

# FORUM: *Buen vivir* - Reimagining education and shifting paradigms

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The new development order that emerged from the ashes of the Millennium Development Goals has brought much needed attention to the natural environment and to societal inequalities, two features which have made the framework relevant to (and demanding for) high-income as well as low- and middle-income countries. Yet, despite the emphasis on education as a goal in itself and a driver for development, there is an alarming negligence and lack of imagination concerning the forms education might take. The apparent compatibility between expansion of education systems and both environmental destruction and worsening socio-economic inequalities (given formal education's complicity with current economic models) has been little challenged by the development community. Ensuring fair, peaceful and sustainable societies surely requires something other than just 'more' schooling. But what kinds of resources and inspiration can we draw on to reinvent education?

This forum discusses a response to this question provided by *buen vivir*, a notion emerging from indigenous cultures and political movements in Latin America. While *buen vivir* has had incipient attention in the international development literature, there is little written, particularly in English, about the contribution it could make to education. We argue here that it needs to be introduced into our imaginary of education, and that learning must push beyond the limitations of the paradigm of modernity and the neoliberal ideology that commits us inescapably to economic growth at the expense of the environment. If we are committed to the idea of sustainability, which has not been well served by these ideologies and agendas, we might want to consider what 'sustainable development' looks like from worldviews with a quite different ontology from the European modernity upon which our development discourse has been based.

## ***Buen vivir* as an alternative to development**

There has been no shortage of critique of the concept of development and its limitations in achieving peace and quality of life for all. We have seen variants of the discourse distance themselves from the mainstream conceptualisation of development as purely economic growth, and the introduction of adjectives to temper how we understand the notion, from human and sustainable development to community-based, ethno- and local development (Villalba 2013, 1427). The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), for example, problematize environmental degradation and call for the protection of life under water and on land, clean energy and responsible consumption and production. However, these goals remain wedded to the underpinning assumption of development as 'growth' or 'progress' and the concept of economic growth in particular (Gudynas 2016). A more fundamental critique, one rarely invoked in the mainstream, has emerged over the last twenty years, with

extensive publications of postdevelopment and postcolonial alternatives to the development project, which challenge the dominant frameworks of development as a linear approach to growth. Postdevelopment demands a deconstruction of development to expose the colonialism concealed within it and to propose contextualised alternatives (Escobar 2011; Esteva 2009). There are a number of associated critiques of developmentalism growing out of academic currents such as degrowth, ecological economics, ecofeminism and environmental justice (Escobar 2015).

What we discuss here takes the form of a critique of the development discourse based on worldviews that are ontologically different from the modernist assumptions that underpin 'development'. These perspectives are rooted in indigenous knowledges, and rather than being another development alternative, present 'an alternative to all these positions' (Gudynas and Acosta 2011). The concept of *buen vivir* has emerged from indigenous cultures in Latin America, although bears some resemblance to African concepts such as *Ubuntu* (Murove 2014), and has been identified in different forms in many cultures around the world (Loomis 2000). *Ubuntu*, for example, emphasizes interconnectedness and belonging to a greater whole (Tutu 1999), and valuing the ecological health of the community as well as the individual (Wang 2013; van de Walt 2010). Other key aspects of *buen vivir*, such as non-dualism and non-violence, can be found in Eastern philosophies, such as Buddhism, Taoism and Advaita Vedanta, and other similar traditions that question the idea of indefinite economic growth and encourage inward contemplation and living in the world but not of it (Satprakashananda 1974; Wang 2013). These philosophies have influenced alternative approaches to development that challenge the focus on economic measures of progress. One example of this is the extensive work done in the Buddhist nation of Bhutan on the index of Gross National Happiness, which emphasizes spiritual, physical, social and environmental health of citizens and the natural environment, as well as the promotion of culture (Kelly 2012). It is important to remember that the doctrine of progress and accumulation of capital do not correspond to absolute universal aspirations (Baranquero 2012).

The contemporary notion of *buen vivir* emerged in the late 1990s from the meeting of ancient indigenous belief systems, the work of critical intellectuals and adoption in the political sphere. *Buen vivir* is the Spanish translation of the concepts of *sumak kawsay* in Quechua and *suma qamaña* in Aymara, as well as similar terms from indigenous languages across the continent (Gudynas and Acosta 2011). The translation is inadequate but serves as a starting point. Literally translated into English as 'good living', this is considered a pale reflection of the original meanings of *sumak kawsay*. *Sumak* means full of plenitude, sublime, excellent, magnificent, beautiful, while *kawsay* is life; to exist in a dynamic, changing, active manner (Villalba 2013, 1429). So it is about harmonious coexistence and living with nature in accordance with principles of reciprocity, complementarity, solidarity and relationality (Villalba 2013). The powerful meaning behind *sumak kawsay* comes from a cosmology so alien to Western modernity that, from that perspective, it is difficult to conceive of it in the full-density of its meaning. Nevertheless, *buen vivir* holds significant promise for the organisation of collective life in modern societies (Vanhulst & Beling 2014).

The fundamental challenge that *buen vivir* presents to development discourses is in the relationship between humanity and nature. In the modern ontology there is a division between nature and society, while for these indigenous ontologies this is

relational, and all forms of existence are expressed as complementary with other beings (Villalba 2013). Nature itself is considered a subject, not external to humans, it is interconnected and worthy of rights; this interdependence between society and nature breaks with the two features of society-nature duality and Eurocentric universalism (Vanhulst & Beling 2014). *Buen vivir* is more systemic, encompassing the entire ecosphere and includes issues of inclusion and equity, biodiversity and natural resources (Gudynas & Acosta 2011, 77). In this sense, communities are defined in an expanded sense including non-human elements and the environment (Pacha Mama [Mother Earth]).

Another key difference is the idea of progress; this does not exist within this indigenous ontological perspective, rather, *buen vivir* is 'a way of living the present in harmony' (Vanhulst & Beling 2014, 56). This means discarding the idea of development as a linear process and reimagining how we conceptualise quality of life and well-being away from ownership of property and levels of income alone, making room for experiences and relationships (Villalba 2013). It involves reflecting on a model that incorporates many facets of a good life – sociality, solidarity, diversity, human rights, ecological justice etc. (Baranquero 2012). It also raises essential questions about the nature of the economy and how we could recreate economic systems 'towards a new [socio-biocentric] civilization' (Acosta 2013, 22), where quality of life takes precedence over capitalistic consumption patterns.

In terms of its relationship with current debates about the SDGs, *buen vivir* is an open proposal under construction. While in some ways it presents a strong criticism of the discourse of sustainable development and of commodification (Salazar 2015), it also provides an opportunity to engage with international agendas in novel ways. Now is a good time to think about how it can be conceptualised and interpreted in a way that remains faithful to these important dimensions of the worldviews that underpin it, but also comprehensible to people for whom breaking out of the paradigm of the European/Western ontology of modernity is not straightforward. This requires deep exploration of the ideas and the proposals, and opportunities to learn and engage in dialogue. *Buen vivir* can contribute to these debates about what it means to live well and provide a constructive critique of the development discourse. However, the legitimisation and deepened understanding of *buen vivir* rests upon the building of 'real spaces for citizen participation and on the emergence of collective learning processes' (Vanhulst & Beling 2014, 60). *Buen vivir* shares with anti-austerity movements the reaction against political institutions and mistrust of the financial sector, but it is 'more unified and proactive in developing a program for alternative solidarity economies and practices' (Salazar 2015).

Liberating other worldviews in the face of Western hegemony of development, to explore how they can contribute to more genuinely sustainable approaches to improving well-being speaks directly to the sustainable development agenda. It provides a coherent critique of 'development as economic growth', which the SDGs are keen to 'decouple from environmental degradation' (UNDP SDG 8.4). Far from being a quaint philosophy from far away, education advocating sustainable development needs to engage with such anti-hegemony worldviews in order to imagine different possibilities for the future. However, it should also be considered that the emphasis on measurement and progress, inherent within the SDGs, is in some ways incongruent with the ontological underpinnings of *buen vivir*. So while it may be able to contribute to these debates, and may bear some resemblance to attempts made to measure well-

being, social progress and happiness, there is also a tension between the need for measurement and the move away from such quantification. This critique can also be found in postdevelopment and postcolonial literatures (Escobar 2011).

### ***Buen vivir* and education**

The role of education in this milieu is complex. Globally, there is a problematic association of education and Western-style schooling, and an obsessive focus in many international campaigns on getting all children to enrol in primary education, regardless of the multifaceted complexities that arise in different contexts. That is not to say that we should not support the empowering potential of education, and even promote its role in achieving other goals, but we require a far broader conception of what this might look like than the one current international agendas promote. Education should offer more than training for 'employability', which is so deeply embedded in human capital approaches to development. Occidental notions of education are difficult to extricate from the drive for salary, consumption and status or neoliberal assumptions about its form and purpose, and decolonising these logics in the context of a global market is not easy. *Buen vivir* could offer possibilities to construct visions of education which challenge these fundamental assumptions about its role. While there are indigenous communities in Latin America which have embodied these principles in their educational practices (see for example Olivera Rodríguez 2014; 2017) - and indeed many would argue that they have to be contextually embedded - there are few formal accounts that educators elsewhere in the world can draw on.

Through extrapolation from the main tenets of the idea, we will draw out some of the key principles for education here. We will not attempt to flesh out the specifics of educational settings, curriculum and pedagogy, as this would require a more extensive treatment than is possible in this forum. More importantly, any such attempt would necessarily be contextual, by definition, this approach would resist any universalising stipulation of how education should occur; any abstraction can only provide an approximation to its real embodiment in education, which would necessarily find its form only in the lived experience of educators and learners. We can, nevertheless, identify the following broad principles:

- *Epistemological pluralism*: acknowledging and transiting between different forms of knowing
- *Porosity of boundaries*: non-rigid classification of the educational space, education professionals and disciplines
- *Holism of learning*: bringing together of the manual, practical, technical, abstract, aesthetic and spiritual
- *Cooperativism*: avoidance of competition-based education and the consequent progressive filtering out of students from level to level
- *Compassion and nonviolence*: recognition of the importance of peace in all aspects of life, including nonviolent communication
- *Collectivism*: learning collectively within a web of relationships between people and with the non-human world
- *Meaningful livelihoods*: a link with enriching forms of work (rather than alienating employability)
- *Living the present*: education as a state of being, not aimed at the exchange value of qualifications

These are not of course ideas unique to *buen vivir*, and can be found in different forms a number of progressive, holistic approaches to education associated with postcolonialism, environmentalism, feminism, mindfulness, nonviolence and others. Yet *buen vivir* provides a coherent principle on which to ground education for development, one rooted in a comprehensive and contextualised philosophy of living. There would also be implications of a *buen vivir* approach for governance of education. Given its opposition to instrumentalisation and commodification generally speaking, there would be a necessary rooting of control of education in the community, with strong democratic and participative engagement.

Importantly, *buen vivir* is not only a goal to be obtained as a result of education, with learning oriented to help achieve a harmonious and sustainable society at some point in the future. It also has a process function, it is a way of being, a mode of operating, particularly as regards the forms of human relations that pertain within the educational space. It is a question, therefore, of education *through* *buen vivir* as well as *for* *buen vivir*. In this way it links in with prefigurative forms of education that aim to embody the ideal society in the here and now, rather than preparing students for a distant future (McCowan 2009).

Clearly, we need to avoid the naive romanticisation of indigenous peoples that is so tempting for inhabitants of materialistic urban cultures who feel their connection to nature, the spiritual world and each other slipping away. All communities face a range of critical challenges, particularly in the contemporary context of globalisation. We must also resist the exotic fetishism of ideas from afar, viewing them as somehow more noble, interesting and worthy than those familiar to us. At the same time, neither should we dismiss them on the basis that they are only viable and meaningful for those living traditional subsistence lifestyles or as a 'nostalgic echo of a remote past disconnected from contemporary debates' (Vanhulst & Beling 2014, 61). Indeed, the very act of valuing anti-hegemonic worldviews and knowledges is an important part of decolonising education. Building a new world - even in the limited form of the compromise with capitalism that is the SDGs - requires a new vision, and for that we must be open to the plurality of modes of knowing and living that the world offers.

Of course, education cannot bring this transformation alone. It could be argued that it is the economic system that perpetuates the environmental degradation and inequalities in society, so it is there that our primary attention should lie. Yet education is fundamental to the global capitalist system - as an industry in itself, as well as a means of preparing compliant workers - and equally it has the potential to transform our understandings of what counts as 'good living' and how it is practiced. In this sense, we should consider the inclusion of the ideas of *buen vivir* in our education systems, particularly in higher education, which needs to reclaim its ability to challenge the *status quo*: understanding the challenges *buen vivir* poses for development discourse is an opportunity to question taken-for-granted assumptions and suggest alternatives.

This forum represents a call to the academic community to engage with ideas of *buen vivir* - and other conceptualisations and practices of 'good living' emerging from worldviews outside the modernist European paradigm - within scholarship and research on international education and development, and also in teaching and preparation of university students. While there is some existing research that explores

these alternative conceptualisations of education that challenge the dominant frameworks of development (see for example Skinner et al. 2016), more extensive work is needed. This forum represents only an initial foray into the topic, and further studies are needed to theorise the notion fully in relation to education, in addition to empirical studies on its incorporation in practice.

Education has an essential role to play in grappling with reconstructing assumptions and learning from these worldviews that offer ways of conceiving a genuinely sustainable relationship with the planet, but without co-opting or diluting the ideas within and behind *buen vivir*. This means opening spaces for collective learning, through formal and non-formal education, through social movements and non-governmental organisations, as well as schools and universities, where we can imagine education through and for *buen vivir*.

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