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Nature & *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador: The battle between conservation and extraction

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Nature & *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador: The battle between conservation and extraction¹

This post is based on a recent publication entitled, "*Buen Vivir* (living well) in Ecuador: Community and environmental satisfaction without household material prosperity?" written by Jorge Guardiola and Fernando García-Quero, from Universidad de Granada, España. This paper was published in *Ecological Economics* (2014, vol 107). It deals with *Buen Vivir*, which is a concept with academic roots from the beginning of the 21st century, when the indigenous movement became a major social and political factor in Ecuador and Bolivia (Torrez, 2001; Yampara, 2001; Viteri, 2002). The systematization of this process was in the discussions undertaken by social partners on the Bolivian and Ecuadorian Constitutional Assemblies (Bolivia 2006-2009; Ecuador 2007-2008). They were later formalized in the approval of both Constitutions². Since that moment, many research projects and studies have appeared, and *Buen Vivir* is increasingly becoming an international issue at all levels (Escobar, 2010; Walsh, 2010; Farah and Vasapollo, 2011; Gudynas, 2011; Radcliffe, 2012; Correa, 2013a; Mejido Costoya, 2013; Vanhulst and Beling, 2014).

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² The *Buen Vivir* is dealt with in quite different ways in these two constitutions (Ecuador approved in 2008; Bolivia approved in 2009). For further analysis see Farah and Vasapollo, 2011; Gudynas and Acosta 2011).

The common issues identified during this process emphasize that the *Buen Vivir* philosophy is based on the idea that nature, community, and individuals all share the same material and spiritual dimensions. The wellbeing of the community is considered more important than that of the individual. Communities work to develop their capacities and enrich their knowledge without doing harm to human health or to the environment. Human beings are therefore part of nature and their quality of life depends on all the living things that share this planet with them. Due to the importance of nature, environmental and local progress are two of the fundamental goals of *Buen Vivir* (see Ecuadorian Constitution, art. 13; art. 333). The indigenous economy emphasizes that all methods of working and production have to be oriented to the local livelihoods, and should not serve for capital gain, accumulation, or surplus. To achieve *Buen Vivir*, it is essential that there is active participation in community spaces and local institutions (Macas, 2010). In summary, *Buen Vivir* of the population depends on strengthening participation in the community, improving harmony with nature, and maintaining local food sovereignty.

In Ecuador there are two extremely different viewpoints or conceptions on how to guarantee *Buen Vivir*. Firstly, the extractive position, which interprets natural resources as tools for its own *Buen Vivir* conception. Second is the conservationist perspective, which promotes the respect of nature and the search of alternative strategies to maintain *Buen Vivir*. The extractive view is commonly known as “republican biosocialism” or “socialism of the 21st century,” and reflects the Government’s position (Coraggio, 2007; Páez, 2010; Ramírez, 2010; SENPLADES, 2010; Falconí y Muñoz, 2012). The conservationist view is prominent in the indigenous movements, opposition political parties, and intellectual circles from Ecuador and abroad. (Dávalos, 2008; Oviedo, 2011; Quijano, 2011; Acosta, 2012; Vega, 2012; Gudynas, 2013).

Extractive development strategies aiming to improve population well-being are focused on economic growth that comes from country ownership of the natural resources. The governments opted for extraction and commercialization of the natural resources in order to ensure fiscal profits for sustained poverty reduction (Correa, 2013b). According to them, economic growth and the massive exploitation of nature are necessary for sustained poverty reduction (Correa, 2012). In theory, the majority of the windfall from Ecuador’s copper exploitation royalties should go to local community projects. President Correa has repeatedly said that his government’s environmental policy was necessary “for the country to emerge from underdevelopment and to attend to the poorest.” He stated that they “cannot live as

“beggars sitting on a sack of gold” (Correa, 2013a). Examples of these policies are the agreements with international companies to carry out the exploitation of natural resources throughout Ecuador. The most famous example is the Yasuni ITT Project, which paved the way for oil exploitation in the Ecuadorian Amazon jungle of Yasuni National Park³.

The extractive position believes that there is no inconsistency in extraction, because the first step in reaching *Buen Vivir* is eliminating poverty and unemployment. They argue that a progressive process of endogenous development is the path towards Ecuadorian wellbeing and that it is necessary to achieve energy sovereignty, food sovereignty, and financial sovereignty within the next 16 or 20 years (SEPLANDES, 2009). Ecuador is still in an early stage build-up phase and needs to strengthen the job market in order to guarantee basic material needs, including those related to food. In this stage, royalties from foreign firms coming from the extraction of raw materials are important to substantially reduce poverty and social exclusion. (SENPLADES, 2007, 2009, 2013).

The conservationists hold a very critical position towards the extractive vision. Extractive position, also referred to as “neo-progressive extractivism” or “brown socialism”, seeks *Buen Vivir* through a model of production and mass consumption (Gudynas, 2010; Escobar, 2010, Acosta, 2012). Extractivism maintains conventional emphasis on economic growth, fostering the massive extraction of natural resources as a primary means to achieve what they consider *Buen Vivir*, while leaving aside the respect for nature and indigenous communities (Acosta, 2011; Cuví et al, 2013; Gudynas, 2013b). This confrontation is very visible in the Yasuni case. The conservationists argue that the term *Buen Vivir* is a “stolen word” from the indigenous movement and is misused by the government (Tortosa, 2012).

From the conservationist point of view, Yasuni exploitation has an adverse impact on the well-being of local communities, regardless of where the profits go. According to this view, the Ecuadorian government has to renounce the oil exploitation of Yasuni National Park. This aggression, invasion, and destruction of nature is contradictory to the *Buen Vivir* principles set out in the Constitution. From a biocentric viewpoint, *Buen Vivir* adopts a broader concept of community that includes all living things on the planet. Adverse impact on the environment has very negative implications for the individual's own welfare, as human beings belong

³ The national initiative undertaken by Ecuador titled “Yasuni Ishpingo Tambococha Tiputini Initiative” (ITT) had the objective to give up the extracting oil from the Yasuni biosphere reserve in exchange for international Trust Funds. See <http://yasuni-itt.gob.ec/inicio.aspx>

to nature, not vice-versa. To ensure the preservation and protection of the environment and to respect the inherent value of nature beyond human purpose, it is essential to be permanently connected to the *Buen Vivir* goals outlined in the Ecuadorian Constitution, that state, among others, that nature is a subject of law (see Ecuadorian Constitution, chapter 7).

Taking this political scenario into consideration in our research, we aim to quantitatively evaluate the influence of *Buen Vivir* features (particularly nature, participation, and food sovereignty) in the subjective well-being⁴ of a rural sample of 1,174 rural households, representative of two cantons in Ecuador (Nabón and Pucará), built in 2012. Our goal is to use happiness measures to account for the hedonic importance that people give to *Buen Vivir* features, versus the importance of more material and individualist issues, such as household income or being employed. To do so, we use a quantitative method, the ordered logit technique, to create a balance by putting *Buen Vivir* features on one side and material issues on the other. Environment and community participation variables and domains are found to be important in explaining subjective wellbeing (SWB), as well as other material related variables and domains.

The evidence found in this paper does not suggest to completely switch the balance to the extractive or to the conservative option, but it at least allows to reduce one without the risk of mistake. The importance of *Buen Vivir* variables and domains in explaining life satisfaction disregards the extractive position, but the importance of material variables and domains does not give full support to the conservative theory alone. In other words, income, employment and the increase of financial satisfaction are necessary for Ecuadorian people to be satisfied with their lives. These results contrast with the fact that descriptive statistics indicate that people are on average quite satisfied despite living in deprivation. This apparently puzzling conclusion may be clarified by this reasoning: people in the sample are in general highly satisfied, probably due to idiosyncratic issues contemplated in the *Buen Vivir* interpretation, but material achievement plays a role in the differences between individuals.

The political implications are that policy interventions centered on raising income or *Buen Vivir* alone will be incomplete. Policies that foster *Buen Vivir* while raising income and employment would succeed; aiming to increase material possibilities while preserving people's ties to the community and to the land. The

⁴ Subjective well-being research refers to the study of the reported cognitive evaluation of affective state of the individual. This is also known in the literature as the 'science of happiness'.

results suggest that self-production dependence has a limit in its influence on SWB, and that income may be a necessary driver to diversify goods and services that permit people to satisfy their needs.

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Call for Editors for Alternautas

Alternautas is seeking to expand its current Editorial team. In May 2014, our academic blog was launched into the world wide web. Almost a year later, our virtual community is thriving. Alternautas has organised panels at international conferences, expanded its subscribers and followers in social networks, become a platform to share news and announcements, obtained its ISSN number, organised collaboration with other development-related institutions and most importantly, has brought together a consistent and steady flow of contributions on critical development thinking to its peer-reviewed academic blog. Recently, the 2014 contributions have been brought together in the first issue of a virtual journal that we expect to expand and maintain in 2015. It is our hope that continuing and expanding Alternautas discussions the Abya Yala contributions to critical development thinking will continue bridging the language barriers, crossing the regional boundaries and joining the global quest for societal alternatives for a fairer, better, and sustainable future. For this, we are looking for Alternautas Editorial Team new members. Ideally, you will:

- Be interested in bridging cultural and regional boundaries in bringing together and expanding the Latin American contributions to global discussions in critical development thinking.
- Be working in academia as an early-career scholar, either doing a PhD or working in Latin American studies, Politics, Development, Anthropology, Sociology, Cultural studies, Philosophy or a related area. We also welcome people who might be in a break from Academia.
- Be able to work in English and either Portuguese or Spanish, both to contribute in writing, translating or editing content for the blog.
- While our workload is very flexible (and we certainly understand the time pressures from modern academic life!) you should be able to commit to work in a flexible and virtual collaborative team. Normally, you should expect that

the time commitment shouldn't be more than a couple of hours a week and you should be able to join a Skype meeting once a month.

If you think that you would be interested in joining us, send us an email with a brief statement of your interest in our work and a CV to alternautasblog@gmail.com, by March 15th, 2015.