticisms of current conventional development on a number of fronts, and that its proposals include practices that are very different to those currently in existence. What isn't very clear is the conceptual development framework on which the GND is founded and in which way it advocates breaking away from the foundations of the current order, and these have to be inferred from its discussions.

The GND is unfolding, above all in the area of reforms, whether these be possible or necessary and in the instrumental arrangements to drive them forward. This explains, for example, the central role that it, (the GND), gives over to productivity and efficiency and its conception of this as an investment plan. This means that the GND is located at a different level from BV. There are no substantive discussions on ethics or the reformulation of politics, etc. It's possible that some of those reforms presuppose a certain level of rupture with or reform of the capitalist order but that issue is not discussed explicitly, and instead there is a call for scientific-technical efficiency, modernization, management, etc.⁵. El GND is recognised as a new form of "Green modernization".

In various cases, the GND makes references to sustainable development whence it is necessary to discuss what is understood by sustainable development⁶. But what is understood by sustainable development? , why is it "sustainable"?, and why is it "development"? It should be noted that BV, on the other hand, gets rid of the concept of development, shifting it from the central role of social, economic and political organisation.

In the GND there are precise indications about elements of that sustainability, such as efficiency, dematerialisation, reduction of the carbon footprint, etc., but it is unclear whether this arises as a result of a debate on the ideas of development that occupy the main agenda. The protagonistic role is translated into instrumental measures, likening it to a plan, its potential to generate a public debate that attacks the root causes of the current crisis, is thus reduced.

This brief summary allows us to go on to consider both BV and the GND vis-à-vis a substantial distinction: "alternative developments" or "alternatives to development". The "alternative developments" are understood to be instrumental reforms within the ideas of development as progress; on the contrary, the "alternatives to development" are characterised by the search for a substantially different order. Considering the available information, BV is an alternative to development, while the GND would be an alternative development.

Exiting Modernity

Buen Vivir has a clear intent: that of exiting Modernity, (understanding this to be a means of understanding that came out of the renaissance / illuminism, with a strong european content albeit constructed on a global level, that upholds ideas such as progress, the superiority of Cartesian based science and technology, western values, etc.). This explains why contemporary development is a key expression of Modernity. Hence BV suggests that an alternative to contemporary development requires a certain level of rupture with and estrangement from the programme of Modernity.

⁵ For example, the paper from the Wuppertal Institute / Greens / EFA, The basic definition of the GND is focused on "state investment in activities which produce goods and services to measure, prevent, limit, minimise or correct environmental damage ...", and from there substantive importance is given to technologies, risk reduction, impact minimisation impacts, etc., with a "green modernization" of the economy.

⁶ Although in some cases the Strategy on Sustainable Development of European Council de Gothenburg, and reformulated in 2005 is alluded to.

It is important to note that it should not be assumed that development and Modernity are conceived as a European “imposition”, or that BV can be reduced to an anti-eurocentrism. In fact it’s accepted that Modernity is a construction that was initiated simultaneously in Europe and in the colonies, including the Americas in particular, where one or another component was necessary and that they were mutually supportive. Therefore BV should not be understood as an anti-Modernist stance, (or as one which is anti-western, anti-european etc.), but rather as a means to transcend that status. In this way, BV in its plurality can take elements that it considers valuable from that Modernity and can be placed within a new cultural context.

Options to “exit” Modernity come up against huge challenges, given that this type of understanding has become generalized throughout the planet, and is culturally reproduced time and time again. This is an endeavour wherein Latin America has certain advantages thanks to its multiculturalism. Nevertheless this is potentially more difficult in Europe given that it requires initiating a new type of critique of its, (Europe’s), own cultural history. To summarise very briefly, and whilst I run the risk of being very schematic, it is a task wherein European should start to be less modern. BV could bring elements to the European discussion so as to promote a renewed criticism of development.

The multicultural contribution is of enormous value in this endeavour. It is in multiculturalism that the knowledge of indigenous peoples is hybridised, because, given the content and originality of this knowledge it allows us to move beyond the limits of modern thought and sensitivities. Nonetheless, BV also contains western positions that have been critical to that modernity, (as is the case of deep ecology). The fact is that this other knowledge and these other sensitivities, despite being critical to modernity, are not completely modern, or they go beyond this modernity, thus offering essential contributions so as to be able to construct a non-modern alternative to development.

Lastly, that “exit” from Modernity is undertaken from the standpoint of a commitment to justice. In other words, the exit is via the “left”. In fact, BV has a clear mandate with justice in the wider sense, not just social, (from where it links up with modern political traditions inherent to some left-wing democracies), but that goes several steps further, and this justice also becomes environmental and ecological, (respecting Nature’s rights).

Meeting points when it comes to strategy

BV is not essentialist; it doesn’t offer prescriptive methods to look at things nor guides, and its construction is contextualised to each population, with their historical, social and environmental particularities. However, from there, proposals, plans and actions should and must be derived. It is in those derived elements that there are other possible linkages with the GND. At any rate there is a relevant difference, given that those elements of management and planning are located within a framework of ideas of alternatives to development, where the notions of development and progress no longer exist.

It is important to note at this point that the debate on the ‘decrease’, at least in the terms in which S. Latouche formulates it, doesn’t offer an option of this type. On the one hand, his criticism of development, whilst it may be radical, is not systematic; it does not include ethical, multicultural components, etc., such as those which appear in BV. What is more, his alternative proposals based on different types of “R” (recycle, reuse, etc.), are insufficient to deal with the current crisis. From the point of view of BV, growth as an organizing concept of development is displaced and this means that it doesn’t make sense that an alternative is presented, to development itself, in reference to growth or non-growth.

In contrast BV is organised so as to ensure peoples' quality of life and the protection of Nature, (both objectives are on the same hierarchical level). In the pursuit of these goals there may be sectors which grow while others, will, conversely, shrink. It is recognised that these equilibriums differ significantly when comparing the industrialised countries and those in the global south.

The GND offers a basket of concrete measures, many of which can be easily used in the strategies and policies that it is possible to derive and then to implement under Buen Vivir. For example, the current discussions inspired by BV, that seek to reduce the pressure of extraction of natural resources contain elements such as a reduction in the consumption of matter and energy, the reduction of the carbon footprint, a diversion of investments towards green sectors, several of which appear in the GND.

Henceforth, in this case the GND could contribute proposals for action, in many cases very detailed proposals, that could act as an inspiration or as a basis, for the plans and strategies that can be derived from the BV.