Thematic Section

Buen Vivir, Degrowth and Ecological Swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and the Green Economy

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ABSTRACT *This article proposes that the 'Green Economy' is not an adequate response to the unsustainability and inequity created by 'development' (a western cultural construct), and puts forward alternative socio-environmental futures to (and not of) development. 'Sustainable development' is an oxymoron. Therefore, instead of the 'post-2015 development agenda', we argue in favour of the '2015 post-development agenda'. We discuss Buen Vivir from Latin America, Degrowth from Europe and Ecological Swaraj (or Radical Ecological Democracy) from India. The intention is to outline that there is politics beyond a unilinear future, unsustainable and unjust, consisting primarily of economic growth.*

KEYWORDS *well-being; environmental justice; sustainability; economic growth; equity; sustainable development*

Introduction

Concern over the ecological unsustainability of human presence on Earth, and the growing inequality coupled with continuing deprivation of a huge part of humanity, has grown rapidly in the last couple of decades (Rockstrom *et al.*, 2009; Piketty, 2014; Steffen *et al.*, 2015). Inequality, injustice and unsustainability, already part of many state-dominated systems, have clearly been worsened by the recent phase of capitalism's accelerated expansion (Harvey, 2014).

Along with this, however, the global exploration of pathways towards sustainability, equity and justice has also grown. These are of two broad kinds. First, and currently on the ascendance, are 'Green Economy' (GE) and 'sustainable development' (SD) approaches. These entail a series of technological, managerial, and behavioural changes, in particular to build in principles and parameters of sustainability and inclusion into production, consumption and trade while maintaining high rates of economic growth as the key driver of development. These attempts have failed (and we argue, will continue to fail) to deliver what they promised: halt the worsening of the planetary health, eradicate poverty and reduce inequality. Somewhat on the fringes, as the second broad trend, are paradigms that call for more fundamental changes, challenging the predominance of growth-oriented development and of the neo-liberal economy and related forms of 'representative democracy'. This essay attempts to provide a critique of the 'Green

Economy' model, and describe the alternative notions or worldviews of well-being emerging (or re-emerging) in various regions. By comparing the two, it suggests how the latter can contribute to re-politicize the public debate by identifying and naming different socio-environmental futures: Buen Vivir, Ecological Swaraj or Radical Ecological Democracy (RED), and Degrowth. Finally, it discusses the risk of mainstream co-option of radical alternatives, and concludes on the need to strive for genuine political and socio-ecological transformation.

SD and the GE

'Everything must change in order to remain the same', Giuseppe Tomasi di Lampedusa, *The Leopard* (1963).

Stockholm 1972 to Rio+20: from the critique to the defence of economic growth

In 1987, the UN World Commission on Development and the Environment presented the report 'Our Common Future' (better known as the Brundtland report), coining the concept SD, then launched at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 (Principle 12 of the Declaration) and ratified at the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements in Istanbul 1996 and the World Summit on SD in Johannesburg 2002. Compared with the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm 1972, this implied an overall reframing of both the diagnosis and prognosis in relation to the ecological crisis (see Table 1). The focus supposedly became poverty in developing countries, instead of affluence in developed countries, along the lines of the post-materialist thesis of Inglehart (1990); 'you first need to be rich, in order to be an environmentalist'; for a critique, see Martinez-Alier (2002). In so doing, economic growth was freed of the stigma, and reframed as a necessary step towards the solution of environmental problems (Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo, 2015). This watering down of the initial debates of 1970s influenced by the Meadows *et al.* (1972) report constitutes the core of the GE, a kind of

Green Keynesianism with proposals such as a New Green Deal, and the 2030 Agenda for SD.

At the UN Conference for SD in 2012 (so called Rio+20 Summit) the concept of 'Green Economy' played a key role (even if not as much as expected) as the guiding framework of the multilateral discussions. In preparation for the summit, The United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP) published the report 'Towards a green economy: Pathways for sustainable development and eradication of poverty' (UNEP, 2011). The working definition presents the GE 'as one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities' (UNEP, 2011: 16). In consonance with the pro-growth approach of SD, the report denied any trade-off between economic growth and environmental conservation and conceptualized natural capital as a 'critical economic asset' opening the doors for commodification (so called Green Capitalism).[1]

In the Rio+20 final declaration, advocacy for economic growth is recalled in more than 20 articles. For example, Article 4 states that 'We also reaffirm the need to achieve SD by: promoting sustained, inclusive and equitable economic growth'. This approach is based on neoclassical economic theory (environmental economics), leading to the belief that economic growth will de-link (or decouple) itself from its environmental base through dematerialization and de-pollution because of the improvement in eco-efficiency (increased resource productivity and decreased pollution). In this conceptual framework, market prices are considered the appropriate means for solving environmental issues and exogenous rates of technological progress are expected to counter-balance the effects of resource exhaustion. However, as we will see, the conflict between economy and environment cannot be solved with appeals to 'sustainable development', 'eco-efficiency', 'ecological modernization', 'circular' or 'Green Economy'.

The weakness of the GE

While the GE approach could be seen as an improvement over the conventional neo-liberal economic model, it remains fundamentally flawed on a number of counts. For instance, the final objective for a New Green Deal is the creation of

Table 1. *A comparison of UN environment conferences: Stockholm 1972 and Rio de Janeiro 1992 (based on Gómez-Baggethun and Naredo, 2015)*

	Stockholm 1972	Rio de Janeiro 1992
Prescription for the environmental crisis	Detailed enumeration of biotic and physical resources that should be preserved	More abstract notion of 'sustainable development'
Causes of environmental degradation	Resource extraction and existing relations of economic exploitation	Poverty in developing countries
Main actors	Governments	• Private initiatives: corporations and NGOs; • Agenda 21 for municipalities (the lowest administration level).
Instruments	• Political demands; • Territorial and resource planning.	• Legislation (e.g., Environmental Impact Assessment); • Market instruments.

'resilient low carbon economies, rich in jobs and based on independent sources of energy supply' (NEF, 2008; UNEP, 2008). While on this end there might general agreement, the controversy remain on the means to adopt. This is reflected in the ongoing discussions on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to replace the Millennium Development Goals, which nations of the world are expected to adopt in late 2015. Among the flaws or weaknesses of the GE/SD approach as articulated thus far in various UN or UN sponsored documents (UNEP, 2011; UN Secretary General Panel, 2012; SDSN, 2013; United Nation, 2013; United Nations, 2014), including the final text for adoption 'Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development', are the following:[2]

1. Absence of an analysis of the *historical and structural roots* of poverty, hunger, unsustainability, and inequities, which include centralization of state power, capitalist monopolies, colonialism, racism and patriarchy. Without this diagnosis, it is inevitable that the prescriptions will not be transformative enough. From the time of the Rio+20 summit (2012), every UN report on the post-2015 Agenda has lacked such a diagnosis

2. *Inadequate focus on direct democratic governance:* There is welcome stress on accountability and transparency, but not on direct democracy (decision making by citizens and communities in face-to-face settings). Power in such a polity would flow upwards from the ground, enabling greater accountability and transparency than possible in only representative democracy. There is no mention of indigenous peoples' rights to self-determination (now recognized under the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), or of free, prior and informed consent powers to communities relating to lands and resources (ILO, Convention 169)

3. *Inability to recognize the biophysical limits to economic growth:* While recognizing ecological limits, these approaches do not see the inherent contradiction between these same limits and unending economic growth (which necessarily entails increasing material and energy flows, as ecological economists have shown). Instead,

there is repeated talk of 'accelerated growth', albeit 'green' and 'inclusive'. Given that human activity has already crossed several planetary boundaries, we may need global *degrowth,* along with radical redistribution so that countries/regions thus far deprived can gain without further threatening the Earth

4. *Continued subservience to private capital:* The approaches remain excessively soft towards big private business and finance capital, and dependent on their goodwill (i.e., voluntary measures) to not only make their operations sustainable but to provide financial support for the transition to sustainability. There is hardly any talk of the need to reign-in irresponsible corporate behaviour towards the Earth and people, through legal and other regulatory mechanisms; and no talk whatsoever of the need to transfer control over the means of production to collectives of producers. There is also continued faith in market mechanisms (e.g. the Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD) mechanism) as a major element of the GE, despite the evidence that these not only hardly work, but are inimical to the goals of equity and justice as they foster commodification

5. *Modern science and technology held as panacea:* There is some grudging concession to indigenous and traditional knowledge, practices, and technologies, but in general, the GE/SD approaches focus predominantly on modern science and technology. Largely ignored is the need to promote democratic, community-based research and development (R&D), and the importance of keeping knowledge in the commons or public domain. For instance, environmental problems need approaches such as 'Post-Normal science', a problem-solving strategy to be used 'when facts are uncertain, values are in dispute, stakes are high, and decision urgent' (Funtowicz and Ravetz, 1994: 1882)

6. *Culture, ethics and spirituality nowhere in the picture:* The importance of cultural diversity, and of ethical and spiritual values (especially towards fellow humans and the rest of nature) is greatly underplayed. The crucial links between culture, sustainability and equity are neither worked out nor recognized

7. *Unbridled consumerism not tackled head-on:* While there is a welcome focus on sustainable production and consumption, there is no explicit focus on the need to curb and drastically cut down the present consumption levels of the rich in the global North (the so-called 1 percent, including the dominant elites of the South). Without this, the majority of humankind will never have the space needed to become more secure and genuinely prosperous

8. *Global relations built on localization and self-reliance missing:* There is little acknowledgement of the need for relatively self-reliant (not to be confused with 'gated'!) communities, at least for basic material/physical, learning, and health needs, with governments and civil society facilitation. Examples across the world testify to the possibilities of such a transformation, which dramatically cuts unsustainable transportation, empowers people to be in control of their own lives, democratizes production and markets, and provides a stable basis for wider socio-economic and political relations across communities. On the contrary, the GE approach continues to promote large-scale global trade, albeit in products that are 'green' which according to UNEP would be more 'competitive'; and,

9. *No new architecture of global governance*: Missing is the need to change the current system of global governance to be far more responsive and accountable to the *peoples* of the world; whether it is a reformed UN, or a new global assembly of peoples that brings on board all relevant partners, indigenous peoples and local communities. Such global governance would have to prioritize human rights and environmental agreements over economic, finance, trade, and commerce agreements.

Radical alternatives for human well-being: Buen Vivir, ecological Swaraj (RED) and degrowth

Critique of development and origins of alternatives worldviews

A range of different and complementary notions or worldviews have emerged in various regions of the

world that seek to envision and achieve more fundamental transformation than that proposed by GE/SD approaches. Some of these are a revival of ancient worldviews of indigenous peoples; some have emerged from recent social and environmental movements in relation to old traditions and philosophies. Arising from different cultural and social contexts, they sometime differ upon the prognosis (what and how shall be done), but they share the main characteristics of the diagnosis (what is the problem and who is responsible for it) as well as similar or equivalent *Weltanschauungen* (worldviews).

Unlike SD, which is a concept based on false consensus (Hornborg, 2009), these alternative approaches cannot be reduced to any single one and therefore do not aspire to be adopted as a common goal by the United Nations, the OECD or the African Union. These ideas are born as proposals for radical change from local to global. In a post-political condition (Swyngedouw, 2007), they intend to re-politicize the debate on the much-needed socio-ecological transformation, affirming dissidence with the current world representations and searching for alternative ones. Along these lines, they are a critique of the current development hegemony (Escobar, 1995; Rist, 2008), meaning a critique of the homogenization of cultures because of the widespread adoption of particular technologies, and consumption and production models experienced in the Global North. The western development model is a mental construct adopted by (*read* imposed upon) the rest of the world that need to be deconstructed (Latouche, 2009). Development might thus be seen as a toxic term to be rejected (Dearden, 2014), and thus, 'sustainable development' an oxymoron.

Deconstructing development opens up the door for a multiplicity of new and old notions and worldviews. This includes *Buen Vivir*, a culture of life with different names and varieties in various regions of South America (Gudynas, 2011; Monni and Pallottino, *Development*, forthcoming); *Ubuntu* with its emphasis on human mutuality in South Africa and several equivalents in other parts of Africa (Metz, 2011); *Swaraj* with a focus on self-reliance and self-governance, in India (Kothari, 2014); degrowth as the hypothesis that we can live

well with less, and in common (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2014); and many others. We could even go back to Aristotle's *eudaimonia* (human flourishing), despite the criticism that we might have.

These worldviews are not a novelty of the twenty-first century, but they are rather part of a long search for and practice of alternative ways of living forged in the furnace of humanity's struggle for emancipation and enlightenment. What is remarkable about these alternative proposals, however, is that they often arise from traditionally marginalized groups. These worldviews are different from dominant western ones as they emerge from non-capitalist communities, and therefore break with the anthropocentric and androcentric logic of capitalism, the dominant civilization, as well as with the various state socialism (effectively state capitalism) models existing until now. However, as we shall see below, some approaches emerging from within the 'belly of the beast' (capitalist or industrialized countries) can also break from dominant logic, such as is the case with degrowth.

These worldviews differ sharply from today's notion of development. It is not about applying a set of policies, instruments and indicators to exit 'underdevelopment' and reach that desired condition of 'development'. In any case, how many countries have achieved development? Decades after the notion of 'development' was spread around the world, only a handful of countries can be called 'developed', others are struggling to emulate them, and all are doing this at enormous ecological and social cost. The problem is not in the lack of implementation, but rather in the concept of development as linear, unidirectional material and financial growth. The world experiences a widespread 'bad development', including those countries regarded as industrialized, that is, countries whose lifestyle was to serve as a reference beacon for backward countries. The functioning of the global system is itself a 'bad developer'.

In short, it is urgent to dissolve the traditional concept of progress in its productivist drift and of development (as well as its many synonyms) as a unidirectional, especially in its mechanistic view of economic growth. However, it is not only about

dissolving it; different views are required, much richer in content as well as in complexity. As Kallis, 2015 explains:

> 'Sustainable development and its more recent reincarnation "green growth" depoliticize genuine political antagonisms between alternative visions for the future. They render environmental problems technical, promising win-win solutions and the impossible goal of perpetuating economic growth without harming the environment.'

Therefore, these alternative approaches are necessary to challenge the ideas of GE and SD, and the associated belief in economic growth as a desirable path in political agendas. We briefly describe a few of these below coming from the contexts in which we, the authors, live: Buen Vivir from Latin America, degrowth from Europe and Ecological Swaraj (or RED) from India.

Buen Vivir: a life culture

Latin America, starting from a renewed criticism of conventional development, finds itself in a process of re-engaging with its origins. On one hand, it maintains and retrieves a historical tradition of criticism and questioning that were elaborated and presented from this region long ago, but fell behind and threatened with oblivion. On the other hand, other conceptions emerge, especially originating from its own ancestral people and nationalities of Abya Yala (name of America before the arrival of European settlers) as well as from other regions of the Earth.

At this point we recognize that, while much of the positions on the conventional development and even many of the critical currents are developed within the own western knowledge of modernity, the most recent Latin American proposals go beyond those limits. Many of them have re-emerged in the context of struggles against extractive industry and other manifestations of neo-liberal economies.

Its best known expressions remind us of the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia; in the first case is Buen Vivir (Good Life) or Sumak Kawsay (in Kichwa), and the second, in particular Vivir Bien (Living Well) or Sumak Qamaña (in Aymara), and Sumak Kawsay (Quechua) (Salón, 2014). This does not imply at all that these countries are adhering to the principles of Buen Vivir (we come back to this later). Other Andean indigenous peoples have similar worldviews, including Ametsa Asaiki of the Peruvian Amazonian peoples and Nandereko of the Guarani. In any case, it is imperative to recover the practices and experiences of indigenous communities, assuming them as they are, without ever idealizing them.

In indigenous knowledge, there is nothing analogous to the concept of development, often leading to a rejection of that idea. There is no concept of a linear process of life to establish a *before* and *after* state, namely underdevelopment and development, referring to the dichotomy in which people have to go through in order to achieve welfare, as in the Western world. Nor are there concepts of wealth and poverty determined by the accumulation and lack of material goods. Buen Vivir looms as a category in permanent construction and reproduction in close relationship with the rest of nature. Insofar as it is a holistic approach, it is necessary to understand the diversity of elements that are conditioned by human actions in the promotion of Buen Vivir, such as knowledge, codes of ethics and spiritual conduct in relation to the environment, human values and the vision of future, among others. Buen Vivir, in short, is a central category of life philosophy of indigenous societies.

Buen Vivir does not synthesize a mono-cultural proposal, as is the case of 'development'. It is a plural concept (it would be better to speak of 'Good Livings' or 'Good co-livings') arising especially from indigenous peoples, without denying the technological advantages of the modern world or possible contributions from other cultures and knowledge that challenge the presuppositions of dominant modernity.

Buen Vivir, as an open and under-construction proposal, enables the formulation of alternative views of life that encompass harmony with nature (as a part of it), cultural diversity and pluriculturalism, co-existence within and between communities, inseparability of all life's elements (material, social, spiritual), opposition to the concept of perpetual accumulation, return to use

values and movement even beyond the concept of value. Buen Vivir, in short, proposes a civilizational change.

Ecological Swaraj or RED

Emerging from the grass-roots experience of communities and civil society practicing or conceiving alternatives across the range of human endeavour in India, Ecological Swaraj (loosely, self-rule including self-reliance), or RED is a framework that respects the limits of the Earth and the rights of other species, while pursuing the core values of social justice and equity. With its strong democratic and egalitarian impulse, it seeks to empower every person to be a part of decision making, and its holistic vision of human well-being encompasses physical, material, socio-cultural, intellectual, and spiritual dimensions (Shrivastava and Kothari, 2012; Kothari, 2014). Rather than the state and the corporation, it puts collectives and communities at the centre of governance and the economy, an approach that is grounded in real-life initiatives across the Indian subcontinent (see www. alternativesindia.org).

This approach rests on the following main (intersecting) elements:

- Ecological sustainability, including the conservation of nature (ecosystems, species, functions, and cycles) and its resilience, building on the belief that humanity is part of nature, and that the rest of nature has intrinsic right to thrive
- Social well-being and justice, including lives that are fulfilling and satisfactory physically, socially, culturally, and spiritually; where there is equity in socio-economic and political entitlements, benefits, rights and responsibilities across gender, class, caste, age, ethnicities, and other current divisions; where there is a balance between collective interests and individual freedoms; and, where peace and harmony are ensured
- Direct political democracy, where decision-making power starts at the smallest unit of human settlement (rural or urban), in which every human has the right, capacity and opportunity to take part, and builds up from this unit to larger levels of governance that are downwardly accountable; and, where political decision making takes place respecting ecological and cultural boundaries
- Economic democracy, in which local communities (including producers and consumers, often combined in one) have control over the means of production, distribution, exchange, and markets; where localization is a key principle providing for all basic needs through the local regional economy, and larger trade and exchange, as necessary, is built on and safeguards this local self-reliance; and, where non-monetized relations of caring and sharing regain their central importance
- Cultural and knowledge plurality, in which diversity is a key principle; knowledge (its generation, use and transmission) is in the public domain; innovation is democratically generated and there are no ivory towers of 'expertise'; learning takes place as part of life and living rather than only in specialized institutions; and, individual or collective pathways of ethical and spiritual well-being and of happiness are available to all

Ecological Swaraj is an evolving worldview, not a blueprint set in stone. In its very process of democratic grassroots evolution, it forms an alternative to top-down ideologies and formulations, even as it takes on board the relevant elements of such ideologies. This is the basis of its transformative potential.

Degrowth: a vocabulary for a new era

Degrowth calls for a rejection of the obsession with economic growth as a panacea for the solution of all problems. It should not be interpreted in its literal meaning (decrease of GDP) because that phenomenon already has a name: it is called recession.[3] Degrowth does not mean 'less of the same' but it is simply different. It was born in the Global North, and it is being developed for that context, though the questioning of a one-way future consisting only of economic growth is also

inspired by – and relevant for – the Global South (Demaria *et al.*, 2013).

Degrowth signifies, first and foremost, a critique of growth. It calls for the decolonization of public debate from the idiom of economism and for the abolishment of economic growth as a social objective. Beyond that, degrowth also signifies a desired direction, one in which societies will use fewer natural resources and will organize and live differently than today. 'Sharing', 'simplicity', 'conviviality', 'care', and the 'commons' are primary significations of what this society might look like. When the language in use is inadequate, degrowth contributes to a new vocabulary to articulate what begs to be articulated (D'Alisa *et al.,* 2014).

The term was proposed by political ecologist André Gorz in 1972 and then launched by environmental activists in 2001 as a provocative slogan (*mot-obus*, a missile word) to re-politicize environmentalism. It springs from the hypothesis that we can live better with less and offers a frame that connects diverse ideas, concepts, and proposals (Demaria *et al.,* 2013).

Generally, degrowth challenges the hegemony of growth and calls for a democratically led redistributive downscaling of production and consumption in industrialized countries as a means to achieve environmental sustainability, social justice, and well-being (Demaria *et al.*, 2013). Degrowth is usually associated with the idea that smaller can be beautiful. However, the emphasis should not only be on 'less' but also on 'different'. Degrowth signifies a society with a smaller metabolism (the energy and material throughput of the economy), but more importantly, a society with a metabolism which has a different structure and serves new functions. In a degrowth society everything will be different from the current mainstream: activities, forms and uses of energy, relations, gender roles, allocations of time between paid and non-paid work, and relations with the non-human world (D'Alisa *et al.*, 2013).

While integrating bioeconomics and ecological macroeconomics (Victor, 2008; Jackson, 2011), degrowth is a non-economic concept. On one side, degrowth certainly implies the reduction of energy and material throughput, which is needed to face the existing biophysical constraints (in terms of natural resources and ecosystem's assimilative capacity). On the other side, degrowth is an attempt to challenge the omnipresence of market-based relations in society (i.e., commodification) and the growth-based roots of the social imaginary, replacing them with the idea of frugal abundance.[4] It is also a call for deeper democracy, applied to issues which lie outside the mainstream democratic domain, like technology. Finally, degrowth implies an equitable redistribution of wealth within and across the Global North and South, as well as between present and future generations.

The attractiveness of degrowth emerges from its power to draw from and articulate different sources or streams of thought and formulate strategies at different levels. It brings together a heterogeneous group of actors who focus on housing and urban planning, financial issues and alternative money systems, agroecology and food systems, international trade, climate justice, children's education and domestic work, meaningful employment and cooperatives, as well as transport and alternative energy systems. Degrowth could complement and reinforce these topic areas, functioning as a connecting thread (i.e., a platform for a network of networks) beyond one-issue politics (Asara *et al.,* 2015).

Discussion: naming different socio-environmental futures

Buen Vivir, RED and degrowth are attempts to re-politicize the public debate by identifying and naming different socio-environmental futures (Swyngedouw, 2007). They articulate particular concerns, demands, and means to achieve the desired socio-environmental arrangements (theory is politics). Furthermore, they oppose power in its different forms, starting from their provocative assertion against the consensus on growth and development in parliamentary politics, in business, in the bulk of the labour movement and in the social imaginary. Rather than accepting a fake and apolitical consensus (such as the need to grow in order to pay the debts, or SD, or climate change discourse *à la* Al Gore where everyone is **369**

supposedly in the same boat), these notions give visibility to the contradictions and the conflicts at different scales.

We have limited ourselves to present the three worldviews in which we are directly involved, though there are several equally important and relevant worldviews and notions, such as those emanating from movements of feminism, post-extractivism, solidarity and social economies, commons, permaculture, transition towns, steady state, social ecology, global justice, environmental/climate justice, occupy 'everything' and others; from traditions like *ubuntu, agdal*, and others; from initiatives like Blockadia, the Yasuni ITT proposal in Ecuador and other similar attempts to 'leave oil in the soil, coal in the hole, gas in the grass', and so on.

While the above-sketched notions are internally diverse and there has been no global attempt at trying to consolidate them into a single coherent vision or framework (if this was even possible or desirable), there are a number of common elements that can be discerned even without a systematic comparative assessment. This is especially true at the level of the fundamental values or principles that they espouse, or are based on. These include: bio-ethics or respect for all life and the rights of (and stewardship towards) non-human nature; holistic human well-being that puts non-material (including spiritual) and material aspects on the same footing; equity and justice; diversity and pluralism; governance based on subsidiarity and direct participation; collective work, solidarity and reciprocity while respecting the individual; responsibility; ecological integrity and resilience; simplicity (or the ethic of 'enoughness' and sufficiency – *aparigraha* in the Indian context); dignity of work; and qualitative pursuit of happiness.

All these proposals recognize that humanity must reconnect with nature. Humanity must assume its limits and adapt its life to natural life cycles. The task seems simple, but is extremely complex. Instead of keeping the divorce between nature and human beings, we must encourage their re-engagement. This also means accepting the essence of the human community, with and in terms of other human beings, as part of nature, without attempting to dominate it.

Radical well-being notions and worldviews can be quite different in their cultural and socio-economic contexts, but they share a common (if currently unstated) critique of the GE, as well as many elements of alternative futures. They call for 'resistance and regeneration' based on the de-commodification of Nature, radical redistribution of income and wealth as well as of reproductive work (care), democratization of the economy, decentralization and de-concentration of the productive sectors, and a deep engagement *within* and *without*.

As a first small step in this direction, we show below how the various well-being alternatives outlined above, and others emerging elsewhere in the world, differ from the GE/SD approach in many ways.

Parameter	GE/SD Approaches	Radical Well-being Approaches
Political governance	State and corporate-centred, with measures for accountability and transparency; representative democracy	Community-centred; direct democracy with representative governance institutions responsible to local institutions
Economic framework	State and corporate-centred and owned; Green Growth as main driver; centrality of financial and market measures for sustainability along with public policy; continued emphasis on competitive trade and economic globalization	Community-centred; community or public ownership of means of production; holistic well-being oriented; centrality of customary and/or public policy measures for sustainability; localized self-reliance for basic needs

(*Continued*)

Parameter	GE/SD Approaches	Radical Well-being Approaches
Social justice and equity	Inclusive development and entitlements; state welfare or responsibility towards the weak.	Radical redistribution of power and wealth; empowerment of the weak to take control of their lives; in the short-run future a welfare and facilitative role for the state.
Knowledge, culture, and technology	Predominant focus on modern science & technology, some concession to traditional knowledge/science and technology; acceptance of privatization; cultural and spiritual aspects marginalized or commodified.	Equal status to diversity of knowledge systems; knowledge generation and custodianship in the public domain; respect of cultural diversity and undogmatic spiritual self-realization.
Human–nature relationship	Human-centred; sustainability as instrumentalist goal; nature as either commons or privatized.	Life-centred; inherent value of non-human nature; spiritual connection between humans and non-human nature; nature as predominantly the commons.
Ecological sustainability	Central goal, but not necessarily over-riding; unclear acceptability of absolute 'limits' of material and energy flows.	Non-negotiable as a bedrock of human existence; absolute 'limits' of energy and materials clearly accepted, with precautionary principle in situations of knowledge uncertainty.

The lines between GE/SD and more radical well-being approaches can of course at times be fuzzier than it appears from the table above. For instance, some proponents of the former seem to encompass the notion of rights of nature, but perhaps not in a holistic, ethical sense as in the latter. On equity and justice, the former can encompass many rights-based and pro-active state actions (e.g., on gender), but usually does not want to make the rich give up substantially towards redistribution, and is weak on changing the structures creating inequality, including capitalism.

Mainstream co-option of radical alternatives

The GE/SD approaches can be seen as an attempt by the proponents of neo-liberal or state-dominated systems to survive the obvious negative impacts of ecological and social crises, at least in the short run, while retaining legitimacy in the face of increasing demands from the public for greater responsibility and accountability. Part of this is also an effort to co-opt the voices and language of those advocating radical alternatives. For instance, 'degrowth' was chosen not only as a provocative slogan, but also as one difficult to co-opt. For the moment, it has worked, though it has occasionally been used by certain politicians and journalists as a synonym of recession (Ariès, 2008).

However, the most interesting example of these attempts of semantic appropriation is how the indigenous visions of *Buen Vivir/Sumak Kawsay* (outlined above) have been taken over in official discourse and policy in some Latin American countries, and consequently by agencies like UNEP. In a comparative analysis of the GE approach and development strategies of some Latin American countries based on these indigenous visions (e.g., Vivir Bien in Bolivia, Sumak Kawsay in Ecuador), UNEP (2013) argues that there is essential similarity between the two. UNEP is able to assert this because, in adapting these concepts into constitutional, legal, or 371

administrative provisions, these countries have either distorted their original meanings and/or clubbed them with other contradictory concepts. Bolivia, for instance, proposes in its National Development Plan a change from 'a development model based on primary exports to one based on the philosophy of Vivir Bien, Living Well, which proposes the fundamental complementarities of access to and enjoyment of material goods, and effective, subjective, and spiritual self-realization in harmony with nature and in community with human beings'. However, the Plan also proposes high rates of GDP growth, and continued use of extractive industries to generate necessary resources and surplus to plough into sectors like agriculture.

In Ecuador, possibly one of the world's most progressive constitutions makes the state responsible for a development path that is the 'organized, sustainable and dynamic grouping of economic, political, socio-cultural and environmental systems which ensure the achievement of good living (Sumak Kawsay)', and extends to nature the right to 'full respect for its existence and the maintenance and regeneration of its vital cycles, structure, functions and evolutionary processes'. This and Ecuador's National Plan for Good Living (2009–2013) come close to the radical alternative visions outlined above. And yet, partly because of the continued dependence on extractive industry, partly because of lack of conviction in direct democracy and economic localization, and partly because the state retains enormous power, it is far from clear that the country is headed towards achieving such visions (Acosta, 2013).

It is not surprising that across the Latin American region, despite some undoubtedly progressive governments and policies, indigenous peoples continue to struggle against the state, and radical human rights and environmental justice groups and activists continue to raise fundamental questions about the direction the governments are taking. In such a scenario, for UNEP or other agencies to claim that the GE approach mirrors, or is mirrored by, indigenous notions of well-being, is somewhat disingenuous.

Conclusion: the need for radical movements to foster transformative socio-ecological transitions

The inability or unwillingness of UN institutions and processes to acknowledge the fundamentally flawed nature of the currently dominant economic and political system, and to envision a truly transformative agenda for a sustainable and equitable future, is disappointing. But it is not surprising, given that these processes are in the hands of officials of nation-states and formal sector 'experts' with private corporate power pushing from behind, and there is seriously inadequate voice of ordinary (including indigenous) peoples in them. For this reason, even as civil society pushes for the greatest possible space *within* the post-2015 SDGs Agenda, it must also continue envisioning and promoting fundamentally alternative visions and pathways.

There is a need to relocate at the centre of our societies the value of solidarity and mutual principles of social organization beyond the conventional economics and utilitarianism on which the GE is based. This complex challenge, barely sketched in this text, we will not meet overnight. We must give way to transitions from existing alternative practices worldwide, guided by utopian horizons advocating a life in harmony among human beings and between us and the rest of nature. This urges us to move towards a new civilization demanding another economy and another politics. It is a patient and determined construction and reconstruction – one that begins to dismantle various dominant fetishes (like 'growth'), and promotes radical changes from existing experiences, especially at the local level, typical of a RED.

The possibility of radical well-being notions such as those outlined above becoming prevalent, and replacing the currently mainstream model of 'development' (with or without its 'sustainable' and 'green' robes), is clearly dim in the current scenario. However, it is not an impossible dream; indeed, as multiple crises increase when even the 'Green Economy' fails to deliver as it inevitably must, people everywhere will be looking for meaningful alternatives. This

is already happening for instance in the context of Southern Europe's severe economic crisis, or as a response to the alienation of an increasingly capitalist state in many southern countries. Indigenous peoples, local communities, civil society and other actors of change need to continue dreaming, practicing, and promoting these alternatives, for one day there will be an overwhelming demand for them, and it will be tragic if we would have meanwhile abandoned them because we thought they were an impossibility.[5]

Acknowledgements

Notes

1 'The key aim for a transition to a Green Economy is to enable economic growth and investment while increasing environmental quality and social inclusiveness'. (UNEP, 2011: 16).
2 Adapted from Kothari (2013). As this article was going to press, the final outcome document of the SDG process came out, though formally not yet adopted. It was too late for us to review in detail, however on a quick reading, we did not find any significant change from the previous documents that we analyze here, so we consider our critique still fully pertinent. The final text for adoption on the 25–27 September 2015 is available here (Last accessed on 18 August, 2015) https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld.
3 Considering the weak and arbitrary nature of GDP as an indicator (Van den Bergh, 2009), and following Latouche (2009), the irrelevance of GDP increases/decreases can be expressed with the term 'a-growth' in the same sense that one can be an a-theist (Demaria *et al.*, 2013).
4 Frugal abundance is the term used by Latouche (2009). Understanding degrowth as a 'matrix of alternatives' we should also consider other proposals with similar connotations such as: 'conviviality' by Ivan Illich, 'prosperity without growth' by Tim Jackson, 'better with less' by Jose Manuel Naredo, 'Buen Vivir' by indigenous communities as recognized in the Constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, and also 'Eudaimonia' by Aristotle, human flourishing, *joie de vivre* and others.
5 Consider the remarkable interest created by our brief article in *The Guardian*, on a similar theme, titled 'Sustainable development is failing but there are alternatives to capitalism' (21 July, 2015), available at http://www.theguardian.com/sustainable-business/2015/jul/21/capitalism-alternatives-sustainable-development-failing?CMP=share_btn_tw.

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