



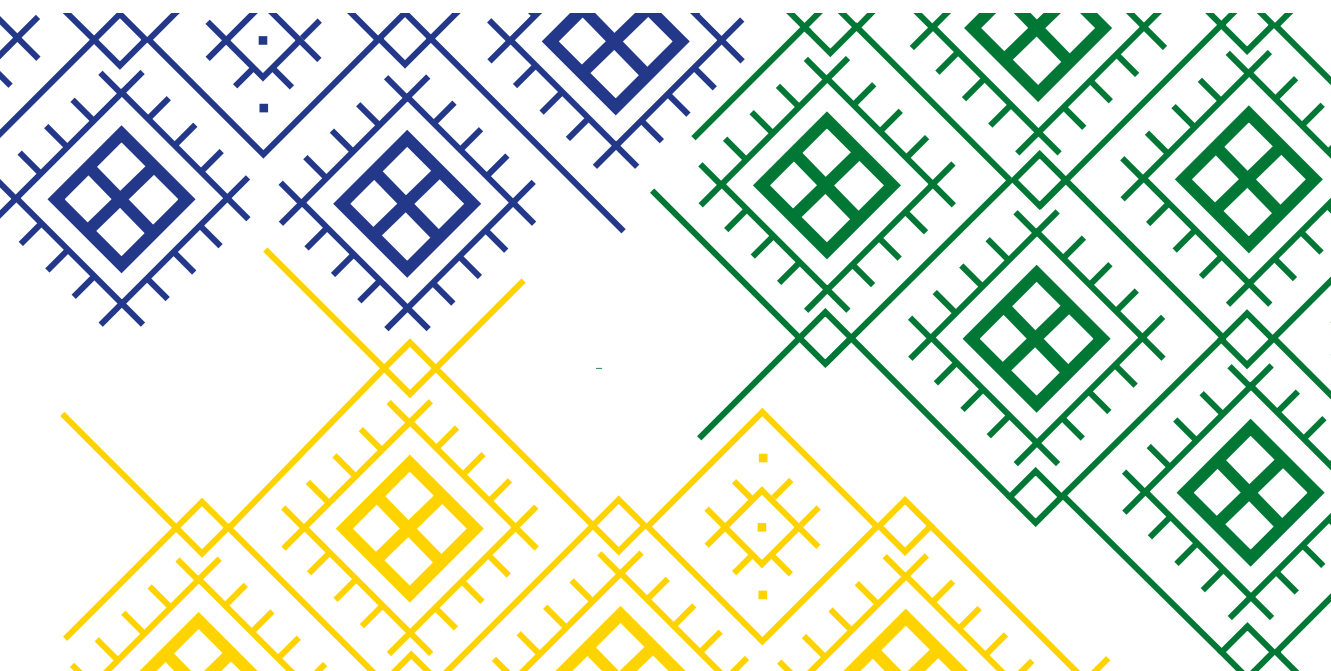
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Is *Buen Vivir* an Alternative to Development?

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Abstract

This paper examines *Buen Vivir*, an Indigenous Knowledge-based developmental paradigm that has gained constitutional recognition in Ecuador and Bolivia. Through critical analysis of its philosophical foundations and implementation challenges, this study investigates *Buen Vivir's* potential as an alternative to Western developmental models. The research method combines extensive literature review with ethnographic fieldwork conducted among Indigenous communities in Southern Mexico between 2006 and 2023.

The study names a fundamental tension between *Buen Vivir's* core principles and current extractivist economic practices in both nations. Drawing from empirical observations of grassroots movements, particularly the Zapatista movement and Oaxacan social movements in Southern Mexico, the analysis reveals how Indigenous praxis offers practical insights into operationalizing *Buen Vivir* principles. These movements show alternative approaches to development that prioritize Indigenous epistemologies and human-nature relationships.

This investigation contributes to development discourse by examining how Indigenous cosmovisions might inform more sustainable and balanced approaches to social organization and economic development. The analysis critically engages with anthropocentric systems' limitations while highlighting Indigenous epistemologies' potential for reconceptualizing development, community welfare, and environmental stewardship. The study concludes by evaluating *Buen Vivir's* viability as an alternative developmental paradigm, acknowledging the complexities of translating Indigenous philosophical frameworks into contemporary practice

Keywords:

Buen Vivir, Indigenous Epistemologies, Alternative Development, Extractivism, Social Movements

Introduction

“ONLY FROM AN extremely limited viewpoint can it be maintained that the defense of the interests of nature is contrary to human interests. Since humankind is part of nature in a wide sense, human fate is indissolubly linked to that of the entire natural world. The conservation of a complete and healthy nature is, consequently, in the interest of humankind, which means that the defenders of nature are also the defenders of humanity; on the contrary, those who attack nature, moved by short-sighted human interests, in the end attack humankind itself, threatening its future together with the future of all nature.” (Stutzin 2002, 3)

Godofredo Stutzin's pioneering advocacy for Rights of Nature in Latin America is still relevant to contemporary environmental discourse. His argument, advanced more than two decades ago, found a critical gap in Western nations' approach to environmental protection and climate change response. There is an absence of legal frameworks recognizing nature as a rights-bearing entity. This critique continues to resonate with current debates surrounding environmental jurisprudence and climate action in the Global South. To name two examples of this there is the constitutional protection for Rights of Nature in Bolivia and Ecuador and the court cases such as Colombia's highest court ruling against the Colombian government demanding action for preservation of the Amazon rainforest and against rising deforestation (Alvarado and Rivas-Ramírez 2018, 519).

The global response has been predominantly characterized by sustainable development initiatives and multilateral conferences, which have thus far proven insufficient in addressing the magnitude of the environmental crisis. The implementation of meaningful climate

action has been significantly impeded by a deficiency in political resolve to enact the necessary structural changes required to mitigate impending ecological catastrophe.

Alternative paradigms have emerged in response to this institutional inertia, including degrowth theory, downshifting movements, deep ecological frameworks, and localized food sovereignty initiatives such as the Slow Food movement. These approaches advocate for a fundamental restructuring of consumption patterns and a return to traditional and local modes of production. However, despite their theoretical merit, these alternative frameworks have not gained sufficient traction to catalyze the systemic transformations necessary to address the scale of contemporary environmental challenges.

This limited adoption of alternative approaches suggests a deeper structural resistance to paradigmatic shifts in consumption and production patterns, despite mounting evidence of their necessity. The gap between theoretical solutions and practical implementation remains a critical obstacle in addressing global environmental degradation.

In a notable paradigmatic shift, two economically disadvantaged Latin American nations, Bolivia and Ecuador, have incorporated the rights of Mother Earth, *Pachamama* in *Kichwa* tradition, into their constitutional frameworks. This legislative innovation occurred simultaneously with these governments' aspirations for substantial social transformation. Given the significant socioeconomic challenges and widespread poverty in these nations, their governments have not pursued degrowth or consumption reduction strategies. Instead, they have articulated an alternative developmental philosophy known as "*Buen Vivir*", living well, which is deeply rooted in Indigenous epistemologies and cosmologies of the

region, such as Indigenous Knowledge of *Aymara* and *Kichwa* Indigenous cultures.

The universal imperative for sustainable development notwithstanding, contemporary governmental interventions and policy frameworks have demonstrated significant limitations in advancing meaningful progress toward Agenda 2030 sustainability objectives. These established targets face mounting criticism about their adequacy, particularly considering the increasingly urgent assessments presented in IPCC reports about climate change trajectories and their implications. This raises critical questions regarding the efficacy of *Buen Vivir* as a transformative framework: To what extent can this philosophical and political approach effectively address the limitations of current sustainable development efforts? Does it offer viable mechanisms for transcending the contradictions inherent in contemporary development models?

These inquiries are particularly pertinent given the apparent contradiction between *Buen Vivir's* theoretical foundations and its practical implementation in resource-dependent economies. This tension necessitates a thorough investigation of whether the framework can indeed facilitate the paradigmatic shift required for genuine sustainable development, or whether it potentially reinforces existing patterns of resource exploitation under alternative ideological justifications.

This tension between extractivist practices and environmental consciousness extends beyond the Global South. Even economically advanced nations with significant extractive industries, such as Norway, face ethical dilemmas regarding their contribution to climate change, the countries applying seemingly climate friendlier energy solutions like Finland, feel the pressure to engage in the mining industry in order to provide minerals for these solutions or to put wind powerplants in the Sámi Indigenous lands in Lapland

risking the fragile Arctic nature in their endeavours. (Kuokkanen 2019) This is generating a substantial need for public discourse on alternative approaches. The inadequacy of conventional sustainable development paradigms has become increasingly clear, suggesting the need for fundamental systemic changes.

Klein (2014) argues that neoliberal capitalist models are fundamentally incompatible with addressing climate change, necessitating radical transformation of current economic systems. This critique resonates with the contradictions faced by nations like Norway, Ecuador, and Bolivia, which struggle to reconcile their aspirations for international recognition as environmentally conscious actors with their continued dependence on extractive industries. This dependency on non-renewable resources creates both environmental and economic vulnerabilities, highlighting the urgent need for alternative development paradigms.

This study examines the potential of *Buen Vivir* as a practical alternative to Western developmental paradigms, particularly in its capacity to advance environmental sustainability and social justice. The research critically analyses the challenges met in implementing *Buen Vivir* principles and explores potential contributions from the experiences of Oaxacan movement and Zapatista movement in southern Mexico, that all embrace pluralistic worldviews that challenge the Western worldview. Of particular interest is how these experiences might inform both the evolution of *Buen Vivir* and the broader development of frameworks that promote ecological harmony through the recognition of Nature's Rights while advancing social justice. The investigation further considers the complex relationship between *Buen Vivir's* conception of 'living well' and the achievement of sustainable development goals. Rather than seeking definitive answers, this research aims to find emerging

patterns and potential pathways for future development alternatives.

The empirical manifestations of alternative epistemological frameworks in these contexts reveal a significant distinction: while *Buen Vivir* is an Indigenous paradigm institutionalized at the state level, the Zapatista and Oaxacan movements prove the practical implementation of autonomous Indigenous epistemologies within a socio-political context dominated by divergent ontological and epistemological frameworks. This contextual differentiation is particularly salient when examining how these communities keep, support and operationalize their distinct cultural and philosophical foundations within environments that predominantly operate under competing epistemological paradigms.

Leston (2022) notes that Ecuador's 2008 constitutional reform incorporating *Buen Vivir* was "*largely inspired by the six Declarations of the Lacandón Jungle issued by the Zapatistas (1993-2006).*" This shows a direct influence of Zapatista thought on the development of *Buen Vivir* as a constitutional concept.

This methodological structure facilitates a nuanced examination of the intersection between theoretical conceptualizations and practical applications of *Buen Vivir*, while leveraging both scholarly discourse and ethnographic observations to inform the analysis. The integration of field research data provides empirical grounding for theoretical conclusions regarding the efficacy and applicability of the *Buen Vivir* framework.

Methodology and Materials Used

The analysis of *Buen Vivir* proceeds through three distinct phases: First, it establishes a theoretical framework through a systematic examination of the *Buen Vivir*

concept as articulated in contemporary scholarship. Second, it investigates the practical challenges and implementation constraints encountered in the actualization of *Buen Vivir* principles. Finally, the study culminates in a critical assessment of *Buen Vivir's* viability as an alternative to Western developmental paradigms, so that it includes some practical reflections from Southern Mexico through viewing the social movement in Oaxaca and Zapatista movement.

The methodology for this study integrates two complementary approaches: a critical analysis of relevant scholarly literature and ethnographic research conducted over an extended period (2006-2023) in Southwestern and Southern Mexico. The ethnographic part focuses specifically on the regions of Oaxaca and Chiapas, where Indigenous communities have developed and implemented Indigenous Knowledge systems that share theoretical and practical alignments with *Buen Vivir* principles, particularly in their opposition to and alternatives to extractivist development models. These regions provide crucial case studies of Indigenous epistemologies being practically implemented through development alternatives that explicitly reject extractivist paradigms. This methodological framework enables a synthesis of theoretical understanding with empirical observations drawn from direct engagement with Indigenous peoples and communities. My field research method is ethnographic Indigenous collaborative method, which is holistic and relational and includes dialogue and collaborative convivial interviews and field study. The ethnographic part of this study centred predominantly on Oaxaca, where sustained field research yielded substantial empirical data.

This paper employs also a descriptive methodology, eschewing prescriptive conclusions in favor of a systematic examination of the *Buen Vivir* paradigm. The analysis is grounded in a focused

review of selected scholarly literature, drawing primarily from seminal works published in leading academic journals by established researchers in the field. Rather than attempting comprehensive coverage, this study offers a targeted exploration of key themes and considerations that emerge from these authoritative sources engaging with both theoretical frameworks and empirical analyses. The conceptual foundation is set up through engagement with key theorists of *Buen Vivir* and development alternatives, including Gudynas' critiques of neo-extractivism and his conceptualization of *Buen Vivir* as a post-development alternative.

This research is informed by my extensive engagement with key theoretical frameworks and practitioners in the field of *Buen Vivir* and development critique spanning the past decade (2014-2024). The choice of articles has been substantively informed by my extensive engagement with leading scholars in the field, including participation in advanced seminars conducted by Eduardo Gudynas and Richard Lalander among others, complemented by sustained involvement in critical development discourse forums. A significant part of this theoretical engagement has centred on the ongoing regular scholarly dialogues at *Universidad de la Tierra (Unitierra)*, the University of the Earth) in Oaxaca, Mexico - initially under the guidance of preeminent development critic Gustavo Esteva until 2022, and later through regular collective intellectual exchanges. These forums have featured contributions from notable scholars in *Buen Vivir* discourse and development critique, including Alberto Acosta, thereby enriching the theoretical underpinnings of this analysis.

This sustained scholarly engagement has helped a methodologically rigorous selection of source material for the present study. The analysis is further enriched by Ranta's (2018) comparative examination of *Vivir Bien* implementation in Bolivia and

Radcliffe's (2015) critical feminist perspective on state-Indigenous relations in Ecuador. These works are complemented by scholarship examining the institutional transformation of Indigenous concepts into state policy, particularly focusing on the divergences between grassroots Indigenous conceptualizations and state interpretations of *Buen Vivir*.

The research methodology prioritizes analytical reflection on specific aspects of *Buen Vivir* as articulated in the selected literature, while maintaining a circumscribed scope that acknowledges the limitations of the source material. Through critical engagement with these texts, the study aims to elucidate the conceptual framework of *Buen Vivir* and examine the theoretical implications raised by these scholarly discussions. This focused approach allows for a nuanced exploration of specific dimensions of the *Buen Vivir* paradigm while remaining within the methodological boundaries established by the selected literature base.

Theoretical Framework of *Buen Vivir*

Indigenous Knowledge systems that led to *Buen Vivir* gained increasing prominence in national political discourses in Bolivia and Ecuador through the emergence of decolonial movements and growing critiques of modernist extractivist practices. Indigenous Peoples' enhanced political agency was driven by this shift in political consciousness manifested through organizations such as Ecuador's *CONAIE* (Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador, *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*) and notably through Bolivia's national leadership under Evo Morales. Morales, an *Aymara* Indigenous leader and former head of the Peasant Workers Federal Syndicate Union of Bolivia (*Confederación Sindical Única de Trabajadores Campesinos de*

Bolivia, CSUTCB), ascended to the presidency in 2006, marking a notable change in Indigenous political representation. His background in Bolivia's largest agricultural workers' union organization exemplified the increasing institutional power of Indigenous voices in regional politics. (Ranta 2018, 36-37)

According to Ranta (2018, 65), the Bolivian concept of *Vivir Bien*, derived from the Aymara Indigenous principle of *Suma Qamaña*, exhibits distinct characteristics from Ecuador's *Buen Vivir*, which originates from the Kichwa Indigenous concept of *Sumak Kawsay*. In the Ecuadorian context, the state's interpretation and implementation of *Buen Vivir* under Correa's administration demonstrated marked divergence from Indigenous social movements' conceptualization of *Sumak Kawsay*. It is noteworthy that both Bolivian and Ecuadorian Indigenous communities encompass heterogeneous cosmovisions and cultural manifestations, resulting in localized variations in the cultural foundations and Indigenous epistemologies underlying *Buen Vivir*. *Buen Vivir* is not synonymous to *Sumak Kawsay* nor *Suma Qamaña* that even if the implementations and understandings of each government are locally adapted. Radcliffe (2015) demonstrates that Indigenous women in Ecuador have critiqued state-implemented *Buen Vivir* policies as potentially constituting another iteration of colonial governance mechanism aimed at controlling and administering Indigenous agendas - effectively functioning as a form of environmental neo-colonialism. This perspective illuminates the complex power dynamics and potential contradictions inherent in state appropriation of Indigenous concepts.

The *Buen Vivir* framework encompasses a conceptualization of human dignity and well-being that diverges from conventional Western developmental models. The *Buen Vivir* approach suggests that true human

dignity and well-being can only be achieved through balanced relationships within human communities and with the natural world, rather than through individual achievement or material success (Kothari et al. 2019, Gudynas 2011).

However, a fundamental contradiction emerges in the implementation of *Buen Vivir* in practice: the financing of these social programs and the pursuit of "decent life" standards primarily relies on extractive industries, particularly hydrocarbon and petroleum extraction. This creates a complex tension between Indigenous philosophical principles and practical economic imperatives.

This paradox illustrates the challenging interface between traditional Indigenous values and contemporary economic necessities, raising critical questions about the practical implementation of alternative development paradigms in the context of persistent poverty and economic constraints.

According to prominent Uruguayan scholar Eduardo Gudynas (2011), whose work is frequently cited in discourse surrounding *Buen Vivir*, the concept encompasses concrete strategic proposals and methodological frameworks. This systematic articulation directly challenges critics who dismiss *Buen Vivir* as merely representing a nostalgic or mystical return to pre-modern Indigenous practices. Gudynas' scholarly contributions demonstrate that *Buen Vivir* constitutes a coherent philosophical and practical framework for alternative development, rather than a romanticized reconstruction of traditional lifestyles. There are practical actions that have been taken such as legal reforms and introduction of environmental accounting, tax reforms, dematerialization of economics and alternative regional integration within South America.

The analysis needs a critical examination of the practical challenges and inherent contradictions embedded within the *Buen*

Vivir paradigm, particularly in evaluating its potential as a post-neoliberal alternative. A fundamental paradox emerges in that nations adopting *Buen Vivir* principles often exhibit intensified dependency on natural resource extraction and extractivist economic models, rather than representing a clear departure from Western developmental frameworks.

Gudynas (2011) articulates that the *Buen Vivir* paradigm encompasses dual theoretical foundations: first, as a critical response to Western developmental theory, particularly manifested in neoliberal market reforms of the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries, and second, as an alternative developmental framework derived from Indigenous epistemologies. The emergence of *Buen Vivir* coincided with widespread social and environmental movements that arose in opposition to the deleterious effects of conventional development projects, leading to a simultaneous rejection and re-conceptualization of Western developmental models.

Buen Vivir's theoretical framework achieved formal recognition through its constitutional incorporation in Ecuador in 2008 and Bolivia in 2009, representing a significant shift in how these nations conceptualize development and progress. The constitutionalization of *Buen Vivir* principles marks a notable departure from traditional developmental paradigms, institutionalizing alternative approaches to social and economic organization derived from Indigenous cosmovisions. (Gudynas 2011, 411-412)

According to Basque economist Dr. Villalba (2013) *Buen Vivir* is an Indigenous cultural concept and with it is meant excellent, harmonious, beautiful and superior dynamic living, living well. The Indigenous epistemological framework that underpins *Buen Vivir* fundamentally diverges from Western notions of linear cultural progress. Instead of pursuing

perpetual advancement and improvement, hallmarks of Western developmental theory, this alternative paradigm emphasizes qualitative well-being in the present moment. This conceptual framework represents not merely a different approach to development, but rather a fundamental ontological shift in how human flourishing is understood and pursued.

Central to this philosophy is the notion of temporal satisfaction, a conscious resistance to the Western imperative of constant progress. This manifests as an emphasis on present-moment consciousness and experiential fulfillment, rather than the continuous pursuit of future improvements. Such an orientation suggests a radical departure from the teleological assumptions embedded in Western developmental models, proposing instead a mode of existence that prioritizes immediate experiential quality over quantitative advancement.

This temporal reorientation challenges fundamental assumptions about progress and human fulfillment that have dominated global development discourse, offering an alternative conception of societal well-being that is not predicated on continuous growth or improvement.

The conceptual framework of *Buen Vivir* encompasses multiple interconnected dimensions of social organization and spiritual practice that diverge significantly from Western individualistic paradigms. This framework integrates consensual decision-making processes, collective labor practices, and the incorporation of cosmological and spiritual dimensions into quotidian existence. These elements are not compartmentalized, but rather function as integrated components of a holistic approach to human fulfillment and social organization.

Central to this paradigm is the principle of reciprocity, which operates both at interpersonal and communal levels. The

framework emphasizes collective well-being through communal living arrangements and shared responsibilities, while simultaneously asserting the universal right of access to these elements of fulfillment. This egalitarian approach to well-being represents a fundamental departure from hierarchical social structures, positioning equitable access to the components of *Buen Vivir* as a fundamental right rather than a privileged condition.

The integration of these various elements connected to *Buen Vivir*, consensus-building, collective labor, spirituality, communal living and related matters, creates a comprehensive framework for social organization that challenges conventional Western conceptions of individual achievement and personal advancement (Villalba 2013).

Anthropologist Postero (2013) elucidates that the *Kichwa* concept of *Sumak Kawsay* in Ecuador encompasses a comprehensive understanding of communal fulfillment, wherein the collective social organizational structure is intrinsically valued. This conceptualization positions community cohesion not merely as an instrumental good, but as a fundamental component of human flourishing.

Within this framework, the communal dimension of existence is understood as integral to, rather than incidental to, the realization of a fulfilled life. This interpretation suggests that the social fabric itself constitutes a core element of well-being, challenging individualistic paradigms of human development and satisfaction.

Although the enumerated rights within Ecuador's constitutional framework parallel those found in various Western and non-Western traditions, the revolutionary aspect of the Ecuadorian model lies in its innovative integration of governance and development paradigms. The constitution mandates a holistic approach wherein

economic, social, cultural, and environmental domains must be systematically aligned to facilitate the realization of *Sumak Kawsay*.

This integration represents a significant departure from conventional governance models by establishing an explicit constitutional imperative for the harmonization of multiple societal spheres in service of Indigenous conceptualizations of well-being. The framework thus transcends traditional rights-based approaches by embedding these rights within a broader developmental philosophy that demands structural alignment across all domains of governance.

In Ecuador development is required to fulfill Rights of Nature or *Pachamama*. There is a biocentric posture that recognizes intrinsic values in the nature in Ecuador, whereas in Bolivia the right is formulated as it is also presented within the classical third generation the Human Rights, quality of life and protection of the environment (Gudynas 2011, 413).

The *Buen Vivir* paradigm thus comes not merely as a critique of existing systems, but as an alternative conceptual framework for redefining societal progress and human-environmental relationships. This theoretical reorientation suggests the potential for reconceptualizing development itself, moving beyond traditional metrics of economic growth to encompass broader considerations of ecological integrity and social well-being. Such a reformulation challenges fundamental assumptions about the nature of progress while proposing alternative metrics for evaluating societal advancement.

This observation regarding the gradual nature of systemic change highlights the complex dynamics involved in translating Indigenous philosophical principles into concrete policy frameworks and societal transformations. The ongoing nature of this transition underscores the need to conceptualize *Buen Vivir* as an emergent

rather than fully realized alternative to established developmental models.

Economist Alberto Acosta's (2013, 2015) analysis of *Buen Vivir* comes from his dual position as both scholar and policy practitioner, informed by his role in Ecuador's constitutional process and his tenure as Minister of Energy and Mining in 2007. His theoretical framework synthesizes normative principles with pragmatic policy prescriptions, articulating a developmental paradigm predicated on the integration of solidarity and sustainability as foundational economic values. Central to his conceptualization is the constitutional recognition of Rights of Nature, Rights of *Pachamama*, alongside the incorporation of Indigenous epistemological principles of reciprocity, complementarity, and collective responsibility. Acosta's framework further emphasizes the significance of cultural pluralism and participatory democracy as essential components for systemic transformation. These theoretical and policy proposals directly address the implementation challenges that I will be examine in a later analysis.

Buen Vivir in Practice

Villalba (2013) names a fundamental tension in the implementation of *Buen Vivir* principles: the reliance on extractive industries, particularly petroleum and other natural resources, to finance social transformation and poverty alleviation initiatives in both Bolivia and Ecuador. This dependency creates a significant contradiction between theoretical principles and practical implementation strategies.

The framework attempts to differentiate itself from historically repressive extractivist practices by emphasizing inclusive stakeholder engagement and multilateral dialogue. However, this theoretical commitment to incorporating diverse perspectives and interests confronts

practical challenges in reconciling environmental stewardship with immediate socioeconomic imperatives.

This paradox illuminates the complex dynamics between transformative social policy and resource extraction, highlighting the challenges inherent in operationalizing alternative development paradigms within existing economic constraints. The tension between Indigenous philosophical principles and extractivist economic practices raises critical questions about the practical viability of *Buen Vivir* as currently implemented (Villalba 2013).

According to Lalander, whose research at Helsinki and Stockholm Universities has focused on this domain, Ecuador's constitutional framework embodies a fundamental tension: it simultaneously enshrines Rights of Nature while asserting the state's prerogative and obligation to exploit natural resources for societal benefit. This dichotomy is particularly evident in the context of poverty reduction initiatives, where environmental protection principles collide with developmental imperatives. This constitutional paradox illuminates the complex interplay between environmental rights and socioeconomic development objectives within Ecuador's legal framework. The dual mandate, protecting nature while utilizing natural resources for poverty alleviation, represents a significant theoretical and practical challenge in the implementation of *Buen Vivir* principles (Lalander, 2014).

Postero (2013) identifies significant disparities between *Buen Vivir* ideals and their practical implementation in Bolivia. Despite experiencing substantial climate change-related impacts, the nation continues to pursue large-scale development projects. In Bolivia the nationalization of the resources and other quick remedies have been used to provide funds for such changes as the retirement account for senior citizens, according to which the over 60-year-olds receive about

300 U.S. dollars a year (Posteris 2013, 82). This contradiction manifests in multiple domains, particularly affecting Indigenous communities, who have experienced adverse health outcomes from environmental degradation and displacement without adequate provision for cultural and livelihood preservation or equitable distribution of development benefits.

A notable paradox emerges in the positioning of President Evo Morales, who has advocated forcefully for environmental reform in international forums, while simultaneously overseeing domestic policies, which have sometimes marginalized Indigenous opposition and environmental protests. However, this analysis requires contextualization within Bolivia's historical trajectory of extractivism, as contemporary environmental and social challenges represent the culmination of long-standing practices established under previous administrations and stakeholders.

The divergence between rhetorical commitments and practical implementation exemplifies the complex challenges in transitioning from historically entrenched extractivist economic models to alternative development paradigms, even under leadership nominally committed to Indigenous rights and environmental protection.

The loudest and perhaps yet unresolved Bolivian conflict is the TIPNIS highway construction development project (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro-Secure, Indigenous Territory and Isiboro-Secure National Park) and respectively in the Yasuni-ITT oil drilling development project in Ishpingo, Tiputini and Tambococha areas in Yasuni rainforest in Ecuador. These cases share significant commonalities, because they involve national parks with resident Indigenous populations, and both instances generated widespread national opposition movements

against the proposed development projects. The convergence of protected area status, Indigenous territorial rights, and broad-based resistance movements illustrates the complex intersections of conservation, Indigenous rights, and national development priorities.

This pattern of conflict between state development initiatives and coalition-based opposition in protected Indigenous territories is a recurring tension in the implementation of *Buen Vivir* principles. The emergence of broad national resistance movements in both cases suggests systematic challenges in reconciling development imperatives with Indigenous rights and environmental protection within the *Buen Vivir* framework.

The TIPNIS highway project in Bolivia was halted in 2011 due to significant Indigenous and environmental protests, nonetheless President Morales continued it in 2017 claiming the Indigenous People now wanted the highway built. Additionally, the Yasuni-ITT project was launched in the name of the greater good and continues despite significant Indigenous and environmental protests and a referendum, where the people of Ecuador voted for discontinuing the project (Olmos 2024, Collyns 2023). In both instances, government responses to opposition movements exhibited similar patterns of delegitimization, with critics being characterized as oppositional to national interests. The official discourse framed social protest movements as manifestations of self-interest rather than legitimate expressions of environmental or Indigenous concerns. This rhetorical strategy of dismissing opposition through accusations of selfishness represents a significant departure from the inclusive dialogue principles supposedly embedded in the *Buen Vivir* framework.

This pattern of delegitimization raises critical questions about the practical implementation of participatory principles

within the *Buen Vivir* paradigm, particularly when confronted with opposition to state-sponsored development initiatives. The disparity between theoretical commitments to inclusive dialogue and actual responses to dissent highlights tensions inherent in the operationalization of *Buen Vivir* principles (Lalander 2014, 17-21).

Alternative Models from Southern Mexico

In this chapter I will discuss historical context, governance models, environmental practices and social organizational outcomes in the context of the alternative models from the Zapatistas of Chiapas state Southern Mexico: and the Oaxacan social movements from the Oaxaca state. The primary ethnographic research was conducted in Oaxaca, where extensive fieldwork provided the empirical foundation for this analysis, even if I conducted field research in Chiapas as well.

In 2020 in Chiapas there lived 5,543,828 people according to INEGI (Instituto Nacional de Estadística y Geografía, the national statistics agency). Chiapas' area of regional highlights includes coastal plains, mountain ranges, and valleys in an area of 73,311 km² (INEGI). The forests and jungles of Chiapas are known for their richness in biodiversity. The Zapatista social movement in Chiapas presents a particularly compelling case study in the successful implementation of principles analogous to *Buen Vivir*, demonstrating the practical viability of harmonizing human development with environmental stewardship through their well-developed autonomous sufficiency practices and the living Indigenous Knowledge with participants from the following Indigenous cultures: *Tzeltal*, *Tzotzil*, *Ch'ol* and *Tojolabal* (Mora 2017, 1).

The emergence of the Zapatista movement is contextualized within the autonomous communal traditions of Mexico's

Indigenous peoples and the systemic marginalization they have experienced. When the Zapatista uprising materialized in 1994, the Mexican state's response was shaped by concerns about potential parallel movements, particularly in Oaxaca, leading to legislative measures aimed at institutionalizing Indigenous autonomy.

The Zapatista movement is very stable, constant, and well organized since its beginning in 1992. It exemplifies how autonomous Indigenous communities have successfully countered socioeconomic marginalization through collective organization and the revitalization of endogenous epistemologies, presenting an alternative to extractivist development paradigms. Stephen's (1997) empirical analysis shows that this model of autonomy has eased increased political participation across demographic constituencies, notably among women and youth, while the preservation of collective rights, particularly regarding land tenure, has strengthened Indigenous communities' capacity for self-determination in Zapatista-controlled territories.

Recent scholarship by Terrats Galindo (2023) documents the emergence of an Indigenous-centred healthcare delivery system that simultaneously addresses historical inequities and upholds cultural rights. This case study illustrates how Indigenous autonomy can enhance the efficacy and cultural appropriateness of essential services, specifically in the healthcare sector, while simultaneously reinforcing traditional knowledge systems and practices. The Zapatista experience thus provides a compelling model for Indigenous self-governance that reconciles contemporary service provision with cultural preservation and community empowerment.

The Zapatista model appears to avoid many of the contradictions evident in the national implementations of *Buen Vivir* in Bolivia and Ecuador. However, methodological

caution is warranted in drawing direct comparisons between the Zapatista experience and national-level implementations, given significant differences in scale, population, and socioeconomic challenges, even if the Indigenous populations in Latin America face similar issues. The relatively limited geographical scope of the Zapatista autonomous municipalities, compared to the comprehensive demands of managing poverty reduction at a national scale, suggests the need for careful consideration of scalability factors in assessing alternative development models.

The Zapatista experience offers an instructive counterpoint, demonstrating the efficacy of selective adaptation of external knowledge while maintaining local autonomy over implementation processes. This model of development, characterized by community-directed decision-making in such as healthcare, agriculture, education and related factors, has facilitated not only material improvements, but also enhanced collective self-efficacy through endogenous change processes rather than top-down implementation.

Subsequently, the 2006 social movement in Oaxaca, precipitated by educational disputes, was born from socioeconomic conditions analogous to those in Chiapas, characterized by endemic poverty and institutional corruption. According to INEGI in Oaxaca lived 4,132,148 people in 2020 in 93,757 km² in the land of fertile valleys, cooler mountains, and warmer Pacific Ocean coastline. Oaxaca exhibits exceptional ethnolinguistic diversity, encompassing twenty distinct ethnic groups: *Amuzgo*, *Afromestizo*, *Chatino*, *Chinantec*, *Chocho*, *Chontal*, *Cuicatec*, *Huave*, *Ixcatec*, *Mazatec*, *Mixe*, *Mixtec*, *Nahuatl*, *Popoloca*, *Tacuate*, *Triqui*, *Tzotzile*, *Zapotec*, *Zoque*, and mestizos (Mononen-Matias 2012). The linguistic complexity is particularly clear within the Zapotec language family, which comprises fifty-eight distinct languages, contributing

to the region's total of 165 documented Indigenous languages (Eberhard, Simons, and Fennig 2023). According to INEGI demographic data, Oaxaca has the highest concentration of Indigenous peoples and cultural diversity among all Mexican states.

The state's Indigenous population includes multiple ethnolinguistic groups, standing for a significant cultural and linguistic heterogeneity within Mexico's broader Indigenous demographic landscape. This cultural plurality reflects not only in population statistics but also in the preservation of distinct socio-cultural practices, governance systems, and territorial arrangements. The demographic prominence of Indigenous populations in Oaxaca has contributed to the state's distinctive sociopolitical configuration, particularly in relation to Indigenous autonomy and communal land management practices. (Mononen-Matias 2023)

Both Mexican states, Oaxaca and Chiapas, have faced pressing needs to address the precarious conditions affecting Indigenous communities, who have been disproportionately impacted by development initiatives, including wind energy projects and extractive industries.

In Oaxaca, these underlying tensions have evolved into an educational conflict, where opposition to governmental reforms stems from their perceived inadequacy in addressing the region's diverse conditions. Notably, since the 1980s, the local *Sección 22* teachers' union has developed an alternative educational framework, The Plan for Educational Transformation of Oaxaca (*Plan para la Transformación de la Educación de Oaxaca*, *PTEO*). This curriculum has been specifically designed by the Oaxacan basic education teachers to accommodate Oaxaca's distinctive cultural heritage, Indigenous traditions, linguistic diversity, social issues, and geographical variations (Sección 22, 2013).

Drawing from extensive ethnographic fieldwork and participatory and

collaborative research conducted during the 2006 Oaxacan social movement and forward, my empirical field work studies at the grassroots level reveal that despite state and federal interventions to suppress the resistance, the movement catalysed significant sociopolitical transformations. The precipitating event of the 2006 Oaxacan social movement occurred on June 14, 2006, when state authorities employed violent repression against Section 22 of the National Union of Education Workers (SNTE) during their annual demonstration. Stephen (1999) analyses the systematic state violence perpetrated against Indigenous Oaxacans as a manifestation of structural repression that extends beyond physical confrontation to target indigenous epistemological frameworks and autonomous governance systems. This systematic oppression works both through direct military and police interventions and through more subtle forms of institutional discrimination, reflecting what Stephen identifies as a deep-seated official hostility toward Indigenous modes of social and political organization. There it can be concluded that the state authorities perceive Indigenous Knowledge systems and organizational structures as fundamentally threatening to hegemonic power relations, resulting in sustained patterns of institutional violence that persist into contemporary contexts.

This state-sanctioned use of force against the teachers' peaceful protest catalysed widespread public outrage, transforming what had been a sector-specific labour action into a broad-based popular mobilization. The violent intervention, authorized by Governor Ulises Ruiz Ortiz, served as a crucial turning point that galvanized diverse sectors of Oaxacan society, including Indigenous communities, civil organizations, and urban residents, leading to the formation of the Popular Assembly of the Peoples of Oaxaca (APPO). This convergence of social forces marked the transition from a localized

teachers' protest to a comprehensive social movement challenging the legitimacy of state governance and demanding structural reforms in one of Mexico's most economically marginalized regions (Mononen-Matias 2012, 2023).

The socio-cultural fabric of Oaxacan society is characterized by deeply embedded Indigenous epistemologies and practices, with a considerable proportion of the population keeping robust ethnocultural Indigenous ancestral lineage and ancestral epistemological foundations. This cultural continuity has fostered the development of community-based initiatives that draw upon traditional communal organizational structures. The concept of communality (*comunalidad*) stands for a fundamental ontological framework that has persisted through intergenerational transmission, maintaining its salience even within contemporary urban contexts. This social paradigm transcends mere cultural practice, embodying a complex system of social organization and collective identity formation that has proved remarkable resilience and adaptability across rural-urban transitions.

The persistence of communality as both a theoretical construct and lived experience illustrates the dynamic nature of Indigenous knowledge systems in contemporary Oaxacan society, challenging simplistic rural-urban dichotomies and showing the adaptability of traditional social structures to modern contexts. (Martínez Luna 2010, Mononen-Matias fieldnotes 2006-2024).

The Impacts of the Oaxacan Social Movement in 2006

In this chapter discuss how Indigenous Knowledge systems, communal resistance to extractivism and communal governance practices have been operationalized in Oaxaca in 2006 and after.

The collective experience of solidarity during the popular uprising in 2006 reinforced existing communal traditions, which continue to influence contemporary social movements in the region. This communality has been instrumental in advancing concepts of participatory democracy and community autonomy, proving the enduring impact of Indigenous organizational principles on modern social mobilization. Oaxacan social movement participators talked in 2006 about the Oaxacan Commune and in doing so made a connection to the Commune of Paris in 1871 that lasted for fifty days. The APPO (Oaxacan Peoples' Popular Assembly), the collective and communitarian resistance organization formed by stakeholders in Oaxaca, and non-affiliated Oaxacan peoples, kept de facto power in the state for about one hundred days, taking over government buildings and building barricades (Mononen-Matias 2012, 2023, Ramirez 2010).

The resistance of 2006 gave the notion of the capabilities of the society, for example when Oaxacan citizens raised about 1500-3000 barricades, that were upheld by residents for the defence of the resistance and the common people against the death patrols and other violent state or paramilitary forces (CIODDH 2007, Mononen-Matias, Field notes from 2006 to 2024). During this period, the people of Oaxaca noticed that there was no crime, other than the human rights offences related to state actors. Throughout the period of autonomous governance, the notable absence of criminal activity stood in marked contrast to the prevalent patterns of crime and impunity characteristic of broader Mexican society. According to CIODDH (2008) twenty-six political murders during the 2006 Oaxaca uprising, in 2007, the number was twenty-one and in 2008 until April, there were fifteen reported cases of murders of people taking part in the resistance. This previously mentioned empirical anomaly in crime rates during

“Oaxaca Commune” is still a significant element in the collective memory of residents, offering insights into alternative approaches to community safety and social order.

The movement's transformative impact on gender dynamics appeared through what seemed like quotidian practices, particularly as individual women of all ages, homemakers, spontaneously joined collective resistance activities through traditional food provision, exemplifying the organic formation of solidarity networks. This bottom-up process of social organization, where individual actors coalesced into collective formations, became emblematic of the movement's broader dynamics. Subsequently, numerous communities such as the Zapotec communities in the Windmill electric industry parks in Istmo area and Paso del la Reina hydraulic plant, have mobilized against extractive development initiatives that threaten their territorial sovereignty, ancestral lands, and livelihood. Concurrently, the teachers' movement, specifically Section 22 of the National Education Workers' Union (SNTE), has developed pedagogical alternatives that integrate Indigenous epistemologies and cultural practices. These educational initiatives are a significant departure from hierarchical instructional models, instead emphasizing community-based learning processes and the cultivation of critical consciousness as well as Indigenous Knowledge.

The 2006 social movement established autonomous media networks, notably community radio stations such as *Radio Plantón* and *Radio Universidad*, which have served as crucial platforms for Indigenous language preservation, Indigenous Knowledge transmission, and collective organization. Indigenous communities have traditional governance mechanisms through communitarian assemblies, *asambleas*, and collective labour practices, *tequio*. These institutional

arrangements present practical alternatives to centralized governance, particularly within Indigenous municipalities operating under *Usos y Costumbres*, Uses and Customs, customary law systems. The proliferation of street art has unveiled since 2006 previously suppressed truths from the Indigenous world, presenting a stark contrast to the official narratives given by the government. This revolutionary art, now featured in galleries, has sparked debate over whether it has transformed into a tourist attraction rather than continuing as a medium for conveying untold truths. (Mononen-Matias 2010, Mononen-Matias fieldnotes 2006-2024).

The movements have catalysed micro-scale alternative development initiatives through cooperative enterprises and solidarity economy networks that prioritize collective wellbeing over capital accumulation. These encompass community markets, artisanal cooperatives, and fair-trade initiatives that strengthen local production systems. Cultural revitalization has manifested through various initiatives, with movements reinforcing Indigenous identity and traditional practices. This cultural resurgence can be seen in the alternative *Guelaguetza* festivals or peoples' celebrations organized annually by Section 22 educators, along with the revitalization of marginalized artistic expressions and traditional healing practices.

The practice of communal celebration stands for a fundamental sociocultural mechanism for intergenerational transmission within Indigenous Oaxacan societies. While the state government's institutionalization of *Guelaguetza* festivals was designed to promote cultural tourism through folkloric representations, this appropriation has prompted resistance, notably through the alternative teacher's *Guelaguetza* celebration. This resistance appears from a critique of the state's commodification of Indigenous cultural practices, which effectively decontextualizes these traditions while

simultaneously marginalizing contemporary Indigenous peoples, their cultural expressions, and their epistemological frameworks.

The *Guelaguetza*, in its original Indigenous context, functions as a vital social institution embodying principles of reciprocity, mutual aid, and collective welfare - concepts deeply embedded in Oaxacan Indigenous social structures. The state's appropriation of this practice stands for a significant departure from these foundational principles. This disconnection between traditional meaning and contemporary presentation could potentially be addressed through structural reforms in the festival's organization, particularly through the implementation of culturally correct profit-sharing mechanisms and increased Indigenous community involvement in decision-making processes, thereby better serving the needs and interests of Oaxaca's Indigenous populations. (Mononen-Matias 2013, 2023, Montes García 2005, Osorno 2007)

Furthermore, communities have mounted effective resistance against extractive industries while implementing localized environmental conservation programs, proving the efficacy of grassroots approaches to ecological sustainability. These initiatives collectively represent an emerging paradigm of community-based development and environmental stewardship, which include the ancestral Indigenous Knowledge that is transgenerational. Traditional Indigenous mezcal artisans, or *mezcaleros*, exemplify the stewardship that only true guardians of the land can provide. They have intricate knowledge of the various maguey cactus species, their specific living conditions, and sustainable harvesting techniques to prevent the extinction of wild plants. In contrast, commercial maguey cultivation and the production of mezcal and tequila are associated with environmental degradation,

including wasteful water management, soil depletion and erosion (Alcona et al. 2024).

While approximately fifty extractivist ventures operate within Oaxaca, examining even a small subset of these cases illuminates how areas unburdened by such activities have avoided the characteristic patterns of conflict and destabilization that frequently accompany resource exploitation in the Mexican context. The absence of extractive industry operations in certain regions of Oaxaca proves, through counterfactual analysis, the positive social outcomes that manifest when communities are spared from the socio-environmental disruptions typically associated with resource extraction projects.

The mining conflict in San José del Progreso, situated sixty kilometres from the state capital Oaxaca de Juárez, exemplifies these tensions. I have followed this conflict since 2009 and observed that has resulted in fatal consequences for local environmental defenders from the Zapotec Indigenous community resisting the mining on their traditional lands, notably the assassination of a community spokesperson Bernardo Vasquez Sanchez in 2012 and at least two others have been murdered by those who gain from the mine's existence. The systemic impunity characterizes the state of Oaxaca, particularly concerning the murders of Human Rights activists and defenders of environmental and Indigenous rights. The extensive mining concessions granted to surrounding territories without proper procedural compliance have made the situation worsened. The fear installed in the community members by the violence limits the protests, because about a half of community members fear for their own or their loved ones lives still on my latest visit in 2023. The mining company in question *Minera Cuzcatlán* belonging to Canadian Fortuna Mines LTD. presents on their

homepage how they have community and stakeholder engagement included in their plan¹, but the negative effects testified during field studies outweigh the benefits. The change brought by the mine growing from 2009 to 2023 to overpowering the vicinity of the population and the remarkably close proximity to the village, which can even be seen in Google satellite maps imagery. Also, the fact that the mine is under the village in this earthquake prone area is worrying, while the environmental impact studies are not to be relied on. The mine has polluted the local water resources twice. Even so the mining concessions now cover vast areas, which has resulted in an increased worry among the Native Oaxacan Zapotec population in the area and resulted in a unified front resisting the mining called *Pueblos Unidos del Valle de Ocotlán* (Copuvo, United Peoples from the Ocotlán Valley). (Mononen-Matias fieldnotes 2006-2024).

Another extractivist development example is another ongoing mining conflict in between the authorities of the municipality of Capulálpam de Méndez, Sierra Norte of Oaxaca, and the mining company Minera Natividad y Anexas. There the state authorities have ordered to shut down the mining operations twice, but the mining continues illegally. The mining company have been reportedly attacking violently the local authorities who have come forward to report illegalities. The mining concessions belonged to the same Fortuna Mines LTD as in the case of Minera Cuzcatlán mentioned, but have since been transferred to Zapata Exploration LTD, located in Vancouver, Canada. The company is using the revolutionary hero, particularly dear to the peasant and Indigenous peoples of Mexico, Emiliano Zapata. The mining company holds concessions and projects even in other municipalities in the

¹ <https://www.mineracuzcatlan.com/desarrollo-compartido>, "Shared development" on Minera Cuzcatlán's homepage, but not all in the village have these benefits, nor do they want it, because the people resisting the mine want safety that includes the health of the earth of their territory and well-being.

area: Talea de Castro, Santa María Lachatao y Natividad. (EDUCA 2024a, 2024b).

The escalation of these conflicts reflects broader patterns of contestation between Indigenous sovereignty and resource extraction in contemporary Mexico, where procedural justice and environmental governance intersect with questions of Indigenous autonomy and territorial rights. The case of San José del Progreso illustrates the complex interplay between local resistance, state authority, and corporate interests in the context of resource development on Indigenous lands.

Comparative Analysis

The constitutional implementations of *Buen Vivir* in Bolivia and Ecuador reflect distinct interpretative frameworks, despite their shared Indigenous origins. The Bolivian constitution codifies *Buen Vivir* as a normative ethical framework derived from Indigenous multicultural principles, emphasizing its role as a moral philosophical foundation for governance. In contrast, the Ecuadorian constitutional framework operationalizes *Buen Vivir* through a rights-based approach, delineating specific entitlements encompassing fundamental human needs including healthcare, housing, education, nutrition, and environmental protection. This divergence in constitutional interpretation reflects different approaches to institutionalizing Indigenous philosophical principles within contemporary legal frameworks. While both nations draw from Indigenous cosmovisions, their distinct constitutional articulations show the flexibility of the *Buen Vivir* concept in accommodating different governance approaches, while keeping its essential philosophical foundations (Gudynas 2011, 412-413).

The conceptualization of *Buen Vivir* represents a dynamic, evolving philosophical framework rather than a static construct. However, its fundamental principles resonate with historical and cross-cultural patterns of human-nature relationships that preceded modernization. The pre-Christian Finnish cosmology (Siikala 2016), for instance, exemplifies parallel conceptualizations of human-environmental integration and sacred relationships with nature, suggesting these perspectives may represent recurring patterns in human societies maintaining close connections to primary production systems. An example on this cosmological relationship is exemplified in the narration of the importance of the night star sky by an informant telling that a legendary sorcerer in the Finnish national epos Kalevala, Väinämöinen², has a place to live in among the stars from where he could turn the places of the stars and so give information about the coming eclipses of the moon and the sun and the weather to be. The Finnish national epos Kalevala is a collection of oral histories on the sacred interconnection with the natural elements and non-human agents and was passed on from generation to generation.

This observation raises significant implications regarding the relationship between modes of production and cosmological frameworks. Societies maintaining direct engagement with food production and natural resources often develop more integrated perspectives on human-nature relationships, reflecting an experiential understanding of biological and ecological interdependencies is not a very novel realization. (Unitierra dialogues 2019-2022, Ellen 1982). This contrasts markedly with the nature-society dualism characteristic of Western modernity, where increasing distance from primary production has corresponded with conceptual separation of humanity from

² Kalevala is a collection of Finnish folk stories published in 1835.

nature. Hence the crisis has been globally acknowledged as resulting from the human development that has caused life on the planet to be endangered. At the Helsinki University there is project remedying the human distancing from other species multispecies storytelling, mostly aimed at children, but also applicable to adults. In this story telling session the participants take a perspective of another being and this is how they get to practice the perspectives of those who cannot speak.³

The *Buen Vivir* framework's emphasis on human-nature integration thus represents not merely an Indigenous philosophical innovation, but rather reflects deeper patterns in human societal organization and environmental relationship. This perspective directly challenges the Western paradigm's externalization of nature, proposing instead a conceptual framework that positions humanity as an integral component of, rather than separate from, natural systems.

Given humanity's fundamental dependence on natural systems, it merits consideration whether *Buen Vivir* might be more accurately conceptualized as a neo-developmental paradigm, offering alternative trajectories and metrics for societal advancement. The emergence of *Buen Vivir* as a theoretical framework coincides with efforts to transcend neoliberal economic models, particularly in response to the demonstrable inadequacies of neoliberalism in addressing both ecological sustainability and social equity in Latin America.

Villalba (2013) posits that Ecuador and Bolivia are undergoing incremental transformative processes in their implementation of *Buen Vivir* principles. This transitional nature of implementation suggests that *Buen Vivir* should be understood not as a fully articulated alternative to conventional development

paradigms, but rather as an evolving framework still in the process of practical and theoretical elaboration.

The dismissal of critical perspectives raises significant questions about the receptivity to alternative developmental approaches, as exemplified by Ecuador's President Correa's response to Yasuni-ITT opposition. This pattern suggests a potential inadequacy in exploring alternative methodologies for achieving social welfare objectives while maintaining fidelity to *Buen Vivir* principles.

The rapid transformation of Bolivian's and Ecuador's socioeconomic structures and their achievement of relative autonomy from international financial institutions represents a remarkable historical development. However, this transformation has been fundamentally dependent on natural resource exploitation, creating a significant tension between developmental objectives and environmental sustainability.

The implementation of *Buen Vivir* principles appears to have encountered pragmatic limitations with leadership under both Correa and Morales adopting essentially capitalist mechanisms for achieving social transformation, despite theoretical commitments to alternative development paradigms. This apparent resignation to conventional economic approaches suggests a perceived absence of viable alternatives for financing social programs and structural reforms.

Nevertheless, this reliance on extractivist approaches that include mentioned TIPNIS and Yasuni oil drilling projects, may represent a failure to fully explore and implement alternative developmental strategies that could have better aligned with *Buen Vivir* principles. The adoption of more innovative approaches might have mitigated some of the social and environmental costs while maintaining

³ University of Helsinki, Children of the Anthropocene – Atmospheres, Research on the Atmospheres of the Environmental Crisis and Multispecies Relations

greater consistency with the philosophical foundations of *Buen Vivir*. This suggests that the current contradictions between theory and practice may reflect not merely practical necessity, but also insufficient exploration of alternative implementation strategies.

Giovannini (2015) names the 1994 Zapatista uprising in Chiapas as a catalyst for Indigenous community enterprises in Chiapas. She states that many Indigenous organizations were founded after 1994 as part of the broader Indigenous rights movement. This is a good reminder that not all Indigenous communities that can be thought to be part of a wider Indigenous movement are Zapatistas. For example, Giovanni (2015) investigated thirteen Indigenous community enterprises and sees these enterprises as concrete manifestations of *Buen Vivir* principles in practice. She exhibits that in these enterprises' collective ownership and management, participatory governance, social goals beyond profit-making, integration of traditional cultural practices and environmental sustainability concerns align with *Buen Vivir*.

Drawing from ethnographic fieldwork and research that included ethnographic observation, convivial and collaborative research conducted in Oaxaca, Southwestern Mexico, and Chiapas, Southern Mexico, observations suggest significant philosophical convergences between local Indigenous epistemologies and the principles of *Buen Vivir*. *Buen Vivir* connects with Oaxacan social movements and Zapatista Movement in Chiapas encompass Indigenous epistemologies and autonomy and like *Buen Vivir*, both Oaxacan movements and Zapatistas emphasize Indigenous Knowledge systems and ways of living sharing a focus on communal decision-making and local autonomy from state control, while all three of them embrace pluralistic worldviews that challenge Western developmental models. Furthermore, all three of them have a close relationship with Nature, while all three

approaches reject extractivist development models and emphasize balance with nature rather than exploitation. For all three of the views, it is central to practice collective land stewardship and defence of territories, the Mother Earth.

Indigenous communities in the Mexican states of Chiapas and Oaxaca face persistent conflicts about extractive development initiatives, including mining operations, wind energy installations, forestry, and hydroelectric facilities. These projects often go ahead without adherence to established protocols, specifically the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) mechanism mandated by international law, and often lack comprehensive environmental impact assessments.

The success of this approach by the Oaxacan social movements and Zapatistas includes the previously mentioned values participatory governance, social goals beyond profit-making, integration of traditional cultural practices and environmental sustainability concerns that result in an increased well-being due improved social well-being for the Indigenous peoples and social justice, improved possibilities to have their needs heard and considered, fulfilled. This can be partially attributed to its foundation in Mexican Indigenous cosmovisions, Indigenous Knowledge such as customary practices and traditional philosophical frameworks that emphasize environmental stewardship, suggesting that Indigenous epistemologies can effectively inform contemporary development practices. This alignment between traditional values and modern development strategies demonstrates the potential viability of alternative approaches to social transformation that maintain greater consistency with *Buen Vivir* principles.

These achievements by the Zapatistas and the Oaxacan social movements, and the Indigenous Knowledge that the movements have highlighted are particularly significant

because they are practical implementations of alternative development models that integrate social justice, cultural dignity, and ecological sustainability. However, the movements continue to face challenges from state repression, economic pressures and constantly growing extractivism e.g. mining projects.

Conclusions

The *Buen Vivir* is an alternative way of thinking about development, it is an alternative to the modern Eurocentric tradition according to Gudynas (2011, 411). This alternative philosophical framework fundamentally reconceptualizes human-nature relationships, rejecting anthropocentric hierarchies in favor of an integrated ecological perspective where humanity is positioned as a constituent element of natural systems rather than superior to them. The evidence from Zapatista communities and Oaxacan social movements in Southern Mexico demonstrates the practical viability of alternative development paradigms grounded in Indigenous epistemologies and local interpretations of principles similar to *Buen Vivir* principles.

This framework presents a direct philosophical challenge to capitalist-consumerist ideologies and their underlying assumptions about human-environment relationships. However, the implementation of these principles in Ecuador and Bolivia reveals significant contradictions between constitutional commitments to Rights of Mother Earth and Indigenous sovereignty, and the practical pursuit of development through extractive industries.

This disjunction between theoretical principles and practical implementation highlights the challenges inherent in operationalizing alternative development paradigms within existing global economic structures. The apparent subordination of environmental and Indigenous rights to

extractive development imperatives suggests significant obstacles in the practical realization of *Buen Vivir* principles at the national level.

The practical implementation of *Buen Vivir* principles remains a significant challenge, particularly given the current reliance on fossil fuel extraction and extractivist policies to facilitate social transformation or as is done in the Western democracies, the social welfare, even if this dependency appears fundamentally incompatible with *Buen Vivir*'s philosophical foundations. There appears to be insufficient exploration of alternative development pathways for example the Zapatista movement and Oaxacan social movements in Southern Mexico present potential models for alternative development strategies more closely aligned with *Buen Vivir* principles and Indigenous Knowledge. This is perhaps an indicator of that because of the nature of the *Buen Vivir* principles, the transfer to it should be constructed and implemented from the below and up and not completely imposed on by the national governments.

The formalization of these principles through constitutional and legal frameworks provides a foundation for developing alternative approaches to development and environmental stewardship. By elevating nature to a matter of public welfare and setting up normative frameworks for human-environment relationships, the *Buen Vivir* paradigm creates institutional structures that could ease the emergence of more sustainable development practices.

The Zapatista and Oaxacan social movements experience challenges the assumed necessity of environmental exploitation for development, suggesting the viability of alternative developmental paradigms. This model demonstrates potential applications beyond rural contexts, as urban environments might similarly benefit from alternative

approaches to well-being, which transcend conventional Western development models.

The Zapatista and Oaxacan social movement experience illustrate, that alternative development models aligned with *Buen Vivir* principles are possible, though questions of scalability remain. More studies focusing on how these principles might be effectively translated into national policy frameworks without compromising their essential character, would provide valuable insights. The grassroots mobilization and autonomous governance practices shown by the social movements in Oaxaca and the Zapatista communities in Chiapas offer instructive empirical insights, which could potentially inform the development of viable implementation strategies for alternative socio-ecological paradigms, for example contribute to the development and implementation of *Buen Vivir*.

The growing severity of contemporary environmental degradation and social inequities has heightened the relevance of *Buen Vivir*, an Indigenous epistemological framework that conceptualizes human-nature relationships and collective wellbeing as inherently interconnected. While the operationalization of this paradigm stays in a state of continuous change, its foundational principles offer significant theoretical and practical contributions to addressing multifaceted global challenges through its integrated approach to social and ecological sustainability. A top-down implementation with the constitutional or legal framework supporting the *Buen Vivir* framework seems to bring more environmental accountability and a platform for a dialogue to the stakeholders the commercial exploitation of natural resources.

The empirical evidence presented in this analysis suggests that effective implementation of alternative development paradigms requires meaningful incorporation of Indigenous epistemologies

through direct participation of Indigenous communities as Indigenous Knowledge experts. Given the inherent complexity of translating Indigenous philosophical frameworks into contemporary practice, states and other non-Indigenous agents must give Indigenous peoples must be given key positions as ambassadors and epistemological authorities in developing and implementing sustainable solutions. The success of grassroots implementations, as proven by Zapatista and Oaxacan experiences, point to the direction that Indigenous communities possess crucial insights for addressing contemporary ecological and social challenges.

This finding has significant implications for addressing the climate crisis: rather than trying to extract or abstract Indigenous Knowledge from its cultural context, governments achieve sustainable solutions are more effectively through processes that actively engage Indigenous communities as equal partners and Indigenous Knowledge holders. Such an approach not only honours Indigenous epistemological sovereignty, but also enhances the practical efficacy of sustainability initiatives by incorporating place-based understanding and time-tested ecological wisdom. As global environmental challenges intensify, the inclusion of Indigenous voices, perspectives, and needs in development processes becomes not merely an ethical imperative, but a practical necessity for crafting workable solutions to our shared ecological crisis.

This reconceptualization of development necessitates fundamental shifts in societal values and consumption patterns. The transition toward sustainable societies requires not only structural changes, but also cultural transformation, replacing consumerist measures of success, exemplified by continuous technological consumption, with metrics more aligned with *Buen Vivir* principles. The realization of *Buen Vivir* as a viable alternative to Western development paradigms thus

requires innovative approaches, which transcend conventional developmental frameworks. This suggests the need for radical reconceptualization of both means and ends in development theory and practice.

This reframing of Nature's status and the emphasis on communal well-being and environmental rights may stand for essential components for achieving genuine sustainable development. The codification of these principles transforms abstract philosophical concepts into concrete policy goals, potentially enabling more effective implementation of sustainable practices.

Concurring with Lalander's (2014) analysis, the constitutional incorporation of Rights of Nature and intrinsic value by governmental entities stands for a revolutionary change in thinking in environmental governance. While conventional pragmatism might dismiss such recognition of Rights of Nature as unrealistic, the mounting evidence of environmental crisis suggests that such radical reconceptualization's may indeed constitute a necessary response to contemporary ecological challenges. That would be a good starting point for implementing *Buen Vivir* together with the consequent respect for the local Indigenous Knowledge and Indigenous territories and starting to find and encourage locally alternative development paths, even in Finland. ♦

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