

# Decolonizing Environmental Politics: Sumak Kawsay as a Possible Moral Foundation for Green

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## Decolonizing Environmental Politics: Sumak Kawsay as a Possible Moral Foundation for Green Policies

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Each nation interprets the value of each good from a different axiological scheme of preconceptions. This is the reason why the moral assumptions of each country conflict in the attempt to reach an international agreement to pursue environmental justice. It becomes difficult to coordinate an axiological hierarchy that prioritizes environmental goods over economic goods. The denial of this priority arises from the assumption that 'man' and 'nature' are two opposite concepts. The Ecuadorian economist Alberto Acosta (2010) points out that the supposed antagonism between human beings and Nature 'is the starting point to understand the conquest and colonization of America, which crystallized merciless exploitation of natural resources' (17; my translation). By contrast, in the Quechua tradition, as well as in other Indigenous traditions, we find a relational concept of Nature.

Although the Quechua concept of *sumak kawsay* is relatively recent, it is also deeply rooted in a conception of the human being in permanent relationship with Nature. The general meaning of this concept is related to living in harmony with Nature and community (Hidalgo, Arias, and Ávila 2014, 29–73). The axiological conflict between environmental goods and economic goods is demolished, because both are part of the structure of 'good living' or 'life in fullness'. Countries like Ecuador or Bolivia have included this concept in their new political constitutions (Asamblea Constituyente de Ecuador 2008; Asamblea Constituyente de Bolivia 2009). Nonetheless, their own moral assumptions often show strong colonial influence.

Which are the moral foundations that could sustain an international policy in order to pursue environmental justice? This philosophical question is hidden in the background of the present research, but it is not intended to be answered in its entirety. Since there are innumerable ways to answer that question, this chapter limits it to a particular case: could the Quechua concept *sumak kawsay* be one of these moral foundations? The answer (hypothesis) that is argued is affirmative and is based on Latin American authors such as: Eduardo Gudynas, Enrique Dussel, Alberto Acosta, Yuri Guandinango, Verónica Andino, Ana María Larrea and Salvador Schavelzon. The method used to answer this question is the critical analectic, structured by Dussel in his effort to find a decolonial methodology. Consistent with this method, the objective of this research is to dialogue about the Quechua concept *sumak kawsay* within the alterity of different moral foundations for international environmental policies, such as the concept of development.

### Dussel's critical analectic method

The Mexican philosopher Enrique Dussel perceives the attempt to formulate a decolonial philosophy with Eurocentric methods as a setback. That is why he sees the necessity of a new methodology based on the critical study of the Hegelian dialectics and the Aristotelian method of analogy. To think that Dussel's method is then Aristotelian-Hegelian would be a total misinterpretation. On the contrary, the analectic method is born as a criticism of other methods and stands on its own merits.

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In *Método para una filosofía de la liberación* [Method for a philosophy of liberation], Dussel (1974) introduces the analectic moment by clarifying the concept of alterity: 'the other, for us, is Latin America with respect to the European totality; it is the poor and oppressed Latin American people with respect to the dominating but dependent oligarchies' (181–182; my translation). Dussel's *other* is not an *absolute* alterity as Levinas describes the other's face. According to the Mexican philosopher, the totality is univocal; the univocity is identity. Then, the totality is opposed to alterity.

The analectic method begins with the recognition of the other as free, as beyond the system of totality; therefore starts from the revelation of the other and, trusting in his word, works, serves, creates (Dussel 1974, 182). Faith in the other's word, an anthropological faith, is the precondition of this analectic moment.

According to Dussel (1974), the dialectical method is the dominating expansion of the totality from itself; the passage from potency to the act of the same (182). After this criticism, he offers a synthetic definition of the analectic method, that is: 'the passage to the fair growth of the totality from the other and to "serve" (the other) creatively' (182; my translation). The critical analectic method involves an exercise of finding similarities in the possibilities of polysemy, as he later explains in a class on this method (Dussel 2016).

The described method guides the objectives of the present chapter. As stated above, this research aims to dialogue about the Quechua concept *sumak kawsay* within the alterity of different moral foundations for international environmental policies. In order to achieve this general objective, it is necessary to go through a critical step and an analectic moment.

The first specific objective concerns the critical stage: the purpose is to question the moral assumptions of the concept development as the foundation of international policies. The reason why it is necessary to question this concept lies in its colonial influence and its harmful consequences for the environment. Furthermore, most of the mentioned Latin American authors oppose the concept of development to the decolonial alternative of *sumak kawsay*. The second specific objective concerns the analectic stage, start from the word of the other: the proposal is to understand the polysemy of the concept in Quechua *sumak kawsay* as a possible moral foundation for environmental policies. The stages of the analectic method will culminate in what Dussel calls the fair growth of the totality from the other and to serve (the other) *creatively*. Therefore, the critical study of the concept of development will bring alternatives based on different moral assumptions in order to reduce the environmental impact.

It is necessary to clarify that this chapter does not attempt to analyze Abya Yala's environmental policies in general. Its approach does not belong to the area of political science or international law. The reflection intends to be philosophical and presents some possibilities of understanding rather than concrete realities. This research is limited to the axiological and moral scope of new constitutional proposals from two specific countries: Ecuador and Bolivia. The study of the concept of *sumak kawsay* linked to the relational Andean worldview aims to question the economy-focused conception of Nature. For this reason, it is carried out from the perspective of a critical look at conventional development. That is why the term Abya Yala is used to refer Latin America, because it means 'Mature Land', according to the historic Kuna Indigenous group (Carrera and Ruiz 2016, 12). Given the maturity of this land, it does not make sense to put here the underdevelopment label.

## Critical description of the concept 'development'

The Global Forest Watch's 'World forest map and tree cover change data'(2020) reveals that Bolivia ranks fourth among the countries with the highest loss of primary forests. An etiological study of deforestation in this country, between 2000 and 2010, remarks the three main direct causes: livestock in sown pastures, mechanized agriculture and small-scale agriculture (Müller et al. 2014, 20). From that decade to the present, the causes remain the same. These have only become stronger and stronger. Despite the immense food production at the cost of the destruction of primary forests, 15.5% of the population of this same country is undernourished (FAO et al. 2020, 8). This unfortunate irony stems from the hope of economic growth based on the export of raw materials.

According to Alberto Acosta (2010), from the conquest and colonization of America 'an extractivist scheme was forged to export Nature from the colonies based on the capital accumulation demands of the metropolises' (17; my

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translation). The contradiction between precarious food security and unbridled food production in Bolivia is the result of an economic scheme founded five centuries ago in the midst of colonial violence.

As a colonial residue, developing countries conceive development as blind economic growth without many environmental considerations. Brazil, the country with the highest loss of primary forests (Global Forest Watch 2020), carries the slogan of Order and progress on its flag. It is under discussion whether Brazil should be considered a developing country or not. This discussion considers economic growth more than its levels of inequality, extreme poverty, and environmental impact.

Amartya Sen (2000) describes as 'narrow views of development the ones that identify development with the growth of gross national product, or with the rise in personal incomes, or with industrialization, or with technological advance, or with social modernization' (3). Those narrow views had their consequences on the status quo of an unfair and anthropocentric structure. According to the Ecuadorian anthropologist Ana María Larrea (2010), the concept of development was constructed from a colonialist perspective and is now in crisis due to the poor results it has generated throughout the world (15; my translation). These poor results include environmental impact, hunger, inequality, etc. Probably, because of these consequences, this type of development cannot be sustained throughout time. This pace of indefinite progress necessarily implies a collapse due to the characteristics of the natural world, hence the need to combine the concept of development with sustainability.

Although for Wolfgang Sachs (1999) the sustainable development combination is an oxymoron, at least its intention gives us a little hope. The Uruguayan researcher Eduardo Gudynas (2003) distinguishes between traditional development and sustainable development, criticizing the first one without ceasing to discuss the second one.

The proposal is to criticize the concept of development but not to destroy it radically. It would be Manichean to think that the biased conception of development is to blame for all the ills that affect the environment and the human community. Furthermore, it would be unfair to ignore the virtues that this model has provided on the possibility of structuring large populations, granting certain food security to a relative majority. Nevertheless, it would also be naive to think that conventional development actually improves our situation in some respects without making it worse in others. In addition, it improves the situation of some beings making it worse for others.

According to Gudynas and Acosta (2011), in the 1940s, the concept of development defined as a progressive linearity or as the opposite of underdevelopment began to be formalized (73). However, the authors point out that in reality 'what is observed in the world is a generalized "bad development", existing even in countries considered as developed' (Gudynas and Acosta 2011, 73; my translation). The relationship between this bad development and the gradual destruction of the environment is decisive. The assumption of blind progressive linearity causes progressive damage as well. This type of moral assumption, where the highest good is economic value, interrupts international treaties aimed at protecting the environment. The most surprising thing about this assumption is its ability to ignore the irreducible relationship between economics and environmental justice.

One of the main notions attached to the progressive destruction of the natural wealth of the *developing* countries is extractivism. Gudynas (2015) defines this concept as 'a type of extraction of natural resources, in large volume or high intensity, which are essentially oriented to be exported as raw materials without any processing or with minimal processing' (13; my translation). This type of export condemns the Abya Yala nations to the lowest profit in economic terms and the highest loss in environmental terms. Moreover, according to the aforementioned study, third generation extractivisms have been the cause of most social conflicts in Latin America (Gudynas 2015, 24). The Uruguayan researcher not only denounces the environmental consequences of extractivism, but also its social problems and moral conflicts.

Gudynas dedicates a whole section to ethics and values in the conclusions of his book *Extractivismos: ecología, economía y política de un modo de entender el desarrollo y la Naturaleza* [Extractivisms: ecology, economics and politics from a way of understanding development and Nature] (2015). In this section, he points out that there is an axiological component that cuts across all levels: 'from the cultural bases of development strategies to extractivist implementations with all their environmental, economic, political and social implications' (433; my translation).

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According to Gudynas, this component is the result of an anthropocentric ethic where 'values are only assigned by human beings, and they prevail directly linked to human benefits and needs' (434). The present chapter considers that not even human benefits and needs are prioritized, since the environmental impact has enormous negative consequences on the well-being of the most vulnerable sectors of the human community. What is often prioritized is a split economic value, briefly separated from its immediate material value.

Gudynas (2015) adds that the 'recovery of other values in nature, and in particular when its own rights are recognized, is not only an antidote to extractivism, but is also an alternative to that anthropocentric ethic' (434; my translation). The moral assumptions of traditional development are determined by the conception of 'nature'.

In the 1980s, a new turn in the conceptions of nature began with a perspective originated in the economy: 'from different starting points and conceptual options, several authors began to consider nature as a form of capital' (Gudynas 2003, 23; my translation). A sample of this type of economy-focused conception is the widely used expression of natural resources. This explains the fact that countries like Bolivia or Brazil see deforestation as a form of economic progress. Developmental extractivism condemns these countries to their own wear and tear. International logic forces them to choose this kind of economy, because the moral foundation of this logic lies in the polysemic value of progress.

Due to the polysemy of the concept of development or progress, it can be used for very different purposes, even contrary to each other. A logical consequence of conceiving nature as a form of capital is the interpretation of economic progress as the exploitation of this capital. By contrast, more recent notions such as sustainability include preserving the environment as part of development. For this reason, if it is interpreted in the previous sense, the term sustainable development itself may sound contradictory.

However, even in the sustainability of a development more courteous with nature there are also moral assumptions that Gudynas would call anthropocentric. Furthermore, Sachs's critique of the concept of sustainable development reveals that this attempt to preserve the environment is ultimately an attempt to preserve the pace of economic growth.

In an article entitled 'Los derechos de la naturaleza en serio: respuestas y aportes desde la ecología política [The rights of Nature seriously: responses and contributions from political ecology]' (2011), Gudynas raises the following argument: 'if the rights of nature are taken seriously, their own values appear, but also the chains of an exclusively economic valuation are broken' (255; my translation). What the present chapter proposes is a decolonizing effort to take seriously the rights of nature.

## **Sumak kawsay as a possible moral foundation for environmental policies**

The economy-focused conception of nature leads the paradigm of conventional development in Latin American countries. Nevertheless, cultures that bestow on nature an immense or even sacred value still inhabit many of these countries. The cases that fit the purpose of this chapter are Bolivia and Ecuador.

Although in Bolivia and Ecuador there are approved opinions that promote extractivism, there is also an attempt to explore in the Andean tradition alternatives to the dominant conception of nature. Given the oral character of this tradition, there is a possibility that the concept of *sumak kawsay* may be actually a new construction. Yuri Guandinango (2013) points out that this notion 'is not explicit in Indigenous communities; since most of the communities of the Ecuadorian highlands are traversed by historical processes that have reconfigured the experiential practices; such is the case of agroecological and sociocultural systems' (14; my translation). Nonetheless, most likely this notion is consistent with a relational conception of nature that is deeply rooted in an Indigenous worldview.

Pablo Mamani (2011, as cited in Schavelzon 2015) lists the terms that could approximate a definition or translation of the concept of *sumak kawsay*: 'richness of life'; 'knowing how to live life'; 'attitude'; 'be full of great heart'; and even 'good die'. In Bolivia, the state assumes as a principle the Aymara version of good living: *sumaj qamaña*. Javier

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Medina (2001) translates it to the following terms: 'good life', 'life quality', 'wellbeing', 'lifestyle', 'good living', 'happiness', 'joy', 'felicity' (26). Xavier Albó (2011) proposes other definitions for *qamaña*: 'live', 'dwell', 'rest', 'shelter' and 'take care of others'. Consequently, according to Albó, the translation of *sumaj qamaña* is: 'good living together or living well together'. Regarding the polysemy of these terms in Quechua and Aymara, Salvador Schavelzon (2015) says: 'the difficulty in defining a signifier tells us about the beginning of a journey where conceptions of life and different worlds are translated and delimited for the construction of political concepts' (181; my translation). However, thanks to this phenomenon, it is possible to apply Dussel's analectic method, where different horizons dialogue due to a possibility of analogy in polysemy.

The new constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia introduce the concepts of *sumak kawsay* and *sumaj qamaña* as a political project. Article 275 of *Constitución de la República de Ecuador* (2008) points out: 'The development regime is the organized, sustainable and dynamic set of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems, which guarantee the realization of the good living, from *sumak kawsay*' (135; my translation). Since, in its constitution, Ecuador is presented as a republic and not as a plurinational state, the principle of *sumak kawsay* is applied as a generality. In the Bolivian case, *sumaj qamaña* is an ethical-moral principle among diverse principles from other *nations* of the state. Article 8 of the Second Chapter of *Constitución Política del Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia* (2009; my translation) establishes: 'The State assumes and promotes as ethical-moral principles of plural society: *ama qhilla*, *ama llulla*, *ama sua* (do not be lazy, do not be a liar, do not be a thief), *suma qamaña* (good living), *ñandereko* (harmonious life), *teko kavi* (good life), *ivi maraei* (land without evil) and *qhapaj ñan* (noble way or life)'. The concepts extracted from the Guaraní tradition do not clash with the relational perception of nature characteristic of the *sumak kawsay*. Especially *ñandereko* and *teko kavi* have an impressive resemblance to the Andean concepts of good life. Although it would be foolish to confuse these notions as if they had the same meanings and were originated in the same traditions, they could all be presented as alternatives to conventional economic development.

Yuri Guadinango (2013) separates the academics who explain the discourse of good living from different perspectives into three groups according to their positions: 'the followers of group A promote good living as an alternative to development; those in group B place good living in line with 21st century socialism; and those in group C understand good living as part of development theories' (19; my translation). This chapter belongs especially to the position of group A, because group C suggests that the concept of *sumak kawsay* may become a reinforcement of the dominant paradigm of traditional development. However, there are reasons to present this concept as a very different alternative due to its possibility of founding environmental policies: (1) the Andean relational worldview; (2) the criticism of the logic of capital accumulation; (3) the recognition of intrinsic values in nature.

What does the notion of Andean relational worldview mean? This first reason is linked to what Gudynas and Acosta (2011) called a 'space occupied by the ideas encompassed under the label of "Good Living"' (76; my translation). Those 'ideas originated in traditional Andean knowledge, focused on the well-being of people and defenders of another type of relationship with the environment, quickly managed to influence the debate on development, and become new alternatives to it' (Gudynas and Acosta 2011, 76; my translation). The worldview that concerns the concept of Good Living does not conceive of the human being as a subject separated from the object so-called nature. The human being is only one part of the *chakana*, the 'bridge at the top', which unites nature, the spiritual world, the human community and the ancestors (Flores Rengifo 2018). Although *sumak kawsay* is not a purely ancestral concept and is mixed with very recent political projects, the coherence between this concept and the relational structure of the Andean traditional conception of nature is notorious. In the Andean relational worldview, we are not the masters and antagonists of nature, but only a part of the relation between all beings that are united by the *chakana*. Good Living is not mere human well-being, but rather a certain harmony of complementarity between all beings.

It is precisely this worldview that challenges development to decentralize its anthropocentric approach. As Verónica Andino (2010) asserts, 'the challenge posed by the Sumak Kawsay paradigm is to consciously dislodge the logic of capital accumulation, with its corollary in the concept of development, from the central place it occupied in the imaginary of the Ecuadorians of what a better society represents' (101; my translation). This is the aforementioned second reason: the criticism of the logic of capital accumulation. If the center is no longer the human being but the

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*chakana*, then the economy-focused logic loses its meaning. With the moral foundations displaced, the edifice of conventional development collapses and an alternative possibility of grounding environmental policies emerges.

Why environmental policies specifically? This is what the third reason is aimed at: the recognition of intrinsic values in nature. The two previous reasons converge on this one. The decentralization of value allows for moral diversification. The following statement is the philosophical complaint of Gudynas (2015): 'dissolution of ethics is what makes tolerable the repeated violation of the rights of people and of nature as a means of extractionist imposition' (434; my translation). Therefore, a reconstruction of an ethic that takes seriously the rights of nature is a *sine qua non* condition for the proposal of green policies. Gudynas adds: 'For this reason, conceptions such as Good Living or the rights of nature are undoubtedly alternatives, but they become substantial when promoting ethical changes that open the doors to other valuations, thus generating consequences on many levels' (Gudynas 2015, 434; my translation). These consequences are directly related to a mitigation of our environmental impact.

The three reasons presented support the understanding of *sumak kawsay* as an alternative possibility of moral foundation of environmental policies. The polysemy of this term is a fertile field for dialogue. This is the reason why this concept represents a decolonial point where the national horizon of Ecuador and Bolivia can meet the international horizon of the rest of Abya Yala. Environmental policies are inevitably international policies because even domestic provisions can affect the rest of the world. Therefore, it is necessary to look for different concepts such as *sumak kawsay* that can represent more nations in their polysemy than those that are represented by the univocal concept of conventional development.

## Conclusions

Is the Quechua concept *sumak kawsay* one of the possible moral foundations that could sustain an international policy in order to pursue environmental justice? Throughout this chapter, an affirmative answer has been argued. As well as other notions of the diverse cultures of Abya Yala, the concept of *sumak kawsay* is a fertile moral foundation for the pursuit and consolidation of international policies that promote environmental justice.

The argumentation has gone through two methodological moments to reach that conclusion. The first step was a critical study: the concept of conventional development was questioned for its consequences on the environment. The reading of Gudynas, Acosta and Larrea revealed that this concept is based on the colonial economic system consolidated later by industrial production demands. The second methodological moment was analectic: the polysemy of the concept in Quechua *sumak kawsay* was understood as a possibility of moral foundation for green policies. 'Life in fullness' is conditioned by harmony with nature and community. This means that the economic values that concern the satisfaction of the human needs do not contradict the environmental values. The reason lies in the relational conception of nature. This concept could constitute a decolonial moral foundation for green policies because it provides alternatives to conventional development.

*Sumak kawsay* is not a magical concept that will automatically solve all the environmental challenges of our time, but it could be a moral foundation alternative to the one that conceives nature only based on economic criteria. This foundation constitutes an axiological system that could morally base international agreements in order to preserve the environment in Abya Yala. At least there is already a point in common between Ecuador and Bolivia, which Dussel would call analectic.

When the national decision-making threatens environmental justice, international considerations must start from the dialogue of moral assumptions towards the search for alternatives, different from the conceptual structure that led to the harmful consequences. The premise that supports this conclusion is that even inside a country that causes and suffers an environmental impact, there may be axiological hierarchies in conflict, also conditioned by the dominant paradigm on an international scale.

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