

## **Buen vivir as a naturecultural economy: an alternative to ‘development’ in times of civilisational crisis**

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### **Buen vivir como economia naturcultural: uma alternativa ao “desenvolvimento” em tempos de crise civilizatória**

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**Abstract:** This article delves into the historical trajectory of the concept of ‘development’, revealing its persistent role as a hindrance in addressing present socioenvironmental challenges. Despite attempts to introduce ‘development’ alternatives like ‘sustainable development’, the prevailing economic framework continues to perpetuate environmental degradation and hasten ecological collapse. The concept of ‘natureculture’ is employed to redefine the economy both as a cultural discourse and as a subsystem of the Earth system. Buen Vivir in the Andean region is presented as an example of a naturecultural economy, offering a promising alternative for addressing the civilisational crisis through the promotion of cultural heterogeneity and the integration of planetary boundaries.

**Keywords:** civilisational crisis; development; natureculture; buen vivir

**Resumen:** Este artículo profundiza en la trayectoria histórica del concepto de “desarrollo”, revelando su persistente papel como obstáculo para abordar los desafíos socioambientales actuales. A pesar de los intentos de introducir alternativas al “desarrollo” como el “desarrollo sostenible”, el marco económico predominante continúa perpetuando la degradación ambiental y acelerando el colapso ecológico. El concepto de “naturcultura” se utiliza para redefinir la economía tanto como un discurso cultural como un subsistema del sistema terrestre. El Buen Vivir en la región andina se presenta como un ejemplo de una economía naturocultural, ofreciendo una alternativa prometedora para abordar la crisis civilizatoria mediante la promoción de la heterogeneidad cultural y la integración de los límites planetarios.

**Palabras clave:** crisis civilizatoria; desarrollo; naturcultura; buen vivir

**Resumo:** Este artigo aprofunda na trajetória histórica do conceito de “desenvolvimento”, revelando seu papel persistente como obstáculo para lidar com os desafios socioambientais atuais. Apesar das tentativas de introduzir alternativas ao “desenvolvimento”, como o “desenvolvimento sustentável”, o quadro econômico predominante continua a perpetuar a degradação ambiental e a acelerar o colapso ecológico. O conceito de “naturecultura” é empregado para redefinir a economia tanto como um discurso cultural quanto como um subsistema do sistema terrestre. O Buen Vivir na região andina é apresentado como um exemplo de uma economia naturocultural, Acknowledgment: The author acknowledges Alcira Bonilla for her generous reviews and critiques during the elaboration of my work oferecendo uma alternativa promissora para enfrentar a crise civilizacional por meio da promoção da heterogeneidade cultural e da integração dos limites planetários.

**Palavras-chave:** crise civilizatória; desenvolvimento; naturecultura; viver bem

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## INTRODUCTION

Humanity is currently facing a civilisational crisis. This is not merely a crisis of the West but of the multiple civilisations that coexist in today's world, as many have adopted, with variations, hegemonic values of Western societies, such as the notion of 'development'. This crisis can be understood in two key aspects. Firstly, the classic discourse of development, which emerged in the 1940s, promised to address global inequalities by providing assistance to impoverished countries, henceforth known as 'underdeveloped' countries. However, this strategy has not only proven to be unsuccessful, as poverty and misery persist in global peripheries even after more than half a century, but it has also exacerbated economic disparities between the so-called 'First World' and 'Third World'. The escalating global inequalities underscore a crisis, as they cannot continue indefinitely without reaching a breaking point. In essence, the discourse of development risks losing credibility if the promise of improving living standards in the global South is not fulfilled, leading inevitably to a multiplication of social unrest.

Secondly, the discourse on 'sustainable development', originating in the 1980s, promised to address environmental challenges while maintaining economic growth. However, several decades later, ecological issues have not only failed to decrease, but they are actually escalating. Since the emergence of the sustainability discourse, numerous indices have revealed that deforestation, loss of biodiversity and global temperature rise, among other issues, have all increased in recent decades. Undoubtedly, the situation signifies a crisis. The dominance of the sustainable development discourse is leading to a dead end, as it becomes increasingly clear that economic growth and environmental conservation are incompatible.

However, the current crisis is not solely economic, social, political or ecological; it is a crisis of civilisations themselves. The discourse of 'development', operating since the 1940s, has functioned as a rhetoric of cultural homogenisation. The rich cultural diversity of numerous countries in Asia, Africa and Latin America has been interpreted and labelled, since the mid-twentieth century, as 'underdeveloped' and 'poor'. This linguistic transformation has resulted in the devaluation of non-Western cultures, with the imitation of what are now termed 'developed' countries becoming an unquestionable goal. In this context, while peripheral cultures were not necessarily characterised by a worldview centred on an instrumental view of nature, Western civilisation imposed the notion of economic growth through the new institutions that emerged in the 1940s within the framework of the Bretton Woods Agreements. This imposition was based on the perpetual increase of consumption and production, deemed an essential objective for all societies to achieve to be considered 'developed'.

Economic growth cannot be sustained indefinitely on a planet with finite resources and environmental capacities. For example, in the context of the climate crisis, while decarbonising society through a transition from fossil fuels to renewable energies is undoubtedly a crucial step, it alone is not sufficient. To effectively confront the current crisis, it is imperative to counteract the process of cultural homogenisation perpetuated by the discourse of ‘development’ since the 1940s. Moving away from the perception of economic sciences as an isolated and abstract discipline, this article adopts Donna Haraway’s notion of ‘natureculture’ to propose the concept of naturecultural economies. It argues, on the one hand, that economies are cultural discourses, and, on the other, that they function as a subsystem within the planetary system.

Building upon the framework of decolonial theory, this article endeavours to advocate for innovative approaches to address the current civilisational crisis within the context of cultural Westernisation. Buen Vivir, which has emerged in Latin America over the past two decades, presents a potential pathway in this regard. Offering a distinct cultural framework that rejects an instrumental view of nature and promotes Indigenous languages such as Aymara and Quechua, Buen Vivir can be understood not only as a ‘new historical horizon of meaning’<sup>1</sup>, in the words of Anibal Quijano, but also as a naturecultural economy. It has the potential to inspire new approaches worldwide, moving beyond traditional prescriptions based solely on economic growth.

The historical scope of this work is limited to the origins of ‘development’ in the United States, the rise of ‘sustainable development’ in the Brundtland Report, and the emergence of Buen Vivir in Latin America, particularly in relation to the constitutional reforms in Ecuador and Bolivia. It does not examine the dissemination of the concepts of ‘development’ and ‘underdevelopment’ in Latin America following the establishment of the Economic Commission for Latin America (CEPAL) in 1948, nor does it address the global impacts of Buen Vivir. Adopting a genealogical approach, this study uses history to deconstruct the notion of ‘development’, presenting it as a contingency rather than a necessity and creating space to explore alternatives such as Buen Vivir.

## GENEALOGY OF DEVELOPMENT

On 20 January 1949, in his inaugural speech for his second presidential term, Harry S. Truman referred to the most impoverished countries of the planet as ‘underdeveloped

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1 Quijano, A. (2014), *“Bien vivir” : entre el “desarrollo” y la des/colonialidad del poder*, Ed. Clacso, Buenos Aires.

areas<sup>2</sup>. The politician outlined four points that the United States should prioritise. Firstly, he emphasised the importance of strengthening the authority of the United Nations. Secondly, he advocated for continuing the programme of world economic recovery, with a focus on restoring Europe. Thirdly, Truman underscored the United States' commitment to resisting communism based on the containment doctrine. Finally, the fourth point formalised the country's commitment to the 'development' of the periphery:

We must embark on a bold new programme for making the benefits of our scientific advances and industrial progress available for the improvement and growth of underdeveloped areas. More than half the people of the world are living in conditions approaching misery. Their food is inadequate. They are victims of disease. Their economic life is primitive and stagnant. Their poverty is a handicap and a threat both to them and to more prosperous areas. For the first time in history, humanity possesses the knowledge and skill to relieve suffering of these people. The United States is pre-eminent among nations in the development of industrial and scientific techniques. The material resources which we can afford to use for assistance of other peoples are limited. But our imponderable resources in technical knowledge are constantly growing and are inexhaustible. I believe that we should make available to peace-loving peoples the benefits of our store of technical knowledge in order to help them realize their aspirations for a better life. Our aim should be to help the free peoples of the world, through their own efforts, to produce more food, more clothing, more materials for housing, and more mechanical power to lighten their burdens.<sup>3</sup>

In this context, 'development' is closely linked to 'growth', with the two concepts often being used interchangeably, although technically 'development' encompasses more than just 'growth'. Eduardo Devés Valdés highlights this distinction, stating that 'development' is 'self-sustained growth that involves society as a whole during a relatively long period of time'<sup>4</sup>. This definition implies an improvement in the overall living standards of the population, including aspects such as education, health, nutrition and housing. Therefore, within the developmentalist framework, 'growth' is seen as a necessary condition for 'development' because it is believed that increasing production leads to a more equitable distribution of wealth. However, it is possible to have 'growth' without 'development', as an increase in wealth does not automatically

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2 Wolfgang Sachs (ed.), *Diccionario del desarrollo. Una guía del conocimiento como poder*, (Perú, PRATEC, 1996), p. 2.

3 Arturo Escobar, *La invención del Tercer Mundo: construcción y deconstrucción del desarrollo*, (Caracas, El Perro y la Rana, 2007), p. 19.

4 Eduardo Devés Valdés, *El pensamiento latinoamericano del siglo XX. Entre la modernización y la identidad. Tomo II. Desde la CEPAL al neoliberalismo (1950-1990)* (Buenos Aires, Biblos / Centro de Investigaciones Barros Arana, 2003), p. 22.

‘trickle down’ to all segments of society. Instead, it may lead to unequal accumulation of wealth.

While Truman’s inaugural speech was fundamental in popularising the notion of ‘underdeveloped areas,’ the United Nations, established in 1945, also played a crucial role in propagating the new discourse of development. Arturo Escobar quotes a 1951 UN document titled “Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries”, in which the following passage appears in its initial pages: ‘Ancient philosophies have to be scrapped; old social institutions have to disintegrate; bonds of caste, creed and race have to be burst; and large numbers of persons who cannot keep up with progress have to have their expectations of a comfortable life frustrated’<sup>5</sup>. In this quote, one of the essential features of the new discourse becomes evident and will be analysed further: the dualism between the modern and the traditional.

There are both convergencies and divergencies between the concepts of ‘development’ and ‘modernisation’. However, it is not possible to define ‘development’ as a synonym of modernisation without making some distinctions. According to Devés Valdés, ‘the theme of modernisation is coeval with the theme of development’<sup>6</sup>, as ‘development’ can exclusively occur in a modern society, but not in so-called ‘traditional’ societies. However, as previously noted regarding ‘growth’, there is no ‘development’ without modernisation, but there are many ‘underdeveloped’ modern societies. In other words, the notion of modernisation is broader than the notion of ‘development’, as the latter is related to a specific type of modernising experience.

At the end of the Second World War, two crucial institutions for promoting the discourse of ‘development’ were established. As part of the Bretton Woods agreements, in 1944, the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank were created. These institutions assumed responsibility for creating programmes, projects and ‘missions’ aimed at the development of poor countries by sending experts in the field of development economics to the peripheries. According to Escobar, the first mission took place in 1949 in Colombia, and was directed by the World Bank. He states: ‘From July 11 to November 5, 1949, an economic mission organized by the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development visited Colombia with the purpose of creating a general program to develop the country. It was the first mission of this type sent by the Bank to an underdeveloped country’<sup>7</sup>.

It is important to highlight the distinction between the contents of developmentalist doctrines, on one hand, and their political use, whether related to Truman or to the new institutions previously mentioned, on the other hand. In this sense, the emergence

5 United Nations Department of Social and Economic Affairs, *Measures for the Economic Development of Underdeveloped Countries* (Nueva York, United Nations, 1951), p. 15.

6 Devés Valdés, *El pensamiento latinoamericano del siglo XX*, p. 56.

7 A. Escobar, *La invención del Tercer Mundo*, p. 52.

of a new discipline, the economics of development, should be noted. After the 1929 crisis, economic liberalism was seriously threatened, and a consensus regarding the importance of state intervention in the economic sphere was established. In the face of this devastating crisis, the idea of self-regulation of the market became controversial. In this context, there were many events that led to the emergence of development economics.

Firstly, President F. Roosevelt (1933-1945) implemented his popular policy known as the New Deal, aimed at alleviating the negative effects of the Great Depression through planning and state intervention, achieving remarkable success by the 1940s. Secondly, a crucial work was published in 1936: "The General Theory of Employment, Interest and Money" by John M. Keynes. This provided an important theoretical basis for critiquing orthodoxy and for the economic transformation that followed the Great Depression. Finally, with the Bretton Woods Agreements and the establishment of new institutions, a technocratic vision of the economy emerged, challenging the ideas of the free market. This shift was crucial for understanding the emergence of development economics in the 1950s as well as the origin of its focus on 'underdeveloped areas'. Development economists argued that industrialisation was key, although it would not occur spontaneously in 'underdeveloped' countries, but deliberate efforts would be needed.

Arthur Lewis, the Caribbean economist who was awarded the Nobel Prize in Economics in 1979, is renowned for his creation of the concept of 'dual economics', which involves an explicit division between the modern and traditional sectors. In his seminal work "Economic Development with Unlimited Supplies of Labour" published in 1954, Lewis articulated a fundamental perspective within the emerging field of development economics. According to Escobar, Lewis believed that 'development' entailed 'the progressive transition of labour from the traditional sector to the modern one'<sup>8</sup>, enabling the rural unemployed population to become employed in the urban and modern sectors. This concept of dual economics presupposes a cultural dichotomy, as evidenced in the following quote from Lewis' work:

In our observations, we encounter numerous advanced industries such as mining and electric energy production alongside more primitive techniques...This stark dichotomy extends beyond economics realm. There are one or two modern cities boasting splendid architecture, advanced infrastructure, and communications networks that seem to belong to a different world compared to the surrounding towns and villages. This contrast is also evident within the common people itself: between the few individuals who have adopted a Western lifestyle, attire, education from Western universities, fluency in Western languages and appreciation for Western

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8 A. Escobar, *La invención del Tercer Mundo*, p. 139.

cultural icons such as Beethoven, Mills, Marx or Einstein, and the vast majority of rural inhabitants who reside in a markedly distinct world...What becomes apparent is the existence of developed economic centres surrounded by economic darkness<sup>9</sup>.

According to Lewis, the modern sector is associated with qualities like whiteness, purity and hygiene, while the 'primitive' sector is portrayed as obscure, unreadable, and even threatening. The 'traditional' sector represents an 'economic darkness' in contrast to the perceived beauty and advancement of the modern. Moreover, the 'traditional' sector is depicted as an entity so markedly different that it seems to belong to an entirely separate world. Lewis implies that the 'development' of an economy necessitates not only industrial growth but also a population that appreciates Beethoven's music and Western languages.

Lewis is also known for the formulation of the idea of 'industrialisation by invitation'. According to Devés Valdés, Lewis distinguished between two types of economies within Caribbean economies: 'one is technified and related to the international market, and the other is subsistence-based, with lower growth, incomes and capital. Each of these sectors works separately, unless the second one supplies unlimited labour to the first one'<sup>10</sup>. According to Lewis, following Devés Valdés' interpretation, industrialisation cannot be generated spontaneously. In contrast to the 'laissez-faire' ideology promoted by the British colonial authorities, the Caribbean economist believes in the importance of active efforts to encourage 'development'. These efforts, as Devés Valdés suggests, are based on 'inviting foreign capital'<sup>11</sup> to absorb the unlimited workforce of the subsistence sector. The technocratic nature of Lewis's proposal is significant, as his critique of economic liberalism presupposes the support of a vertical notion of 'development'. This verticality excludes the desires and interests of the population, especially those who inhabit the 'subsistence' areas.

Walt W. Rostow is the author of the theory of stages of economic growth. Previously, it has been mentioned that the new discourse of 'development' was framed within the context of the struggle of the capitalist world to prevent the expansion of communism. In this sense, one of the most relevant and popular works of this economist, from 1960, is titled "The Stages of Economic Growth", and its subtitle is "A Non-Communist Manifesto".

According to Rostow, there are five stages through which every society should traverse: while the first stage is the so-called 'traditional' society (defined by Rostow as 'underdeveloped'), the fifth one is the modern and 'developed' society. The author believes that 'development' is directly related to industrialisation, and its realisation

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9 Arthur Lewis, *Economic Development with Unlimited Supply of Labor* (Bombay, Oxford University Press, 1954), p. 408.

10 Devés Valdés, *El pensamiento latinoamericano del siglo XX*, p. 34.

11 Devés Valdés, *El pensamiento latinoamericano del siglo XX*, p. 34.

requires a 'take-off', such as the one produced in England between the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Therefore, 'underdevelopment' is identified as equal to a preindustrial situation, and 'development' can occur when peripheral countries imitate the process of taking off through which England traversed. However, identifying England as 'underdeveloped' before its Industrial Revolution is problematic and controversial. Universal history is read here entirely from the point of view of the Industrial Revolution, as if the whole past had been teleologically directed towards that event. From this perspective, 'underdevelopment' is not understood in contrast to 'development' but as an initial phase of 'development'. As Rostow suggests, 'it is possible to identify all societies, in their economic dimensions, as lying within one of five categories: the traditional society, the preconditions for take-off, the take-off, the drive to maturity and the age of high mass-consumption'<sup>12</sup>.

From Theotonio Dos Santos' perspective, Rostow's classification is deemed a 'historical barbarism'<sup>13</sup>. The Brazilian economist believes that 'Rostow's model has a common beginning, starting from the undistinguished mass of traditional economies and societies in which he transforms the six thousand years of civilisation's history, ending with the undistinguished industrial society'<sup>14</sup>. Dos Santos' critique highlights Rostow's anachronism, as the author analyses the past through the lens of the present. Therefore, the dependentist thinker questions the possibility of 'Third World' countries reproducing the 'take-off' experience of England in the nineteenth century through imitation. However, the experiment did occur in South-East Asia in the second half of the twentieth century, resulting in remarkable economic growth among the so-called 'Asian Tigers'. This example has been used to extol the virtues of 'development' and to critique dependency theory, but it is worth noting that the only cases of successful take-off have been those of the South-East Asian countries and China, and both cases occurred under specific contexts that are not easily extrapolated to the rest of the world.

## SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The emergence of the discourse on 'sustainable development' can be traced back to 1987, when a commission organized by the United Nations released a report known as "Our Common Future". Later, this report became known as Brundtland Report, as Gro Harlem Brundtland, the Norwegian prime minister at that time, chaired the

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12 Walt W. Rostow, *The Stages of Economic Growth, A Non-Communist Manifesto* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960), p. 4.

13 Theotonio Dos Santos, *La teoría de la dependencia: balances y perspectivas* (México, Plaza y Janés, 2002), p. 8.

14 Dos Santos, *La teoría de la dependencia: balances y perspectivas*, p. 9.

commission. The text introduced the term ‘sustainable development’ for the first time, presenting it as a significant alternative for the last decade of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first century. Simultaneously, ‘sustainable development’ aims to eradicate poverty and protect the environment, maintaining the classic goal of ‘development’ (poverty eradication) while adding a new ecological dimension. In the initial pages of the report, a definition of the term can be found: ‘Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’<sup>15</sup>.

The Brundtland Report did not emerge out of the blue. The debate regarding the contradictions between environmental conservation and economic development began several decades earlier. Firstly, it is worth mentioning the publication of “Silent Spring” by Rachel Carson in 1962. According to Alcira Bonilla, this text is considered a pioneer of the ecological movement. Carson produced ‘an early critique of the devastation caused by the use of DDT’<sup>16</sup>, a pesticide notably polluting and hazardous to birds, fish, and even humans. The success of “Silent Spring” was one of the reasons why the use of DDT was banned in 1972, although its use is still promoted today as an effective method against malaria.

Secondly, the publication of the book by the Club of Rome, “The Limits to Growth”<sup>17</sup>, was a clear precursor to the discourse of ‘sustainable development’. In this 1972 book, it is pointed out that the notion of infinite growth in a planet with limited resources (non-renewable energies, limited fertile soil, lack of water, etc.) is an illusion. Finitude is not only related to the existence of limited sources but also to the sinks of the planet, where the waste and pollutants produced by humans are deposited.

In the 1970s, however, the movement of ‘appropriate technologies’ emerged, which modified the perception of ‘growth as inevitably related to the consumption of more and more resources’, leading to an ‘awareness of the availability of new technological options’<sup>18</sup>. This newfound awareness of technological adaptability was crucial for the evolution of the discourse on ‘sustainable development’, as it marked a departure from the ideas of the Club of Rome. Indeed, the limits to growth ‘were no longer seen as a barrier to economic growth’<sup>19</sup>, but rather as an obstacle that could be

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15 Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future* (Nueva York, Oxford University Press, 1987), p.23.

16 Alcira Bonilla, *Apuntes histórico-conceptuales sobre Ecosofía Intercultural* (Buenos Aires, M. Fernández Braga, 2023), p. 4.

17 D. Meadows;D. Meadows; J. Randers, *Los límites del crecimiento* (Buenos Aires, Taurus, 2012).

18 W. Sachs (ed.), *Diccionario del desarrollo*, p. 118.

19 *Ibid.*

overcome through the proper use of technology. From this perspective, growth did not necessarily have to come to an end.

Thirdly, the Stockholm Conference marked a turning point in the environmental debate. Held from June fifth to sixteenth, in 1972, it was originally known as the “United Nations Conference on the Human Environment”, later renamed as the first “Earth Summit”. According to Bonilla, ‘the name change was not only related to the massive presence of representatives from 113 countries, 19 international organisations, and more than 400 NGOs, but also to its political, cultural and scientific importance, considering that the issue of the ecological crisis was discussed in the public international sphere for the first time along with measures to counteract it’<sup>20</sup>. In this context, one of the most common themes of future discourse on ‘sustainable development’ emerged: the idea of global problems requiring cooperation among different nations to address them. From A. Escobar’s perspective, ‘sustainable development’, as presented in the Brundtland Report, can be understood in the following four ways.

Firstly, this discourse was part of the problematisation of global survival that, as has already been pointed out, emerged several years ago, for instance, with the book by the Club of Rome. In other words, this first feature is related to the recent invention of the notion of ‘global problems’, which is based on a view of the world as a global system where all parts are interconnected. This new problematisation was a direct consequence of the destructive nature of the ‘development’ process initiated after the Second World War, which aroused ecological fervour not only in the North but also in the South.

From the 1970s onwards, the United Nations organized multiple meetings (such as the “Rio Conference” in 1992, Johannesburg in 2002, Rio+20 in 2012, Egypt in 2022, etc.) that marked a turning point in the view of ‘development’. According to W. Sachs, these conferences transformed the postwar perception of a global space in which different nations were individually striving to maximise their own economic growth. Since the 1970s, ‘the notion of a global interconnected system operating under multiple common constraints was reinforced’<sup>21</sup>. Indeed, in the opening pages of the Brundtland Report, there is a reflection on the implications of viewing Earth from space: ‘In the middle of the twentieth century, we saw our planet for the first time from space. Historians will discover with the passage of time that this vision had a greater impact on our thinking than the Copernican Revolution in the sixteenth century, which transformed humanity’s perception of itself by revealing that Earth was

20 A. Bonilla, *Apuntes histórico-conceptuales sobre Ecosofía Intercultural*, p. 8.

21 W. Sachs (ed.), *Diccionario del desarrollo*, p. 116.

not at the centre<sup>22</sup>. From the perspective of the report, ‘development’ in its classical sense was no longer sustainable. For instance, the hole in the ozone layer highlighted the importance of common boundaries. From the 1930s, global production of chlorofluorocarbons (CFC) grew rapidly until the emergence of the first reports pointing out their effects on the ozone layer in the 1970s. With the Montreal Protocol in 1987 (the same year the Brundtland Report was released), a significant reduction in global production of CFCs was agreed upon. However, economic growth did not cease, as the chemical pollutant was replaced by hydrochlorofluorocarbons (HCFC), which have lesser negative effects on the ozone layer.

In the latest edition of the book of the Club of Rome, released in 2012, it is pointed out that if the damage to the ozone layer was one of the most significant global problems that humans have faced until now, ‘the next limit that humanity will have to address is the greenhouse effect or global climate change’<sup>23</sup>. In fact, the accumulation of greenhouse gases in the atmosphere (carbon dioxide and methane, among others) cannot be endless, as these gases ‘suddenly saturate the atmospheric sinks more rapidly than the planet’s capacity to evacuate them’<sup>24</sup>. The problem of damage to the ozone layer has been addressed without the need to halt economic growth. However, it is not possible to guarantee with certainty that climate change could be addressed in the same way, through new technologies capable of producing sustainable energy without impeding the logic of endless economic growth.

The discourse on ‘sustainable development’ indeed reveals a peculiarity: it is intertwined with the new discourse on globalisation, which gained notable prominence in the 1990s after the fall of the Berlin Wall. According to Escobar, the discourse adopts two debatable premises: on one hand, ‘sustainability of local cultures is not discussed but sustainability of the global ecosystem is’, which leads us to believe that the ‘global’ represents us all equally; on the other hand, it is supposed that ‘we all share the same responsibility for environmental damage’<sup>25</sup>, which is further from the truth. In the name of ‘global problems’, the paradigmatic Eurocentric action is committed: what is local now becomes representative of the whole of humanity. For Escobar, the vertical nature of the discourse is clear: ‘Western scientists keep speaking in the name of Earth. God does not allow a Peruvian farmer, an African nomad or an Amazon worker to have a say on this matter’<sup>26</sup>. Later, it will be perceived that the Andean proposal of Buen Vivir reveals a compelling answer to this issue.

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22 Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, p. 16.

23 Meadows, Meadows, Randers, *Los límites del crecimiento*, p. 179.

24 *Ibid.*

25 A. Escobar, *La invención del Tercer Mundo*, p. 327.

26 *Ibid.*

Secondly, the discourse on 'sustainable development' promotes a peculiar economy of visibility. While the critique of the Club of Rome was directed towards endless economic growth, and therefore towards the waste and excessive abundance of the wealthy, the discourse of 'sustainable development', instead, makes the poor responsible for ecological issues.

Indeed, before the publication of the Brundtland Report, it was necessary to dispel the prejudice that the preservation of the environment and the eradication of poverty are contradictory goals. Robert McNamara, president of the World Bank between 1968 and 1981, stated in his 1973 speech in Nairobi that the priority of 'development' policies was still poverty eradication. However, with the dangerous increase in deforestation and desertification around the world, 'the poor were rapidly identified as destructive agents and became objects of advertising to promote environmental awareness'<sup>27</sup> during the 1970s. This turning point was fundamental to reconciling growth and the environment, as 'development' (apparently) eradicates poverty, and therefore protects the environment as well. In the Brundtland Report, in fact, it is possible to read: 'Environmental stress has often been seen as the result of the growing demand on scarce resources and the pollution generated by the rising living standards of the relatively affluent. But poverty itself pollutes the environment, creating environmental stress in a different way'<sup>28</sup>. Later, the report presents the same idea again: 'Poverty reduces people's capacity to use resources in a sustainable manner; it intensifies pressure on the environment'<sup>29</sup>. Poverty eradication and environmental protection are perceived, from this perspective, as entirely compatible.

However, the fact that the discourse on 'sustainable development' absolves the responsibility of the wealthy for environmental damage is controversial. According to Escobar, 'the poor are criticised as irrationals and lacking environmental awareness'<sup>30</sup>. For instance, slash-and-burn agriculture is a traditional technique of various indigenous communities that has been accused of being unsustainable, creating a peculiar economy of visibility that hides the responsibility of major industrial polluters without addressing the wasteful lifestyle promoted by 'development'. In other words, the classic dualism of the 'development' discourse is reintroduced: while traditional techniques are blamed for environmental damage, modern techniques are believed to allow for 'sustainable development'. The definition of 'sustainable development', in fact, emphasises that satisfying present needs should not compromise the satisfaction of future needs. However, there is no discussion about what constitutes a need. For example, the report does not mention the phenomenon of planned obsolescence

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27 W. Sachs (ed.), *Diccionario del desarrollo*, p. 118.

28 Brundtland Commission, *Our Common Future*, p. 41.

29 *Ibid.*, p. 67.

30 A. Escobar, *La invención del Tercer Mundo*, p. 328.

existing in contemporary societies, or the wasteful consumption promoted by consumer society. In other words, the discourse on 'sustainable development' does not critique the lack of compatibility between sustainability and capitalism. The elimination of planned obsolescence and a reduction in consumption, however, could significantly decrease waste production and pollution, as well as reduce the endless extraction of raw materials.

Thirdly, the new discourse maintains the main features of economic reductionism and developmentalism. In the Brundtland Report, many terms of classical 'development' are emphasised: basic needs, population, resources, technology, institutional cooperation, industrialism, etc. While the book by the Club of Rome presented economic growth and environmental protection as incompatible, the Brundtland Report reconciles them. According to Escobar, 'the report is less concerned about the negative consequences of economic growth on the environment than about the effects of environmental damage on economic growth. It is growth (the expansion of the capitalist market) and not the environment that needs to be protected'<sup>31</sup>. In fact, considering that poverty is perceived as the root cause of environmental degradation, growth could eradicate poverty and, therefore, improve the environmental situation, as had been formulated since the 1970s.

Fourth and lastly, the Brundtland Report does not speak about nature but about the 'environment'. In fact, the discourse promotes the death of nature and the birth of the environment<sup>32</sup>. The notion of environment, in contrast to nature, is related to the view of the world as a collection of 'resources': while nature is an autonomous entity (from which humans are a part), the notion of environment places the human being at the centre. According to Escobar, 'the active principle of this conceptualisation is the human agent and its creations, while nature is relegated to an even more passive role'<sup>33</sup>. Furthermore, the notion of environment leads to the normalisation of expressions such as 'natural resources', creating a peculiar horizon of meaning beyond which acting and thinking become impossible. In fact, the notion of environment is more compatible with the emphasis on management and faith in planning. While nature often emerges as an uncontrollable and dangerous force, the environment seems to be entirely controllable.

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31 *Ibid.*, p. 328.

32 Later, when considering Buen Vivir, it becomes evident the anthropocentric nature of the notion of environment, contrasting with the Andean concept of Pachamama. While the environment is defined as the set of physical, chemical and biological conditions that surround human beings, Pachamama is associated with a perception of nature that transcends any human-centeredness.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 329.

In summary, the Brundtland Report revitalizes the old paradigm of 'development'. Far from criticising the imposition of a monocultural lifestyle or discussing productivism and consumerism, what could be understood as a civilisational crisis is now reduced to a mere technical problem. Once again, the discourse of 'development', now labelled as 'sustainable', fosters cultural homogenisation. According to Sachs, 'Western aspirations become implicitly accepted, not only in the West but worldwide, and societies choosing to move beyond productivism become inconceivable'<sup>34</sup>. Consequently, ecology remains confined within the framework that the 'development' paradigm offers, obligated to speak the language of productivity, growth and efficiency. It is conceivable only to elaborate alternative forms of 'development', making it seemingly impossible to imagine alternatives beyond 'development'. 'Development' is imposed as the sole viable option, and 'the epistemological and political reconciliation of economy and ecology proposed by the discourse of sustainable development creates the appearance that we only need small adjustments to the market system to begin a new era of environmentally benign development'<sup>35</sup>. This underscores the significance of proposals such as Andean Buen Vivir, which prioritise local culture over uniform globalisation, and strive to break free from the relentless pursuit of 'development', as will be explored further in this work.

## NATURECULTURAL ECONOMIES

The notion of 'natureculture'<sup>36</sup>, proposed by Donna Haraway, emphasizes the inseparability of nature and culture, illustrated through the longstanding relationship between humans and dogs. Haraway argues that the co-evolution of this bond cannot be understood from an essentialist perspective, either as purely biological or strictly cultural, but rather as an interwoven combination of both. Although Haraway's proposal may have been groundbreaking for readers in the United States, it is worth noting that the concept of relationships between humans and non-humans, such as mountains (referred to as 'apu' in Quechua), is widely recognized in the Andean region. Nevertheless, the concept of natureculture could prove valuable for rethinking economic sciences as a co-construction between human and non-human realms.

The emergent narrative of Buen Vivir enables a critique of the perception of the economy as an isolated and abstract discipline. It challenges the current 'coloniality

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34 W. Sachs (ed.), *Diccionario del desarrollo*, p. 128.

35 A. Escobar, *La invención del Tercer Mundo*, p. 330.

36 Haraway, D. (2003). *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People and Significant Otherness*. Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press.

of power<sup>37</sup>, where coloniality is understood as a form of domination linked to the invention of the notion of ‘race’ during the conquest of what is now known as the Americas, and power is seen as a network of relations encompassing five spheres of social existence: work, collective authority, intersubjectivity, sex, and nature. In contrast to ‘disciplinary and mechanistic visions that compartmentalize economy, politics and culture’<sup>38</sup>, the de/coloniality of power enables an understanding of the economy (the sphere Quijano identifies as ‘work’) as inseparable from the other four spheres of social existence.

Naturecultural economies should be analysed in two distinct senses. On one hand, this involves critiquing the notion of the economy as a universal science, understanding economies (in the plural) as culturally embedded discourses. On the other hand, economies cannot be considered independently of ecological boundaries and biophysical structures; rather, they must be understood as subsystems within the planetary system.

Economy and culture are interwoven entities. This is why, even in times of homogenising globalisation and neoliberal hegemony, there remains significant diversity and variety in economic practices worldwide. Viewing the economy as a cultural discourse is exemplified by the Andean approach to the notion of ‘production’. According to Josef Estermann, in this region, human ‘are not owners or producers, but caretakers (‘arariwa’ in Quechua), cultivators, and facilitators. The only strictly productive force is Mother Earth, Pachamama, along with its various aspects, such as water, minerals, hydrocarbons, and energy in general’<sup>39</sup>. For example, humans do not produce fossil fuels; rather, they extract these natural resources, which have been created by Earth’s systems over millennia. The cultural characteristics of the economy become evident when considering the contrast between the ‘homo faber’ of Western modernity and the ‘homo cultivator’ of Andean traditions<sup>40</sup>.

Another relevant example of the relationship between economies and culture is Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness (GNH). This concept was introduced by the

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37 Quijano, A. (2014), *“Bien vivir” : entre el “desarrollo” y la des/colonialidad del poder*, Ed. Clacso, Buenos Aires.

38 Marañón, Boris y López, Dania (2020), *Des/colonialidad, crisis del “progreso”-“desarrollo” y emergencia de los buenos vivires como nuevo horizonte de sentido*, Bajo el Volcán, No. 2, pp. 77-112.

39 Estermann, Josef (2012), *Crisis civilizatoria y Vivir Bien. Una crítica filosófica del modelo capitalista desde el allin kawsay/suma qamaña andino*, Polis Revista Latinoamericana, 11 (33): 149-174.

40 It is important to note that Andean and Western civilisations are not monolithic entities existing in a state of purity. For example, socio-environmental conflicts such as the dispute over the construction of the road in Bolivia’s TIPNIS or the struggle to keep fossil fuels underground in Ecuador’s Yasuní demonstrate that the Western notion of ‘development’ remains compelling for segments of the Andean population. Similarly, the degrowth movement, which originated in Europe, exemplifies a critique of productivism and consumerism within Western societies.

country's fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, during the 1970s and 1980s and became a central tool for public policy. Furthermore, GNH was incorporated into Bhutan's Constitution in 2008 and endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in 2011, serving as 'not only a critique but also an alternative to the Western model of development'<sup>41</sup>. Rooted in the traditions of the Southeast Asian region and deeply influenced by Buddhism, this index contrasts with the materialist perception of well-being, which has spread globally from the West through the Gross Domestic Product (GDP), a tool that promotes productivism and consumerism. In other words, 'both Buen Vivir and GNH are emergent concepts grounded in cultural traditions distinct from the West and from the worldview imposed on much of the world through globalisation'<sup>42</sup>.

On the other hand, economies function as a subsystem within the planetary system. Since the 1970s, as highlighted by the influential work of the Club of Rome, economic growth encounters natural limits due to Earth's finite resources and waste absorption capacities<sup>43</sup>. In other words, endless growth on a finite planet is unattainable. More recently, in 2009, the Stockholm Resilience Centre released research on the concept of 'planetary boundaries'<sup>44</sup>, identifying nine limits that, if crossed, could trigger tipping points and self-reinforcing feedback loops. For example, the goal of limiting global temperature increase to 1.5°C above pre-industrial levels, as set by the 2015 Paris Agreement, directly challenges the current economic model based on fossil fuel extraction and combustion.

In Ecuador, the Yasuní-ITT initiative can be seen as an example of a naturecultural state economic policy. This project involved (and still involves) leaving the oil beneath the ground in a specific area of Yasuní National Park—one of the most biodiverse regions in the world and home to uncontacted Indigenous communities—with the aim of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and protecting the park's ecosystem. In exchange, the Ecuadorian government sought contributions from the international community amounting to half of the potential revenue that oil extraction would have generated. In this sense, unlike the hegemonic logic of 'sustainable development', which often integrates environmental considerations merely to sustain economic 'development', this policy subordinated economic interests to the 'rights of nature', as recognized in Ecuador's 2008 Constitution.

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41 Delgado Gian Carlo (Ed.) (2014), *Buena Vida, Buen Vivir: imaginarios alternativos para el bien común de la humanidad*, CEIICH (UNAM), México, p. 316.

42 *Ibid*, p. 318.

43 Meadows D.; Meadows D.; Randers J. (2012). *Los límites del crecimiento*. Buenos Aires: Taurus.

44 Rockström, J., Steffen, W., Noone, K. et al. (2009), *A safe operating space for humanity*. Nature 461, 472–475.

Strictly speaking, all economies are naturecultural, as they depend on the co-existence between humans and the non-human sphere. In this sense, it is possible to distinguish naturecultural economies both as a ‘factum’<sup>45</sup> and as a ‘desideratum’<sup>46</sup>. Undoubtedly, economies are simultaneously natural and cultural, which supports the understanding of naturecultural economies as a ‘factum’. However, there is also a way to view this concept not only as a fact but as an aspiration to build culturally plural economies, or ‘a world where many worlds fit’ in the words of the Zapatista movement. This vision aligns with planetary boundaries and with what Ecuadorians call the ‘rights of nature’. Buen Vivir, in this vein, may be understood as an example of a naturecultural economy as a ‘desideratum’, an aspiration for a cultural horizon that transcends the notion of (un)/‘sustainable development’.

## BUEN VIVIR AS AN ALTERNATIVE TO DEVELOPMENT

La partícula cósmica que navega en mi sangre  
Es un mundo infinito de fuerzas siderales  
Vino a mí tras un largo camino de milenios  
Cuando, tal vez, fui arena para los pies del aire.

Luego fui la madera, raíz desesperada  
Hundida en el silencio de un desierto sin agua  
Después fui caracol quién sabe dónde  
Y los mares me dieron su primera palabra.

Después la forma humana desplegó sobre el mundo  
La universal bandera del músculo y la lágrima  
Y creció la blasfemia sobre la vieja tierra  
Y el azafrán y el tilo, la copla y la plegaria.

Entonces vine a América para nacer en hombre  
Y en mi junté la pampa, la selva y la montaña  
Si un abuelo llanero galopó hasta mi cuna  
Otro me dijo historias en su flauta de caña.

45 Bonilla A. (2017), *La filosofía intercultural como diálogo crítico necesario en el cambio de época*, CUADERNOS DEL CEL, Vol. II, N° 3. P. 8-23.

46 Bonilla uses the distinction between factum and desideratum to describe intercultural philosophy. She argues that, on one hand, philosophy has always been intercultural. On the other hand, however, intercultural philosophy can also be understood as an aspiration to counteract the philosophical monologue of the West.

Yo no estudio las cosas ni pretendo entenderlas  
Las reconozco, es cierto, pues antes viví en ellas  
Converso con las hojas en medio de los montes  
Y me dan sus mensajes las raíces secretas.

Y así voy por el mundo, sin edad ni destino  
Al amparo de un cosmos que camina conmigo  
Amo la luz, el río, el silencio y la estrella  
Y florezco en guitarras porque fui la madera.  
*Tiempo del hombre*, Atahualpa Yupanqui

In this poem by Atahualpa Yupanqui, human being is portrayed as intertwined with nature without asserting sovereignty over the environment. 'Natural resources' such as wood, jungle, rivers and seas are not viewed from an instrumental and utilitarian perspective, but rather as elements of harmonious coexistence between humans and non-humans. The poem is deeply rooted and situated, as the narrator's experiences and the worldview presented emerge from the Latin American context.

Buen Vivir represents a manifestation of a millennial horizon of meaning originating from Andean culture. However, despite its deep roots in indigenous values and principles, the term itself is relatively new, having been coined at the beginning of the twenty-first century. According to Jaime Villanueva Barreto, Buen Vivir is 'a reinterpretation of the main values and principles that form the basis of indigenous worldviews'<sup>47</sup>. Its origin as a concept, however, did not originate directly from native cultures and cannot be exclusively attributed to them.

Furthermore, the poem by Yupanqui that was presented earlier undoubtedly resonates with the principles of Buen Vivir, even if the popular artist did not perceive the Andean sensibility in those terms. Indeed, the term Buen Vivir might not be widely recognised in some indigenous communities. While Buen Vivir emerged amidst the resistance of indigenous social movements, it evolved into a political discourse following constitutional reforms in Bolivia and Ecuador in the latter part of the first decade of the twenty-first century.

This tension between Buen Vivir as a demand for authentic cultural transformation and Buen Vivir as a state rhetoric has been persistent in recent decades, revealing the struggle for the interpretation of the term. This is exemplified by the concept of the 'Socialism of Buen Vivir' associated with the governments of Rafael Correa (Ecuador) and Evo Morales (Bolivia). In both cases, Buen Vivir was utilized to justify extractivist

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47 Jaime Villanueva Barreto, *Fenomenología e Interculturalidad. Pluralidad de mundos: el sumak kawsay y la crítica al desarrollo* (Bogotá, Aula de Humanidades, 2020), p. 246.

measures, leading to a significant distortion of its original meaning. For instance, the abandonment of the Yasuní-ITT initiative<sup>48</sup> by the Ecuadorian government in 2013 illustrates the contradictions between Buen Vivir as a set of moral values and as a narrative instrumentalised by political parties. It is important to acknowledge these tensions as they highlight the challenges that this new form of resistance (or reexistence) faces, recognising that every emancipatory proposal is systematically subjected to struggle and interpretation.

‘Buen Vivir’ is the Spanish translation of ‘Sumak Kawsay’ in Ecuadorean Quechua, while ‘Suma Qamaña’, also translated as Buen Vivir, comes from Bolivian Aymara. Although both concepts share the same meaning, Villanueva Barreto highlights an interesting difference between them: ‘Sumak Kawsay’ emphasises the idea of a good living (a life that accepts the existence of material boundaries) in contrast to a better living (a living that strives for endless material accumulation), while ‘Suma Qamaña’ introduces a communitarian element against individualistic logic. Buen Vivir differs from the classical Greek concept of Good Life or ‘eudaimonia’, as it is not only manifested in an environment shared solely with humans, the ‘polis’, but also with non-humans, plants, mountains, rivers, as pointed out in Yupanqui’s poem.

It is worth highlighting that Quechua and Aymara are ‘two of the pre-Hispanic languages most commonly used in the Andean regions and are still spoken by millions of people today’<sup>49</sup>. Buen Vivir, as a cultural horizon expressed in these languages, has not only been under attack by classical colonialism but has also lost strength under the influence of the colonality of power. The way of speaking and the language used are not mere mirrors of a seemingly objective reality, but rather unique ways of interpreting the world. Therefore, the preservation of these languages is crucial, as they offer a possibility to counteract the homogenising effect of the developmentalist horizon.

Buen Vivir should not be understood as an alternative ‘development’, but rather as an alternative to ‘development’. The need for new adjectives and qualifications in the last seven decades such as ‘social development’, ‘human development’, ‘ethno-

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48 The Yasuní-ITT Initiative, proposed in 2007 by the government of the ‘Revolución Ciudadana’, became one of the symbols of ‘Sumak Kawsay’ in the political-institutional realm. The initiative aimed to leave the oil reserves in the Ishpingo-Tambococha-Tiputini (ITT) block, located in Yasuní National Park, untouched. This park was designated a Biosphere Reserve by UNESCO in 1989 due to its remarkable biodiversity of flora and fauna. The plan sought international compensation from industrialised countries, which bear greater historical responsibility for the climate crisis, in exchange for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions and contributing to the care of the biosphere. The proposal represented one of the most significant and ambitious initiatives in the global fight against climate change, making Ecuador the first country to formalise a mitigation policy aimed at leaving oil in the ground to reduce GHG emissions.

49 *Ibid.*, p. 243.

development', 'sustainable development', etc., reveals the failure of 'development' policies. According to Villanueva Barreto, 'the alternative concept of Sumak Kawsay is not a mere transformation of the concept of development, as this term and its meaning do not exist in the Andean worldview: not being a new developmentalism, it is constituted as an alternative to development and even beyond development'<sup>50</sup>.

Furthermore, 'the philosophy that sustains this Buen Vivir constitutes an invitation to go beyond the notions of sustainable development and green capitalism that do not challenge capitalism'<sup>51</sup>. Villanueva Barreto, like other authors analysed, believes that these concepts are deceiving, as they attempt to satisfy two incompatible demands: economic growth and environmental care. As Villanueva Barreto puts it: 'it has been attempted to satisfy both demands by introducing the idea of sustainable development, which is an euphemism for saying that we continue to exploit nature but in a slower way that prolongs its agony'<sup>52</sup>.

Buen Vivir, as a philosophical proposal, introduces a relational ontology as an alternative to Western metaphysical dualism. According to Villanueva Barreto, in a relational ontology 'everything is intertwined: past and future, animals with plants and humans, nature and artificiality, life and death, etc.'<sup>53</sup>. This helps explain why the notion of 'ayllu' is so important in the Aymara language. Although it is literally translated as community, its members are not exclusively humans: the 'ayllu' is instead a community of living beings, encompassing humans and non-humans, plants, mountains, rivers and forests. The interconnectedness of living beings, present in the notion of 'ayllu', can be perceived in Yupanqui's poem, where not only humans and nature are related, but also the future and the past, as well as life and death. Indeed, the present moment can only be appreciated after a long journey of millennia ("largo camino de milenios"), and even our human life could originate from other non-human lives and continue in them, as one traverses the world without age or destination ("sin edad ni destino"). Moreover, the subject-object relationship of modern philosophy, based on a substantial ontology, is challenged when the poet says that he does not study things or attempt to understand them, but recognises them, as he has lived in them before ("yo no estudio las cosas ni pretendo entenderlas. Las reconozco, es cierto, pues antes viví en ellas").

Secondly, Buen Vivir introduces a cosmic holism that regards nature as a mother echoing the notion of 'Pachamama'. The relational ontology of Buen Vivir challenges Western metaphysical dualism precisely because interconnectedness occurs within the framework of nature as a totality. According to Villanueva Barreto, 'Pachamama

50 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

52 *Ibid.*, p. 284.

53 *Ibid.*, p. 253.

has a political dimension, not only because of the formal acknowledgment of its rights in the new Constitutions, but also due to the symbolic force that the concept represents: it implies a new way of relating to the world and to ourselves. It represents a displacement of the entire symbolic and political order of the West<sup>54</sup>. The perception of nature as a mother challenges our conventional understanding, rendering 'development' as an exotic and undesirable endeavour of endless resource extraction. From this perspective, there is no economic profit that justifies the socioenvironmental damage caused by 'development'.

It is important to highlight the juridico-political relevance of Buen Vivir, as 'part of the political and philosophical expression of Buen Vivir is the acknowledgment at the Constitutional level of nature's rights'<sup>55</sup>. 'Sumak Kawsay' and 'Suma Qamaña' have found their way into two political Constitutions: the Ecuadorean (2008) and the Bolivian (2009). Despite their similarities, it is worth noting the differences between them. According to Villanueva Barreto, in Bolivia's case, 'Suma Qamaña and other associated concepts are ethical and moral principles and do not appear as rights'<sup>56</sup>. Therefore, the Bolivian Constitution leads to an understanding of Buen Vivir as a cultural framework within the plurinationality of the state. Villanueva Barreto's affirmation can be elaborated by reading the eighth article of the Bolivian Constitution, in the section about the fundamental basis of the state: 'The state assumes and promotes as ethical and moral principles of a plural society: ama qhilla, ama llulla, ama suwa (do not be lazy, do not be a liar, do not be a thief), suma qamaña (Buen Vivir), ñandereko (harmonious life), teko kavi, ivi maraei (soil without evil) y qhapaj ñan (path or noble life)<sup>57</sup>.

'Suma Qamaña' is explicitly presented as an ethical and moral principle in the Bolivian Constitution. In chapter II, under the section named 'fundamental rights', Buen Vivir is not mentioned, leading to uncertainty regarding the relationship between Buen Vivir and rights. On the other hand, in the Ecuadorean case 'Sumak Kawsay' is presented at two levels: as a framework for a set of rights and as an expression of the organisation and execution of these rights, not only within the state but throughout society<sup>58</sup>. Therefore, the Ecuadorean Constitution has an advantage regarding the explicit relationship between Buen Vivir and rights. Indeed, in chapter II ('rights of Buen Vivir') of section II ('healthy environment') of title II ('rights') of the Ecuadorean Constitution, it is possible to read in article 14: 'The right of the population to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that guarantees

54 *Ibid.*, p. 290.

55 *Ibid.*, p. 263.

56 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

57 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

58 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

sustainability and Buen Vivir (Sumak Kawsay) is acknowledged. It is in the public interest to preserve the environment, conserve ecosystems and biodiversity, maintain the integrity of the country's genetic heritage, prevent environmental damage, and restore damaged natural spaces<sup>59</sup>.

Not only is Buen Vivir presented as a right, but the environmental dimension is also more highlighted in the Ecuadorean Constitution, as the rights of nature are explicitly acknowledged between articles 71 and 74, in title II ('rights') and chapter VII ('rights of nature'). However, the advantage of the Bolivian Constitution lies in its stronger emphasis on plurinationality and the acknowledgment of the cultural diversity of the country. This can be perceived in the previously analysed article 8, where Suma Qamaña is just one of the possible 'Buenos Vivires', expressed in languages other than Aymara, that are now recognised by the Bolivian state.

Although the Ecuadorean Constitution focuses more on the environmental dimension recognising nature's rights, while the Bolivian Constitution highlights the plurinational dimension by emphasising the great cultural and linguistic diversity existing within its territory, both are convergent and constitute a quiet revolution against the seemingly unstoppable force of 'development'. On one hand, recognising nature's rights imposes limits on development, inviting us to understand Pachamama beyond an instrumental approach and to rethink our economies based on the increase of GDP. The Ecuadorean Constitution, adopted in 2008, is the first Constitution in human history where nature is acknowledged as a subject of rights, leading to a transition from current anthropocentrism to biocentrism.

According to A. Acosta and E. Martínez, while human rights initially emerged as a challenge to monarchical powers and later gained prominence following the atrocities of the Holocaust, the rights of nature have arisen as 'part of a process to stop the monstrosities committed against nature'<sup>60</sup>. These rights acknowledge the intrinsic value of the non-human universe, extending beyond both exchange value and use value. Unlike environmental rights, which are fundamentally human rights, the rights of nature transcend anthropocentric frameworks. As a result, with the recognition of the rights of nature, 'the constitutional version of the right to a healthy environment, present for some time in Latin American constitutionalism, is surpassed'<sup>61</sup>.

Furthermore, the Western idea of human rights can be challenged. Although the importance of human rights is undeniable, this notion is imbued with an anthropocentric nature that fails to consider the relevance of the environment in which humans live. As Villanueva Barreto notes, 'regarding rights of nature, humans

59 *Ibid.*, p. 296.

60 Acosta, Alberto y Esperanza Martínez (2017), *Los Derechos de la Naturaleza como puerta de entrada a otro mundo posible*, Direito e Práxis, Rio de Janeiro, Vol. 08, N.4, p. 2930.

61 *Ibid.*, p. 2942.

are not at the center but nature, which, however, includes humans<sup>62</sup>. Nature's rights, in other words, imply and incorporate human rights, but from a broader perspective. Moreover, speaking about human rights without addressing nature's rights is paradoxical, as humans can only survive as part of an ecosystem. Without a doubt, recognising nature's rights is a crucial strategy for challenging developmentalist hegemony and confronting the possibility of environmental collapse in the twenty-first century.

On the other hand, the acknowledgement of plurinationality erects a barrier to 'development', as it prioritises cultural heterogeneity over the assimilation caused by the modern and developmentalist nation-state. For instance, as previously mentioned, it is essential to underscore the significance of Buen Vivir as a force that deconstructs our hegemonic notion of productivity, promoting alternative ways of understanding production. In contrast to the primacy of quantitative indicators during the era of 'development', Buen Vivir enables a new qualitative assessment of life.

Buen Vivir, regarded as a 'new historical horizon of meaning', provides a foundation for rethinking economies as naturecultural systems. It highlights the intrinsic connection between cultural values and economic frameworks while demonstrating the dependency of economic (sub)systems on nature's regeneration and the preservation of its cycles. Plurinationality serves as the condition for promoting alternative conceptions of productivity, as it confronts the developmentalist monologue and opens up avenues for a plethora of worldviews.

Finally, it is undeniable that the constitutional reforms, despite their significance, have not resulted in radical improvements for the Ecuadorian and Bolivian populations. While the emergence of a new narrative that transcends the 'development' paradigm represents an important transformation, it becomes ineffectual if it fails to enhance people's quality of life. As noted at the outset of this work, current civilisations, despite their undeniable cultural richness, have been deeply influenced by Western values such as 'development'. In this context, the civilisational alternative emerging from the Andean region is not entirely exempt from these influences. One of the most significant obstacles for Buen Vivir as a naturecultural economy is what M. Svampa terms 'neo-extractivism'<sup>63</sup>. Unlike the classic CEPAL discourse, which criticized the international division of labor whereby peripheral countries exported raw materials and central countries supplied industrial goods, progressive Latin American governments in the early twenty-first century have favored a model reliant

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62 *Ibid.*, p. 277.

63 Svampa, Maristella (2019). *Las fronteras del neoextractivismo en América Latina. Conflictos Socioambientales, giro ecoterritorial y nuevas dependencias*. Buenos Aires: CALAS

on extraordinary revenues from the exploitation of so-called 'natural resources' to pursue 'development'.

In the context of China's rapid economic growth and rising demand for Latin American natural wealth, the exploitation of nature has been framed as a means to alleviate poverty in regions where a substantial portion of the population cannot meet basic needs. Implementing Ecuador's rights of nature or Bolivia's Law of Mother Earth (enacted in 2010) has proven challenging in such contexts. This tension between *Buen Vivir* and neo-extractivist structures underscores one of the most significant limitations of the proposal.

The political engagement of civil society, however, is crucial to addressing this issue. As Acosta and Martínez point out, just as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948 did not lead to immediate implementation, the preservation of nature's rights will also require time and the sustained efforts of an organised society to uphold them.

The 'Yasunidos' movement in Ecuador, for example, has demonstrated, far more than the government of the 'Revolución Ciudadana', the vital role of society in defending nature's rights. The environmental collective 'Yasunidos', composed primarily of young urban ecologists, gathered nearly one million signatures in 2014 to hold a popular referendum. However, the referendum was only conducted in 2023, following initial rejection by the National Electoral Council (CNE) and the Ecuadorian government's delegitimization of various civil society groups. In the 2023 plebiscite, the rejection of the oil extraction project in Yasuní-ITT prevailed, with 58.95% of the votes.

In Bolivia, popular pressure has also achieved significant victories. For instance, in 2009, the TIPNIS (Isiboro Sécore Indigenous Territory and National Park), an area of immense biodiversity spanning approximately one million hectares and originally inhabited by three Indigenous peoples (Mojeño-Trinitario, Yuracaré, and Tsimané), became the focal point of a conflict over the construction of a road during Evo Morales's administration. From August 15 to October 19, 2011, the VIII Indigenous March for the Defense of TIPNIS took place. Over the course of these 65 days, which included a violent repression in Chaparina, the march concluded with the arrival of the protesters in La Paz, where they were met with widespread support for their cause. Popular pressure forced the government to halt the road project in 2011 and pass Law 180, which prohibited the construction of the route through TIPNIS.

In a nutshell, this serves as a powerful reminder that societal change does not solely depend on state-led initiatives but also on collective agency. Social and socioenvironmental movements play a fundamental role in ensuring that nature's

rights are protected, demonstrating the transformative potential of organised civil society.

## CONCLUSION

Aiming to expose the constructed nature of the notion of ‘development’, a historical examination of the concept has been conducted. Originating in the 1940s as a response to the profound impacts of the Great Depression, it was championed through various programmes, conferences, reports, missions and regional commissions of the United Nations. This promotion was facilitated by financial assistance and technical support from institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund and bolstered by the expertise of ‘development’ economists. These efforts unfolded within the broader context of the Cold War and the containment doctrine advocated by President Truman.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the initial optimism surrounding ‘development’ began to wane, particularly with the emergence of studies highlighting the adverse environmental consequences of economic growth. The publication of “Limits to Growth” in 1972, alongside the convening of the Stockholm Conference in the same year, marked significant moments that paved the way for the discourse on ‘sustainable development’ in the 1980s. This new discourse advocated for the compatibility of economic growth and environmental conservation. The concept of ‘sustainable development’ gained relevance through United Nations conferences, including the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, the Millennium Development Goals established in the 2000s, and the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in 2015.

The presentation has illustrated how classical ‘development’ aimed to homogenise cultures, urging peripheral countries to forsake their local cultures and adhere to the rapid pace of progress. As ‘development’ progressed, it led to a notable decline in cultural diversity and a significant Westernisation of the globe. Consequently, the predominant voices shaping discussions around contemporary issues are precisely those that have contributed to the present crisis. As Boaventura de Sousa Santos aptly articulates, ‘we have modern problems for which there are no modern solutions’<sup>64</sup>.

The notion of ‘natureculture’ has been employed to rethink economies as a co-construction between humans and non-humans. This concept proves particularly useful in describing the society-nature relationship in the Andean region, where relational ontologies take precedence over anthropocentric worldviews.

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64 Boaventura de Sousa Santos, *Descolonizar el saber, reinventar el poder* (Uruguay, Trilce, 2010), p. 15.

Buen Vivir stands out as a compelling example of a naturecultural economy. Indeed, this movement achieved a groundbreaking Constitutional reform in Ecuador in 2008, which marked the first instance in human history of officially recognising the rights of nature. This milestone represents not only a legal and political transformation but also an ontological emancipation. It has been proposed that by challenging Western metaphysical dualism, Buen Vivir advocates for a relational ontology rooted in the Andean notion of 'Pachamama'.

Furthermore, Buen Vivir has been underscored as a threat to Western hegemony over languages. Indeed, the Constitutional reform in Bolivia in 2009 emphasised the plurinational nature of the country, recognising its rich cultural diversity and the multitude of its languages. Considering that languages are not merely reflections of reality but rather windows that offer unique interpretations of the world, the affirmation of languages such as Aymara and Quechua is a significant step toward challenging cultural homogeneity.

It is worth noting that Buen Vivir has demonstrated its resistance through the reform of two Constitutions, setting it apart from other Latin American movements such as the Mexican Zapatistas, which did not express their resistance from within the state. Contrary to certain critiques, this highlights that the underlying idea behind this specific alternative to 'development' is not about reverting to a lost past destroyed by colonisation; rather, it is about fostering a hybridisation between modern institutions and traditional worldviews. Recognising that cultures are never monolithic but always dynamic, Buen Vivir does not necessarily seek to challenge Western hegemony to impose an Andean hegemony. Instead, it aims to foster a fluid dialogue among diverse cultures.

However, despite the scopes of Buen Vivir, this movement faces limitations. In the case of Ecuador, although nature's rights have been recognised, the country has struggled to break free from its extractivist paradigm. While the Constitutional reform has led to strengthened environmental risk assessments and increased cultural awareness regarding the importance of nature conservation, Ecuador continues to heavily rely on income generated from oil extraction, with mining also playing a significant role. This indicates that the country has been unable to transcend its dependency on environmentally harmful economic practices, even with the support of the new Constitution.

In the case of Bolivia, the reinforcement of the indigenous rights in the early 2000s faced strong resistance from conservative powers, culminating in a coup in 2019. Following the ousting of Evo Morales, Bolivia's first indigenous president, Jeanine Añez assumed power with a Bible in hand at the Government Palace, signaling a clear threat to the indigenous movements that had gained prominence in the early twenty-

first century, challenging the dominance of the Catholic Church. During Añez's government, there were numerous incidents involving the Wiphala, the indigenous symbol and flag, particularly when it was removed from the mast of the Government House and replaced with the traditional national flag.

The aspiration for Buen Vivir as a naturecultural economy does not rely solely on juridico-political transformations but also on the active participation of civil society. Social change does not follow a top-down trajectory from the state to society; it requires an empowered population willing to fight for its rights. The numerous Indigenous Marches in Bolivia and the example of Yasunidos in Ecuador, illustrate the vital role of political engagement. These movements exemplify the possibility of forging a social model where, as the Zapatista movement envisions, 'the people rule, and the government obeys'.

Buen Vivir como economía naturocultural: Una alternativa al "desarrollo" en tiempos de crisis civilizatoria

Este artículo profundiza en la trayectoria histórica del concepto de "desarrollo", revelando su persistente papel como obstáculo para abordar los desafíos socioambientales actuales. A pesar de los intentos de introducir alternativas al "desarrollo" como el "desarrollo sostenible", el marco económico predominante continúa perpetuando la degradación ambiental y acelerando el colapso ecológico. El concepto de "naturcultura" se utiliza para redefinir la economía tanto como un discurso cultural como un subsistema del sistema terrestre. El Buen Vivir en la región andina se presenta como un ejemplo de una economía naturocultural, ofreciendo una alternativa prometedora para abordar la crisis civilizatoria mediante la promoción de la heterogeneidad cultural y la integración de los límites planetarios.