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► **To cite this version:**

Martin Calisto Friant, John Langmore. The Buen Vivir: A Policy to Survive the Anthropocene?.
Global Policy, 2015, 6 (1), pp.64-71. 10.1111/1758-5899.12187 . hal-02468974

HAL Id: hal-02468974

<https://hal.science/hal-02468974>

Submitted on 23 Jun 2020

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The Buen Vivir: A National Policy to Survive the Anthropocene?

Short title: The Politics of Buen Vivir in Ecuador

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Abstract:

This article examines the ideology and the politics of *buen vivir* as the government of Rafael Correa in Ecuador has implemented them from 2007 to 2013. The analysis focuses on the implications of this model, which is based on traditional Andean worldview. The article first explores the main components of *buen vivir* including its focus on strengthening democratic participation and environmental justice. Secondly, the implementation of this ideology is analysed through a review of the new constitution and government policies. Thirdly, key outcomes are assessed through various social and economic indicators. Fourth, a critical approach to the government's interpretation of *buen vivir* is taken and the many contradictions and inconsistencies in its implementation are unfolded. Nevertheless, the policies of *buen vivir* have the potential to create innovative and inspiring solutions, especially in the face of the environmental and social challenges brought by the anthropocene.

The anthropocene¹ has brought new and profound global challenges. As we begin the 21st century, the social and ecological foundations of human society are being seriously threatened. Global warming, the destruction of vital ecosystem services and continued resource depletion are leading towards an increasingly severe environmental crisis. At the same time, global inequalities are alarmingly high and are growing both within and between countries. Despite unprecedented technological developments, in 2010, 49 per cent of the world remained in poverty, living with under US\$2.50 per day (PPP) (World Bank, 2014) and the global Gini coefficient was as high as 70% (Milanovic, 2013).

Worst of all, policies in many countries are replicating a form of development which is further aggravating these issues. In fact, it has been argued that neoliberal policies imposing economic austerity, liberalization and deregulation have led to ever-greater levels of disparity (Nayyar, 2011, Stiglitz, 2013). These same policies have also exacerbated the continued destruction of the natural world (Bellamy, Foster, Clark and York, 2011). If humanity wants to survive the anthropocene, a re-conceptualization of our model of civilization is in order.

In the face of these challenges, Ecuador is implementing an alternative to mainstream visions of development based on the indigenous concept of *buen vivir* (or *sumak kawsay* in Kichwa). *Buen vivir* can be directly translated as 'living well', yet it is built on a completely different conceptual basis than hegemonic visions of wellbeing. Seeking to create harmonious relations between and within people, nature and society, a more accurate translation of *buen vivir* would be 'harmonious coexistence' (Acosta & Gudynas, 2011). Since the election of Rafael Correa as president in 2007, Ecuador has attempted to embrace this concept as the basis for the national framework of social and economic policy. This article examines the meaning and the application of *buen vivir* in the Ecuadorian scenario

¹Human impacts on the natural world have been so significant that various academics have argued that we have created an entirely new geological epoch: the anthropocene. The timing of the start of the anthropocene is still debated, with some arguing for its beginning during the industrial revolution of the late eighteenth century while others suggest that it should be linked to the rise of agriculture in the Neolithic revolution (around 10,000 B.C), making the term closely synchronous to the Holocene.

in order to uncover the potential it has in solving the challenges brought by the anthropocene.

What is *Buen Vivir*

Buen vivir is an inherently pluralistic concept. While its roots emanate from Andean cosmovision, it has evolved beyond native cosmology by incorporating alternative ideologies from the western world (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). Mixing with ecological, poststructuralist, socialist and radical democratic voices, *buen vivir* is built on a rich diversity of ontologies and teleologies united in the creation of an alternative to hegemonic visions of development (Escobar, 2011). The concept is thus in continuous debate and reinvention, while placing no culture or ideology above any other. This is what Esteva calls 'radical pluralism' leading to 'a world in which many worlds can be hospitably embraced' (2010, p. 67).

Although there is no definitive conception of *buen vivir*, it has core elements that can be found in all its definitions². First *buen vivir* does not create a conceptual divide between nature and society. This is why Gudynas calls it a biocentric rather than anthropocentric ideology (2011). Instead, nature is conceptualized as *pachamama*, (mother earth), the source of all life, of which humans are an intrinsic part (Houtart, 2011). *Buen vivir* thus places people as equal inhabitants of the earth, sharing the same limited yet plentiful environment. This symbiotic relationship with *pachamama*, leads towards the creation of a mode of life in harmony with the natural cycles of life and death. The ideal envisioned by *buen vivir* is thus in direct opposition to the extractivist consumerism of industrial capitalism (Acosta, 2010). In contrast, *buen vivir* promotes organic agriculture, renewable energy, ecotourism and recycling as the

² There is a theoretical divide between a more ancestral notion of *sumak kawsay* and its postmodern transformation into *buen vivir* (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). The length and scope of this survey article does not allow for a more profound analysis of this distinction and will thus use *buen vivir* throughout.

basis for an economy in which people and nature can flourish from each other's cycles (SENPLADES, 2009).

Buen vivir is also founded on strong communitarian aspects, proposing a progressive vision of social and environmental justice. Promoting both distributional and procedural justice, *buen vivir* fosters a greater social control over the government and the means of production (Acosta & Gudynas, 2011). *Buen vivir* hence aspires for a radically democratic society where people have a meaningful power over political and economic forces. Co-operative economic structures and active citizen participation in political decision making are thus promoted as ways to reorganize society 'from the bottom up' (Esteva, 2010).

Finally, *buen vivir* is conceptualized under a vision of happiness that reaches beyond the material accumulation and individualism typically endorsed by capitalism (Hidalgo-Capitán & Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). Less emphasis is placed on hierarchy and competition: while more is placed on solidarity, reciprocity and citizenship as a whole. *Buen vivir* is thus closely related to concepts of *degrowth* and *slow economy*, aiming to create a future that seeks human emancipation in a holistic and sustainable manner (Acosta, 2010).

***Buen Vivir* in Ecuador**

When president Correa won power in 2007, the country, much like the continent, was going through a turbulent period. Years of neoliberal reforms and neo-colonialism had left a depressed economy with high levels of poverty and inequality (Walsh, 2010). This led to rampant violence and insecurity as well as a political instability that saw as many as eight different presidents in the eleven years prior to Correa's election (Polga-Hecimovich, 2013, p. 136). At a time of disillusionment towards global capitalism, Correa allied with indigenous movements, which were proposing *buen vivir* as an increasingly appealing alternative. Correa was thus elected based on a platform of change, and 'socialism of *buen vivir*'.

One of the first priorities was to turn the page from the 1998 neoliberal constitution and design a new one. Alberto Acosta, a leading academic of *buen vivir* became the president of the constituent assembly and designed it as ‘the roadmap for the construction of a utopia’ (2010,p. 24). The new constitution thus set *buen vivir* as the foundational principle of the new nation. Its preamble clearly states its objective: to create ‘a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the *Buen Vivir*’.

The constitution establishes and guarantees the ‘rights of *buen vivir*’ (Articles 12-34); an interrelated set of rights and responsibilities necessary for the realization of *buen vivir*. These innovative rights include universal healthcare and education (including university), food, energy and economic sovereignty, a healthy environment, communication and participation, as well as the right to water and housing.

Moreover, these rights are balanced with responsibilities, both towards nature and society. There is thus a mutual responsibility for citizens and the state in the construction and maintenance of the social and environmental fabrics that enable the achievement of *buen vivir*. Citizens have the key social responsibility to be involved in the political life of the nation. This establishes the groundwork for the creation of a pluri-national state, governed through a participatory form of democracy (Articles 95-237, 395, 398).

Another unique feature of the constitution is that it has granted rights to nature (Articles 71-74). In fact, ‘pachamama, where life is reproduced and realized, has the right to full respect for its existence and maintenance and the regeneration of its natural cycles, structure, function and evolutionary processes’ (Article 71). This gives the Ecuadorian constitution a biocentric perspective, beyond the western anthropocentric conception of rights.

Finally, the constitution seeks to create a form of social contract, linking citizens, the government and the market in the collective pursuit of *buen vivir*. It thus builds on the notion of ‘social economy’, based on cooperative and

associative modes of production pursuing fairness, equity, economic democracy, grassroots solidarity and sustainability (Articles 276 and 283, 284).

All in all, the constitution is rich in utopian rhetoric in line with the ideology of *buen vivir*, yet it leaves many of the specific mechanisms for their realization to secondary legislations, which unfortunately fail to uphold the same revolutionary standards (Acosta, 2010).

National Planning for *Buen Vivir*

Since the enactment of the new constitution, the national framework for social and economic policy has been dictated by 4-year national plans called '*Plan Nacional del Buen Vivir*' (National Plan for *Buen Vivir*, PNBV). The two PNBVs elaborated since the election of Correa (2009-2013 and 2013-2017), have three basic pillars. First, they seek to transform the economy from reliance on the primary sector, especially petroleum, towards a modern tertiary sector economy based on services, ecotourism and biotechnology. Second, they aim to reduce poverty and reinforce social equity by redistributing resources towards efficient public services such as education, healthcare and social security. Third, they seek to establish a more participatory form of democracy by enhancing citizen involvement at all levels of governance (SENPLADES, 2009, 2013).

In order to achieve these goals, the PNBVs seek to increase extractive mining activities in the short term, the idea being to 'use the extraction of raw materials in order to stop the extraction of raw materials' (SENPLADES, 2013 p. 48). This discourse is clearly oxymoronic. In fact the social and environmental consequences of these activities are in direct opposition to a biocentric vision of *pachamama* and a grassroots social economy. This contradiction shows the extent to which the government has adopted its own interpretation of *buen vivir*.

Results: Redistribution and State Modernization

To reach the objectives set by the PNBVs, social spending has been

substantially increased from 10.7% of the GDP in 2006 to 15% in 2012 (CEPAL, 2014). During the same period, education spending grew from 3.4 to 4.8% of GDP (and is due to increase to 6% by 2017) and health spending grew from 1.2% to 2.1% (Naranjo Bonilla, 2014, p. 25).

These increases were possible due to a substantial growth in government revenue from 14.7% of the GDP in 2006 to 23.1% in 2012. The government was able to obtain this revenue thanks to high international oil prices, and a 2010 law increasing of the state's share of petroleum profits from 13% to 87%, which now represent 48% of its revenue (Becker 2013, p.47). Additionally, the government has tripled income tax revenue thanks to a much-heightened efficiency in its collection. A 2008 foreign debt default also saved the government over US\$ 3 billion for social programs (Becker 2013).

The effects of the rapidly increasing social spending can already be witnessed (see table 1). Poverty and employment figures show some encouraging improvements and the PNBV plans to continue efforts in this direction (see table 1). Moreover, the state substantially increased the minimum wage from US\$170 per month in 2007 to US\$394 in 2013 (Ambrosi De La Cadena, 2014). It now covers 93.8% of the basic basket of goods, which 45.5% of households are able to afford (see table 1).

These advances in poverty reduction can also be attributed to the improvement of the conditional cash transfer program to mothers, seniors and persons with disabilities, which increased from US\$15 per month in 2006 to US\$50 in 2013. It now benefits over 1.8 million people, up from 1.2 million in 2006 (Naranjo Bonilla, 2014,p. 42).

Table 1: Selected Socio-Economic Indicators			
	2006	2012	2017 objective
Poverty			
Ecuador	43%	32.2%	20%
LA average	34%	28.2%	-
	2006	2012	2017 objective
Extreme Poverty			

Ecuador	16.1%	12.9%	0%
LA average	12.5%	11.3%	-
Minimum Wage coverage of the Basic Basket of Goods			
	2009	2012	
	79.5%	93.8%	
Percentage of Households who can afford the Basic Basket of Goods			
	2007	2012	2017 objective
	39.6%	45.5%	55%
National Employment Indicators			
	2007	2012	2017 objective
Unemployed	5.0%	4.1%	-
Underemployed	58.7%	50.9%	40%
Fully-Employed	35.3%	42.8%	55%
Source: CEPAL, 2014; SENPLADES, 2013, pp. 286-289			

Education figures have also shown significant progress and key education figures are now above regional averages (see Table 2). Enhancing the quality and the availability of education has been a priority for the government, especially for the creation of a 'knowledge-based economy' (SENPLADES, 2013). Schools and universities have greatly increased their quality due to the introduction of standardized tests for both students and educators.

With respect to health, while some progress can be observed, most key figures remain below Latin American averages (see table 2). While the quality and outreach of the public health service saw undeniable improvements, this is probably one of the weakest aspects of the PNBV and a long road remains ahead.

Table 2: Selected Health and Education Indicators		
Average number of pupils per teacher, by level of education	2007	2012
Pre-Primary	17	12
Primary	23	18

Secondary		15	12	
Literacy rate of people aged 15 and over				
		2007	2011	
Ecuador		84.2%	91.6%	
LAC Average		91.5%	91.5%	
Population aged 15 and over, by years of schooling (percentages)				
		2005	2012	
Ecuador	0-5 years	20.7	17.9	
	6-9 years	38.2	32.4	
	10-12 years	24.7	30.4	
	13 years and over	16.3	19.3	
LAC Average	0-5 years	29.9	25.1	
	6-9 years	32.5	30.6	
	10-12 years	23.1	26.6	
	13 years and over	14.4	17.7	
Maternal mortality ratio (per 100.000 live births)				
		2005	2013	2017 objective
Ecuador		98	87	50
LAC Average		93	85	-
Life expectancy at birth				
		2005-10	2010-2015	
		74.6	75.5	
Infant mortality rate (per 1.000 live births)				
		2006	2012	2017 objective
Ecuador		23.5	19.8	6
LAC Average		-	16	-
Source: CEPAL, 2014 and SENPLADES, 2013, p.152				

Environmental results are particularly important as Ecuador is one of the most biodiverse countries in the world. Unfortunately figures show mixed results (see table 3). Although the mainland and marine territory under environmental conservation have both increased, the deforestation rate remains one of the

highest in the continent (SENPLADES, 2013, p. 242). While the proportion of renewable energy supply was slightly reduced, a number of new hydroelectric projects could increase this figure to 60% by 2017 (see table 3). Moreover, CO₂ emissions per capita have remained stable from 2005 to 2011 (CEPAL, 2014).

Nevertheless, the considerable number of new mining projects, which are being promoted by the government, will inevitably have severe environmental impacts (Radcliffe, 2012).

	2008	2012	2017 objective
Proportion of mainland territory under environmental conservation or management	25.9%	30.5%	35.9%
Continental coastal territory under environmental conservation or management (hectares)	357.000	440.800	817.000
Proportion of renewable energy supply (Percentages)	2006	2012	2017
Ecuador	46.1	43.1	60

Source: CEPAL, 2014 and SENPLADES 2013, pp. 242-330

Finally, in economic terms, Ecuador accomplished faster rates of GDP growth than the rest of the region while diminishing foreign debt (see table 4). The advances in health and education have also led to a significant improvement in the HDI (Human Development Index), which grew two times faster in Ecuador than in the rest of the region. These results, obtained despite the economic recession of 2008-9, have led some to speak of an 'Ecuadorian miracle'. Scholars such as Nayyar, have argued that the Latin American left faced the crisis with greater resilience precisely thanks to such strengthened social protection systems and redistributive policies as are discussed above (2011).

Nevertheless, the picture is far from ideal. While the Gini coefficient

improved, the government failed to reach its objective of reduction to 0.42 by 2013 and has now set a more modest goal of reduction to 0.44 by 2017 (SENPLADES, 2013, p.130). Yet, it is important to note that the Gini is hardly an accurate measure of inequality in a country where one third of the economically active population does not have a stable, measureable income. Ecuador hence continues to be a profoundly unequal society, a world of ‘haves and have-nots’ that the Gini cannot possibly convey.

It is also clear that standard socio-economic indicators alone do not respond to the alternative vision proposed by *buen vivir*. Some alternative indicators are now starting to emerge. For instance the 2013 World Happiness Report, of the UN’s Sustainable Development Solutions Network ranks Ecuador in 49th place with a score of 5.865 in the 2010-12 period and it is the country with the 4th fastest growth in the world compared with 2005-7 results (Helliwell, Layard and Sachs, 2012). The Happy Planet Index of the New Economic Foundation shows comparable results with Ecuador rising from 58th to 23rd in the world (Abdallah et al. 2012). These are the sorts of targets that truly measure *buen vivir*. Their improvement shows that the country might be heading in the right direction. As Stiglitz and Fitousi have pointed out, many other new indicators like these are desperately needed in order to measure progress in more a holistic and sustainable manner (2013). The Ecuadorian government has acknowledged this necessity and is in the process of developing a set of ‘*buen vivir* indicators’ (Acosta, 2010).

Gini Coefficient	2005	2012	2017
Ecuador	0.531	0.468	0.44
HDI	2007	2012	2030
Ecuador	0.688 (99 th)	0.724 (89 th)	0.82
LAC average	0.722	0.741	-
Average GDP growth at constant prices	Average growth from 2006 to 2013		

Ecuador	4.35%	
LAC Average	3.65%	
Foreign Debt as percentage of GDP	2005-10	2012
	36.54	18.18
Source: CEPAL, 2014 and SENPLADES, 2013, p.130		

Challenges for Ecuador and the *Buen Vivir*:

Overall, the government has made its own interpretation of *buen vivir*. In fact, there has clearly been a greater emphasis on social and economic rather than environmental and spiritual goals. The government's implementation of *buen vivir*, has thus received much criticism, from indigenous groups, social movements, journalists and academics alike (Walsh, 2010; Acosta, 2010; Radcliffe, 2012; Becker, 2013). This criticism has revolved around three major concerns.

First of all they point out how the redistributive process was limited to the revenues from natural resources (mainly oil) rather than a transformative redistribution of the means of production (Radcliffe, 2012). It can thus be argued that the country has merely moved to post-neoliberalism but not to post-capitalism. Indeed, inequalities in the control of the means of production, have impeded the realization of the communal aspirations of *buen vivir*. Cooperatives, associations and small enterprises clearly lag behind large industries and corporate farms. The concentration of sales is such that only 1% of companies control 90% of all sale revenues (Fernández, Pardo&Salamanca, 2014, p. 111). The 'social economy' envisioned by *buen vivir* is thus still a project in design.

Secondly, criticisms have targeted the government's ambition to expand the extraction of natural resources. While Correa argues this is only a short term strategy to obtain the much needed capital for social programs, social movements believe this is a very risky path that clearly contradicts the biocentric ideas of the *buen vivir* (Walsh, 2010). Additionally, the course of development brought by the

exploitation of raw materials is associated with a 'resource curse' that condemns Ecuador to be a producer of raw material at the periphery of global capitalism (Becker, 2013). The continued reliance on the primary sector is thus not only an impediment to economic development in a traditional sense, but also to the realization of the alternative economy.

Opposition to mining extraction has caused countless social clashes against the government that has, on every occasion, imposed its will against that of local communities (Polga-Hecimovich, 2013). This autocratic confrontation of dissent is precisely the third major criticism against Correa's government. Protests have been rising since Correa took office, leading to the government's criminalization of some 200 citizens, facing charges of terrorism and sabotage, for defending their right to *buen vivir* (Becker, 2013).

The state's autocratic stance can also be observed through its heavy control of the media. The government has prosecuted various journalists who have been accused of 'defamation' and has greatly expanded the number of government owned media outlets (Becker, 2013). Moreover, Correa was able to amass so much power that the judicial and the legislative branches are now widely under his control. This has led Polga-Hecimovich to describe Ecuador as a 'delegative democracy, with an absence of equilibrium between state powers and no horizontal accountability' (2013, p. 153).

All in all, Ecuador seems to treat its citizens as passive social clients rather than active participants in a radical democracy. While *buen vivir* promotes active citizen involvement, realities are typically paternalist, with the state providing social services in exchange for citizens' approval in elections. The state did extend and improve the provision of social services to those previously excluded, yet in no way does this represent the radical institutional transformation envisioned by *buen vivir* (Acosta 2010, p. 27). In synthesis, as Acosta puts it 'never before have the powerful economic groups been better off, and never before have the poorest sectors been less worst-off' (interview in Fernández, Pardo & Salamanca, 2014, p. 112)

Compromises, Contradictions and Inconsistencies.

The policies of Correa and the ‘socialism of *buen vivir*’ seem to be riddled with contradictions and inconsistencies. The government had to make difficult decisions and compromise between different ideologies and socio-economic forces. Many criticize the government for not taking more transformative redistributive measures. However, it is important to note that the president did not want to antagonize the Ecuadorian economic elite, which already had little regard for his ideologies. In those conditions, facing massive socio-economic repercussions (even a possible coup), it can be argued that Correa took a more precautionary road, redistributing only as much as was politically feasible.

The short-term use of mineral resources is another point where the government might have had to compromise. Seeing that a more widespread economic redistribution might cause unviable social upheavals, other sources of financing for social policies had to be found. Considering that Ecuador has one of the most ‘underutilized’ mining sectors in the region, this was seen as an easy short-term solution.

Finally Correa’s autocratic style of governance could also be seen as another compromise. In fact, Ecuador used to be characterized as ‘un-governable’ due to high levels of political instability. In these circumstances, Correa’s presidency represents a unique moment of social stability and political continuity. Indeed, his rule has been able to secure a much-needed level of government autonomy, efficiency and consistency. Nonetheless, it is undeniable that, as Becker puts it, the president was ‘too willing to sacrifice empowerment and broader levels of popular participation to achieve higher levels of economic performance, particularly in the extractive sectors’ (2013p. 48).

In the midst of these compromises and inconsistencies, one hopes the state will not lose sight of the real objective. The realization of *buen vivir* will inevitably require a complete socio-economic transformation in the long run, leading to a form of life based on an entirely different paradigm. So far, the state has unfortunately replicated the same capitalist, materialist and extractive ontologies.

This leads to the question of whether the *buen vivir* can actually be realized in the context of a capitalist democracy? Or does it require such a deep transformation that only a revolutionary break with the past can lead towards it?

No matter what road is taken, the *buen vivir* remains a utopia in constant construction and reinvention. For its realization, civil society and the state will have to collaborate more closely and profoundly. Most importantly, the state will have to accept that it does not hold a monopoly over the construct and will have to open the door for a more democratic construction of this ideal. Otherwise, the demands for its realization could be brought to the streets.

Conclusion: The *Buen Vivir* in Transnational Perspective

Beyond the implications and successes of the *buen vivir* at the national level, this same ontological framework could provide an innovative perspective for transnational issues.

Buen vivir's collective philosophy of progress and the harmony envisioned between and within humankind and nature pose the foundations for a truly global consciousness. If humanity has a chance of succeeding against the challenges brought by the anthropocene, it must step beyond the anthropocentric and ethnocentric constructs, which have dominated global policymaking. Moreover, the 'radical pluralism' envisioned by *buen vivir* poses the foundation for a form of global partnership that seeks to operate beyond entrenched ideological and narrow national interests and towards collective 'humane' aspirations.

The constitutional principles inspired by *buen vivir* could also lead to the solidification of 'third generation rights'. Indeed, the rights to economic, energy and food sovereignty, to a healthy environment and to water, represent milestones from which to base international policy making. The rights of nature are an even further step, which merits the greatest international attention. In the face of the present ecological challenges, guaranteeing rights to nature at the transnational level could ensure the basis for binding efforts to protect the ever-dwindling natural world.

Finally, the move towards a 'social economy' based on green technologies and economic democracy is a positive aspiration for all humankind. The social

inequity and the technological divide that characterise the globalised world further emphasise the importance of a transnational effort towards this objective. As new powers emerge and new alliances are formed (ALBA, UNASUR, CELAC and the New Development Bank), south-south cooperation and north-south partnerships can lead the way towards another type of globalisation that, in the face of the challenges of the anthropocene, might be capable of upholding the vision of sustainability proposed by *buen vivir*.

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