



From Latin America to Asia
Learning from our roots
A conversation on
Vivir Bien

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Walter Solon Romero, "Tunupa" fragment of the mural "El Retrato de un Pueblo" (The portrait of a People) 1985 - 1989, technic pyroxylin, Universidad Mayor de San Andres, La Paz - Bolivia.

What is *Vivir Bien*?

Vivir Bien is a Spanish word that refers to the way of life of indigenous peoples in South America. The Aymara people call it *sumaqamaña*, the Quechua, *sumakkawsay*, the Peruvian Amazon, *Kametsa Asaiki* and the Guaraní, *ñandereko*. It can also be translated as “living well,” “good life,” “knowing how to live,” “inclusive life,” “sweet life,” among others.

The practice of “*Vivir Bien*” or “*Buen Vivir*” may differ depending on the history, location and culture of each indigenous community in the Andes of South America. But underlying such particularities are some common elements that have been identified and developed into a concept now codified in the constitutions of Ecuador and the Plurinational State of Bolivia.

Many of the underlying principles of “*Vivir Bien*” can be found in indigenous cultures all over the world. Indigenous peoples of the Philippines use different native terms to refer to what they call “simple life,” where one has enough to enjoy life. They also use the words *hayahay*, *hamugaway*, *gumpi-a katubo*. In India they speak of the *Adivasi*¹ way of life. In many cases there are no exact words, but there are similar practices.

What then do these visions have in common? What can we learn from them that can help build our future?

We are currently in a systemic crisis, caused by the capitalist system, which highlights the urgency of finding and creating alternative systems. One key source is our roots located in the non-capitalist societies—experiences, wisdom, knowledge, and practices that indigenous peoples all over the world have preserved. We are not talking about a utopian return to a pre-colonial past, but of the merging of lessons from our ancestors with those from today to build something new. To enlighten the future, we need to learn from things from the past that remain relevant in the present.

Some key concepts for an alternative society


One way to approach the heterogeneous and living concept of “Living Well” is by contrasting it with another vision, what many indigenous peoples of the Andes in South America call “Living Better” in reference to the capitalist way of life.

Bio-society vs. Human-society

In “Living Well,” humans are an integral part of nature, and the two are not taken as separate identities. The goal of humans is not to control nature

1 This word consists of “adi” (original) and “vasi” (inhabitant).





but to take care of nature as one takes care of one's mother that has given one's life. This is where the expression "Mother Earth" comes from. This means that society cannot be understood only in relation to humans but as a community that has nature at the center. On the other side is the anthropocentric vision of "Living Better," embodied in the words of the 1992 Rio Declaration where "human beings are at the center of concern for sustainable development."

For the Adivasis, the word *Adivasi* encompasses not only people but also trees, rivers, wild animals, air, wind, etc. The life of the Adivasis in India is inseparable from the forest. A similar relationship with nature is characteristic of indigenous communities in Thailand, the Philippines and all over the world. The dichotomy between nature and humans does not exist. We are all part of nature and we have to respect nature. The ceremonies that pay tribute to nature vary in different indigenous communities all over the world but all of them worship nature. For example, the Subanen in the Philippines express their respect through the ritual of *maguras* which is performed to seek permission from the spirit guardians of Earth.

"We are not 200 years backwards, but 200 years ahead," said an Adivasi participant from India.

A post-capitalist society has to recover this relationship that the Adivasis of the world have preserved. We need to change not only the economy and the political system but also, and mainly, our relationship with nature.

Rethinking alternatives based on indigenous visions

Focus on the Global South recently undertook a series of exploratory discussions with indigenous peoples, social movements and civil society organizations in Asia to see what can be learned about the concept of "Vivir Bien" as developed in South America; how similar concepts are practiced throughout Asian societies, and whether these concepts can provide feasible alternatives to the neoliberal model. This publication is based on those discussions, which occurred in Thailand, India and the Philippines in the first months of 2013.

While found at the opposite ends of the Earth, Asia and Latin America have many parallel experiences in modern history, such as being governed by neoliberal policies creating widespread social and ecological damage in the name of economic growth. Social movements in both regions have responded by developing alternatives that promote the welfare of people and the planet over the interests of corporations and international capital. One such alternative which has gained much attention in recent years is *Vivir Bien*, or Living Well, developed from common beliefs of indigenous peoples in South America.



The new society has to be a Bio-society and not only a Human-society. This means that society has to recognize and preserve the vital cycles of nature, like the water cycle, and the existence of millions of living beings in biodiversity. We humans may think that we know more but maybe we know less, though we think we are superior to nature. How can we organize the economy, the legal system and democracy to strengthen nature? These are some of the most important challenges for a new society.

Harmony vs. Growth

For “Living Well” the goal is harmony, for “Living Better” it is growth. One vision recognizes that our planet has physical limits and wants to live in equilibrium within these limits. The other wants to find ways to expand beyond the limits. Without growth, the current capitalist system cannot exist. The “Living Well” vision claims exactly the opposite: we can only live if we look for balance. Harmony is not an idyllic status or an end to history. In harmony, there are different sides and emerging contradictions that need to be rebalanced.

Indigenous peoples in the Philippines speak about having enough to sustain life. The purpose of life is not to progress permanently but to have what is necessary to enjoy life.

In the Andean communities of South America the evolution of time is not linear but circular. The concept of progress does not exist or is relative. Growth is not constant. One society/community or generation is not superior to its predecessors. Sometimes going backwards implies a different context. Not all indigenous cultures have these concepts of time and “evolution,” but almost all have rituals to remember and learn from their ancestors.

A new society has to live under a different paradigm of evolution. The linear progress is not possible in a finite planet. The purpose of humanity is not to be always superior but to find how to solve the emerging contradictions seeking for balance. This is the great challenge for the 21st century. Our mindset has been shaped to think about having more. The key concept of the capitalist system is growth; without economic growth, capital cannot expand and make more profit. And capital that does not have a return is not capital.

Many concepts based on this linear vision have to be revised under a new way of life. What is poverty and wealth? Are the developed countries more developed? What does the “right to development” mean? Does it mean the right to follow the same path of development of those capitalist countries that have created a climate crisis with their greenhouse gases? How can we seek balance in a finite planet? Through development (labeled sustainable, integral, etc., but always development) or through redistribution to address inequality?



Community vs. Individualism

When “Living Better,” the focus is on the individual. An individual has to grow, and be better than others even if this means the exploitation of other humans and of nature. Such a society is built not on humanism but on individualism. In “Living Well,” the key is to live in the community with others and nature. Asian cultures are also often known to value community, as in India where many indigenous communities do not believe in private property, but see communities as necessary for helping each other. Excommunication from such a community is feared more than death, because an individual without the community is meaningless. Major milestones are not confined to an individual but shared with the entire community—in this sense, when a child is born, the whole village celebrates, and a marriage is not merely between two people but a bond between two villages. This concept is also prevalent in the Philippines, better expressed in the indigenous term *pamayanan* than in the loan word *komunidad*.

Governed by the philosophy of *adivasi*, there are more egalitarian communities in India that live mainly from the forest without relying on agriculture.

The indigenous communities in the Andes of South America are not egalitarian. There is private property and communitarian property. There are differences and in many cases tensions. They do not negate those individualities but try to live with them through different ways of redistribution such as the responsibility to cover the costs of a community celebration or assigning tasks to the wealthiest as their means to serve the community.

Indigenous communities vary from region to region and country to country, but all over the world the main responsibility of indigenous peoples is toward their community.

A post-capitalist society has to relearn to live in communities while respecting diversity. The individual cannot be above the community. Individuals need the support of the community in order to flourish and in return to enrich the community. It is not the denial of the individual but the recognition that what we are as individuals is a product of the inheritance of communities. This is the case for example of individual knowledge that is always based on previous knowledge in our communities and, as Thai social movements say, it cannot be privatized through trade agreements only to benefit a few corporations.

Complementarity vs. Competition

The vision of “Living Well” does not affirm that everybody is the same or has to be the same. Differences and particularities are part of nature and



Who are indigenous peoples?

Indigenous peoples are spread across to at least 72 countries worldwide. Practicing unique traditions, they have retained social, cultural, economic and political characteristics that are distinct from those of the dominant societies in which they now live. The United Nations has not adopted an official definition of the term “indigenous,” though it has prevailed as a generic term for many years. In some countries, there may be preference for other terms including tribes, first peoples/nations, aboriginals, ethnic groups, *adivasi*, *janajati*.²

Estimations say that indigenous peoples are between 300 to 370 million, representing around six percent of the world population. There is a lot of discussion about these figures; in cases like Indonesia, the government recognizes only 1.1 million indigenous people as *komunitas adat terpencil* (geographically-isolated customary law communities). However, the national indigenous peoples’ alliance, Aliansi Masyarakat Adat Nusantara (AMAN), estimates that there are between 50 to 70 million indigenous peoples in Indonesia from a national general population of 220 million.³

Asia contains 70 percent of the world’s present-day indigenous populations according to the International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs. India has the largest indigenous population with 84 million *adivasis* that represent 8.2 percent of the national population. The Philippines has more than 10 million indigenous peoples and in Thailand officially only a million are recognized. Almost two million of Ecuador’s 14 million inhabitants are indigenous, and Bolivia has around six million, representing 62 percent of the population. In 2005 an indigenous president was elected for the first time in Bolivian history through 54 percent of the votes.



Art by Federico “Boy” Domínguez;
entitled “Karagdagan”

² http://www.un.org/esa/socdev/unpfi/documents/5session_factsheet1.pdf

³ The Indigenous World 2013 by International Work Group for Indigenous Affairs http://www.iwgia.org/iwgia_files_publications_files/0613_EB-THE_INDIGENOUS_ORLD_2013.pdf



life. We have to complement each other in order to complete a balanced whole. The logic of “Living Better” is to compete and try to be better than the others, because the moment one stops competing others will take the lead, and those left behind lose. The Adivasis have a similar concept of mutuality, with critical problems being solved communally. A similar approach exists in many indigenous communities where key issues are addressed in community meetings.

The current capitalist logic says that to be more efficient humans/societies need to compete. The main battlefield for competition is the market. A restrained market results in inefficiency. Solidarity and kindness are merely ceremonial principles while the rules for free competition are established in hard law at national and international levels. The most developed expressions of this logic are free trade agreements. Countries have to focus on the sectors where they have comparative advantages to compete with other countries. Whoever conquers more markets and raw materials sources leads. This logic of free competition is destroying small farmers, countries and nature.

For centuries, indigenous peoples in the Andes have practiced complementarity instead of competition. This is now being lost to the penetration of the market and capital. Complementarity means a community has to join efforts with other communities in order to live and thrive. The goal is not to beat the other communities but to see how together we can



A Warli painting by Jivya Soma Mashe, Thane district (from Wikimedia commons)

The Warlis or Varlis are an indigenous tribe or Adivasis, living in mountainous as well as coastal areas of the Maharashtra-Gujarat border and surrounding areas.

share what Mother Earth has given us. There are processes of exchange based on the values of use of different products.

Complementarity seeks optimization by combining forces. The more one complements others, the more there is resiliency. The application of this principle to trade changes absolutely the current logic of free trade agreements that are designed to benefit corporations more than people and countries.

Complementarity in the “Vivir Bien” vision is not the union of only “good” forces, but of “opposite” forces too. There is not pure good or pure bad. Both are part of reality and the challenge is to seek balance between them and to complement them. Complementarity does not lead to neutrality but builds upon the contradictions of reality without trying to make everything uniform.

Integrity vs. Materiality

For “Living Better” the measure of accomplishment in life are the material things. The more one has accumulated, the higher one’s status. Everything is reduced to money and this is the key indicator of moving forward or backwards in this endless growth. This is why all aspects of life are monetized and those that cannot be quantified and brought into the market does not count, like the invisible domestic work of wives or the gusts of wind. On the other hand, “Living Well” focuses on all parts of life: to eat well, to dance well, to sleep well, to drink well, to practice one’s beliefs, to work with one’s community, to care for nature, to care for the elderly, to express one’s creativity, to listen, to respect others...to die well. Some sectors in the Philippines refer to a similar concept as the desire for a “simple life,” where basic human needs are met such as food, decent living conditions, education, medicine, in a life of peace without discrimination, violence or conflict.

For indigenous peoples all over the world the spiritual life cannot be separated from the material life. The Adivasis define themselves as spiritual communities that live with their ancestors in the forests. To them, all things are infused with the divine spirit and are deserving of respect. They use nature only to meet their needs, not to satisfy their greed. In Andaman and Nicobar Islands, the Adivasis managed to survive the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami by interpreting the messages of the seashore and the animals. They ran together with the elephants, cattle, dogs and snakes to the highest parts of their islands just before the tsunami waves came.⁴

We need to redefine wellbeing or welfare to build a new post-capitalist society. The more holistic approach of indigenous people to the purpose of life is key to this process.

⁴ <http://www.maanystavat.fi/online/Adivasi%20Ecological%20Democracy%20of%20Wild%20Forests>



Learning about the flaws, weaknesses and contradictions

Indigenous peoples' way of life are a great source of knowledge to build upon, but it cannot be idealized nor replicated without taking into account different contexts. As in any society there are contradictions and practices that should be overcome. In the Andes of South America a lot have been written about the *chacha-warmi*, the relation between man and woman, where the only way to become *jaqi* (human being) is through the marital union. But the reality is that in many situations women does not have the same rights and advantages as men in indigenous communities. A new post-capitalist society has to overcome the patriarchal practices in all communities.

For the Subanen of southern Philippines, preservation of culture does not mean being backwards and anti-development. Positive developments have been made in relation to women's roles. Women are seen as the main preservers of culture. Women and children are now given more recognition and voice in decision-making, and women are active leaders.



Art depicting life in a Warli community
(from www.handcraft.co.in: Warli Painting-Warli Dance-HandCraft.)

Indigenous people:

Strengthening and spreading the resistance to all sectors

All over the world indigenous peoples and peasants are being displaced from their land forest, rivers and coastal homelands. Their territories and natural resources are the targets of mining corporations, real estate companies, mega dams, industrial corridors, 'fracking' businesses, infrastructure projects, agribusiness and others. Biodiversity and knowledge are also being 'grabbed'. Through different mechanisms of Intellectual Property Rights their seeds and wisdom are being privatized. Now new mechanisms for financialization of nature like REDD (Reduced Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) are being used to displace those that for centuries have preserved the forests. There have been increasing media reports on human rights violations committed against them. Indigenous peoples and peasants all over the world are under attack because of the expansion of capital.

There are resistance struggles from indigenous peoples in all continents. Some are able to temporarily stop those projects or to limit their damage. In other cases they see their territory shrinking and they migrate to urban slums. The discussion about *Vivir Bien* is also a discussion about how to strengthen and spread their resistance to other social movements. The future of indigenous peoples relies on their ability to win not only the support of other sectors, but also to show that their struggles are not only for indigenous peoples but for all sectors, as seen in the struggle against water privatization or opposition to GMOs.

All indigenous communities have developed in rural areas. Seeds, water, land and forests are central to their reality. This is not the situation in urban areas, where new issues like energy, transportation, waste, mass media and money have emerged. If the principles of *Vivir Bien* and the Philippine indigenous communities were to be followed, how would society change? What would be the roles of money, markets and finance? What would be the relationship between the economy and nature? What would be the implications for work, salaries and profit? When it comes to laws and rights, how should they be addressed? How would democracy and governance be structured?

Many principles of indigenous communities can help in the search for alternatives in these key aspects but much more need to be explored, taking into account different contemporary experiences.

The construction and implementation of a new paradigm is far from simple. Even after *Vivir Bien* was enshrined in the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, we have seen the governments continue to pursue policies that are much more aimed at Living Better. What is missing to strengthen the connection between vision and practice? Why this contradiction between what is said and what is done?

To learn about our roots we also must recognize the contradictions, flaws and weaknesses of the different societies.





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