

# *Buen Vivir—Sumak Kawsay. ¿A New Referential for Public Action in Ecuador?*

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While *buen vivir* (good living) and *sumak kawsay* give name to an array set of demands and aspirations that emerged in the last years of the twentieth century against the so-called “neoliberal model”, in its meaning structure, these terms are not entirely equivalent, there are disputes about its significance and its implications for public action. In this article, I analyze the meanings and contradictions that appear in trying to translate these terms into specific instrument of public policy.

*Keywords:* good living, *sumak kawsay*, public policy, public action

## Introduction

This article has been part of a larger research concerning the process of shifting the referential for public action in Ecuador since year 2007. Public action is understood as “the way in which the contemporary societies define and qualify their collective problems and produce answers, contents, and processes to address them” (Thoening, 1997, p. 28). From this perspective, public policies are the result (or a dependent variable) of public action and this means that public policies are not only conceived as actions accomplished by the State itself but by a plurality of actors. Thus, public action represents an interactive process that involves several actors positioned at different arenas and levels with diverse logics of action (Massardier, 2003, p. 82). This interactive process takes place within a wide framework of reference (or referential) which lays down general ideas about what and how public policy should be made in order to solve the collective problems faced by a society at certain period of time.

During the first years of the new century, terms like *buen vivir* (good living), *sumak kawsay* or *sumac qamaña*, have been interpreted as signs of the crisis of Western modern society and its role of universal model, this is to say, its role of worldwide “referential”. As a consequence, these terms have been interpreted as new sources of meaning which at the same time enable a fundamental rupture with the “paradigm of development” identified as economic growth, industrialization, and welfare spreading out (Santos, 2010; Acosta & Martinez, 2009; Leon, 2009; Guillen & Phelan, 2012; Houtart, 2012).

My analysis is focused on the process by which a public policy is made, since this process always occurs inside a referential framework (Jobert & Muller, 1987; Jobert, 2004; Surel, 2008; Muller, 2010), in this article I observe how the referential of *buen vivir* (good living) or *sumak kawsay* is being translated to specific instruments of public policy.

### ***Buen Vivir (Good Living) or Sumak Kawsay as Public Action Referential***

As is known, the process of policy making requires a representation of the reality in which it takes place and a public policy is expected to intervene. The actors of the public action organize their perception of the problem, manage their solutions, and define their proposals in reference to some frame of images and meanings: This set of symbolic representations constitutes the public policy referential (Muller, 2010, p. 115). The construction of this referential occurs in the political arena, during the political struggle. A crucial aspect of the political struggle is the dispute for defining how the social world actually is and how it should be. During these interactions, certain expressions function as keywords and core-meanings where the significance of the social experience is negotiated and contested (Fraser, 1997, p. 122). Thus, the most representative political signs tend to be, at the same time, the least precise. The ambiguity tends to be so profound that some political signs become “empty signifiers”, not because they are devoid of any meaning, but due to its agglutinative and mobile nature (Laclau, 2004, p. 95).

However, if the actors involved in public action look for instituting these terms as the guiding criteria for public policies, they need to set its meaning at some specific point that allows the passage to a concrete course of action. When we observe this process of fixating meaning and translating it into concrete decisions for public action, coherence and contradiction tend to emerge simultaneously.

### **The Good Living (*Buen Vivir*)**

This type of process might be observed during the institutionalization of the *good living* ideal (*buen vivir—sumak kawsay*) in Ecuador. The term first showed up mentioned with little relevance in the document of “Movimiento País” party’s platform during the electoral contest in 2006. Once in the government, the term was introduced as a social aim exposed in the new Constitution approved by referendum in 2008. Shortly after, the former government’s *plan of development* was named *Plan Nacional del Buen Vivir PNBV* (National Plan of Good Living). In this document, the term is introduced as a “shift of paradigm”, expressing the passage from the old referential of development to the new referential of *good living* (PNBV, 2009, p. 31). Likewise, in the mentioned document also appears traced a “long term strategy” (LTS) which is meant to conduce the society “towards a new model of wealth generation and redistribution for a *good living*” (PNBV, 2009, p. 91). The objective of the LTS is to change the prevailing model of the productive structure (or productive matrix). This change is conceived as a process of transition in four successive stages from the current economy based on the primary sector into a “bio-knowledge [based] society” (Ramirez, 2010, p. 15). Although with obvious modifications, the description of LTS seems to follow the classic rostowian model of five stages for economic growth in combination with a selective import substitution model.

In the PNBV, *good living* is defined as “the satisfaction of needs, achieving a quality of life and death with dignity, to love and be loved, the healthy flourishing of every one in peace and harmony with nature and the unlimited prolongation of human cultures”. It also points out that the *good living* “presupposes [...] that freedoms, opportunities, capabilities, and real potentialities of individuals expand and flourish so that they are allowed to simultaneously achieve what society, territories, diverse collective identities and each one [...] values as desirable goal of life [...]”. Hence, the good life would require “rebuilding the public [...] in order to make prosper the possibility of reciprocity and mutual recognition, and this makes possible the self-realization and the construction of a shared social future” (Ramirez, 2008 quoted in PNBV, 2009, p. 10).

If we compare the *good living* theoretical definitions presented through official documents, we may identify certain ideas in common with the later literature regarding development and well-being. We can quote specifically the capabilities literature from Sen (2010) and Nussbaum (2007) contributions, or the UNDP (United Nations Development Program) human development postulates, as well as some reflections on sustainable development and environmentalist literature. Reflections from Sen and Nussbaum, for example, identify the development process with a set of capabilities and basic rights that every society “is able to recognize and guarantee” to its members (Nussbaum, 2007, p. 87; Sen, 2010, p. 387). This inference is inevitable when we move the reflections on welfare and development from the field of economics to the field of political philosophy (as Nussbaum did). By means of this transdisciplinary intersection, it becomes clear that what is at stake is not a technical and economy-dependent evolutive process, but the political definition of a set of rights which may be and must be guaranteed to the members of a society and, therefore, the responsibility of the State in regard to those rights.

Currently, the Ecuadorian Constitution establishes a “regime of *good living*” as a social protection system based on social rights. This system poses an alternative way for linking politic, economic, social, cultural, and environmental issues. Unlike other conceptions about welfare, *good living* makes it explicit the “relationship between human rights, model of development [...] and rights of nature (Trujillo & Avila, 2008, pp. 79-82). Ecuador is the only country in the planet which constitutionally establishes the obligation of the State to guarantee all of these rights (human and nature) through the planning function and through a participative process of policy making. If good living constitutes the ultimate social goal towards to which public action must be oriented, the fulfillment of these rights through policy process would be the concrete way of going forward in that direction. In this context, the real challenge comprises on building the feasibility (political, social, and economic) and sustainability to this system, beyond the partisan rhetoric and the political and economic cycles.

### **The *Sumak Kawsay***

Several Kichwa scholars and researchers agree that the meaning of the term *sumak kawsay* might be studied only if the analysis is made within the broader framework of the Kichwa people cultural matrix, and not as an isolated concept which would be utterly translatable to the Spanish language. In attempting to build an interpretation of the Andean cosmovision, related to their ways of understanding and idealizing the world, one can assume an ethnocentric position, especially considering *a priori* that one’s own culture beliefs and values are the standard ones. This approach would lead us to see the Kichwa culture as a matrix of pre-modern thought, characteristic of “traditional societies” in which the estrangement from the divine reason (secularization), or the objectification of the nature with the consequent subjectivation of the human being, still has not been given (Habermas, 1993, pp. 30-33). A second approach seeks to observe this matrix from an intercultural perspective. This analytical approach supposes leaving aside any assumptions about the prevalence of a unique universal reason and instead establishing a dialogue, in epistemic equity, between different visions or ways of interpreting the world. Following this second approach, one might observe that the Andean worldview contains its own rationality (see Estermann, 1998).

According to this view, everything in the physical and metaphysical world is related to each other. The basic entity of the Andean thought is not a substance (the self) but a relationship; so the Andean logic’s guiding principle would be the concept of “relationality”. In this worldview, reality is multiple, instead of linear or

sequential. The understanding of this reality is possible only through the experience of interrelating. From this perspective, an individual separated from the whole constitutes a useless abstraction. The dignity of the *Runa* (Kichwa person) lies in his/her participation in the totality, inside which, he/she performs as a relational node or *chakana*. So his/her worldview is cognitively oriented by the relationality and interdependence. Among the principles that govern these interrelationships are: correspondence, complementarity, and reciprocity (Garcia, Lozano, Olivera, & Ruiz, 2004, p. 165; Estremann, 1998, pp. 114-123).

Kichwa indigenous institutions such as the *tinkui*, the *minka*, the *ayni*, the *makipurarina*, the *yanaparina*, and the *paktakausay* are based on these principles. These institutions regulate the social and economic relations in this community. The practices and mechanisms associated to these institutions provide significance and sense to the community's life (Kowii, 2009, pp. 3-4). The community is conceived as the continent of social life: The political and economic organization is thought from the community as the starting point, while *Pacha* is the space-time-order of the existential whole. *Pacha* is the common basis for the physical and spiritual reality and the vital foundation for relationality, *Pacha* is the very cosmos interrelated. In this worldview, the rhythm of time is marked by the cycles of renewal of *Pacha* and by the occurrence of the past in the present. The future is imagined as the return "to the land without evil" as well as the restoration of the cosmic order (Estremann, 1998, pp. 143-145; pp. 185-187).

For some scholars, especially for those who assume the Kichwa indigenous perspective, *good living* (*buen vivir*) and *sumak kawsay* are not completely equivalent terms, *buen vivir* would be more precisely translated to the Kichwa language as *alli Kawsay* which more accurately corresponds to the idea of something good or desirable, a state of conformity, while the term *sumak kawsay* connotes a superlative term, a "state of plenitude of the whole vital community"; and the "fullness of life" (Maldonado, 2010; Macas, 2010, p. 14; Kowii, 2009, pp. 4-5).

Other scholars go even further and point out an inauthentic use of the term (*sumak kawsay*) by the official rhetoric. They denounce "an usurpation that it is possible only after the decline of the Marxism thesis and the idea of progress inherited from Enlightenment period" (Oviedo, 2012, p. 56). According to these critics, the "Andean ancestral *sumac kawsay*" would refer to "the sacred coexistence of the ancient Andean peoples and their philosophical Vitalism" (Oviedo, 2012, p. 72).

There is a different perspective, which although is critical with the use of the term by the ruling party and is also critical with those who try to transform the *sumak kawsay* idea into an "archaeological object", providing it with an uncertain ancestry. They claim that much of the conceptualizations built around the term *sumak kawsay* constitute a "surprising invention of tradition" which is scarcely related to the current Kichwa people's concerns (Muyulema, 2012).

### **Incongruences in the Sphere of Public Action**

A first divergence related to the attempt of establishing a new referential for public action is that the terms *buen vivir* and *sumak kawsay* are not completely equivalent, there are disputes of meaning around these terms, and there is not an agreement on how to concretize these ideas in feasible public policy instruments.

In the Andean worldview, *Runas* and *Pacha* are not conceived as separate entities, each one with their own values and rights, since this worldview assumes a holistic and completely interrelated understanding of the reality; both are imperatively united throughout the cycles of creation and renewal of the cosmic order, and are a clear understanding that *Runas* depend on the nature to care and develop their lives. While in the "good

*living*”, the concerns about sustainability arise from finding the damages caused to the environment by human actions, given the objectification of nature in the modern and industrial society. *Sumak kawsay*’s greater value is harmony and equilibrium of the whole and the principles of reciprocity and complementarity imply, as a necessary condition, the maintenance of that equilibrium. That is why some authors have called this as “cosmo-centric” rationality (Farah & Vasapollo, 2011, p. 17). In the *good living* referential, the conception of the human being is closer to Sen’s version, it is an individual that assumes himself/herself as free and autonomous and as the holder of individual rights. This individual, at the same time, is immersed in a social context in which seeks support and recognition and therefore needs to interact with others and with the environment to achieve his/her “self-realization”. Thus, it would seem that the ideologues of *good living* tried to bring together in the same construct the anthropocentric emphasis of the Western discourse on welfare and rights; the socio-centric vision aroused by the social movements and their demands during last decade of 20th century; including some reflections and criticism emerged against the development discourse during the same period; and finally they included in such a construct the term, and their own interpretation, of *Sumak Kawsay*, (see Acosta, 2011; 2010; PNBV, 2009; Ramirez, 2010) though seemingly they failed in grasping the cosmo-centric vision.

In the enunciation of some *good living* policies, the objectives appear to be driven more by the Sen’s capabilities theory (or an interpretation of) than by a cosmo-centric vision of the *sumak kawsay*. If one looks at some specific policy instruments, they seem to be more associated with an instrumental view of the welfare (as a mean for economic grow) than with an intrinsic socio-political compromise to guarantee a set of rights. For instance, in the National Plan of Good Living (2013-2017), the fourth objective is to “strengthen the capabilities and potentialities of the citizenship” and the policies and goals for reaching this objective are related mainly with increasing the coverage and quality of education services, but the specific instruments, as the Law for f Higher Education (LOES) or the budget prioritization in this sector, have been planned more in a dependent relation with the change of the productive matrix than in relation to an alternative model of well-being. As the official rhetoric points out, these reforms seek to “promote the reciprocal interaction between education, productive sector, and scientific and technological research in order to scope the transformation of the productive matrix and the satisfaction of needs” (PNBV, 2009-2013).

The reform of the higher education mainly aims at “the formation of human capital”, especially in “strategic careers required by the country’s development model” (SENPLADES, 2012, p. 13). Even though, on the one hand, the gratuity of post-secondary education is intended to reduce the access barriers and consequently this would work as a democratizing factor; on the other hand, the admission conditions and the quotas allocation system is blind and disregard the departure conditions from which applicants are competing, given a context of high structural inequality.

Finally, in regard to the conception of the relationship man-nature, it would seem like the *good living* is closer to the *sumak kawsay* vision. Is this feature which might justify the use of both terms as entire equivalents; *good living* is defined as “the healthy flourishing of all in peace and harmony with nature” (PNBV, 2009, p. 9) or like “an opportunity to build another kind of society based on a citizen's coexistence in diversity and harmony with Nature” (Acosta, 2011, p. 23). In both visions nature has an intrinsic value, i.e., its value does not depend on the utility generated through its appropriation by human beings (Gudynas, 2011, p. 243). But, here again it is possible to find contradictions. For instance, the controversial decisions made by the current government about deepening the natural resources exploitation, just as the rostowian process describes, in its

first phase the LTS raises an intensification of the primary export model in order to generate the necessary surplus and accumulate enough capital to move on to the next phase in which it is possible to develop certain type of industries, as some official documents pointed out, by now this accumulation is possible only by exerting greater pressure on natural resources, since these are our comparative advantage and a “great opportunity that God has given us to get out from poverty” (PNBV, 2009, p. 95; Ramirez, 2010, p. 15; Correa, 2012).

### Conclusions

In this article, I have tried to characterize the *good living* or *sumak kawsay* as the new referential(s) for public action in Ecuador. Since 2007, with the emergency of a new government, apparently there was a replacement of the ideas and values imposed by the so called “neoliberal model” for policy making. This replacement is seen as a “return to the State”, with all reforms and public dynamics that this return implies. The inclusion of the idea of *good living* or *sumak kawsay* in the constitutional text in 2008 echoes this shift.

The idea of *good living* seems to put together a set of reformulations based on some learnings and criticism about the notion of development in the past 30 years. In opposition to the former period, the *good living* framework for public action activates the redistributive function of public policies and assumes responsibility for guaranteeing social rights. However, at the same time, the Government sets the LTS in which a vision, rather orthodox, of the modernization project is revealed. About *sumak kawsay*, it is possible to find at least two interpretative options: First, it could be conceived as a *Kichwa* expression fully equivalent to the institutional definition of the term *buen vivir* (*good living*); the second option is assuming an intercultural perspective on the *Kichwa*-Andean worldview, in this second case, we would find a “nonequivalent” meaning since the term *sumak kawsay* contains ideas and values which may be seen as incommensurable respect to other visions like welfarism or development from which *good living* take some premises, the differences could be observed specially regarding the conception of the individual and social relations and the dependent relation of human being with nature.

In this context, if one of the aims of *good living* is to expand the freedom of individuals and communities, so everyone can pursue the way of life he/she considers more valuable, then this means that *good living* does not pretend to institute a “global doctrine of the good” (Rawls, 1988, pp. 252-253), but instead of that within the wide space of this construct, as referential for public action, there is room for many different visions about social goals. This would lead the society to a radical pluralism in the goals of policy making.

The Ecuadorian Constitution establishes in a ground-breaking way the warranty of all human rights as well as the mandate of making them effective through planning of public policies, this is, through public action, since as there is declared, and this would be the right path to achieve *good living*.

The constitutional normative framework founds a condition of possibility for rethinking the relations between the state and the society under a different rationality. Beyond the state’s obligations, constitutionally pointed out, is the commitment of citizens and social actors who, through cooperation and contestation, try to embody those rights, and thus, through the public action, lead up the institutionalization of the mechanisms to perform those rights. This means social actors will have to translate their demands into languages and practices of public action and to actively participate in the process of policy making, because every time more “to make politics, is to make public policies” (Muller, 2010, p. 104).

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