

Good Life As a Social Movement Proposal for Natural Resource Use: The Indigenous Movement in Ecuador

Philipp Altmann
Freie Universität, Berlin, Germany
email: PhilippAltmann@gmx.de

Abstract

The Ecuadorian indigenous movement has developed the concept of Good Life (Sumak Kawsay or Buen Vivir) as a conceptual weapon in order to defend the territories of indigenous nationalities as the movement itself defines them. Starting in 2002, petroleum exploitation in indigenous areas in the Amazon has been denounced as an attack against the principles of the traditional concept of Good Life. The introduction of the concept of Good Life allowed the local as well as the national indigenous organizations to define their vision of the country and society, while allowing easier coalitions with a growing Ecological Left. Good Life is not only a new content in the indigenous discourse, but also an instrument for social movement mobilization and coalition building. This text aims to offer a clearer idea of what the indigenous movement in Ecuador understands as Good Life, the development of the concept, the different contents and relations it has, and its strategic use in Ecuadorian politics.

Keywords: Ecuador, indigenous movement, Good Life

1. Introduction

The concept of Sumak Kawsay or Good Life has made an impressive career since its first use in 2000. Since its integration into the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia in 2008 and 2009, it has been widely discussed as an alternative to capitalist development and the possible principle of a new way of understanding the economy. In this context, the new concept lost most of its origins - even if many of the participants point out that the Good Life is “a category in the philosophy of life of the ancestral indigenous societies [and] invites us to assume other ‘knowings’ and other practices” (Acosta 2010: 10). The fact that it “questions the western concept of well-being” (Acosta 2010: 13) has been understood especially by non-indigenous intellectuals as a radical alternative in the sense of a “new paradigm of development for Latin America” (Ramírez 2010: 5) or a “biocentric turn” (Hernández 2009: 62). In this way, the Good Life was integrated into the political project of a “*socialism of the sumak kawsay or republican bio-socialism* [that] recovers a biocentric ethic of living together” (Ramírez 2010a: 73). These free readings of the concept claim that “the andine vision is not the only source of inspiration in order to impulse the Good

Life” (Acosta 2010: 13). The Good Life or Sumak Kawsay is also attributed to Afroecuadorian (Fernández-Juárez 2010: 17-18) and Western sources, such as “Aristotelian, Marxist, ecologic, feminist, cooperativist, humanist...” (Acosta 2010: 13) ones. Only a few intellectuals stick to a more verifiable and, necessarily, basic definition:

In its most general sense, *buen vivir* denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledge and living based on the communion of humans and nature and on the spatial-temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. This notion is part and parcel of the cosmovision, cosmology, or philosophy of the indigenous peoples of Aby Yala (Walsh 2010: 18).

In this text, Good Life will be seen as a proposal of the indigenous movement that, despite its wide usage in non-indigenous circles, remains part of the discourse of this movement. As the Good Life is a new concept that builds on an older discourse, this text will provide a short summary of the general development of the discourse of the indigenous movement in Ecuador in order to allow an analysis of Good Life as a part of this discourse. Thus, an interpretation of the concept and its political and economic implication will be made possible.

2. Indigenous Movement Discourse from the Mid-1970s to 2000

The 1970s and 1980s in Ecuador were marked by an “ethnic re-identification” (Quijano 2006: 32) of the indigenous in the context of a renewed indigenous movement with new emerging organizations. The earlier organizations, defined by a unionist and classist vision, lost ground after the second land reform in 1973. Ethnic organizations were able to gain influence with the support of the Catholic Church. This changing hegemony of organizations was accompanied by a shift in discourse towards an identitarian understanding of the indigenous and their position in society, leading to a reorientation aiming at their “self-determination [...] in a new concept of the pluralist Ecuadorian state.” (Federación de Centros Shuar 1976: 129) In short, a discourse oriented towards difference could complete or, in some cases, replace the earlier discourse orientated towards equality.

A central part of this shift was “the re-encounter of a vision of the world from which the acts of agrarian life and collective life acquire an explicit and valorized common sense.” (León 1983: 8) This “idealization of the past” (León 1983: 8) was accompanied by a renewed concept of the indigenous that understood “a population that has community of culture, past, perhaps language, and considers that it should dispose of a common or own authority” (León 1983: 8) as an indigenous nationality with the right for self-determination. This concept of nationality has Marxist origins as it sees “the emergence of state elements” (Pacari 1984: 115-116) as a typical characteristic of a nationality. It comprises “concrete specifications of

organization of life and destiny, specifications in the mode of production and in the socio-cultural manifestations” (UNAE s.a.: 47). Following those concepts, the new indigenous movement fights for the self-determination and liberation of the indigenous peoples (Pacari 1984: 115).

The acknowledgment of diversity and difference, sometimes as part of a model of autonomy (León 1983: 8), took the place of equality in the core of the demands of the indigenous movement. The indigenous started to fight for “a citizenship with the right to difference” (León 1983: 10) within a multinational state (León 1983: 8). Multinationality¹ with indigenous autonomies was seen as explicitly opposed to the traditional regime of integration, a reason for the early completion of this new idea with concepts of pluriculturalism (Pacari 1984: 119). It is also important to emphasize the fact that those concepts do not imply any kind of ethnic isolation (Pacari 1984: 118-119). The fight of the indigenous movement was for a recognition as different peoples and nationalities within society and state, “in the level of equality” (Pacari 1984: 121).

A central base for this change in discourse has been the understanding of the land of the indigenous peasants. Following the failure of the land reform in 1973, a reconceptualization of land took place within the indigenous movement. Land was now understood not only as an economic asset, but also as cultural place. A local Amazonian organization stated in 1985:

The land for the native doesn't mean the lot that the law can assign to him, or the family patrimony [...]. The land means a certain place where he lives and finds the reason for his existence. His concept of land is that of a territory, an extensive home country in which he mobilizes freely in relation to the other members of the group. A territory whose concept is basically integrated by the forest (*sacha pacha*). Inside the *sacha pacha* (forest) is everything, included, as a further element, the land (*allpa*). The *sacha pacha* (the forest) is an extensive territory that has preserved itself, that has defended itself for the group and in which can be found freely and roaming in all its scope, more than the ashes and bones of their ancestors, their souls, the powers and spirits that guide their life and their destiny (UNAE s.a.: 34).

There is a direct connection between an indigenous nationality and its territory. The economic, social, and political expressions of the nationality were “born and developed in a territory historically linked to the *raison d'être* of this people, in which the territoriality, the origin of man, the historical development as well as its objective manifest themselves within a culture, a knowledge and unique cosmivision.” (UNAE s.a.: 47). From this perspective, the fights of the indigenous movement are “fights of defense of the territory, of the survival of the group” (UNAE s.a.: 22). Since the very beginning of this new movement, mobilizers demanded the recognition of and guaranty for “(each nationality) the property of their [each nationality’s] territory, registering it orderly in a collective form,

¹ Some years later renamed plurinationality.

inalienable and sufficiently extensive in order to secure its demographic growth and cultural development.” (Pacari 1984: 122)

The relation between indigenous nationality and its territory is reflected in a traditional socio-political structure that goes from family (*ayllu*) to wider community (*llacta ayllu*) and finally to people (*mama ayllu*), the latter defined by a common language, culture, territory and economic connections. These three levels of social organization correspond with three levels of legislation: family norms (*ayllu camachic*), social norms (*llacta camachic*), and legal norms for the whole people (*mama ayllu camachic*) complete each other harmoniously in the different social entities (Pacari 1984: 115). Their moral bases are traditional principles, such as ‘Don't be lazy, don't lie, don't steal’ (*ama quilla, ama llula, ama shua*) and the “harmonious relation between universe-earth-man (*pachamama-allpamama-runa*), that resumes the ideological and cultural cosmovision” (Pacari 1984: 115). The idea of a harmonious relation between different principles or between man and nature is a central characteristic of the new indigenous discourse, and it influenced the concepts developed by the movement.

In the following years, said concepts and ideas were integrated into a homogenous political project that sought “The transformation of the nature of the actual power of the hegemonic Uninational State, exclusive, antidemocratic and repressive; and to build the New Humanist Plurinational Society” (CONAIE 1994: 7). The leading principle, formulated ten years earlier, continues to remain present. In the integral project “The man and the nature in close and harmonious interrelation guaranty the Life” (CONAIE 1994: 11). In 1994, CONAIE,² the main organization of the indigenous movement, made “the Integral Humanist principle in the interrelation Man-Nature-Society” (CONAIE 1994: 11) the central part of its fight for “The construction of the New Plurinational Society.” (CONAIE 1994: 11) In the latest formulation, in 2001, CONAIE stated that:

We sustain *the principle of the Integral Philosophy*, in the *interrelation and reciprocity between the Cosmos, Man-Nature-Society*; in order to achieve better condition of individual and collective life, advocating for it the construction of the *New Plurinational, Communitarian, Collective, Egalitarian, Multilingual and Intercultural, Equitable, with vision of sustainable development* (CONAIE 2001: 3-4).

3. The Birth of Good Life

In the year 2000, the German agency for development, GTZ, organized a series of events aimed at the discussion of cultural aspects of the fight against poverty called National Dialog 2000 (*Diálogo Nacional 2000*). One part of this program was called ‘Good Life’ (*Suma Qamaña*) and, in collaboration with the Federation of Municipal Associations (*Federación de Asociaciones Municipales*), inspired a great quantity of publications on indigenous concepts of Good Life and their different aspects that could spread through the whole country. In this context, Good

² Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador, Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador

Life was presented as being different from development (Medina 2011). Here, a group of members “of the intellectual Aymara elite, formed in an anthropological, ethnological or ethnohistorical academic tradition” (Uzeda s.a.: 2) around Javier Medina and Simón Yampara (Spedding, in: Uzeda s.a. 1-2), among others, developed a coherent indigenous concept of the Good Life. Before this moment, *suma qamaña* did not form part of the historical or everyday discourse of the indigenous in Bolivia. It can therefore be considered “a postmodern invention of the Aymara intellectuals of the XXI century” (Uzeda s.a.: 20). The anthropologist Alison Spedding indicates that *qamaña*, in the Bolivian indigenous communities she studies, means something along the lines of ‘staying at home’ after work or because of illness. Therefore, *suma qamaña* does not represent any kind of ideal of life. Spedding offers the concept of *sum sarnaqaña*, which refers to the compromise and collaboration of the whole family with each other and inside of their community as a moral ideal, as an alternative that covers the vision of an economic ideal better than *suma qamaña* (Spedding 2010: 6). Nevertheless, she accepts the texts that participate in the definition of *suma qamaña* as “Steps towards the elaboration precisely of an ideal type of social and economical system” (Spedding 2010: 19-20).

In the following years, the GTZ was able to disseminate the new concept in a series of events on the whole American continent, including a workshop in Panama in 2002. At that moment, the Good Life seemed to be based primarily on an opposition of the ‘Western’ life and way of thinking to the indigenous alternatives (GTZ 2002: 22-23). Good Life was understood as “quality of life” (GTZ 2002: 24) and defined provisionally as “Living mostly in harmony and equilibration with one self, with the community and with the cosmos” (GTZ 2002: 24). A part of this process of expansion of the new concept of Good Life was an adaptation of *suma qamaña* to the Quechua *sumak kawsay* – not a direct translation, given that the Quechua version of Good Life doesn't dispose of the same ethnic and linguistic reflections as the Aymara pioneers did (Uzeda s.a.: 14).

Some intellectuals pointed out that the concept of Good Life exists in a series of different expressions in different cultures, which are not synonyms but complementary understandings of the same problem (Gudynas 2011: 8/12). This is something that allows the Good Life to be culturally and politically transversal and to offer a broad alternative to capitalist development (Gudynas 2011: 8).

4. The Introduction of Good Life in Ecuador

An article by Carlos Viteri Gualinga that has been circulating in different versions since 2000, was the first application of the concept of Good Life in Ecuador. Analyzing the indigenous vision of development in the Amazon Viteri, himself an amazonian Kichwa, concludes that there is no indigenous conception of development:

But there is a holistic vision about what should be the objective or the mission of all human effort, that consists of looking for and creating the material and spiritual conditions in order to construct and maintain the ‘good life,’ which is also defined as ‘harmonious

life,' that in languages as the runa shimi (Quichua) is defined as the 'alli káusai' or 'súmac káusai' (Viteri 2002: 1).

Therefore, alli káusai is "a central category of the philosophy of life of the indigenous societies" (Viteri 2002: 1) that comprehends knowledge, ethical, and spiritual norms of treating the environment, human values, and visions of the future, among other things. As the good life transcends the sole satisfaction of basic needs and the access to services, it cannot be understood as an analogue to development (Viteri 2002: 1-2). It is rather the fundament of a new form of knowledge that "is the basic condition for the administration of the local ecological and spiritual bases of subsistence and the autonomous decision of the necessities." (Viteri 2002: 2) Good life means a way of living that tries to adapt to its environment. It refers to a reconstruction of indigenous principles, adopting them to actual and future realities but always based on the local community and its autonomy (Viteri 2002: 5). The spiritual aspects of good life are the special relationship between man and nature, mediated through certain members of the community:

Inside of this vision, the forest and the land are layers that unite the physical spaces with the untouchable, the material with the spiritual, whose mediator is the wise person (yachac in runa shimi). The social praxis of this vision on life and cosmos results fundamentally in the dynamics of the construction of the Alli Káusai (Viteri 2002: 3).

That same year, in 2002, economist Alberto Acosta cites the concept of Good Life in order to critique the western understanding of economic development (Acosta 2002: 46). He offers the Good Life as an alternative to development in which economic growth is secondary.

One year later, in 2003, the local indigenous organization Autonomous Territory of the Aboriginal Nation of the Kichwa People of Sarayaku, an Amazonian filial of CONAIE that fights against petroleum production in their territory, issued a text called "The book of life of Sarayaku in order to defend our future" ("Sarayaku Sumak Kawsayta Ñawpakma Katina Killka") where a broader definition of the Good Life in the context of demands for territorial autonomy and a plurinational state is developed (Sarayaku 2003: 1). Good Life, which in this text appears for the first time as Sumak Kawsay, is described as "life in plenty" (Sarayaku 2003: 10) and "life in harmony" (Sarakayu 2003: 26-27). The Sarayaku definition is of a more spiritual nature as it invokes not only the indigenous tradition but also certain Gods and cosmological rules:

Our main divinities, *Amazanga* and *Nunguli*, remind us that we should only use the necessary from the forest if we want to have a future. They never accepted that we hunt more than the allowed or that we sow without respecting the rules of the *Ukupacha* and the *Kaypacha*. Their wraths, pleasures and wisdoms have been revealed to us through our wise men and women, who taught us about the secrets to achieve the harmony of one with himself and with the nature, our maxim of the *Sumak Kawsay*. So, a time of regeneration has to be given to the nature, in order to be able to renew our own life. We

have been in constant movement, allowing us and the other forms of life to continue their circle. *Mushuk Allpa*, the land in permanent renovation, has been a fundamental premise of the *Sumak Kamsay*. [...] This living together and harmony taught us to understand the multiple dimensions that compose the *Sumak Allpa*. The *muskuuy* (knowledge and understanding) allowed us to adapt appropriately to the conditions of life in the forest and to define our presence in these territories, since hundreds of years ago, with our ancestors Tayak Runa (Sarayaku 2003: 3-4).

Following these principles, the organization demands a declaration of their territory as a “Zone of biological, cultural and historical interest for the country and humanity” (Sarayu 2003: 26-27), which is to be protected in different degrees defined by ecological characteristics and traditional usage of the land. In this context, projects of development and education are to be promoted in order to strengthen communitarian tourism, traditional handicraft, and sustainable agriculture (Sarayu 2003: 26-27). In this text, the Good Life appears not only as a spiritual alternative to development on a general level, but also as a decisively local and concrete project.

Also in 2003, the state development agency CODENPE (Development Council of the Nationalities and Peoples of Ecuador) under control of the indigenous organizations, presented its Strategic Plan, which proposes a development that combines all social, economical, and environmental aspects: “It includes the sustainability as a productive relationship in agreement with the preservation of a permanent process of search of the good life or personal, family, communitarian and collective well-being” (CODENPE 2003, in: Maldonado 2006: 114). Nevertheless, this kind of development is not further specified by CODENPE or other state actors.

In 2004, the newly founded Intercultural University Amawtay Wasi, close to CONAIE, made the Good Life a guiding principle for their way of education. The latter should be:

A shared responsibility for the entirety of social actors of the diverse cultures that intervene in the process of the transformation and control of the local, national and international human development, in order to achieve a appropriate ‘good life’ for the actual and future generations (Universidad Intercultural Amawtay Wasi 2004: 168).

An education that grows out of the interrelation of different cultures and visions of the world should, in this sense, be “A way among others to walk towards wisdom, to approach the comprehension of the ‘good life’” (Universidad Intercultural Amawtay Wasi 2004: 172-173).

In the following years, the discussion around the new concept of Good Life became quieter, a silence that was broken only by the structural political changes that brought the new party, Alianza PAÍS, into the government. In its plan for the government of 2007-2011, it defines Good Life as a central part of its political proposal in the terms: “Good life in harmony with the nature, under an unrestricted respect of the human rights” (Alianza PAÍS 2006: 3/10). Hence, the concept of Good Life was an important part of the discussions in the constituent assembly that

elaborated a new constitution for Ecuador in 2007 and 2008. In a proposal to this assembly, CONAIE expressed its hope that the new constitution may be a starting point “For the construction of a post-capitalist and post-colonial society, a society that promotes the ‘good life,’ transmitted from generation to generation by our ancient taitas and mamas, a society that regains the teaching of its ancient peoples and can live in harmony with our Pacha Mama” (CONAIE 2007: 1).

In this society, the economy should not be oriented towards profit, but towards human well-being. It has to become a tool in service of community and society (CONAIE 2007: 7) and as such, it has to be based on the principles of the Good Life, including the principle of reciprocity as it is lived by the indigenous communities (CONAIE 2007: 21).

Finally, Good Life was defined in the preamble and 99 articles (Acosta 2010: 6) of the new constitution as social purpose and as responsibility and duty of the state. This fact has been discussed widely by intellectuals in the world and is, along with the Constitution of Bolivia, the reason for the international interest in the concept of Good Life. But its integration into the Constitution does not end the discussions about its meaning, how it is to be realized, and if it can be an alternative to capitalist development.

The Constitution meant a complete adaptation of the concept of Good Life in the discourse of the state as the already cited publications by the National Secretary of Planification and Development, SENPLADES, and the Ministry of Public Health (*Ministerio de Salud Pública*) of 2010, or the National Plan for Good Life 2009-2013³ by the SENPLADES show. These adaptations have in common that the Good Life is depoliticized and loses its critical contents – it becomes another word that sounds good and means nothing.

In 2008, Marlón Santi became president of CONAIE. Santi had been the president of the community of Sarayaku in 2003 and co-author of the manifesto with which this organization introduced the concept of Good Life into the discourse of the indigenous movement. His presidency was the moment of the final and total integration of the concept of Good Life into the discourse of CONAIE and the indigenous movement as a whole. In those years, the politics of CONAIE were oriented towards socio-ecological problems. Most of the conflicts between the indigenous movement and the government were conflicts over laws that had to do with environmental questions, not economical or cultural ones as in previous years.

Nevertheless, the concept of Good Life and its integration into the constitution and the government program meant a strengthening of the indigenous movement. As the authentic originator of this concept, the indigenous movement could use “the theology of the world, of the Mother Earth, of the Pachamama” (Tenesaca 2010: 108-109) within the new constitution in order to press for its interests. Included in the deep structural changes that were behind the concept of Good Life (as they are behind plurinationality or interculturality) and that have not been undertaken by the government was a motive for further mobilization for the indigenous movement (Tenesaca 2010: 108-109). These mobilizations went mostly against neo-extractivist activities that the movement defined as contrary to Good Life: “[T]he Pachamama is the mother that nurses her children; if this mother that

³ To be found under <http://plan2009.senplades.gob.ec/web/en>

nurses is not poisoned, is not looted, is not contaminated, it is possible that, really, there is a socialism” (Tenesaca 2010: 109).

In 2010, CONAIE broke up the dialogue with the government (CONAIE 2010: 1) and justified this measure with the Good Life. They stated, “The government of Rafael Correa is a false socialist traitor, populist, genocidal, fascist to the principles of the *sumak kawsay*, furthermore, it covers up the colonialism of the XXI century” (CONAIE 2010: 2). The specific reasons were the new law of mining and new concessions for petroleum exploitation in the amazon, among others (CONAIE 2011: 25). CONAIE and the indigenous movement used this moment to present their ideas as an alternative for the Ecuadorian society, an alternative “that includes the respect for collective rights, a solidary economy, defense of the *pachamama*, inclusion and the respect in the public politics of interculturality and plurinationality, towards the construction of the true *Sumak Kawsay*” (CONAIE 2011: 28). In the same text, the Good Life appears as part of an economic proposal. Following CONAIE, Ecuador should count “with an economical model of life based on the *Sumak Kawsay*” (CONAIE 2011: 7).

5. Conclusion

The Good Life is a new political concept that resumes contents that have been under development since the beginning of the 1980s in the discourse of the indigenous movement. This reorientation of the idea expressed 30 years ago, that the indigenous tradition offers a special and harmonious relationship between the individual, society, and environment, was integrated with the concept of Good Life into a discourse that aims to offer alternatives to capitalist development. The establishment of a proper concept that expresses this idea allowed a further development of a vision of the world without the need for economic growth (alongside the vision of a world without oppression and discrimination, which is expressed in other concepts within the same discourse).

At least until its wide acceptance in 2007-2008, the concept of Good Life seems to have been tightly connected with some influential persons. Marlón Santi took part in the introduction of this concept in the discourse of the indigenous movement in 2003 as president of the local organization of Sarayaku and also in its complete integration since 2008 as president of CONAIE, the largest indigenous organization. Alberto Acosta, a mestizo intellectual, introduced this new concept into the academic discourse in Ecuador and later, as a member of *Alianza PAÍS* and the government, into the state politics and the new constitution. Nevertheless, it is built on discursive contents that seem actually to have a longer history, especially the idea of a harmony between human beings, society, and nature that Nina Pacari specified as the first organized indigenous in 1984. Even if the central waypoints in the development of Good Life in Ecuador have been defined by certain persons, the concept as such has been able to integrate the other central demands of the indigenous movement. As a result, it could establish itself as a clear and well defined alternative not only to capitalist development, but also to the centralist nation-state with its institutionalized discrimination.

The concept of Good Life may not be the complete change some intellectuals may desire. Still, it is a concise and solid representation of certain ideas

that formerly had been present in a more implicit manner in the discourse of the indigenous movement. In short, the Good Life as a central concept amongst others makes ecological aspects of the economy an important matter for the movement. It is not a fight against exploitation and oppression only, but also against a way of life that does not allow a harmony inside society and between society and nature. In this sense, Good Life is an integral part of indigenous thinking that will remain inalienable by external agents, such as the government or political parties.

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