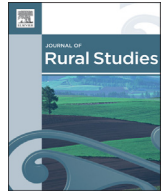




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Radical ruralities in practice: Negotiating *buen vivir* in a Colombian network of sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emerging concept of *buen vivir* – interpreted as integrative and collective well-being – as it is being envisioned and practiced by a network of sustainability initiatives in Colombia. As an example of a transition narrative currently taking place in Latin America and beyond, *buen vivir* represents a turn towards a more biocentric, relational and collective means of understanding and being in the world. Yet despite the many discourses into *buen vivir* (many of which tout it as an alternative to neoliberal models of development), there is a general lack of research into its varied forms of application, especially in terms of lived experiences. Drawing on the new ruralities literature, this paper explores the extent to which *buen vivir* visions and practices represent radical new ruralities – so-called alternatives to development. Data were collected from individuals and ecological communities in predominantly rural areas who are members of the Council of Sustainable Settlements of the Americas (CASA), a network which promotes many of the principles of *buen vivir*. Through participatory methods, results demonstrate that CASA visions are based on constructing territorial relations through intercultural knowledge exchange and experimentation into alternative lifestyles. Despite the substantial challenges and contradictions of putting these visions into practice, we argue that lived experiences promote processes of self-reflection on what *buen vivir* really is or could be. We hold that the inclusive nature of *buen vivir* offers opportunities for diverse peoples to cohere around shared meanings of the 'good life,' while providing the freedom to live variations depending on social and ecological context.

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1. Introduction: the 'good life' of *buen vivir*

Latin America is one of the few regions in the world where important counter-hegemonic processes are taking place at the state level (Escobar, 2010). Beginning with the 'pink tide' (Bull, 2013) of post-neoliberal projects in the late 1990s, this has culminated in the Andean nations of Bolivia passing a new constitution refounding the country as a plurinational State based on the concept of *vivir bien*; likewise, Ecuador passed a new constitution based on the concept of *sumak kawsay* and the legal recognition of the rights of nature. The above concepts are conventionally referred to as *buen vivir*, which roughly translates as the 'good life.' As an

example of a transition narrative in Latin America and beyond, *buen vivir* represents a departure from the modern development narrative through a turn towards a more biocentric, relational and collective means of understanding and being in the world (Gudynas, 2011a).

Central to the notion of *buen vivir* is the age-old search for what it means to live a good life. In the western world, "well-being" has become a popular way to measure this, with the increasing recognition that current well-being and its long-term sustainability are the ultimate goals of development (Boarini et al., 2014). Yet frameworks for exploring well-being are usually based on universal quantitative indicators of subjective well-being so as to inform public policy. *Buen vivir*, on the other hand, is conceptualized as collective and integrative well-being, where the subject of well-being is not the individual, but the relation between an individual and his/her specific cultural-natural environment (Gudynas, 2011a; Guardiola, 2011). *Buen vivir* can thus be seen as an alternative to neoliberal models of development, the latter of which lack this

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relational focus (Acosta, 2008; Farah and Vasapollo, 2011; Escobar, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2012; Kauffman and Martin, 2013; Villalba, 2013).

Yet as Deneulin and McGregor (2010) point out, well-being (and *buen vivir* as well) may mean different things to different people – turning it into a potential source of conflict. This is especially pertinent in current debates on sustainability, with the increasing recognition that well-being strategies based on high-fossil fuel lifestyles are detrimental to the environment, leading to the collective need to develop more sustainable meanings of well-being (Deneulin and McGregor, 2010). In Ecuador, resulting conflict can be seen, for example in the government's recent approval of oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park which arguably contradicts the Constitution's principles of *buen vivir* by privileging economic development over the supposed rights of nature.¹

The above example demonstrates the contested nature of *buen vivir*, which have led many authors to question the extent to which the term really offers an alternative paradigm to development (Walsh, 2010; Escobar, 2010; Villalba, 2013). To use the expression of Escobar (2012), is *buen vivir* an alternative modernity, or an alternative to modernity? While much research into *buen vivir* has taken place at the level of the state, Escobar (2010) points to the discourses and strategies of sub-state social movements – both indigenous and non-indigenous (Gudynas, 2011a) – which mobilize the term to search for the radical possibilities that inhere in alternative ways of connecting (and not separating) nature and culture. Emphasizing the plural nature of *buen vivir* that goes beyond indigenous conceptions, Gudynas (2011a) opens up the debate of non-indigenous 'good lives' of, for example, rubber tappers in the Amazon or the residents of a favela in Brazil.

The search for these other possibilities led our research to actively follow a Colombian network of sustainability initiatives called CASA (The Council of Sustainable Settlements of the Americas) in its quest for *buen vivir*. Established in 2012, CASA is a self-financed and self-governed network that evolved out of the Colombian ecovillage² movement and now comprises a broader network seeking to articulate diverse visions and practices of sustainable living such as those between Indigenous communities, neo-rural settlements and urban initiatives (see CASA, 2015). Within CASA, members repeatedly but differentially use the notion of *buen vivir* when discussing community, territory and sustainability issues. This plurality of meanings of *buen vivir* offered a unique opportunity for us to investigate and experience first-hand the ongoing struggles and negotiations to define and help shape alternative lives based on the concept.

Well-being is an increasingly accepted means of capturing the human experience of development (Boarini et al., 2014) and critical to the development paradigm that such universal indicators are situated. The objective of this article to explore the extent to which the concept of *buen vivir* can provide visions and experiences of new relations between individuals, society and nature. We do so by making use of lived human experiences in the cultural-ecological context of Colombia and the CASA network.

In what follows, we introduce the key concept of radical ruralities, and provide contextual background on *buen vivir* and the CASA network. We then outline our participatory approach, and

present our results in two parts: one on the *buen vivir* visions that circulate within CASA and one on how these visions are put into practice. We discuss the radical ruralities of CASA practices, and close off with concluding remarks.

2. Radical ruralities and *buen vivir*

As a result of transformative processes in the countryside brought about by neo-liberalism and globalization, new narratives of rurality have emerged which branch away from conventional notions of the productivist countryside. Halfacree (2007) identifies four ideal type narratives to describe these trends: The first is *super-productivism* in which moral dimensions of 'countryside' make room for the commodification of nature (Katz, 1998; McAfee, 1999). *Consuming idylls* describes the romance of an agricultural backdrop based on consumption-oriented uses such as amenity migration whereby properties are bought in the countryside for recreational purposes (McCarthy, 2008). There is also the *effaced rurality* in which the rural, in effect, has been effaced by the geographical development of capitalism, becoming a 'free floating signifier' used whenever a marketable identity is needed (Hopkins, 1998).

At the periphery of the above narratives are the *radical ruralities* with which this article engages. These expressions diverge from the inherently capitalistic logic of the other narratives by striving for the production of truly different forms of rural space, which not just extend the scope of rural possibilities but also concern the issues of the ideological underpinnings of the forms of rural space currently debated. Such radical ruralities have three key elements: first, a strong community discourse; second, they promote diverse meanings of land beyond that of simple means of production; and third they give great importance to ecocentric and deep ecological beliefs. While Halfacree (2007) focusses on back-to-the-land movements, community-based ecovillages, and peri-urban co-housing (mainly in the global North), Kay (2008) describes the strong Latin American roots of these radical rural expressions, employing the term *communitarian* proposals to describe community-based peasant groups developing grassroots post-capitalist relations. These he relates to the Zapatistas of Mexico and to the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil.

Certain manifestations of *buen vivir* share these key elements of *radical ruralities* by striving to create different forms of being in the countryside. Several of these attempt to return meaning and control over territories to local populations by redefining relations to place³ (Gudynas, 2011a; Escobar, 2008). In this way territory has become essential for articulating a defence of alternative worlds in rural areas by several social movements who use the term to construct an identity of their 'otherness' as a political strategy (Koop, 2014). A good example of this is the work carried out by Escobar (1998, 2008) who shows the articulation between Afro-Colombian social movements and biodiversity-environmentalist discourses through what he describes as the negotiated construction of territory.

The concept of 'territory' plays an important role within *buen vivir*, integrating the natural and spiritual diversity of all forms of life through customs, traditions, languages, worldviews, principles and values (Huanacuni, 2010). These expressions of *buen vivir* furthermore promote cultures based on the bond and respect with 'living territories' (Farah and Vasapollo, 2011), where a territory is

¹ As Borón (2012) notes, however, the situation is more nuanced, with the Ecuadorian government having made an international appeal for funds to abstain from carrying out the extraction (itself post-extractivist in theory). With the lack of international response, the government decided to go ahead with the extraction, justifying the decision by arguing that the revenue generated was needed by the country to invest in the country's national plan for *buen vivir*.

² Litfin (2009:125) defines an ecovillage as "a planetary knowledge community grounded in a holistic ontology and seeking to construct viable living systems as an alternative to the unsustainable legacy of modernity".

³ Here we use Escobar's (2001:40) definition of place as "the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), sense of boundaries (however permeable), and connection to everyday life, even if its identity is constructed, traversed by power, and never fixed".

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