

EVENT REPORT: BÖLL LUNCH DEBATE, November 13th, 2012

***Buen Vivir* and *Green New Deal*: Equivalent Concepts for the EU and Latin America?**¹

The *Green New Deal*: A reform programme²

Worldwide we are facing a major crisis: Global warming, scarce resources, an unsustainable economic system and the severe social impacts of these phenomena. So how can we assure prosperity now and for future generations face to the limited resources of our planet? In Europe the Greens launched the *Green New Deal* to try to give answers to these challenges. In Latin America academics are discussing the *Buen*



Vivir concept. The *Green New Deal* proposes a strategy to guarantee prosperity and social cohesion by reducing inequalities between societies and within society, as a starting point respecting the environment. The *Green New Deal* is not an end in itself; it is first of all a tool. It suggests ways of socially and ecologically transforming the capitalist economy. This is the major difference to the concept of *Buen Vivir* representing an approach of political philosophy which questions some of our general systemic assumptions more profoundly.

The *Green New Deal* is based on the following constitutive elements: Firstly, it aims at energy saving and energy efficiency by investing in infrastructure, isolation of houses, sustainable public transport, and other sectors. Secondly, it means to protect natural resources by using more efficient and sustainable means to fit our needs. This concerns for example agriculture or waste management.

The third aim is to achieve social inclusion and cohesion by new company and administrative structures and organisation of labour.

A further challenge is to adapt more easily to new situations under limited resources. Therefore, the *Green New Deal* includes, as forth aspect, investments in research and development. Education and training that reassure resource efficient and sustainable practices within society are the fifth constitutive element.

¹ Guest speakers were: Eduardo Gudynas, Researcher at the Latin-American Centre of Social Ecology (CLAES); Andrea Ventura, Universidade Federal da Bahia; Arnaud Pinxteren, Member of Parliament of the Brussels-Capital Region.

² The information about the *Green New Deal* is based on the website <http://greennewdeal.eu>

If the *Green New Deal* shall meet its objectives, these five types of measures need to be carried out under solid, socially and environmentally feasible conditions. Vital among these conditions is a better regulation of financial markets as well as environmental protection. This way, investments can support the protection of common goods. Another essential aspect for a solid framework is taxation and public investments that serve to guarantee a just redistribution of wealth. In order to make the framework attractive public expenses also have to be effective. Enhancing democracy and putting forward political participation are crucial objectives of the *Green New Deal* because they are vital to assure broad acceptance and support from the society. These conditions would allow for the *Green New Deal* to be properly implemented.

In the end, the *Green New Deal* aims at changing the current paradigm in societal relations and the relationship of society and environment. In this respect, it can be seen as a possible starting point for change. However, the concept represents one approach and it is not comprehensive. There are also other approaches questioning the way we produce and consume.

The *Buen Vivir*: A concept of political philosophy³



There are three dominant ways of understanding the Latin American concept of *Buen Vivir*. In its general understanding the concept criticises the western approach to development and in this respect is often used by governments and media in order to advertise certain projects and distinguish them from western development projects. Social welfare cards in Venezuela, called “Cédula del Buen Vivir”, can be named as an example where a government used the label of *Buen Vivir* in a general way.

The second way to understand the concept is more limited. It links the *Buen Vivir* concept with political debates, mostly in order to criticise the capitalistic system and defend different approaches to development. In this understanding, the *Buen Vivir* label is often linked to socialist alternatives. This can be observed in Ecuador for example, where the constitution includes some principles of *Buen Vivir*.

The third understanding of the concept is a more substantive one, as it conceives the *Buen Vivir* as a critique to current development and a stance to move beyond this criticism. The concept is thus a critique and an alternative at the same time. Welfare in this respect is not based on individual welfare or quality of life. It can only be understood at a holistic level and comprehends a social and environmental dimension.

³ The ideas presented about ‘Good Living’ are mainly based on ongoing work from the CLAES in South America.

The ideas contained in the concept of *Buen Vivir* originate in the criticism of indigenous organisations in Latin America as well as in the critical stance on Western development, represented for example by the *Deep Ecology* Movement⁴. The concept therefore is neither a synonym for indigenous thoughts, nor the call for a return to primitive ways of living. Instead, it has a multicultural component for organising the future from a different perspective. It is a big critique to current development.

What are the different core values in the relationship with nature within both concepts? Is the *Buen Vivir* a true post-developing paradigm and the *Green New Deal* just a programme for reforms without any concept for structural change in the guiding values of human relationship with nature? Which role does economic growth play in both concepts?



These questions are considered the most interesting and controversial in debating both concepts. The first big difference between the concepts is that the *Buen Vivir* fundamentally questions the conceptual basis of western development. It represents a politico-philosophical debate of criticising and finding the true sense of development and welfare. The *Green New Deal* on the contrary is a discussion of alternatives within the western framework of development. Its goal is to reform the framework and to

create an ecologically and socially responsible capitalist system. The *Green New Deal* is not a concept of political philosophy but a policy program. The *Green New Deal* also does not take cultural and ethical elements into account to the extent *Buen Vivir* does.

One may argue that all criticism to development can then be considered *Buen Vivir*. However, according to Latin American experts there are relatively clear limits about which criticisms are integral parts of the concept and which ones are not. There are two main parts within the concept of *Buen Vivir*. The first one concerns the environment. Different *Buen Vivir* movements agree that the environment has its own intrinsic rights which are not given by humans. Their relation with nature should be constructed by recognising nature's independent value. This point of view roots in indigenous perspectives as well as the U.S. American radical *Deep Ecology* movement. And this is also where to find one of the differences between *Buen Vivir* and the *Green New Deal*, since *Buen Vivir* rejects the utility value the *Green New Deal* assigns to nature.

The second important part of *Buen Vivir* is about how to understand economy. *Buen Vivir* is both post-socialist and post-capitalist. It rejects the mere economic valuation of social and natural relationships because they imply a utilitarian approach. At the same time it deviates from key socialist assumptions, which state that only humans can assign value and support industrial progress, as well as their materialist focus. *Green*

⁴ Deep Ecology website: <http://www.deepecology.org/>

New Deal in contrary keeps up an anthropocentric perspective. This is probably the biggest difference between the *Buen Vivir* in the strict sense and the *Green New Deal*. To conclude, we can say that the distinction between policies and politics is useful to distinguish the different approaches of the *Green New Deal* (policies) and *Buen Vivir* (politics).

Diverging core assumptions

The *Buen Vivir* does not offer policy proposals while the *Green New Deal* is a more structured plan. However, there are some instruments in common. The *Buen Vivir* is not only about how to use resources more efficiently, it is also about questioning the cultural roots of development. In doing so it takes into account the spirituality in humans' relationship with nature. It intends to change the notion of development, putting aside the debate between 'Growth' and 'De-growth' as it is a Europe based debate rooted in classic ideas of economic welfare. Therefore, both at European and Latin American level, the *Green New Deal* critiques' do not perceive it as a shift of paradigm but only as a means to transform capitalism in a more sustainable, efficient and just way.



Many Latin American experts hold that the *Green New Deal* is a programme of green modernisation that reinforces the idea of modernity in its cultural sense. The *Green Economy* is part of this understanding of development, as it is an instrumental and a technical approach, not a conceptual and philosophical one. Many supporters of the *Buen Vivir* further argue that instruments are not merely a means to a device and therefore not neutral and the *Green New Deal* does not question them. The social and ecological capitalism is a fallacy according to *Buen Vivir* promoters, a myth that is not reachable because there are many problems of hierarchy that will prevail even if the economic problems that capitalism brings are solved. Negative elements will persist even in a healthy capitalist environment while the relations of power will remain unchanged. The dialogue of *Buen Vivir* and the *Green New Deal* is therefore quite difficult because the approaches and their core assumptions are fundamentally different.

Other approaches to the debate

Environmentalist movements in Latin America and especially in Brazil did some research about how socio-environmental conflicts develop in the light of new situations brought about by climate change. They criticise the UN instruments, such as the Kyoto Protocol to fight global warming. According to them today's developmental structures are no longer adequate. The objective should not only be to reduce emissions, but to

adapt to the threats and consequences of climate change. Are there alternative development approaches besides the *Buen Vivir* from a Latin American perspective? What role should technologies play to change the current development and industry trends? And how can citizens produce, distribute and live while respecting the environment and reducing consumption?

In this respect, these environmental movements defend the concept of “*technologies of the social change*” (inclusion through technology). To accomplish social inclusion through technology those people who are negatively affected by social, economic or environmental problems should be included in defining how technologies or models should look like in order to solve these conflicts. These approaches make a point for respecting nature as a transversal objective.

An example for this is how some small scale farmers in Brazil deal with nature. Their subsistent agricultural system is in fact changing. There are two different realities in Brazil nowadays: On the one hand small scale producers using “*Acequia*” (namely: irrigation trench) without great access to water and on the other hand big single crop producers enjoying abundant reserves of water. Yet, there are really successful stories about how small subsistent farmers can survive without using large amounts of water, without heavy machines that damage the soil but with organic fertilisers produced by themselves . This can be seen as a great “*technology of the social change*”, which has helped these people to adapt to new conditions.



How can you put the conceptual *Buen Vivir* into practice?

The *Buen Vivir* does not offer recipes ready for use. However, one of its objectives is to apply or adapt positive experiences and best practices to the particular context of each region. Currently, even some governments supporting the *Buen Vivir* have neo-extracting policies. Critics claim that they misuse the concept politically. This shows the difficulties to translate the *Buen Vivir* concept into policies, even for progressive governments such as the Bolivian one. In this respect the *Green New Deal* can be analysed from a *Buen Vivir* perspective in order to see which elements can be applied in the Latin American context, redefining them into a different direction.

So what can we learn from *Buen Vivir*? There are examples at the small and midscale level related to proposals of less consumption and some other examples for the long term. However, the *Buen Vivir* experts insist that besides the application of the *Buen Vivir* in the policy field, the conceptual roots of the concept are the important core aspect of debate right now.¹

For more information

Green New Deal

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- The New Green Deal in the European Parliament. Greens/EFA (2012)

Buen Vivir

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- Buen Vivir – Das gute Leben jenseits von Entwicklung und Wachstum. Rosa Luxemburg Stiftung Analysen, 5 – 33. (2012)

ⁱ The event was held under Chatham House rule. The expressed opinions are not necessarily those of the Heinrich Böll Stiftung.