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Ecologist or post-developmental buen vivir: a biocentric alternative from activism

El buen vivir ecologista o posdesarrollista: una alternativa biocéntrica desde el activismo

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ABSTRACT

Ecologist or post-developmental *buen vivir* is an epistemology of the global South born from the union of different demands from indigenous, environmental, feminist and decolonial activism. Although there is an abundance of literature on what *buen vivir* is, there is no work that has systematised the values, proposals and claims of the ecologist -post-developmental trend of *buen vivir*. For this reason, this paper has two objectives: 1) to show the thematic pillars on which this trend of *buen vivir* was built and the values that support it, also showing the discrepancies that have appeared in the literature on this subject; and 2) to discuss those issues that have not been addressed in sufficient depth or that have been treated in a generic or abstract way.

A review of the literature published by the ‘main representatives’ of this trend of *buen vivir* has been carried out using the PRISMA guidelines. These representatives were defined by seven previous works. A total of 178 works were studied using the method of thematic analysis.

It was determined that the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* primarily addresses three interconnected thematic blocks (economy, environment and state), which are broken down into twenty-one values, proposals and demands that shape its political-philosophical discourse.

It is a paradigm that provides answers to common concerns or worries in the international sphere. However, the chameleon-like relativisation of *buen vivir* has generated contradictions between its values. Moreover, despite its enormous potential, there has been no empirical study of the socio-economic consequences of their proposals.

As such, this is the first work that systematises the values of the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir*, which represents an enormous advance in the understanding of the current political agenda of part of the Latin American social movements, as well as a solid nexus with the pluriversal proposals.

Keywords: alternatives to development, biocentric ethic, *buen vivir*, literature review, post-development, social movements.

RESUMEN

El *buen vivir* ecologista o posdesarrollista es una epistemología del Sur global nacida a partir de la unión de diferentes reivindicaciones procedentes del activismo indígena, ecologista, feminista y decolonial. Aunque la literatura sobre qué es el *buen vivir* es abundante, no hay ningún trabajo que haya sistematizado los valores, propuestas y reivindicaciones de la corriente ecologista-posdesarrollista del *buen vivir*. Por ello, este trabajo presenta dos objetivos: 1) mostrar los pilares temáticos sobre los que se erigió esta corriente del *buen vivir* y los valores que la respaldan, mostrando también las discrepancias aparecidas en la literatura sobre esta temática; y 2) discutir aquellos temas que no han sido abordados con la suficiente profundidad o que han sido tratados de forma genérica o abstracta.

Se ha llevado a cabo una revisión de la literatura publicada por los “principales representantes” de esta corriente del *buen vivir* aplicando las directrices PRISMA. Estos representantes fueron definidos por siete trabajos previos. En total se han estudiado 178 trabajos a través del método del análisis temático.

Se ha podido determinar que el *buen vivir* ecologista-posdesarrollista aborda primordialmente tres bloques temáticos interconectados (economía, medioambiente y Estado), los cuales se desgranar en torno a veintiún valores, propuestas y reivindicaciones que dan forma a su discurso político-filosófico. Se está ante un paradigma que da respuestas a preocupaciones o inquietudes comunes en el ámbito internacional. Sin embargo, la camaleónica relativización del *buen vivir* ha generado contradicciones entre sus valores. Además, a pesar de su enorme potencial, no se ha profundizado de forma empírica en el estudio de las consecuencias socio-económicas de sus propuestas.

De tal modo, este es el primer trabajo que sistematiza los valores del *buen vivir* ecologista-posdesarrollista, lo cual representa un enorme avance en la comprensión de la actual agenda política de una parte de los movimientos sociales latinoamericanos, así como un sólido nexo de unión con las propuestas pluriversales.

Palabras clave: alternativas al desarrollo, ética biocéntrica, *buen vivir*, movimientos sociales, posdesarrollo, revisión de la literatura.

R E S U M O

O buen vivir ecológico ou pós-desenvolvimentista é uma epistemologia do Sul global nascida da união de diferentes exigências do ativismo indígena, ambiental, feminista e decolonial. Embora a literatura sobre o que é o buen vivir seja abundante, não existe nenhum trabalho que tenha sistematizado os valores, propostas e reivindicações do movimento ecológico-pós-desenvolvimentista do buen vivir. Assim sendo, este trabalho apresenta dois objetivos: 1) mostrar os pilares temáticos sobre os quais foi construída esta corrente do buen vivir e os valores que a sustentam, mostrando também as discrepâncias que têm aparecido na literatura sobre este tema; e 2) discutir aqueles temas que não foram abordados com suficiente profundidade ou que foram tratados de forma genérica ou abstrata.

Foi efectuada uma revisão da literatura publicada pelos “principais representantes” desta corrente do buen vivir, aplicando as diretrizes PRISMA. Estes representantes foram definidos por sete trabalhos anteriores. No total, foram estudadas 178 obras através do método de análise temática.

Verificou-se que o buen vivir ecológico-pós-desenvolvimentista aborda principalmente três blocos temáticos interligados (economia, ambiente e Estado), (economia, ambiente e Estado), que se dividem em vinte e um valores, propostas e reivindicações que moldam o seu discurso político-filosófico.

Estamos perante um paradigma que dá respostas a preocupações comuns ou preocupações na arena internacional. Contudo, a relativização camaleónica do buen vivir tem gerado contradições entre os seus valores. Além disso, apesar do seu enorme potencial, as consequências socioeconómicas das suas propostas não foram estudadas de forma empírica.

Trata-se, pois, da primeira obra que sistematiza os valores do buen vivir ecológico-pós-desenvolvimentista, o que representa um enorme avanço na compreensão da atual agenda política de parte dos movimentos sociais latino-americanos, bem como uma sólida ligação com as propostas pluriversais que nos últimos anos têm vindo a emergir e a ganhar importância na esfera política e na literatura académica.

Palavras-chave: Alternativas ao desenvolvimento, ética biocêntrica, bem viver, movimentos sociais, pós-desenvolvimento, revisão de literatura.

1. Introduction

For years, academic literature and activism have been searching for alternatives to development models and agendas. Buen vivir¹ is a concept that originated in Latin America and that several authors defend and value as a viable alternative to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (Demaria et al., 2023; García-Arias & Cuestas-Caza, 2024; Hidalgo-Capitán et al., 2019).

The buen vivir has been evolving since its popularisation in the first decade of the twenty-first century. Different studies have detected how this concept fragmented into three intellectual trends during the presidency of Rafael Correa Delgado (2007-2017) and the inclusion in the Ecuadorian Constitution (2008) of the terms *sumak kawsay* and *buen vivir* (García-García, 2023). These trends are: culturalist-indigenous *sumak kawsay*, ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* and socialism of *buen vivir*/*sumak kawsay* or socialist-statist *buen vivir*²³.

The ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* continues to participate in the debates on post-capitalist, post-developmental, decolonial and feminist models. This is due, on the one hand, to its continuous academic production and, on the other hand, to its presence in international activism, since its “main intellectual representatives” are from different countries: Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Ecuador, Germany, Mexico, Uruguay and Spain, among others. In addition, numerous works on *buen vivir* have formulated debates and sought common ground with different epistemologies from the global South and North. Thus, for example, dialogues have been established with deep ecology (García-García, 2022b; Gudynas, 2017), social, solidarity, community, ecological and feminist economics (Villalba-Eguiluz y Pérez-de-Mendiguren, 2019), ecofeminism (Pérez Orozco y Mason-Deese, 2022), ubuntu philosophy (Nascimento Silva y Elibio Junior, 2022; Pereira da Silva, 2020), and Afro-American cultures and Afro-diasporas (Nascimento Silva y Elibio Junior, 2022), among other trends. The mutual influence between *buen vivir* and degrowth is particularly noteworthy (Acosta, 2023; Beling, 2019). Gudynas (2015) considers that the main difference between the two concepts lies in the greater emphasis of *buen vivir* on intercultural and identity debates⁴.

¹ In academic studies in English, it is common to find the terms “good living” or “living well”, although the concept is also frequently used in Spanish, i.e., without translation.

² Appendix A contains a table showing the differences between the different trends.

³ Although many works have used the terms *sumak kawsay* and *buen vivir* as synonyms, it is important to clarify that they are different concepts. The former refers to an indigenous cosmovision of the Andes and the Amazon. In contrast, *buen vivir* is based on this worldview, but through academic and political spaces it has been adapted to non-indigenous epistemologies and ontologies.

⁴ As will be explained in more detail later in the text, the ecologist-post-developmental trend considers *sumak kawsay* as one of the many forms of *buen vivir* that exist in the world. However,

In recent years, this trend's proposal of the existence of numerous forms of buen vivir or buenos vivires (good livings) has allowed this concept to be integrated within current debates on the pluriversal perspective (Demaria et al., 2019, 2023; Escobar, 2018; Garcia-Arias y Cuestas-Caza, 2024).

Although the literature on what buen vivir is abundant, there is no work that has systematised the values, proposals and claims of the ecologist-post-developmental trend of buen vivir. For this reason, this paper has two objectives: 1) to show the thematic pillars on which this trend of buen vivir is built and the values that mostly support it, also showing the discrepancies that have appeared in the literature on this subject; and 2) to discuss those issues that have not been addressed in sufficient depth or that have been treated in a generic or abstract way.

In order to achieve the stated objectives, this paper has followed the PRISMA guidelines and has analysed all the articles, books, book chapters and theses on buen vivir published by those defined as the “main representatives” of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir. These authors were defined in seven previous works. A search by name and surname was carried out in four databases (Dialnet, ProQuest, Scopus and Web of Science), the academic repository Scielo and the academic search engine Google Scholar, which yielded a total of 178 works, whose information was extracted using the technique of thematic analysis.

Thus, after explaining the methodology employed, this paper will present the three thematic blocks and the approximately twenty-one values/proposals/claims that fundamentally make up the ecologist-post-developmental discourse of buen vivir. This will be followed by a discussion of the weaknesses of its approaches, which require new debates and political strategies. Finally, the main conclusions of this study will be presented.

degrowth and sumak kawsay have profound epistemological and ontological differences that go beyond intercultural and identity debates.

2. Methodology

In order to define the main values, proposals and claims of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir, a review of the literature published by those considered to be the “main representatives” of this trend has been carried out (table 1). These intellectuals have been defined by the following seven works:

W1: Cubillo-Guevara & Hidalgo-Capitán (2019)

W2: Cubillo-Guevara et al. (2014)

W3: García-García (2022b)

W4: Hidalgo-Capitán y Cubillo-Guevara (2017)

W5: Le Quang (2020)

W6: Vanhulst (2015)

W7: Vanhulst et al. (2020)

There are other works that also mention the representatives of the buen vivir and sumak kawsay trends, however, they indicate that they start from what has been established by one or more of the previous ones (García-García, 2023).

It is important to clarify that these studies have identified trends among the publications on buen vivir, i.e. they are not studies dedicated entirely to the delimitation and selection of authors of buen vivir. It should be noted that some of the authors listed in tables 1 and 2 do not fully agree with the categorisation made. However, given that, on the one hand, these seven works have coherently justified the ideological similarities of these authors and their tendencies on the buen vivir and, on the other hand, that they are scientific investigations that have been subjected to peer review, it has been decided to use these works as a reference to unravel the main values, proposals and claims of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir.

When analysing these studies, it was identified that not all of these studies mention the same authors. Which study names which author can be found in table 1.

Table 1. Representatives of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir according to different works

Author	W1	W2	W3	W4	W5	W6	W7	Total
Acción Ecológica	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	1
Acosta Espinosa, Alberto	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
Aguinaga, Margarita	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	3
Boff, Leonardo	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	5
Carpio Benalcázar, Jaime Patricio	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	8
Centro Latinoamericano de Ecología Social (CLAES)	No	No	Yes	No	No	No	No	1
Escobar, Arturo	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	5
Esteve, Gustavo	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	6
Gudynas, Eduardo	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	7
Lander, Edgardo	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	4
Lang, Miriam	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	4
León Trujillo, Magdalena	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	5
Martínez, Esperanza	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	5
Martínez-Alier, Joan	No	No	No	No	No	Yes	No	1
Mokrani, Dunia	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	No	3
Quijano, Aníbal	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	5
Quintero, Rafael	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	4
Quirola, Diana	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	4
Svampa, Maristella	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	No	Yes	4
Unceta Satrústegui, Koldo	Yes	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No	3
Tortosa, José María	Yes	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No	4
Vega Sillo, Elisa	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	5
Vega, Fernando	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	5

Source: own elaboration.

Following the assessments and nuances made by García-García (2023), several of these authors have not been considered as representatives of this trend: Acción Ecológica, Leonardo Boff, Centro Latino Americano de Ecología Social (CLAES), Edgardo Lander, Joan Martínez-Alier, Aníbal Quijano, Rafael Quintero López and Diana Quirola Suárez. García-García (2023) points out that there is confusion between those who have been the main intellectual leaders of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir and other intellectuals who have made a specific contribution or whose ideas on issues common to the buen vivir have had an influence on the movement. For this reason, the number of representatives has been reduced to fifteen (eight men and seven women). It should be noted that these

authors are mainly Latin American academics, although their links to environmental and post-development activism should also be emphasised, either through active participation through NGOs or political parties, or more indirectly through their academic publications and policy advice⁵.

Once these representatives had been identified, a search by name and surname was carried out in four databases (Dialnet, ProQuest, Scopus and Web of Science), the academic repository Scielo and the academic search engine Google Scholar. These databases were selected because of their international recognition as platforms of high scientific reliability. It was important to include databases such as Dialnet and ProQuest and the Scielo repository, since they include numerous academic studies written in Spanish –the native language of fourteen out of the fifteen representatives of this trend– on the topics addressed here. Google Scholar⁶, on the other hand, is not a highly reliable search engine for scientific documents, but it was used for two reasons. Firstly, several of the representatives of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir do not work in the academic world, but in activism and politics. Their works are necessary to understand the principles of this trend of the buen vivir, and Google Scholar offers the possibility of identifying and accessing them. Secondly, Google Scholar also offers reports, which is a type of document that does not appear in academic databases. Therefore, this paper will not focus on the indexation or the impact index of the works of these representatives, but on the arguments they have developed or what they have said to give rise to a trend of their own.

Applying the PRISMA guidelines to each author in each database (Page et al., 2021; Ruiz-Adame, 2022), all their journal papers, books, book chapters and reports that discussed in whole or in part about sumak kawsay and buen vivir from 2000 to 2024 were selected. Given that some of the works did not include references to buen vivir in their titles or abstracts, a keyword search (“sumak kawsay”, “suma qamaña”, “buen vivir”, “buenos vivires”, “vivir bien”, “good living” and “living well”) was carried out within those texts by authors whose subject matter had links to buen vivir, thus avoiding missing possible works of interest.

⁵ Further details on the professional profiles and nationalities of the representatives can be found in appendix B.

⁶ Only the first fifty Google Scholar entries were analysed. This is because Google Scholar has few options for limiting searches and, in addition, its search algorithm includes a huge number of works that are not by the selected authors, but which cite or mention them.

Table 2. Names and number of works by representatives of ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir in different scientific databases (2000-2024)

Author	Dialnet	Google Scholar	ProQuest	Scielo	Scopus	Web of Science	Total works
Acosta Espinosa, Alberto	18	32	8	8	9	10	52
Aguinaga Barragán, Alba Margarita	2	7	0	1	0	0	8
Carpio Benalcázar, Jaime Patricio	3	7	1	0	2	2	8
Escobar, Arturo	8	9	9	3	8	10	17
Esteva, Gustavo	1	4	3	0	3	1	5
Gudynas, Eduardo	14	20	9	4	10	9	38
Lang, Miriam	0	11	2	0	3	1	12
León Trujillo, Magdalena	0	3	1	0	1	0	4
Martínez, Esperanza	1	8	0	3	0	3	9
Mokrani Chávez, Dunia	0	5	0	0	0	0	5
Svampa, Maristella	3	6	3	0	4	3	12
Unceta							
Satrústegui, Koldo	6	5	2	0	1	0	8
Tortosa Blasco, José María	3	6	0	0	0	2	7
Vega Sillo, Elisa	0	2	0	0	0	0	2
Vega, Fernando	1	7	0	0	1	1	7
Total works	61	138	38	19	42	43	341
Total works without duplications	44	94	35	16	39	37	178

Source: own elaboration.

In contrast to other literature reviews, the use of keywords and booleans is not effective in studying the case of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir. This is because only the socialist trend complements the term buen vivir with this categorisation (“socialism of buen vivir”). In contrast, culturalist-indigenous and ecologist-post-developmental political actors did not use these classifications, as they considered their definitions not to be subjective, but to be the real buen vivir.

Thus, a literature search based on concepts such as *buen vivir*, and the families of words linked to ecologism and post-developmentalism, offers extensive results that for the most part do not refer to the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir*, but use the terms to describe different characteristics that may be associated with any of the three trends of *buen vivir*, or none of them. For this reason, starting with the literature written by the 15 authors finally selected makes it possible to delimit the enormous amount of work that currently exists on *buen vivir*. Although this may result in the loss of contributions by authors who could also form part of this trend or other works of interest, it is not possible to search for these authors or to include these works among the thousands that exist.

On the other hand, in order to extract the information from the 178 documents selected⁷, the method of thematic analysis was used (Braun y Clarke, 2006, 2014). This method is suitable for the objectives of this research because it “provides a robust, systematic framework for coding qualitative data, and for then using that coding to identify patterns across the dataset in relation to the research question” (Braun y Clarke, 2014). Furthermore, given the flexible characteristics of this method:

A thematic analysis at the latent level goes beyond the semantic content of the data, and starts to identify or examine the underlying ideas, assumptions, and conceptualizations –and ideologies– that are theorized as shaping or informing the semantic content of the data. [...] Thus, for latent thematic analysis, the development of the themes themselves involves interpretative work, and the analysis that is produced is not just description” (Braun y Clarke, 2006, p. 84).

“To sum up, thematic analysis involves the searching across a data set –be that a number of interviews or focus groups, or a range of texts– to find repeated patterns of meaning” (Braun y Clarke, 2006, p.86).

The first two phases of the thematic analysis were carried out on printed texts, in which the main ideas were noted and coded. Depending on the text consulted, the coding varied, with some works devoting several pages to the analysis of a single concept, while others presented several ideas and terms on a single page.

In the third phase, these codes were summarised into main theme, secondary themes and sub-themes, in order to subsequently construct an initial sketch of the themes addressed and how they are related (appendix D). To check whether the themes and sub-themes had been selected correctly, Python was used to count the terms that appeared.

In the fifth phase, this initial sketch was reviewed and checked whether the ideas had been presented correctly or whether they could be simplified, regrouped, renamed or improved. Through this fifth phase, it has been found that the central theme of this trend is *buen vivir* (what it is, what values it has, how it is to be built...).

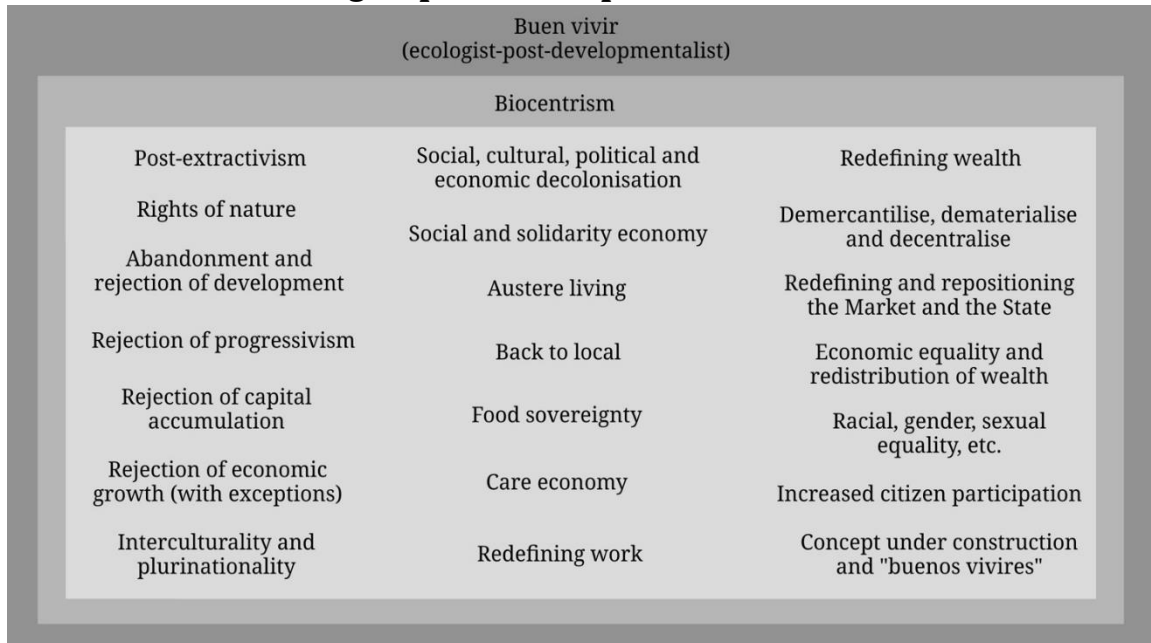
⁷ The 178 selected papers can be found in appendix A.

Associated with the buen vivir (ecologist-post-developmental), three secondary interconnected themes appear recurrently, structuring the meaning and approaches around this concept: economy, environment and State. These are accompanied by twenty-one values, proposals and demands (sub-themes) that give shape to the political-philosophical discourse of the ecologist- post-developmental buen vivir. These sub-themes are reflected in figure 1, which represents a three-level hierarchical diagram in which the higher levels encompass the lower ones. The first level responds to the main theme (buen vivir), and the next two levels expose the sub-themes, showing how the sub-theme “Biocentrism” influences the rest of the values/proposals/claims on which the discourse of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir is built.

There are sub-themes that apparently could appear at the same point, but if they have not been grouped together it is because of their relative importance within the approaches. Thus, for example, “rejection of capital accumulation” and “rejection of economic growth” would form two distinct categories, since the former speaks of a capitalist logic, while economic growth may be necessary to cover the basic needs of the population and, furthermore, does not necessarily imply accumulation. For example, “redefining and repositioning the Market and the State” or “redefining wealth” are titles that refer to a whole series of arguments that can be summarised in this way. Another case is that of “biocentrism”, which refers to a whole philosophy and way of understanding the world that encompasses numerous concepts. Among them, one can find “post-extractivism” or “rights of nature”, but these have been categorised separately because they are frequently used and analysed, and there are works dedicated solely to these two issues. Ultimately, the choice of sub-theme titles is based on a criterion of synthesis, on the one hand, and reiteration, on the other.

The sixth phase of the thematic analysis is aimed at the examination, articulation and coherent construction of the object of study, as well as the identification of possible contradictions, discursive weaknesses and/or absences. This phase will be developed in the Results section.

Figure 1. Hierarchical diagram of the values, demands and challenges of ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir



Source: own elaboration.

3. Results

The discourse of the representatives of ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir is particularly focused on the relationship between human beings and nature, specifically on the need to move from anthropocentric societies to biocentric societies. Biocentrism is the fundamental pillar of this trend, so that most of the values that sustain it are subordinated to it.

From the biocentric perspective of this branch of buen vivir, nature ceases to be an object and becomes a subject, which has intrinsic rights that human beings must respect (Martínez Yáñez, 2023; Svampa, 2019). In this way, the humanity/nature duality is broken and a biocentric ethic is established, through which all living and exanimate beings possess their own value that is independent of the valuation and utility that human beings can subjectively grant them (Gudynas, 2021).

The representatives of this trend are especially linked to social movements that reject extractivist practices, as extractivism is a clear example of human activity that does not respect the rights of the environment and does not allow for its maintenance and reproduction. Moreover, this type of activity is associated with the displacement of communities, repopulation by outsiders ("colonists"), water pollution, soil deterioration, and increased violence, among other problems. Accordingly, the construction of an alternative socio-economic model becomes vital to achieve buen vivir (Acosta, 2023; Gudynas, 2023).

This being so, there is a general rejection of the use of developmentalist policies among the representatives of this trend. For this reason, some authors refer to this trend as post-developmental buen vivir (Vanhulst et al., 2020). The

rejection of development is rooted in economic, environmental and cultural issues. Modernity's conception of progress pursues a constant improvement of the material conditions of the population, which requires, among other things, a constant and growing accumulation of capital. With the enlightenment, came the separation of human beings and nature, and development policies "scientifically" justified the exploitation of nature as a source of wealth in order to achieve progress. Likewise, this conception of linear progress implicitly signifies the existence of specific formulas for achieving the well-being of citizens, which is supported by the meta-narratives of modernity in which there is no place for approaches such as *buen vivir*. This is why the authors of ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* are very critical of progressivism, as it is not a valid alternative that can provide a solution to global needs and problems (Acosta, 2024; Gudynas, 2021; Svampa, 2019). Some of these authors even consider that progressivism cannot be considered a left-wing stance or ideology (Gudynas, 2021).

Economic growth is the means to achieve (infinite) capital accumulation, but this is environmentally unsustainable. The fetishism for economic growth is nowadays hidden and justified through development. However, it has been known for decades that economic growth does not necessarily bring about development, and nor is it certain that growth is essential to achieve greater well-being (García-Quero y Guardiola, 2017).

It should be clarified that the authors of ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* are aware that a decrease in economic growth is not associated with a direct improvement in well-being, i.e., they focus on the fetishist and predatory character that growth has acquired today, without ignoring that "there are societies whose productive capacity must increase in order to satisfy some basic human needs" (Unceta Satrústegui, 2014, p.162). Similarly, they consider the abrupt end of extractivism or oil wells to be unfeasible, but defend the need to cease expanding the extractive frontiers (Acosta y Martínez, 2009).

On the other hand, in line with post-developmental approaches, it is argued that development is an unattainable chimera: "Development, as a re-edition of the lifestyles of the central countries, is unrepeatable at the global level" (Acosta, 2015, p.303; Demaria et al., 2023). Certainly, one of the characteristics shared by all the countries considered developed in the world is that they are in ecological deficit (Global Footprint Network, 2025), as they have an ecological impact greater than their own territories can bear, which is compensated for by the ecological surplus of developing countries.

This relationship between development and ecological deficit is a well-known phenomenon, since, as countries achieve higher rates of development, covering their basic needs and generating higher incomes, the population increases its consumption and demand for goods and services (Wackernagel y Beyers, 2019; WWF, 2022) and, consequently, the exploitation of natural resources. Acosta et al. (2022) speak of an "imperial way of life", since the way of life of developed countries endangers the global ecological balance, so imitating these countries is unsustainable and impossible on a global level. Thus, development is not only understood as a socio-economic project, but as a colonial project of modernity. In decolonial literature, development is seen as a form of neo-colonialism. Acosta (2015, pp.310-311) and Vega



Sillo (2011, pp.260-261) consider that social, political and economic decolonisation is the preliminary step towards the general decolonisation of society, which in turn will enable the abolition of the patriarchal system and the elimination of racism, the fundamental axes of colonialism.

Buen vivir is plurinational and intercultural, because it includes all identities, which are treated with the same respect and have the same freedoms and rights. For this reason, the construction of a plurinational and intercultural state is indispensable. This type of state is not a way of incorporating other cultures into the state bureaucracy or favouring the creation of specific and isolated institutional spaces, but rather the entire governmental structure assumes, processes and incorporates the diverse cultural codes of the different groups living in a territory. Today's nation-states of hierarchical structures, artificial borders and monocultural norms are not part of the buen vivir. Therefore, institutions must be built in which all citizens participate, horizontalizing power and broadening democracy (Acosta y Martínez Abarca, 2018; Carpio Benalcázar, 2019; Vega Sillo, 2011).

Likewise, the rights of nature are also an important element to take into account in the construction of the plurinational and intercultural state, as there is a direct relationship between the two. The depredation of nature is a frontal attack on the culture and spirituality of different social groups and communities (García-Arias y Cuestas-Caza, 2024; Martínez Yáñez, 2023; Svampa, 2019).

With regard to economic issues, the market and the state are also redefining their roles. The market has proved incapable of satisfying the basic needs of the population on its own, as well as provoking other detrimental effects such as increased inequality, the deterioration and breakdown of trust and community relations, the savage exploitation of nature... For this reason, ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir considers that there must be a social and solidarity economy, since solidarity and sustainability are defended as its pillars, in opposition to the behaviours based on selfishness, competitiveness, commodification and environmental depredation that are developed in the capitalist market economy. Buen vivir seeks to recover and revalue all these alternative forms of market and to displace (not eliminate) the capitalist market from its hegemonic place, moving "from a market society to a society with markets" (Unceta Satrústegui, 2014, p.191). Acosta (2010) and Gudynas (2011b) give as examples of other markets that operate under different logics and values: peasant, indigenous, cooperative markets, among others. Thus, ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir moves away from totalising formulas and economic meta-narratives and recovers the concept of the substantive economy.

Moreover, economic inequality is one of the main challenges that states have been facing since the last two decades of the twentieth century. Neoliberal policies and the shrinking of public finances have generated greater inequality between and within states (Piketty, 2023). Those policies that opted for the self-regulation of markets have generated greater inequalities, since, among other things, markets distribute and redistribute wealth among those who can afford to participate in them pecuniarily. In the society of buen vivir, everyone must have the same opportunities and the same possibilities of choice, without differentiation based on race, ethnicity,

religion, gender, sexual orientation or lack of economic means (Acosta, 2010; Demaria et al., 2019).

To achieve this goal, the intervention of the state is essential, by being responsible for facilitating and guiding this transition, correcting the problems of the hegemonic market, promoting economic forms and values in line with *buen vivir*, and correcting inequalities and inequities by acting in different areas of human life—social, economic, cultural, gender, ethnic, intergenerational...— (Acosta y Martínez Abarca, 2018; Carpio Benalcázar, 2019).

The achievement of equality, the reduction of poverty and the increase of freedom then implies the revision of current social values and the redistribution of economic resources in favour of the most disadvantaged and marginalized people, to the detriment of those individuals or social classes that concentrate power and wealth (Acosta et al., 2021; Acosta y Martínez Abarca, 2018). However, the goal of *buen vivir* is not to lead society to an equality of opulence, as austerity—in the way of living—acquires great relevance. The representatives of ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* consider that both poverty and affluence have to be eradicated, so that on the economic level it aims at the satisfaction of primary and existential needs. The continuous pursuit of opulence in capitalism through accumulation has generated human relations based on materialism, mercantilism and consumerism, giving rise to environmental problems, inequalities, violence, exploitation and discrimination, among other ills. The economy of *buen vivir* must be a “self-centred” social and solidarity economy, which develops endogenous productive forces, uses local productive resources and controls modes of accumulation and patterns of consumption (Acosta, 2023; Benalcázar, 2024; Gudynas, 2023). Global markets would thus become superfluous and their function would only be to satisfy those needs—not wants—that local markets cannot meet. Similarly, Unceta Satrústegui (2014) stresses the need to abandon the understanding of wealth as material accumulation and market production, defending other forms of wealth such as relational, social and environmental wealth, among others.

On the other hand, and in a similar way, capitalist forms of ownership must be reviewed, as the social and solidarity economy cannot be totalized by private and/or public or state forms of ownership; the development of cooperatives, economic collectives, mutuels, community organisations, and self-managed enterprises, among others, must then be allowed and encouraged (Acosta, 2015; Acosta et al., 2021). Thus, the state should not become the new totalitarian institution that governs and plans the economy, but should interact with markets and society, establishing a balanced relationship between them.

Another important point about the social and solidarity economy advocated by ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* is related to the sustainability of life. Two issues are fundamental here: food sovereignty and provision of care or care economy. Food sovereignty is another fundamental pillar of the economy of *buen vivir* and is also seen as an important part of the processes of decentralisation of power. Representatives of this movement see food dependency on foreign countries as another of the perverse processes of global capitalism, in which people’s food depends on traders hundreds or thousands of kilometres away, when, in reality, this food could be produced locally. The way to achieve food sovereignty would be



through democratic access to land, participatory responses and plans that include the entire population, the decentralisation of decision-making power, and the recognition of ancestral and home-grown technologies that are on the margins of markets and form part of traditional practices (Acosta y Martínez Abarca, 2018).

On the other hand, feminist economics has developed numerous postulates that explain how the capitalist economic model is contrary to the life not only of nature, but also of the human species itself. The so-called feminism of care defends an inclusive economic system that recognizes the relations of production and reproduction in the same way, since the relations of reproduction have traditionally been assigned to women and have been made invisible, thus obscuring their vital importance and priority for human survival and for the existence and correct functioning of the so-called productive part. The economy must be at the service of life, caring for it, not commodifying it, so that the relations of production and reproduction must be recognized on equal terms and must be equitable.

Thus, the values that must govern the social and solidarity economy of *buen vivir* include solidarity, reciprocity, cooperation, sustainability, complementarity, responsibility, integrality, relationality, community self-reliance, sufficiency, redistribution, equality, equity, cultural diversity, democracy, citizen participation, transparency and social, economic and environmental justice (Acosta, 2015; Acosta y Martínez Abarca, 2018; Esteva, 2019; León T., 2012; Varea y Zaragocin, 2017). *Buen vivir* complies with these principles and conditions, given that it takes up the cosmovision of ancestral peoples and converges with feminist, ecological, social and solidarity economy. This does not mean renouncing efficiency, but it no longer plays a central role and ceases to be an end in itself.

Unceta Satrústegui (2014) considers that in order to move towards the new civilizational model that represents *buen vivir*, the decommodification of nature and human relations, the dematerialisation of wealth and the decentralisation of power and decision-making are inevitable. “The constant increase in market space is negatively affecting both equity and social cohesion, as well as collective trust, the formation of social networks and the very organisation of community life” (Unceta Satrústegui, 2014, p.173). To this must be added the commodification of nature, which, in addition to the harmful effects it causes per se, does not take into account the biophysical limits of the environment and its laws of operation (Acosta, 2015; Unceta Satrústegui, 2014). Thus, the environment cannot be understood as a source of materials and resources, social relations cannot be goods and services that can be economized, and quality of life cannot depend solely on possessions and income. The social and solidarity economy would be the means to ensure the harmony of people with themselves, with their fellow human beings and with nature (García-García, 2023; 2024).

In this context, the decentralisation of power and decision-making becomes a fundamental part of this utopia, as each community, people or region must be allowed to decide on the way of life that they consider valuable and that allows them to achieve *buen vivir*. As already mentioned, ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* argues that “*Buen Vivir* is in reality a set of *buenos vivires*” (Gudynas, 2016, p.9; Kothari et al., 2019). *Buen vivir* is a plural concept that is composed of different values and ideas from different parts of the world and different worldviews, which

makes it a term in constant construction and reconstruction (Acosta, 2023; Carpio Benalcázar, 2019; Gudynas, 2011b). Gudynas (2011a) states that “in the very essence of Buen Vivir there is a relativity that allows it to be adjusted to each cultural and environmental context” (p.17) and Acosta (2015) adds that buen vivir was never intended to be a fully formulated and essentialist proposal, that there is no manual to achieve it (pp.309-310). For this reason, Acosta (2024) and Acosta y Martínez Abarca (2018) argue that it must be the citizens who define and collectively build buen vivir or buen convivir through local participation processes.

However, not everything that citizens build has to be buen vivir, i.e., this construction has to respect the environment, generate equality (economic, gender, and racial, among others), guarantee food security, revalue and recognize work, and generate a social and solidarity economy, among other issues. In other words, the means are not prescribed, but certain ends common to buen vivir are defined.

Finally, representatives of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir have also paid special attention to the discourses that, through science, have justified and continue to justify the domination of nature and of human beings themselves. Science is seen as having lived under the shelter of the west and modernity in order to generate colonial relations and justify the depredation of the environment (Gudynas, 2019; 2024).

Science is a tool and a means with limitations, especially when it comes to social science. Ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir defends the use of science, but recovers its original role and moves away from the excessive optimism that has been deposited in it in recent decades (Gudynas, 2019), thus breaking with racism, machismo and the domination of nature that has been imposed through modern science (Gudynas, 2024; Vega Sillo, 2011). Furthermore, this trend claims the need to freely share acquired knowledge, moving away from the current scientific model in which wisdom is bought and sold and in which there is no place for ancestral knowledge and practices, which have been buried and discredited by the scientific method of the west (Acosta, 2015; 2024).

Therefore, the construction of the society of buen vivir is an ecological, post-developmental, decolonial, post-capitalist and feminist project.

4. Discussion

Ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir addresses and proposes solutions to many of the current problems being tackled on the international scene, which gives it great potential. Moreover, the theoretical efforts made by the “main representatives” of this trend have highlighted their commonalities with worldviews and epistemologies from the global South and North.

This intellectual trend is heavily influenced by contributions from postmodern literature, bringing with it some of the main theoretical weaknesses that are part of current post-modern political and left-wing debates (García-García, 2023).

This trend defends the need to favour and expand citizen participation, which is the means to move towards buen vivir. However, ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir has not defined what is meant by citizen participation. In the political discourse of progressivism and the left, especially in Latin America, there are



constant references to the importance of citizen participation in decision-making and how this participation is the means to achieve greater social justice, eliminate marginalisation and discrimination, decentralize power, and achieve greater well-being for the population, among other issues (Acosta et al., 2021; Borón, 2008; Coraggio y Laville, 2014; Esteva, 2019; López Obrador, 2019; Ramírez Gallegos, 2010). However, neither a definition of citizen participation nor the mechanisms to carry it out is given –nor do they provide possible reference studies to consult this information–. It is stated that this citizen participation, translated into greater involvement in political life, would also be the way to guarantee democracy and strengthen it. Nonetheless, ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* has not defined this process as such, nor how it is to be carried out. However, it is established that this citizen participation, translated into greater involvement in political life, would also be the way to guarantee democracy and strengthen it, though this gives rise to another conception that needs to be defined: democracy⁸. Both are concepts of enormous complexity, with an abundance of literature. In the case of ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir*, clarifying these concepts is especially relevant, since all its “main representatives” rely on them to build the *buen vivir* society.

In this context, the demand of citizen participation and democracy raises several questions: do citizen participation and democracy alone guarantee *buen vivir*? If not, should citizens be respected for choosing a way of life that is not in line with *buen vivir*? If the citizenry's decision is not accepted, is it possible to speak of democracy, and would citizen participation then make any sense?

On the other hand, the advancement of the concept of numerous possible *buenos vivires* by representatives of ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* is a discourse that breaks with the totalising meta-narratives and the universalist project that characterizes modernity. Acosta (2015) provides some examples of *buenos vivires*: “the Mapuche (Chile), the Guaraní (Bolivia and Paraguay), the Kuna (Panama), the Achuar (Ecuadorian Amazon), [...] in the Mayan tradition (Guatemala), in Chiapas (Mexico), among others” (p.301). Likewise, in recent years, numerous studies have appeared on forms of *buen vivir* in different parts of the world (Barabas, 2023; Coombe y Jefferson, 2021; Fisher, 2019; Gervazio et al., 2022; Godden, 2021; Habersang, 2022), which support the term *buenos vivires* (good livings) advocated by the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir*. These studies focus primarily on field studies of indigenous cultures and show worldviews and practices that are more respectful and harmonious with the environment and closer to the social and solidarity economy. However, these “*buenos vivires*” show notable differences with respect to the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* in the way they understand elements such as equality, care, LGBTI rights and the role of the State, among others. In this way, *buenos vivires* fall into a relativism that empties the term of its content. Ecologist and post-developmental authors have created a framework of values to be fulfilled in order to be part of the *buen vivir*, so that each people, community and/or nation, through citizen participation, must decide how to manage these values and define how to achieve the *buen vivir*. Here again, the contradiction and problem of defining the limits of citizen participation arises. To

⁸ Some examples of the existing debates and the different criteria used to measure and/or define democracy can be found in Boese (2019), Dahl (2020) and Economist Intelligence Unit (2024).

suggest that democracy and citizen participation guarantee the transition towards buen vivir is a utopian idea, since there is enormous human diversity and innumerable interests that intervene in democratic and decision-making processes. Turning buen vivir into a relative concept under construction inevitably leads to the emergence of values and challenges within it that are contrary to those originally stated by the ecologist-post-developmentalists authors.

In addition, it should be mentioned that field studies on the buen vivir have been mostly directed at local cases of indigenous cultures, i.e. there is an absence of buenos vivires outside of the local and indigenous. Acosta (2015) provides similar examples, but also idealises indigenous ways of life and provides a new version of the Rousseauian myth of the good savage (p.301). Both Acosta (2015) and other authors (Gudynas, 2009; Vega Sillo, 2011) associate Western culture with the origin of colonialism, racism, xenophobia, discrimination, machismo, oppression, exploitation of nature, lack of political pluralism, poverty, inequality, etc.

Regardless of the debate on what life was like in the extinct Abya Yala, an example of the “paradox of tolerance” defined by Popper (1945) is born out of the ecologist-post-developmentalists approaches of buen vivir. This paradox appears due to the contradiction generated by their feminist and decolonial values. Their feminist approaches establish that the society of buen vivir is characterized by being equitable between men and women, sharing care work between both genders, equal pay, eliminating oppression of women and LGTBI people, valuing the fundamental role played by women for human survival... While their decolonial approaches establish respect for the customs and worldviews of other cultures and do not question or intervene in them.

Thus, for different feminist trends (liberal, radical, queer, etc.), some indigenous practices and customs are contrary to women's rights. For example, the concept of yananti (complementarity) is common to various indigenous cultures and establishes the complementarity of all entities in life, even if they are opposites. Under this principle, men have to contribute to women what they lack and vice versa (García-García, 2022a). Women's roles are associated with raising their offspring, cleaning the home (jallmana) and working in the vegetable garden (chacra), while men are responsible for hunting and obtaining materials from the forest (sacha) for the home. When the time comes, the women take on the education of their daughters in the orchard and the men take on the education of their sons in the jungle. Viteri Gualinga (2003) explains that this division of labour allows men and women to “walk the path that corresponds to them in direct relation to their sex” (pp.53-54).

All this contrasts with the demands of indigenous activists for greater gender equality, a voice for women, shared leadership, horizontality in power and in relations between men and women, as well as other classic demands of feminist movements (García-García, 2022a; Sempértegui, 2021). Recent research has shown that some forms of buen vivir such as sumak kawsay have lost sight of many of the issues that especially affect women (Gallardo, 2023).

As such, the permissiveness or not of this type of values (considered discriminatory by western culture) opens the debate on what the limits of tolerance should be. Therefore, in this type of case, the ecologist-post-developmentalists buen vivir has to rethink whether its feminist principles or the defence of interculturality



and the refusal to intervene in other cultures (colonialism/neocolonialism) have more weight. The relativism conferred on *buen vivir* by this trend leads to a conflict between different principles. Furthermore, despite blaming western culture for violence, inequality, machismo and LGBTBI-phobia, the academic literature indicates that these are situations that are not of an isolated character or western origin, but are found all over the world and in different historical moments.

Thus, the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* is at a crossroads. Possible ways out would include, for example, adopting a precise and non-negotiable framework of what *buen vivir* is, which would imply replicating certain approaches of the universalist meta-narratives of Modernity. This would break down the contradictions between its feminist and decolonial values. Another alternative could be to recognise the limitations of the democratic model embedded in the world-system, assuming the rules of traditional politics in order to initiate the transition towards the society of *buen vivir*. Likewise, citizen participation presents enormous limitations for issues of great complexity or that affect a large number of citizens. Citizen participation is a feasible system when it has a local character, which allows for decisions that lead to *buen vivir*; however, there are no examples of how this system can be scaled up to the national level.

It should also be mentioned that the representatives of ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* have produced an insufficient intellectual proposal as to how to make the transition from capitalism (“colonial”, “racist”, “Eurocentric”, “patriarchal”, “heterosexual”, “cisgender” and “extractivist”) to a system of *buen vivir*. In other words, the studies of these intellectuals on the impacts of *buen vivir* on employment, wages, inequality, poverty, consumption, economic growth, inflation, exchange rates, external debt, public deficit, public services, or democracies, among other issues, are practically non-existent. Instead, there has been an exclusively theoretical and descriptive development of what the “utopia under construction” of *buen vivir* should look like. or local studies have been carried out with already settled indigenous populations.

Thus, ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* addresses and proposes solutions to many of the current problems being tackled on the international scene, which gives it great potential. However, it has to overcome the obstacles that have arisen from the localist relativisation of the concept and the disputes between a feminism that seeks to abolish patriarchal structures, and a decoloniality that justifies (indigenous) cultural conservatism. Furthermore, it has to deepen empirical, experimental and prospective analysis, and transgress the exclusively theoretical and idealistic perspective.

Finally, it should be mentioned that this study has certain limitations. In the methodology, it has been made clear that the seven works that establish who are the “main representatives” of the ecologist-post-developmental *buen vivir* have identified trends and that, in some cases, the authors who are part of this trend do not agree with this categorisation. In this respect, it would be of interest to carry out future research that will delimit and select the authors of *buen vivir*, and that will take up the disagreements of the categorised authors.

This, in turn, could shed more light on why authors who have also worked on, for example, the rights of nature (Richter, 2025), neo-extractivism (Caria y Domínguez Martín, 2015), or the social and solidarity economy in buen vivir (Villalba-Eguiluz y Pérez-de-Mendiguren, 2019), among other topics.

Similarly, this paper has not analysed which are currently the most relevant debates in the field of buen vivir, i.e. it has only limited itself to studying the case of ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir. Future research that analyses the current role of this trend in the research trends on buen vivir and the contemporary debates that are developing could be of great interest. This, in turn, would also allow us to analyse the contributions of other important researchers of buen vivir who have been left out of this work.

It should also be mentioned that this study has not delved into empirical analysis. However, once the theoretical, philosophical and discursive approaches have been clearly delimited, there is an opportunity to build new empirical research to test the applicability of these approaches to buen vivir.

5. Conclusions

In this paper, we have found 178 works on the buen vivir linked to the so-called “main representatives” of the ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir. After analysing them, it has been shown that the political-philosophical discourse of this trend covers three fundamental thematic blocks: the economy, the environment and the state. On top of these, it deploys approaches based on twenty-one values, demands and challenges.

The primary element on which this trend is built is its biocentric philosophy, which determines all its other proposals. Thus, it is a branch of buen vivir that opposes extractivism; defends the rights of nature; rejects developmentalism, progressivism, capital accumulation and generalized economic growth; promotes interculturalism and plurinationality; and defends social, cultural, political, economic and environmental decolonisation; it supports the social and solidarity economy as a socio-economic model, as well as austere living, a return to the local, guaranteeing food sovereignty, the valorisation and centrality of the provision of care that enables human life, redefining what work is and what wealth is; it advocates the redefinition and relocation of the market and the state; it supports equality (of race, gender, and sex, among others) and the redistribution of economic wealth; advocates the decommodification and dematerialisation of the economy and human relations, and the decentralisation of power; argues for greater citizen participation in decision-making; and considers that there are innumerable forms of buen vivir (“buenos vivires” or “buenos convivires”).

The representatives of this trend have placed great confidence in the fact that the way to move towards buen vivir is to guarantee greater citizen participation (and thus fuller democracy). However, there is no definition of what is meant by citizen participation and democracy, nor how they are to be implemented. This situation, and considering as buen vivir cultures and practices that understand issues such as the role of women in society, the role of the state and equality, among others, in very different ways, has led to a relativism that empties the meaning of ecologist-post-developmental buen vivir of its content.

The concept of buen vivir continues to occupy an important place in Latin American activism, especially among post-developmental, post-extractivist, feminist and environmentalist social movements. The construction around this concept of alternative agendas to the Sustainable Development Goals is extremely useful for the elaboration of new public policies, but it is necessary to study in depth the socio-economic consequences of the implementation of this new paradigm in realpolitik and to transcend an exclusively theoretical analysis.

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