

Reflections on Good Living—*Buen Vivir* From cultures of consumerism to cultures of sustainability

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CULTIVATING CONSUMERISM OR SUSTAINABILITY?

The Worldwatch Institute that dedicated its State of the World Report¹ to critically assess the progress and different challenges towards achieving sustainability has made the case for *transforming cultures*, calling for one of the greatest cultural shifts imaginable from cultures of consumerism to cultures of sustainability. Christopher Flavin, president of Worldwatch Institute, in the preface of the report highlights: “that there can be no doubt that consumer cultures are behind what has been called the ‘Great Collision’ between a finite planet and the seemingly indefinite demands of human society...despite a 30% increase in resource efficiency, global resource use has expanded 50% over the past three decades...Like a tsunami, consumerism has engulfed human cultures and Earth’s ecosystems. Left unaddressed, we risk global disaster. But if we channel this wave, intentionally transforming our cultures to centre on sustainability, we will not only prevent catastrophe, but may usher in an era of sustainability one that allows all people to thrive while protecting, even restoring, Earth.

“The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment warns us that some 60% percent of ecosystem services (e.g., climate regulation, fresh water, waste treatment, fisheries) is being degraded or used unsustainably. The damage is the result of cultural systems that encourage people to define their happiness and success in terms of how much they consume...The key to this transformation will lie in harnessing institutions that play a central role in shaping society to instil this new cultural orientation.”

Analysing the rise and fall of consumer culture, Erik Assadourian in the same report² defines the essential role of *cultural pioneers* for harnessing change, and states that: “transforming cultures is of course no small task. It will require decades of effort in which cultural pioneers those who can step out of their cultural realities enough to critically examine them work tirelessly to redirect key culture-shaping institutions: education, business, government, and the media, as well as social movements and

1. Erik Assadourian (Project Director) Linda Starke and Lisa Mastny (Editors) (2010), *Transforming Cultures from Consumerism to Sustainability* (The Worldwatch Institute, State of the World Report 2010: Washington DC) Available at: <<http://www.worldwatch.org/bookstore/publication/state-world-2010-transforming-cultures>>.

2. Erik Assadourian (2010) “The Rise and Fall of Consumer Cultures” in The Worldwatch Institute, State of the World Report 2010, pp. 3–20.

long-standing human traditions. Harnessing these drivers of cultural change will be critical if humanity is to survive...

“Consumerism has now so fully worked its way into human cultures that it is sometimes hard to even recognize it as a cultural construction...Indeed, consumer is now often used interchangeably with ‘person’ in the 10 most commonly used languages of the world, and most likely in many more...

“Considering the social and ecological costs that come with consumerism, it makes sense to intentionally shift to a cultural paradigm where the norms, symbols, values, and traditions encourage just enough consumption to satisfy human well-being, while directing more human energy toward practices that help to restore planetary well-being.”

A NEW LANGUAGE FOR GOOD LIVING BUEN VIVIR

- **Ubuntu** (South Africa) = Is an African ethic or humanist philosophy focusing on people’s relations with each other the essence of being human: *I am, because we are*. Ubuntu speaks particularly about the fact that you can’t exist as a human being in isolation, it speaks about our interconnectedness.
- **Buen Vivir** (Ecuador, Bolivia, Colombia) = The term “buen vivir” or Sumak Kawsay, describes the right of the people to live in a healthy and ecologically balanced environment that ensures sustainability. In practice, the concept of “good living” implies knowing how to live in a community by eliminating prejudice and exploitation between people, as well as respecting the rights of Mother Nature.
- **Ujamaa** (Tanzania) = Comes from the Swahili word for extended family or family-hood and is used to express the concept of people living and working together, it means unity in supporting one another, it also means the need to give back to those who support you.
- **Lagom** (Sweden) = Defined as “just right” or “enough”, Lagom is also widely translated as “in moderation”, “in balance” and “suitable”, which carries the connotation of appropriateness or the right amount for use or consumption.
- **Minga** (Colombia) = Used by the indigenous and peasant people to describe the meeting of friends and neighbours to do some collective and free work for the purpose of social utility, for example to work together to harvest a crop, clear a rural road, fix a neighbours house. Minga, is also a popular concept that expresses solidarity and the ideals of community life.
- **Allemansrätt** (Sweden) = Described under Swedish common law as the right to free and public access to the countryside, for example to camp, walk or to harvest berries, whether it be private or common forest or farmland.

OUR COMMON CAUSE

Friends of the Earth (FoE) partnered with other NGOs to write a report³ to explore the central importance of working with cultural values and makes the case that civil-society organisations can find *common cause* in working to activate and strengthen a set of helpful ‘intrinsic’ values, while working to diminish the importance of unhelpful ‘extrinsic’ values. The report highlights some of the ways in which communications, campaigns, and even government policy, inevitably serve to activate and strengthen some values rather than others:

There is an irony at the heart of much campaigning on global challenges—including campaigning on humanitarian and environmental crises: as our awareness of the profound scale of these challenges and the difficulty of addressing them grows, we tend to rely ever more heavily upon a set of issue-specific tactics which may actually militate against the emergence of the systemic and durable solutions that are needed...

The values that must be strengthened—values that are commonly held and which can be brought to the fore include: empathy towards those who are facing the effects of humanitarian and environmental crises, concern for future generations, and recognition that human prosperity resides in relationships—both with one another and with the natural world. Undoubtedly these are values that have been weakened—and often even derided—in modern culture...they are values that must be championed if we are to uncover the collective will to deal with today’s profound global challenges.

CHALLENGES TO SUSTAINABILITY

Nicola Bullard, senior associate with Focus on the Global South, has gone further to criticise our understanding of “development”, in light of the *multiple crises* (financial, food, climate, energy...) that the planet currently faces. In a recent article⁴ she expressed her views on the challenges to sustainability:

The biggest challenge we face is not how we understand sustainability, but how we really understand development. When we consider the state of the world and the systematic failure of “development” to provide food, housing, education and welfare for the marginalized majority, the word tends to lose all moral content and even practicality.

The lack of imagination is maybe our greatest obstacle: not the lack of imagination to design technocratic and complicated solutions to absorb greenhouse gases, to construct living organisms “made to specifications” or new financial instruments for carbon marketing. There is too much human imagination involved in wrongly “solving” problems. What is really needed is imagination to conceive how to live differently, how to dismantle the power structures, which obstruct change, and how to rethink “development”.

Firstly, our way of understanding “development” is fundamentally incorrect. It is not possible to continue believing society as something independent from nature, neither the economy separated from the material base of life. Growth as we know it, is not possible.

3. Tom Crompton (September 2010), *Common Cause: The Case for Working with our Cultural Values* in the report published in partnership by Climate Outreach and Information Network, Campaign to Protect Rural England, Friends of the Earth, Oxfam and WWF. Available at: <www.wwf.org.uk/change>.

4. Nicola Bullard, (2011 June), ‘It’s too late for Sustainability. What we need is system change’ published in *Development: Challenges to Sustainability*; Volume 54, No. 2. <<http://www.palgrave-journals.com/development/journal/v54/n2/index.html>>.

Secondly, the planet is far too degraded and fragile to talk of sustainability: We must start to talk of regeneration and restoration. And thirdly, the dominant international political and economic order is a rising barrier to the rights of the peoples and of Mother Earth, and it needs to be transformed.

WHAT IS ALL THE KNOWLEDGE FOR?

Manfred Max-Neef, Chilean economist and environmentalist, who won the Alternative Nobel Prize in 1983, and has gained international reputation for his work on *development alternatives*, expressed in an interview⁵:

We have reached a point in our evolution in which we know a lot...but we understand very little. Never in human history has there been such an accumulation of knowledge like in the last 100 years. Look how we are. What was that knowledge for? What did we do with it? And the point is that knowledge alone is not enough: what we lack is understanding.

Economists study and analyse poverty in their nice offices, have all the statistics, make all the models, and are convinced that they know everything that you can know about poverty. But they don't understand poverty. And that's the big problem. And that's why poverty is still there. And that changed my life as an economist completely: I invented a language that is coherent with those situations and conditions...and that's the origin of the metaphor of barefoot economics...The principles, of an economics which should be based in five postulates and one fundamental value principle:

The economy is to serve the people and not the people to serve the economy.

Development is about people and not about objects.

Growth is not the same as development, and development does not necessarily require growth. Growth is a quantitative accumulation; development is the liberation of creative possibilities.

No economy is possible in the absence of ecosystem services.

The economy is a subsystem of a larger finite system, the biosphere, hence permanent growth is impossible.

And the fundamental value to sustain a new economy should be that no economic interest, under no circumstance, can be above the reverence of life. And I say life, not human beings, because, for me, the centre is the miracle of life in all its manifestations.

This is echoed by recent political transformations in countries such as Colombia, Bolivia and Ecuador, where social movements have claimed that the central problem is not to look for alternatives of development but alternatives to development, by constructing a new paradigm, the paradigm of Buen Vivir, as a possibility to recover harmonic relations within and between us and by recognising the rights of Mother Nature.

EARTH DEMOCRACY

Many other social and peasant movements in other parts of the hemisphere are working for *visionary solutions* for a sustainable future, such as the reclaimed Indian activist and women's leader: Vandana Shiva⁶, who started her road to ecological

5. Interview with Manfred Max-Neef: 'Experiences in Barefoot Economics', by Amy Goodman in *Democracy Now*, March 2011, <http://www.democracynow.org/2010/11/26/chilean_economist_manfred_max_neef_on>.

6. Navdanya International: Vandana Shiva, web-page: <www.vandanashiva.org>.

sustainability with the Chipko movement in the 1970s when women in the region of the Himalayas protected forests by hugging trees:

For me, ecology and feminism have been inseparable...it is one expression of combining women's rights and nature's rights, celebrating our cultural diversity and biological diversity. The defence of nature's rights and people's rights have come together for me in Earth Democracy—the democracy of all life on earth, a living democracy which supports and is supported by living culture and living economies...

We need a new paradigm to respond to the fragmentation caused by various forms of fundamentalism. We need a new movement, which allows us to move from the dominant and pervasive culture of violence, destruction and death to a culture of non-violence, creative peace and life...

One hundred years after Gandhi wrote Hind Swaraj—defining the concept of using 'soul force' as a means to seek right livelihood, which is what a deeper freedom is all about—his ideas are even more relevant as we seek creative ways to deal with climate change, corporate rule, food and water insecurity and the loss of citizens' rights.

Similarly, it is appropriate to relive the words and life experience of another great women's leader: Wangari Maathai, a Kenyan environmental and political activist, who in the 1970's founded the Green Belt Movement, focused on the planting of trees and environmental conservation, and who became the first African woman to receive the Nobel Peace Prize for her contribution to sustainable development and democracy:

I want them to know that despite the challenges and constraints they face, there is hope. I want to encourage them to serve the common good. My experiences have taught me that service to others has its own special rewards. I also have a lot of hope in the youth. Their minds do not have to be held back by old thinking about the environment. And you don't have to be rich or give up everything to become active... We have tried to instil in them the idea that protecting the environment is not just a pleasure but also a duty. (Wangari Maathai)

FUNDAEXPRESIÓN / RURAL URBAN DIALOGUE FESTIVAL (COLOMBIA)

Video-documentary: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma7HBBU3Sak>

- While they tell us to import, we say produce local food.
- While they tell us to forget, we relive our traditions and heritage.
- While they say everything is money, we are guardians of nature and life.
- While they are at war, we make music.
- While they discriminate, we mix together.

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You can view her complete profile and the organisation she is associated with at: http://www.learn2change-network.org/?About_Us__Our_Network__Activists#anker_clgi