

# Ecuador's *Buen vivir*

## A New Ideology for Development

by  
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*The concept of buen vivir (good living) has attracted interest far beyond its source in the Andean ethnic tradition. It is being debated internationally as a contribution to development theory and has become the fundamental purpose of Ecuador's policy since the adoption of the new constitution in 2008. There are, however, deep contradictions between the constitutional prescriptions and spirit of buen vivir and recently formulated policies that reveal a pragmatic approach on the part of the government. These contradictions suggest that, far from being a strategic orientation for effective policy making, buen vivir serves as a new ideology and is being used to support a reform plan based on a quite traditional understanding of the concept of development.*

*El concepto de "buen vivir" ha despertado interés más allá de su origen en la tradición étnica andina. Su contribución a la teoría del desarrollo es parte del debate internacional y también se ha convertido en el objetivo fundamental de la política pública del Ecuador desde que se adoptó la nueva constitución en 2008. Hay, sin embargo, profundas contradicciones entre las prescripciones constitucionales y el espíritu del buen vivir y algunas políticas formuladas recientemente que revelan un enfoque pragmático de parte del gobierno. Estas contradicciones sugieren que, lejos de ser una orientación estratégica para la formulación de políticas más eficaces, el buen vivir sirve como una nueva ideología y está siendo usado para apoyar un plan de reforma basado en una interpretación bastante tradicional del concepto de desarrollo.*

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President Rafael Correa came to power in Ecuador in 2007. In the previous decade, the country had experienced a period of intense political and economic instability: there had been eight presidents, and a deep financial and economic crisis in 2000 had led to the dollarization of the economy and massive emigration to Europe and the United States.<sup>1</sup> Correa, a charismatic and highly educated economist with training in Belgium and a Ph.D. from the University of Illinois, had briefly served as finance minister in 2005 and founded a new party, the Movimiento PAIS, a left-wing alliance of academics and middle-class and indigenous sectors (Dávalos, 2014: 63, 202, 222–224). One of his 2006 campaign promises was to refound the country through the drafting of a new constitution. The major challenge was to “articulate the struggle for social justice,

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equality, and the abolition of privileges with the construction of a society that respected diversity and nature" (Vanhulst and Beling, 2014: 57).

He kept his promise, and a constitutional assembly was convoked in 2007. With the explicit purpose of turning the page from the neoliberal reforms of the 1980s and 1990s (Friant and Langmore, 2014), the new constitution, approved by referendum in September 2008, established *buen vivir* (good living or living fully [Dávalos, 2014: 199]) as the foundational principle of the new state.<sup>2</sup> The concept has attracted interest among academics, politicians, and social movements far beyond its source in the Andean indigenous tradition. In fact, it has become an internationally debated topic (Fatheuer, 2011; Friant and Langmore, 2014; Guardiola and García-Quero, 2014; Hidalgo Capitán, 2014; Lalander, 2014; Monni and Pallotino, 2013; SENPLADES, 2013: 16; Vallejo et al., 2015; Vanhulst and Beling, 2014; Waldmüller, 2014) and has been proposed as a model for confronting major global environmental challenges (SENPLADES, 2013: 18). Some writers consider *buen vivir* an original contribution to the debate about the concept of development built on a completely new set of values and perception of the world (Falconí, 2013; Gudynas and Acosta, 2011). Others point to its similarities with the notion of development, especially human and sustainable development, since the 1990s (Walsh, 2010). Whatever one's perspective on it, since the adoption of the new constitution *buen vivir* has been the fundamental purpose of policy and the guiding principle of national planning.<sup>3</sup>

This paper is not intended to provide insight into *buen vivir*'s origins, the worldview on which it is based, or its contribution to the theory of (post) development<sup>4</sup> but to examine the extent to which its principles are being used as guidelines for policy making. Despite the constitutional prescriptions and the declarations of political authorities, some of the key policies implemented in recent years reveal a deep contradiction with *buen vivir* principles and spirit. The paper is organized into four sections. The first will provide a brief characterization of *buen vivir*'s foundational elements. The second will present a schematic description of three basic conceptions of ideology that can be employed to clarify the relationship between the principles of *buen vivir* and recent policies, which will be analyzed in the third. The last section will outline some final considerations about the ideology of *buen vivir* and the role it plays in building consensus for the Correa government's modernization project.

## BUEN VIVIR: A NEW PACT OF COEXISTENCE

The preamble of Ecuador's 2008 Constitution states that the task of the Constituent Assembly was to build "a new form of coexistence, in diversity and harmony with Nature and others, to achieve good living, *sumak kawsay*"<sup>5</sup> (ANC, 2008: 15). René Ramírez, current minister of sciences and technology and former national planning minister and perhaps the member of government who has written the most about *buen vivir*, calls it "a new social pact" or a "new pact of coexistence" (Ramírez, 2010b: 55, 60, 62, 63, 64). *Buen vivir* implies both material and spiritual well-being and is identified with a life of fullness (Macas, 2010: 14), equilibrium, and harmony with the various dimensions of the human

being. Although there is no consensus on its exact meaning and implications, most writers agree on a few basic elements that can be considered its pillars: harmony with Nature, respect for the values and principles of indigenous peoples, satisfaction of basic needs, social justice and equality as responsibilities of the state, and democracy. Two crosscutting features that characterize it are its work-in-progress character and its opposition to the Western, anthropocentric, capitalistic, and economy-centered paradigm of modernity (Vanhulst and Beling, 2014: 56).

*Harmony with Nature.* Respect for Nature, symbolized by the Pachamama (Kichwa “Mother Nature”) is perhaps the clearest and most widely accepted dimension of buen vivir. The constitution includes a chapter on the “Rights of Buen Vivir” (ANC, 2008: Article 14) in which it acknowledges the right of the people to live in a healthy and ecologically equilibrated environment that can guarantee the sustainability of buen vivir or *sumak kawsay*. Declared of public interest are the preservation of the environment, the conservation of ecosystems, the biodiversity and the integrity of country’s genetic heritage, the prevention of environmental damage, and the recovery of degraded natural spaces.

Buen vivir assumes a relationship of belonging rather than domination or exploitation between people and Nature. It calls for a “biocentric” understanding of life in which Nature has rights of its own and an intrinsic significance regardless of its value for human life (Ramírez, 2010a: 24). The chapter dedicated to the rights of Nature in the constitution asserts “the right to respect for its existence and the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structure, functions, and evolutionary processes” (ANC, 2008: Article 71). Consequently, buen vivir cannot be achieved through an economic model that exploits Nature: “the new social pact signed by Ecuadorean society cannot coexist with a primary-exports-dependent economy” (Ramírez, 2010b: 68).

*Respect for the values and worldviews of indigenous peoples.* The ethnic tradition of the ancestral people of Ecuador becomes an explicit reference in that buen vivir is identified with *sumak kawsay*: “Ecuador, as an Andean country, understands the notion of economic, social, cultural, and environmental rights according to a worldview that comes from the ancient societies of South America’s Andean region: *buen vivir* is *sumak kawsay*” (SENPLADES, 2013: 16). Buen vivir is built on the firm belief that diversity is richness and interculturality is vital for achieving a new society based on justice and equality for an (ideal) ancient indigenous tradition. The constitution protects the rights of communities, peoples, and nationalities and establishes that the integrity of their territory has to be respected (ANC, 2008: Articles 57–60). The national development plans for 2009–2013 and 2013–2017 set specific goals for the promotion and strengthening of the different identities that make up Ecuadorean society.<sup>6</sup>

*Satisfaction of basic needs.* The constitution translates as “rights” what in the language of development are commonly called “basic needs.” Among the “primordial duties” of the state we find “to guarantee, without discrimination, the fulfilment of the rights established in the constitution and in international legal instruments, especially education, health, food, social security, and water for its inhabitants” (ANC, 2008: Article 3). The concept of basic needs reappears in the

2009–2013 national plan: “In a society where high rates of unsatisfied basic needs still exist, it is necessary to provide economic alternatives to the primary-exports strategy” (SENPLADES, 2009: 55). For this purpose a long-term strategy of accumulation and distribution called an “endogenous strategy for basic needs satisfaction” is outlined (SENPLADES, 2009: 56, 57, 58). The first step of this four-stage path focuses on the “democratization of means of production, wealth distribution, and diversification of forms of property” (SENPLADES, 2009: 59), as well as on import substitution and exports diversification (SENPLADES, 2009: 60, 61). The 2013–2017 plan places greater emphasis on the need to introduce a “change in the production matrix”—structural change—that will “generate employment and reduce poverty and inequality” (SENPLADES, 2013: 73).

*Social justice and equality as the state’s responsibility.* Buen vivir has a strong relationship with the general welfare and the collective interest (Falconí, 2013: 13). It has also been called “sumak kawsay socialism” or “twenty-first-century socialism” to stress its implications for social justice and equality (Ramírez, 2010b: 136). Again, the state plays a fundamental role in political life as “the main agent of collective action” (SENPLADES, 2013: 85). The constitution asserts that the state must “plan national development, eradicate poverty, and promote sustainable development and the equitable distribution of resources and richness to achieve buen vivir” (ANC, 2008: Article 3).

*Democracy.* Buen vivir socialism requires participatory and deliberative democracy based on the constant participation of people in the public life of the country (SENPLADES, 2013: 24). As Ricardo Patiño (2010: 133), former minister of finance and current minister of foreign affairs, points out, “In Latin America and Ecuador democracy and participation have been reduced to the simple act of voting. On the contrary, democracy supposes a direct involvement of society in decision making.”

*Buen vivir as a work-in-progress project.* Buen vivir is “a concept that is being debated, a flexible notion that invites reflection. It is a complex, not lineal concept, historically determined, and one whose significance is constantly being revisited” (Ramírez, 2010a: 139). Rather than a constitutional declaration, it is an opportunity for the collective creation of a new form of organizing life itself (Acosta, 2011: 51).

*Buen vivir as a critique of the paradigm of modernity and the concept of development.* Buen vivir rejects the foundations of mainstream development theory. Ramírez (2010b: 64) explains: “The new pact of coexistence emphasizes the construction of new worlds, in contrast to the Western civilizatory proposal, which is centered on the productive/economic sphere and on consumption.” In the economic field, the paradigm of modernity is identified with the Washington Consensus and the orthodox theory of development; both conceptual frameworks are firmly rejected (SENPLADES, 2009: 5). The 2009–2013 national plan argues that the concept of development has remained basically immune to criticism over time. The objections it has received from different perspectives—feminist, environmental, cultural, communal, and political—have left it incapable of proposing an alternative. The plan “promotes a suspension of the word ‘development’ to introduce a debate on the concept of buen vivir” (SENPLADES, 2009: 18). This paradigm shift requires a new measure of

well-being, a new set of goals, instruments, indicators, and tools (SENPLADES, 2013: 28). To create distance between past theory and practice, Correa chose the name “Citizens’ Revolution” for his government plan.

## BASIC APPROACHES TO IDEOLOGY

“Ideology” has been defined in terms of various conceptual frameworks over time and has acquired different meanings (see Domínguez and Caria, 2014a). Three connotations of the word can be applied to the functioning of *buen vivir* in the current political moment: false consciousness, mobilizing utopia, and dominant ideology.

Ideology as false consciousness, the backbone of the Marxist definition, has a negative connotation and is described as a distortion of thought, a reality seen as if through a lens that turns the image upside down, disguising its contradictions. It represents a falsification of reality that aims at legitimizing the interests of the ruling class that holds control over the state (Marx and Engels, 1974 [1845–1846]: 26, 40, 72, 580). Its basic function is to maintain a particular form of control. Marx, Gramsci, and Žižek, among others, have followed this broad orientation (Domínguez and Caria, 2014a).

Ideology has also been described in positive terms as a mobilizing illusion, a motivation for collective action. In fact, in Marxist analysis, not only must the old (bourgeois) ideology be deconstructed but also a new ideology must be built as an “offensive weapon” against hegemonic ideals (see Domínguez and Caria, 2014a: 4). In the Marxist tradition, this new ideology is the expression of political ideas related to the interests of the working class. Collective action must seek a state of completeness (sometimes called “utopia”) that represents its ultimate goal and aspiration. Lenin, Gramsci, and Lukács can be associated with this interpretation, and here we can recognize an intersection with the psychoanalytical understanding of ideology. In the psychoanalytical tradition, specifically among writers such as Freud, Lacan, Marcuse, and Althusser, ideology—defined as a religious and cultural representation, the nucleus of a society’s ideals—is created to confront human defenselessness against Nature and to correct civilization’s regrettable imperfections (Freud, 1978 [1927]: 158–159). It is made up of illusions, materializations of humanity’s most urgent and ancient desires. Lacan, for example, suggests that what really matters in the pursuit of this illusion is the desire rather than the probability of its fulfillment. The desire gives rational and cohesive order to reality (Domínguez and Caria, 2014a: 9).

Revel (1989: 145) argues that when it has become dominant ideology turns into an “interest syndicate” for defending the status quo. It becomes contradictory, acting in opposition to its principles, and intolerant. Its contradictions with reality lead to a radicalization of its application rather than to (self-)critical review (Revel, 1989: 148). Žižek (2008a: 21) argues that dominant ideas never correspond exactly to the ideas of the dominant class; they include certain claims of the oppressed, although these claims are reinterpreted to make them compatible with existing power relations. Žižek also asserts that ideological discourse is always centered on a particular lemma that he calls a “knot of significance” or

a “signifier with no meaning,”<sup>7</sup> which has a purely performative function (to construct and perform an identity). To serve the dominant ideology the lemma must exclude from the symbolic order all signifiers (words) that have a relevant symbolic function in the conceptual framework of the opponents. Nevertheless, the symbol behind those signifiers will persist as a symptom (Žižek, 2008b [1989]: 108), representing a central concept that has been repressed and excluded from official discourse. “What is excluded from reality reappears as a signifying trace on the very screen through which we observe reality” (Žižek, 1992: 283). I will argue that the concept of development has been excluded from the official discourse about buen vivir but reappears as a symptom at every step of policy planning and implementation.

## THE IDEOLOGY OF BUEN VIVIR

The main policies and actions of Ecuador’s government in recent years on the basic elements of buen vivir seem to spring from a rather more pragmatic (and far less revolutionary) political orientation. The concept of development underlying the most recent of these policies rather resembles the post-Washington Consensus, and any reference to buen vivir in official discourse appears to be simply a consensus-building instrument for Correa’s government plan.

## THE FALSE CONSCIOUSNESS OF THE CITIZENS’ REVOLUTION

*Harmony with Nature.* The 2013–2017 national plan makes change in the economic model a priority: “Public investment is oriented toward sowing oil and harvesting a productive structure for the society of knowledge” (SENPLADES, 2013: 17). Extractivist activities are meant to generate a surplus to be distributed and invested in other sectors of the economy (basically manufacturing). The idea of “using the extraction of raw materials (in the short term) to stop the extraction of raw materials (in the long run)” (SENPLADES, 2013: 48) is a clear and naive contradiction that Villavicencio (2014: 124) compares to the squaring of the circle. The Banco Central del Ecuador reports that the proportion of exports represented by raw materials has increased from 74.3 percent in 2007 to 83 percent in 2014.<sup>8</sup> The non-oil-sector trade balance deficit doubled between 2006 and 2012 (Viteri, 2013: 49). Extractivist activities have severe social and environmental impacts on local communities, among them displacement, health deterioration, deforestation, and water pollution (Dávalos, 2014: 171–186; Gudynas, 2010: 63). According to Global Forest Watch, the deforestation rate in Ecuador has increased by 55 percent: whereas 203,015 hectares were lost between 2001 and 2006, 315,009 hectares were lost between 2007 and 2012.<sup>9</sup> The relationship of exploitation between man and Nature is not being changed; on the contrary, (neo)-extractivism (Dávalos, 2014: 132–135; Gudynas, 2009; 2010) “aims to turn nature into a viable commodity in the world market” (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014: 478). While in the past extractivism was associated with poverty and economic marginalization, nowadays it is conceived as the motor of development and an important source of financing for social programs (Gudynas, 2010: 67).

From this perspective, the Yasuní-ITT Initiative, which proposed a mechanism of financial compensation for leaving oil underground (see Dávalos, 2014: 362–364; García and López, 2014), has gained symbolic relevance. At the beginning it was emblematic of a new conception of Nature with rights of its own, but since Correa's decision to exploit the oil in the ITT bloc in 2013 it has become emblematic of the type of development that is now being pursued. Despite the apparent determination to defend the ITT initiative in the 2012 Rio + 20 Conference (Correa and Falconí, 2012: 268–270), as early as in January 2010 the president had already expressed his intention to exploit the ITT bloc because he considered the conditions of the trusteeship proposed by the United Nations Development Program “dishonouring” (Arsel and Angel, 2012: 220).

Two contradictions emerge from the formulation and then cancellation of the proposal for leaving the Yasuní National Park untouched. The first refers to the actors involved. The initiative took shape during a long process of indigenous and environmentalist resistance and functioned as an “offensive weapon” against oil exploitation in the Amazon. During Correa's first presidential term, Yasuní became popular among civil society organizations as a symbol of Ecuador's renewed democracy and part of a new proposal to control carbon emissions.<sup>10</sup> Yet from the moment that the initiative was transformed into public policy, the actions of the state excluded and marginalized the very groups that had defended it from the beginning (Arsel and Angel, 2012: 218). The second contradiction is between means and goal. In fact, the state has to promote development and defend Nature at the same time (223), and the means to achieve post-neoliberal development (intensifying the extraction of natural resources) threaten the goal (respect for Nature's integrity) (211; North, 2013: 124; Sánchez, 2011: 37).

Buen vivir is a “distortion of thought,” a false consciousness—harmony with Nature—that covers up the real consciousness, that of “beggars sitting on a sack of gold.” This metaphor for the persistence of poverty and vulnerability in a population with unexploited oil reserves at its disposal (*El Comercio*, January 12, 2012) reintroduces a utilitarian conception of Nature and makes its value in monetary terms prevail over other dimensions. Vallejo et al. (2015: 181), in a multicriterion analysis of the ITT exploitation option that goes beyond a simple cost-benefit assessment, conclude that if social and environmental criteria, among others, are incorporated, the “benefits to be derived from an economic transition toward a model based on the renewable energy sources and from the protection of the critical environmental and social ‘capital’ exceed the income gap identified from a financial perspective.”

Similarly, Correa declared the major threats to his master plan for the country “leftism and naïve environmentalism,” to which he later added “naïve indigenism” (Dávalos, 2014: 206). However, this attitude is contradictory to the principle of respect for ancient peoples. Again, buen vivir is a distortion of thought; it presents reality as perceived through a lens that turns the object upside down.

*Respect for the values and worldviews of indigenous peoples.* What began as a strong alliance between Correa and the indigenous movements gradually turned into open conflict once the political discussion focused on specific issues (Ortiz, 2014: 600, 601). It is reasonable to think that this is due to a change in

attitudes on both sides, but the government has systematically disregarded some crucial indigenous demands, the first being the integrity of their territory. Again, the Yasuní-ITT Initiative is emblematic: it violates not only the buen vivir principle of harmony with Nature but also Article 57 of the constitution, which establishes that territories of peoples that live in voluntary isolation are untouchable and forbids any kind of extractive activity there. Beyond the Yasuní-ITT case, the government refuses to organize consultations where environmentally damaging activities (mining) might affect the environment and culture of ancestral peoples; this instrument is established in the constitution and in several international treaties for the protection of human rights.<sup>11</sup> A social movement called Yasunidos has emerged to call for popular consultation that would ratify or reject oil exploitation in the Yasuní-ITT area. A consultation demand presented at the end of 2013 to the National Election Council generated a violent dispute over the legitimacy of the signatures that supported it. Eventually the council declared the request invalid and Yasunidos accused it of manipulating the process of demand analysis.<sup>12</sup>

*Satisfaction of basic needs.* Undoubtedly, there has been improvement in social conditions, reflected by the reduction of poverty and inequality rates and better education and health, in recent years. Between 2006 and 2014, poverty decreased from 37.6 percent to 22.5 percent, and extreme poverty dropped from 16.9 percent to 7.6 percent. In the same period, the Gini coefficient decreased from 0.54 to 0.47 (INEC, 2015). This means a quicker reduction than the regional average: the income of the poorest 40 percent of the population increased by 8.8 percent, compared with an average of 5.8 percent for the country as a whole (World Bank, 2015). These improvements are, however, the effect of family-support social policies implemented since 2007 (Ray and Kozameh, 2012: 14, 15), together with the impact of migrants' remittances (Dávalos, 2014: 208), rather than the consequence of a more democratic economic model. Acosta (2013: 13) points out that beyond the discourse and the promise of radical change, wealth concentration is not being tackled. There has been no structural transformation or change in the accumulation model. Furthermore, some writers argue that if we shift from basic needs satisfaction to a broader approach of subjective well-being, policy focusing on raising income alone will be insufficient; what is likely to succeed is policies that foster the buen vivir ethos, preserving, among other values, people's ties to the community and the land (Guardiola and García-Quero, 2014: 182).

Social justice and equality are the responsibility of the state. To achieve buen vivir, what is required is a radical reorientation of the economic model through the endogenous strategy for basic needs satisfaction (SENPLADES, 2009: 56, 57, 58). The first step in this direction was supposed to be a redistribution of wealth and the democratization of the means of production. With regard to water and land redistribution, a decades-old demand of social and indigenous movements, Correa declared that "efficacy and productivity criteria have to prevail over justice and access to land, and efficiency is not a characteristic of family and small farmers' agriculture" and that "to divide a large property into many small ones means to distribute poverty" (see Hidalgo, 2013: 162; Pástor, 2014: 96). It is worth mentioning that "5 percent of landowners control 52 percent of the cultivated land, while 60 percent of farmers own only 6.4 percent of the



land" (SENPLADES, 2013: 298). From 2009 to 2012, the land distribution plan implemented by the Ministry of Agriculture (Plan Tierra) distributed approximately 40,000 hectares, mainly of public property. The initial goal was to reduce the Gini index for land tenure from 0.80 (0.81 according to the last agrarian census [SIPAE, 2011: 16]) to 0.69 (Pástor, 2014: 98), though to achieve this result it would be necessary to distribute approximately 2 million hectares (Hidalgo, 2013: 162). As far as water for irrigation is concerned, in spite of a specific constitutional mandate<sup>13</sup> the concentration of water usage between 2006 and 2011 increased (SENPLADES, 2013: 299). Similarly, a look at the private sector structure reveals that largest 10 percent of enterprises control 96 percent of total sales (Acosta, 2013: 16). According to 2013 official tax data, 118 big economic groups declared an income equivalent to 48 percent of the gross domestic product, and in 2012 the fifth quintile (the top 20 percent) accounted for 52 percent of national income (Domínguez and Caria, 2014b: 34).

Social justice and equality cannot be limited to poverty reduction; it is necessary to lay the foundations for a new form of socialism, which requires a radical transformation of power relations and of the economic and social structure. This issue is not being addressed. Correa defines himself as a (Christian) socialist; nevertheless, during his governance, the profits of the major economic groups (banks and trade) have grown 50 percent more than in the previous neoliberal years (Acosta, 2013: 16). Again, *sumak kawsay* socialism is false consciousness that conceals reality and is being used to legitimize the government's action.

*Democracy.* Correa understands democracy in terms of Rousseau's idea of the general will, which does not correspond to the concept of participatory and deliberative democracy. In the past eight years, citizens have been called on several times to vote for their representatives or to accept or reject reforms: on all occasions the results represented a victory for Correa, although with different degrees of popular support. Voting, however, has become a plebiscite, asking people to accept or reject a package that cannot be discussed or modified (de la Torre, 2013: 42). The possibility of implementing a real participatory democracy in which *buen vivir* is constructed with the contributions of everyone is limited. Two examples will help to clarify this point. The first is the 2011 referendum, which consisted of 10 questions on a set of very disparate issues: the reform of the judicial system, security, the environment, and banks and the media.<sup>14</sup> The government's campaign was oriented toward obtaining a "yes" majority on all the questions, and citizens were asked to reaffirm their support for Correa's government rather than to express their opinions on the subjects of consultation. The second example occurred in October 2013, when a group of female members of the National Assembly proposed a discussion of legalizing abortion in the case of rape.<sup>15</sup> Correa threatened to resign if the proposal was even discussed by the Assembly, and the representatives supporting the proposal were accused of being traitors.<sup>16</sup> As Friant and Langmore (2014: 6) point out, "Ecuador seems to treat its citizens as passive social clients, rather than active participants in radical democracy."

The notion of the citizenry is central to the official discourse: it provides an "empty signifier," as Laclau (2006) would call it, that gives coherence to social movements' demands and plays a major role in hegemonic (official) discourse

(Ortiz, 2014: 588).<sup>17</sup> The “citizenry” has replaced the “organization” as the legitimate subject of social action (Ortiz, 2014: 591).

### BUEN VIVIR AS MOBILIZING UTOPIA

It is easy to read in *buen vivir* the expression of a dream or desire coherent with Lacan’s definition of ideology. It introduces to the public domain a dimension traditionally considered a private matter: “to love and be loved” and “to have time for contemplation” are textually mentioned in national planning as guiding principles (SENPLADES, 2009: 6). From the same perspective, the foundational value of the indigenous tradition in the constitution satisfies the desire to confer dignity on a culture and population marginalized for centuries. Beyond the debate about their effectiveness and enforcement, the rights of Nature can be interpreted as a desire to (re)establish equilibrium between people and the environment in the face of an increasingly conflictive relationship with often-dramatic consequences for human life.<sup>18</sup>

In this sense, *buen vivir* can be seen as a fantasy of returning to an ancient (or ideal) state of fullness in which the desire itself—the enjoyment of expectation—prevails over the actual probability of fulfilling it. Many *buen vivir* supporters show little concern about its vague definition or about its doubtful coherence and sometimes clear contraposition to certain government approaches. When *buen vivir* is presented in official discourse as the solution to the problems of mankind, it is described with a pathos that flows from the inner emotional sphere rather than from a rational understanding of the world: what matters here is maintaining a utopic horizon.

*Buen vivir* is often called a “utopian future” or a “realistic utopia” (Ramírez, 2010b: 128). The 2013–2017 national plan begins by stating, “*Buen vivir* is our horizon” (SENPLADES, 2013: 22), and therefore, as Eduardo Galeano said, “It is necessary to keep on walking.”<sup>19</sup> As a mobilizing utopia, *buen vivir* provides social cohesion and a collective identity, for it uses an inclusive language with which (almost) everyone can identify. Though it cannot be attributed to a single social class or ethnic group, it certainly reflects the aspiration of various groups, a fact that played a fundamental role in the constituent process and the refounding of the state.

### BUEN VIVIR AS A DOMINANT IDEOLOGY

*Buen vivir* has achieved the status of a dominant ideology and, as Revel theorized, has become contradictory and intolerant. As a contradictory ideology it has the power to turn to its advantage certain facts that contradict its principles, and it is thus used to justify policies that are antithetical to its pillars. As we have seen, the government is using *buen vivir* to legitimize measures that are in clear contradiction to its principles. Further, a dominant ideology does not tolerate dissent: “any divergence is a betrayal” (Dávalos, 2014: 265) and is rejected with violence. This happens not only when the oligarchy of the opposition, often motivated by discredited intentions, speaks but also when social movements express their dissatisfaction, which is systematically disdained and ridiculed (Becker, 2013: 44). Some organizations’ demands and

stances certainly reflect corporate interests, but in a participatory democracy dissent cannot be repressed, nor can the critique of authority be avoided.

The ideology of *buen vivir* corresponds to the interests of the groups upon which it is exerted: recent social policies have had far greater outreach than in the past. But this has occurred without compromising what Gramsci would call “the nucleus of the economic activity” (Domínguez and Caria, 2014a: 5), the privileges of economic elites (Hidalgo, 2013: 164; North, 2013: 127; Unda, 2013: 34). Social improvement has been kept compatible with existing power relations, as Žižek’s theory predicts. In summary, *buen vivir*, as the fundamental purpose of Ecuador’s policy, is the lemma of an ideological discourse, a signifier with no meaning of its own, that is used to construct and perform an identity; it has what Žižek would call a performative function.

Some hypotheses can be formulated to explain the gap between the *buen vivir* ideal and the concrete policies implemented by Ecuador’s government. First of all, considering the traditional instability of the country, Correa has avoided open confrontation with Ecuadorean economic elites: he has adopted a more cautious approach and redistributed “as much as was politically feasible” (Friant and Langmore, 2014: 6). Liisa North (2013) argues that a more ambitious redistribution would compromise the interests of exporters of bananas, cut flowers, broccoli, and shrimp, which provide part of the currency influx that Ecuador needs to sustain its dollar regime. She suggests that “either Correa doesn’t want to damage them because he thinks they are efficient producers or he cannot harm them due to their political power” (2013: 125). Correa himself does not seem to have much confidence in the contribution that small farmers and businesspeople can make to the economy or in the role of direct participation in the democratic process. A deeper democratization would have been possible only through a much stronger alliance with social movements. Vanhulst and Beling (2014: 57) argue that, “as has been the case with many radical transformative discourses throughout history, it should come as no surprise that the new social and political utopia of *Buen Vivir* falls short of its promise when brought down to political, economic, and social praxis.” At the same time, as far as the change in the productive structure is concerned, the current international context is not favorable to a reduction in Ecuador’s dependence on primary exports. South-South globalization will push small open economies like that of Ecuador, specialized in the production of raw materials, toward an intensification of their commercial relations with Asian countries; this means exploiting even more their comparative advantages and intensifying the extractivist trend (Burchardt and Dietz, 2014: 469; Cunha, Bichara, and Lélis, 2013: 201).

## FINAL REMARKS

Although *buen vivir* is defined in official documents as an alternative to “development,” the policies it inspires are similar to traditional development-oriented formulas. To a great extent *buen vivir* includes alternative visions of development (not alternatives to development), especially “human” and “sustainable” development, introduced in the Western world since the 1990s (Walsh,

2010: 20). Walsh argues that the language and emphasis of the 2009–2013 national plan resemble human development: liberty, autonomy, inclusion, and social cohesion. From this point of view, the innovative power of *buen vivir* and its difference from traditional development appear to lose much of their strength. “The crucial question is whether *buen vivir* is becoming another discursive tool and co-opted term, functional to the State and its structures and with little significance for real inter-cultural, inter-epistemic, and plurinational [and, we would add, productive structural] transformation” (Walsh, 2010: 20).

Žižek describes ideological discourse as a signifier with no meaning, a knot of significance. This knot is the essence of ideology and excludes a key element of the symbolic order; that element then returns in the form of a symptom. *Buen vivir* is a knot of significance that excludes the concept of development from the symbolic order to let it return when established power needs to justify or legitimize its actions. The traditional concept of development reappears when Correa justifies the decision to exploit the ITT bloc by explaining that “it will contribute to GDP growth”<sup>20</sup> (growth being the most traditional and problematic measure of development). In addition to this, in the 2009–2013 national plan “*buen vivir*” and “development” are understood as interchangeable, but “development” appears three times more often than “*buen vivir*,” despite the “suspension of the word ‘development’ to introduce a debate on the concept of *buen vivir*” (SENPLADES, 2009: 18).

Sutton (1989: 35) defined development as “the major ideology of our time.” He claimed that its function is to give rationality to policies inspired by different doctrines, to satisfy different needs, and that, like most ideologies, it is vague, imprecise, and contradictory. “It is functional to rationalise policies and aspirations and to face competing doctrines. The term satisfies different needs, inspires and frustrates its users, and it is characterized by vagueness and utopian exaggeration, as well as the many contradictions that ideology generally exhibits.” In this light, *buen vivir* and development have clear “elective affinities”: both are ideological.

Whatever the conflicts Correa’s Citizens’ Revolution has had to face, it still has the support of a significant part of the population, as election results have clearly demonstrated. In a country as unequal and exclusive as Ecuador, Correa’s policies of income support for marginalized sectors, together with the modernization of the old and inefficient state apparatus, have produced the effect of a revolution. The country has undergone a much-needed transformation that compensates for the eclipse of environmental sustainability. The question is whether it was necessary to make up for the government’s modernization project with the charm of *buen vivir* poetry, “a vigorous spirit that impels to learning and self-improvement” and “is perceivable in love, friendship, solidarity, and harmony with Nature” (SENPLADES, 2013: 24). The answer is probably yes: the concept of development, so deeply rooted in the discourse that justified three decades of neoliberalism, had gained such a bad reputation that it was necessary to exclude it from official political discourse until some kind of catharsis, profound renewal, had occurred in the state and in the society. In recent years *buen vivir* has played a less central role in the arguments used by the government in pursuit of legitimacy; it is being gradually replaced by the need to change the productive structure of the economy as the most

urgent step in the transition to *buen vivir*. As Žižek predicted, now that the new power has been affirmed, development has reappeared to claim its leading role in one of its most traditionally understood ways—as economic growth and structural change.

## NOTES

1. Between 1999 and 2007 almost 1 million people left the country, approximately 7 percent of the total population and 14 percent of the workforce (UNFPA/FLACSO, 2008: 15).

2. Bolivia has experienced a similar process since the election of President Evo Morales. The country has approved a new constitution that is explicitly inspired by *buen vivir* or *suma qamaña* (the Aymara equivalent of the Kichwa *sumak kawsay*). For a comparison of the two countries with regard to *buen vivir* see Vanhulst and Beling (2014) and Lalander (2014).

3. The two national development plans issued since the approval of the new constitution in 2008 have both been called national plans “for *buen vivir*” (SENPLADES, 2009; 2013).

4. For a detailed description of the origins and principles of *buen vivir* see Hidalgo Capitán (2014). For an analysis of *buen vivir* as an “invention of tradition” see Sánchez (2011) and Viola (2014).

5. “Good living” in Kichwa, the language of many Ecuadorean indigenous groups.

6. The 2009–2013 plan establishes as Goal No. 8 “Reaffirm and strengthen national identity, different identities, plurinationality, and interculturality” (SENPLADES, 2009: 82). The 2013–2017 includes as Goal No. 5 “Build spaces to join together and strengthen national identity, different identities, plurinationality, and interculturality” (SENPLADES, 2013: 181).

7. This knot of significance resembles Laclau’s (2006: 647) “empty signifier”: “Any politico-discursive field is always structured through a reciprocal process by which emptiness weakens the particularity of a concrete signifier but, conversely, that particularity reacts by giving to universality a necessary incarnating body.”

8. <http://www.bce.fin.ec/index.php/component/k2/item/756> (accessed March 20, 2015)

9. <http://www.globalforestwatch.org/country/ECU>.

10. Within the framework of net emissions avoided. <http://cbd.int/doc/meetings/fin/ds-fb-01/other/ds-fb-01-ppt-d12-ec-daniel-ortega-es.pdf> and Correa and Falconí (2012).

11. The constitution establishes consultation with the inhabitants prior to the beginning of such activities (ANC, 2008: 43). Furthermore, treaties aiming at protecting human rights, for instance, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization should prevail over national legislation (ANC, 2008: 189).

12. For two opposing views of the incident, see <http://www.telegrafo.com.ec/politica/item/yasunidos-no-alcanza-firmas-para-consulta-popular-sobre-yasuni.html> and <https://www.gkill-city.com/articulos/el-mirador-politico/poca-transparencia> (accessed March 30, 2015).

13. Transitory Disposition 27: “The government, in two years’ time from the enforcement of this Constitution, will review the situation of access to irrigation water in order to reorganize the distribution of concessions, avoid abuse and inequality in usage tariffs, and guarantee more equal distribution and access, especially to small and medium-sized farmers” (ANC, 2008: 203).

14. The complete text is available at [http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Referéndum\\_constitucional\\_consulta\\_popular\\_de\\_Ecuador\\_de\\_2011](http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Referéndum_constitucional_consulta_popular_de_Ecuador_de_2011) (accessed March 30, 2015).

15. Abortion is permitted only when the mother’s life is in danger or when the pregnancy is the consequence of the violation of a disabled woman.

16. See <http://quitolatino.wordpress.com/2013/10/15/laborto-in-ecuador-allassemblea-nazionale-dellecuador-si-discute-il-coip-codigo-organico-integral-penal> (accessed March 30, 2015).

17. According to Laclau (2006: 647–648), hegemony is “a relationship by which a certain particularity becomes the name of an utterly incommensurable universality. So the universal, lacking any means of direct representation, obtains only a borrowed presence through the distorted means of its investment in a certain particularity.”

18. Houtart (2011: 62) concludes that “these concepts [*buen vivir*], which were important for the life of the indigenous people of our continent, respond to the need to create a new way of life despite the contradictions inherent to the human condition.”

19. <http://enfermeriaintercultural.wordpress.com/2012/01/26/para-que-sirve-la-utopia-para-caminar-galeano/> (accessed March 30, 2015). The 2013–2017 national plan asserts that buen vivir is “the utopia that keeps us walking” (SENPLADES, 2013: 17).
20. <http://infolatam.com/2013/09/29/correa-aspira-que-yasuni-permita-a-ecuador-crecer-en-8/> (accessed March 30, 2015).

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