

A Reset for Unprecedented Times by Natasha Chassagne

Maria Zambrano* lives in the highlands of Ecuador's Cotacachi Canton, home to two of the world's 36 internationally recognized biodiversity hotspots. It is also home to a people fiercely committed to their own social and environmental well-being. Zambrano is an Indigenous Ecuadorian of the Kichwa people. Sitting at a café in Cotacachi, the seamstress is dressed in a black wrap-around skirt and a traditional embroidered white shirt, on which she's done all the embroidery. The colorful stitching, she explains, is symbolic of her land, depictions of the connection between humans and Pachamama, which she uses to refer to Mother Earth. Pachamama, she says, is at the heart of everything she does.

Zambrano and other Kichwa who inhabit the cloud forest in this mountainous region of the Andes, know that if their environment is destroyed, it will profoundly impact their ability to thrive. And so they are embroiled in an ongoing fight to protect it. Cotacacheños are guided by what they call Buen Vivir in Spanish, or *sumak kawsay* in the Kichwa language, which loosely translates as "the Good Life." It is for them both a philosophy and a lived practice.

A direct and critical response to Western ideas of sustainable development, Buen Vivir is about respecting the rights and responsibilities of communities to protect and promote their own social and environmental well-being by driving grassroots change. Cotacacheños have been engaged in resistance against large-scale mining operations in the region for more than three decades in the name of Buen Vivir, because the destructive nature of mining is in conflict with their vision of environmental reciprocity.

Local Indigenous community leader David Torres explains, "Buen Vivir signifies first and foremost protecting our environment, more than anything." There is a strong sense of connection to each other and the natural environment that is missing from mainstream global political ideas about sustainability and well-being, Torres says. This is especially pertinent now, in the midst of current social and ecological crises. The lessons from this Andean canton can be applied to help transform communities across the globe, at a time where that's more necessary than ever.

The Reset

We are currently living amid a planetary climate emergency, a global pandemic, uprisings against state violence upon Black, Brown, and Indigenous peoples, and a failing economic system the world over. Pandemic lockdowns have forced major lifestyle changes: shifting consumption habits, realizing how deeply connected we are to each other and the environment, and focusing more on the non-material aspects of life for strengthening our well-being. Never before in modern society have we had to redesign our lives with such speed and magnitude: how we live them, how we connect with one another, and

what and how we consume.

This is precisely where Buen Vivir comes in.

Buen Vivir represents a combination of respect and reciprocity, community, solidarity and harmony. The idea is far from novel. While it originates in the Indigenous philosophy of *sumak kawsay*, its current conception goes beyond Indigenous interpretations of community and environment to include progressive politics, contemporary academic research, and the experiences of non-Indigenous communities.

This foundation is supported by three main pillars: The first is social, evoking equity, solidarity, and rights. The second is material, emphasizing the human capacity for work, health, and education, as opposed to the accumulation of wealth. The third is spiritual, referring to the idea of transcendence through nature rather than religion. Buen Vivir is present in the Indigenous communities in the Andes where it originated, and has since been adopted to varying degrees in communities across Latin America.

In Western capitalist society, we tend to ignore the highly dependent relationship we have with the Earth in favor of continuous economic growth and wealth accumulation. Nature becomes a resource to exploit, instead of a relationship to nurture. In contrast, Buen Vivir centers on the collective well-being of both the environment and community, which can help societies effectively address crises like climate change and future pandemics. For Cotacacheños, this plays out in daily life through the way they approach their role in and responsibility to the natural environment.

Indigenous women cook the meal during the Inti Raymi celebration at the foot of the Volcano "Taita" Imbabura in Iluman, Ecuador, on June 25, 2017. Inti Raymi, Festival of the Sun in Quechua language, is an ancient spiritual ceremony held by the Yachak association of the Indigenous Kichwa people of Iluman. Photo by Patricio Realpe/LatinContent/Getty Images.

Zambrano explains, "For us Indigenous people to have Buen Vivir, Mother Earth has to be in good health." Zambrano lives in close proximity to mining operations and shares how their massive environmental destruction is disrupting fragile ecosystems: the contamination of land and water as well as deforestation. "Our Pachamama is sick," she says, and that has direct repercussions on Zambrano's ability to produce food for her community. Her corn harvests, for example, have been declining in recent years. Pointing to the cascading impacts from mining, Zambrano says, "All of this has changed our climate."

Part of the problem is that the mining, according to Cotacacheños, creates a divide between society and nature. "We are part of this whole ecosystem," says local government official Leandro Garcia. "We do not want to exclude ourselves." It is with that mindset that Cotacachi Canton became the first "ecological canton" in South America, as declared by a municipal ordinance in 2000.

"This idea came from the grassroots," says Felipe Lopez, the head of a local environmental organization. "We convinced the local government [to declare an ecological canton]." The declaration is an environmental policy born from social mobilization, like the mining resistance in Cotacachi. The goal is to promote environmental awareness among the people who live there, and protect the cultural and

environmental wealth of the region by banning any economic activity that contaminates the natural environment—including mining—across the approximately 1,700 square kilometers (650 square miles) of the canton.

An Indigenous woman walks with a meal during the Inti Raymi. The lively celebration, set by the winter solstice, goes on for various days. Colorful processions pass through the mountain villages in honor of the God Inti (Sun), giving thanks for the harvest and expressing their deep relation to the Mother Earth. Photo by Patricio Realpe/LatinContent/Getty Images.

In honoring this approach, local communities in the canton are creating sustainable economic alternatives like community-based ecotourism, local renewable energy, and small-scale organic and regenerative agriculture that respect the role nature plays in society here. Few other ecological cantons, counties, or cities exist around the world, and definitions vary. But China is fully embracing the concept, and has seen a proliferation of eco-cities and eco-counties since it established a national program in 2003.

In 2008, in a direct challenge to the Western neoliberal agenda, grassroots movements for social and environmental justice resulted in changes to both the Ecuadorian and Bolivian constitutions to include specific references to Buen Vivir. While this was due in large part to mobilization led by Indigenous organizations across Ecuador in their long-standing struggle for *sumak kawsay*, Cotacacheños say that the politicization of Buen Vivir has become more of an empty slogan than a credit to its original principles.

To counter the commodification of the concept, Cotacacheños have helped build explicit descriptions and practices that can help define what it is (and isn't). Beyond the Andean philosophical outlook, Buen Vivir has a pragmatic side that is applicable in any cultural context.

The Path to Well-Being

The philosophy of Buen Vivir is, by definition, utopian—the pursuit of the sublime. It is what many who are searching for alternative approaches to Western-style sustainable development imagine when they think about a world free of social and environmental injustices. But, the path toward that utopia is a nuanced version called *Vivir Bien*, which means living well, or *ally kawsay* in Kichwa. Both Buen Vivir and *Vivir Bien* are based on the same ideas and principles, only the former is aspirational, while the latter is rooted in behavioral change.

Vivir Bien is about the daily actions, decisions, and choices we make for ourselves, our families, and our communities. This may include environmental education, participation in local decision-making, and changing behaviors that hamper Earth's regenerative capacity. And unlike the universal guidelines and benchmarks that define sustainable development, that action is tailored to local experience and circumstances. Each community has its own unique history, geography, culture, and needs, so its application of *Vivir Bien*, too, will be unique. David Sanchez, an Indigenous community leader, says, for example, that his community in the foothills of Cotacachi has been undertaking reforestation of the land previously cleared by the Ecuadorian government.

While aspects of the philosophy are critical of Western systems and norms, many Western

communities already incorporate some principles of Vivir Bien. In recent years, in Western countries we have seen an orientation toward communal well-being through greater involvement in community centers, community activities and gardens, and neighborhood assistance programs. Fostering a cultural sharing such as a language exchange and community multicultural events not only strengthens solidarity, but also helps build community capacity.

So, too, with politics. Participation in public decision-making is as much a right as a responsibility, and a truly participatory democracy is vital to creating real change, like the Cotacachi Ecological Canton Ordinance.

The Cotacachi Valley below the Imbabura Volcano. Photo by Ian McAllister/Alamy Stock Photo.

Reducing the use of fossil fuels and using natural resources on an as-needed basis have powerful positive impacts. Focusing on economic activities that work within the limits of the environment results in a “degrowth” of socially and environmentally damaging sectors of the economy. Shifting toward a conscious consumerism through a Social and Solidarity Economy (made up of local small businesses, cooperatives, associations, and fair trade groups), moves us away from global market capitalism.

Such behavioral changes in daily life are a demonstration of the possibility of achieving social and environmental well-being within the confines of a Western capitalist society, rather than an attack against it.

Re-evaluating Needs

In these times of social and ecological crisis, we have had to re-evaluate what it is we really need for well-being to flourish. It involves dismantling Western ideals of well-being and their entanglement with economic growth and consumption. As Lopez says, “Economic wealth is just one type of wealth, and it’s not the most important wealth for achieving Buen Vivir. Social wealth is very important, [as is] cultural and environmental wealth.” It’s about how we value things.

Buen Vivir focuses on holistic factors to understand a community’s needs, such as family, good health, a healthy environment, leisure time, community, equity, solidarity, identity, and respect. Connection with others is a big part of meeting these needs. Communities in the Ecuadorian Andes participate in communal work and knowledge sharing—called minga in Kichwa—to help address the needs of all, including the environment. The Citizens’ Minga for Environmental Education, for example, brings together 30 residents including community leaders and members, and council members to manage their local environment and address issues like water quality and biodiversity conservation at the community level.

Kichwa families share a meal in May 2020 after negotiating heritage land boundaries. The Kichwa who inhabit this region of the Andes understand their stewardship of the environment is central to their well-being. Photo by Ian McAllister/Alamy Stock Photo.

“Minga work and democratic living teaches us that we live by doing things for

others,” Garcia says, contrasting it with our increasingly urbanizing world and big cities, where familiarity and mutual aid are often absent today. “The theme of solidarity is being lost.”

The year 2020 has highlighted that we have undervalued the critical, yet nonmaterial, needs of humanity that Buen Vivir emphasizes. As Lopez explains, “There are many intangible things that a government can’t really give you: peace with yourself, peace with communities, peace with your environment.” He says, “If you’re living this idea of Buen Vivir, you’re aware that your actions will disturb that [sense of peace, so] you’re much less likely to take what you don’t need.”

We are at a critical crossroads in society. Buen Vivir offers an opportunity to nurture our relationships with family, friends, our communities, and the natural world through a communal and nature-oriented mindset. On a practical level, it helps us evaluate what really matters through daily actions and choices that consider the impacts on both the environment and those around us.

“People say, ‘Yes, I’m very happy,’ but that could change tomorrow,” Lopez says. “If the underlying spiritual and social and psychological bases are not strong enough, they’ll change.”

*This story is based on a research project of a political nature. Therefore, pseudonyms are used to protect the participants’ identities. Interviews were conducted in Spanish and translated into English. People shown in these images were not a part of the research.