

**Transforming Sustainable Development: Anthropological Perspectives
and Learning from Indigenous Ontologies with Nature**



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Terminology

Buen Vivir (Spanish) / Sumak Kawsay (Kichwa): Good living

Kawsak Sacha (Kichwa): Living Forest

Introduction

“Climate change, species extinction and accelerating inequalities are manifestations of a more fundamental crisis facing humanity: the global dominance of a capitalist/colonialist world order based on logics of extraction and exploitation” (Basu 2024: 78). And although explicit colonial powers have begun to feel like a relic of the past, the colonial epistemological erasure of diverse ways on knowing and being has compounded the dominance which Eurocentric universalizing knowledge systems hold today. The United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (UN SDGs), and ‘sustainable development’ broadly, have aimed to address the crises facing humanity and nature today. However, anthropological voices have criticized the systems and practices of ‘sustainable development’ which are ontologically rooted in traditional development agendas and Eurocentric, universalizing, knowledge systems. The continued exploitation of nature and peripheral communities by centralized development institutions such as the World Bank and International Monetary Fund, has undermined the capacity of ‘sustainable development’ agendas to truly address the ecological and human crises of today. Here, anthropologist Arturo Escobar has called for a transformation of development and engaging ‘alternatives to development’ to reach ‘pluriversal’ futures. This “transition involves moving from the modern understanding of the world as universe to the world as ‘pluriverse’, or ... from a paradigm of ‘globalization to one of ‘planetarization’. If the former privileges economic and cultural integration and homogenization under a set of (Eurocentric) universal principles, the latter advocates for communicability among a multiplicity of cultural worlds on the grounds of shared ecological and political understandings” (Escobar 2012: xx).

By first examining ‘sustainable development’ in Ecuador in the 21st century and then offering numerous anthropological perspectives, the role of ‘alternatives to development’ will be evaluated as a process of re-vitalizing our relationships with nature. On sustainability and the crises of today, broad international scientific consensus has pleaded and asserted the need to reconfigure existing practices to protect current and future generations (IPCC 2023, 1992). Since then, ‘sustainable development’ and the UN SDGs have emerged as the universal landmarks of sustainability and development (World’s Knowledge Network 2020). Alternatively, in 2008, Ecuador has created a new constitution which recognizes the inherent rights of nature alongside commitments to participatory

governance together with indigenous populations. This addition to the development discourse has added nature as a unique stakeholder to the future of development, entirely independently from its interactions with humans.

This essay explores the dominant discourse of ‘sustainable development’ with indigenous principles of Sumak Kawsay which have been embedded in Ecuador’s 2008 constitution. Sumak Kawsay (good living) describes an alternative framework for development with nature with greater grounding in values, community, and collective well-being, as opposed to economic motivators. While these two perspectives share common themes of mutualistic aims between human and nature well-being, their ideological methods and goals conflict.

Officially established in the United Nations in 2015, seventeen Sustainable Development Goals have defined and shaped what development means for humanity and nature. Sumak Kawsay’s enshrining of the rights of nature as innate, has ontologically separated the value and considerations of nature beyond its utility in meeting the desires of humanity.

The aim of this paper is to critically explore the human development with nature through the contexts and discourses on the subject in Ecuador. To do so, the following objectives will underline this analysis:

- a. Understand how Ecuador’s government and 2008 constitution have interacted with development and nature
- b. Recognize monetary ends as a uniting principle of modern development
- c. Contextualize environmental sustainability and human rights as a collective effort against oppressive (universal) forces
- d. Identify the nuance which differentiates ‘alternatives to development’ and ‘alternative development strategies’ and locate the complexity of navigating each
- e. Advocate for tangible approaches which aspire towards mutualistic human development with nature

To do so, first, human development with nature will be described within the frameworks of financial need, governmental challenges, and the shortcomings of language. Then, diverse interventions across recent decades of development in Ecuador, including monetization, national populist redistribution efforts, and well-being focused development, will be discussed as approaches to the challenges faced by ‘sustainable development’. Oil and mining cases will be utilized as clear points of contention within ‘sustainable development’ given their contribution potential to fund human development, yet clear imposition and extraction from nature. Next, anthropological perspectives will discuss these points of

contention and offer ethnographic and participatory methods to inform alternative perspectives. Within this context, Arturo Escobar's pathways towards the 'pluriverse' will be analyzed within their capacity to achieve holistic and viable solutions. Finally, a playful development analogy will be made to make sense of this conundrum and conclude with a meaningful way forward.

1. The Development Issue

Human development with nature is inherently a multiplex issue with great region and context-dependent variation. Nevertheless, central themes and challenges emerge, with Ecuador's adoption of Sumak Kawsay principles presenting a compelling narrative of transforming long practices of extraction and capitalization of nature towards a newfound respect and entanglement with the interests of nature. In this section, key challenges will be engaged including limited national financial resources, the drive for national autonomy, difficulties within effective regulation, and globally competing understandings of sustainability. For the purposes of this paper, references to 'nature' encompass this acknowledgement of nature as an independent being.

Emerging from the historically heavy influences of neoliberal and dependent international relationships, populist president Raffael Correa came into power with a myriad of inequalities at large. Widespread poverty, deficient education, and fragmented communities looked to Correa and his new government for solutions. And although the new government had empowerment to enact numerous changes, it is naïve to ignore the necessary role of monetary influx in actualizing tangible change (Tony 2018:3-12). While redistributive commitments are critical steps towards serving the people effectively, in traditional development practices, success is often measured by financial growth, almost as an end in itself (Tony 2018:3-12). Notably, large scale monetary influx is available through a handful of strategies including intergovernmental development agreements, international loans, realized and productive economies, and natural capital. Attempts to distance from international dependencies have encouraged many nations to direct towards more isolationist development strategies. In following isolationist ideologies to foster intranational growth, in especially agrarian and producing economies, natural capital presents a unique, non-conditional, monetary opportunity. Essentially, natural capital is free to use at governing will for 'developing' and 'developed' nations alike (Salant 1995).

Given the value which utilizing nature as capital holds to fund human development, extractive practices against nature can be described as sustainable development. This has challenged and obscured the understandings and practices of sustainable development, resulting in open and vague interpretations, used where convenient.

In sum, problems associated with human development with nature are twofold:

- a. Human development is seen as a financial endeavor for which nature offers capital.
- b. Language, understandings, and practices vary regarding what is(n't) sustainable development.

Critically, the aims of human development are seen as primarily financial undertakings by sustainable development, and nature's unique capital potential has been offered as a sacrifice on its behalf.

1.1 The development issue - Effective regulation is difficult

Even in contexts where conservationist natural resource extraction policies and commitments are engaged, effective regulation has remained an ongoing challenge at national and local scales. Nationally, varying political figures, weak institutions, and corruption have presented serious threats to the precedents surrounding environmental extraction (Bell 2018: 318-322; Humphreys Bebbington 2018: 183). In Ecuador, Amazonia, and Latin America broadly, bribery has persisted as a significant threat to good governance of nature. In 2017, Ecuador's Vice President Jorge Glas was convicted of accepting \$13.5 million in bribes from Brazilian conglomerate, Odebrecht, in exchange for government extraction contracts and blind eyes to abuses (Campos 2021: 172-174).

When it comes to local governance, similar challenges are at play in the effectiveness of limiting deforestation. However, determinants of success including transparency, participative methods, the formal recognition of nature rights, and gender equity were highlighted as significant contributors to low deforestation, which local governments can be encouraged to emphasize within their practices (Fischer 2021).

1.2 The development issue – What is sustainable development?

International cooperation targets for both environmental and development benefits are engaged together through the UN's Sustainable Development Goals (SDG's), agreed upon in 2015. However, it is not always clear how intersecting goals function in-tandem. For example, SDGs 8 and 9, 'Decent Work and Economic Growth' and 'Industry and Infrastructure' alongside the majority of development literature has presented forms of natural extraction to be crucial for development needs. (Campodónico 2017:158; Heller, 2016; Moreira, 2014). In contrast to these compromises of sustainable development, 'Indigenous Sustainable Development' perceives environmental and human development to be independent of even in opposition of normative development agendas which centrally include economic growth and large infrastructure. Further, the 'singling-out' of SDGs, isolating specific goals for project aims, in development practices, has conflicted the Indigenous sustainable development approach which understands the nature of

development to be holistic. (MacNiell 2020: 248). As discourse surrounding sustainable development has become more mainstream, the boundaries around terminology are left unclear and conveniently vague for extraction initiatives to exploit through differing meanings behind claims of sustainability; for example, In one instance, where gender equity practices were deemed sufficient for sustainability claims, irrespective of environmental effects.

2. Interventions

Recent decades of sustainable development in Ecuador have engaged diverse and innovative interventions to human development with nature. Monetization, new national regulations, and slowly emerging ideologies presenting alternative development strategies are contextualized and synthesized to present a grasp development contexts in Ecuador.

2.1 Interventions – Monetization

Essentially, monetization strategies often aim to engage financial ends with environmental means. In both international and local spaces, raising financial capital is crucial for nature advocacy, in part, to displace funding otherwise available from environmental extraction. Depending on the circumstances, three common approaches have emerged: Intergovernmental commitments, corporate carbon credits, and regional/local tourism initiatives. These are often evaluated through the ecosystem services framework which includes biodiversity, climate regulation, and spiritual protections as valuable to global markets.

Presented at COP29 in 2024, the report from the UN ‘Independent High-Level Expert Group on Climate Finance’ called for \$1 trillion in annual international investment in sustainability efforts, termed the ‘New Collective Quantified Goal’ (Songwe et al. 2022: 8). Negotiations at the UN COP29 have presented the collective benefit and duty of such intergovernmental funding, alongside parallel protests, calling for the financial validation of climate inequalities. Given the nature of COP conferences, the \$1 trillion figure has then served as the starting point for negotiations. At COP29, the final agreement has amounted to \$300 billion in projected annual funding (COP29 Climate Talks 2024). Still, questions have remained concerning when and how the funding would be actualized, as the earlier COP21 Paris agreement towards \$100 billion annually was critically unrealized until 2022 (Songwe et al. 2022). Ecuador, like many developing nations, is heavily reliant on such funding, with little national budget available for environmental protection investment (Ecuador Development Report 2024).

Within these financial agreements, corporations play a significant role as well, primarily through participation in ‘carbon credit’ programs to achieve ‘net-zero’ emissions targets

(Carbon Credits International). Essentially, carbon credit programs allow carbon sinks such as nature conservatories to sell their sequestered carbon to corporations who wish to offset their own emissions and make sustainability claims, without necessarily changing their production practices. Critically, development authors have challenged the validity of such carbon crediting systems, citing concerns about the indigenous land abuses, (lack of) methodological soundness, and general commodification and simplification of nature and the climate (Padin-Dujon 2023, Bryant 2019). In 2024, an adjacent approach for the greater Amazon has gained development prowess. 'Reforestation bonds' have offered 'green investment' opportunities to engage new private investors; however, they continue to operate under the framework of 'carbon removal units' (New Conservation Finance 2024). These financial structures have deeply embedded nature as a financial asset, whose price is determined through a single primary metric: quantity of carbon sequestered.

At regional and local levels, ecosystem services are commonly monetized by and tailored for international tourism. Ecosystem services expand on how nature is considered and entail four categories by which nature's benefit to humanity is defined. Historically, ecotourism, a framework intended to benefit several ecosystem services through tourism beyond otherwise purely financial motivations, has been a tool of sustainable development practices, claiming to offer mutualistic growth for both tourism and the environment. Wesche (1993:35) has described how this favorable language has been used by ecotourism practitioners yet fallen short in terms of true benefit to nature and local populations; thus, becoming a new avenue for mass tourism in Ecuador and straining ecologies. Supported by the progressive government elected in 2007, a new form of tourism has been promoted as a more just approach. Utilizing the diverse ecosystems and established indigenous collaboration commitments, Ecuador is among the pioneering countries for 'community tourism', an approach where local communities have ownership over tourism practices. Exemplary of the program, the Fakcha Llakta indigenous community has facilitated 'ethno-eco-tourism' around the Peguche Waterfall Protected Forest (PWPF) by educating and engaging tourists as active participants rather than 'simple viewers'. This approach, accompanied by the tourism profits, has supported the Fakcha Llaka in their independence and capacities as 'guardians of the PWPF' (Trujillo 2020: 111-145). Other examples of community tourism have showcased modern lodges and 'cultural experiences' offered to tourists, which has led to concerns around the authenticity and commodification of cultures in favor of catering to tourist desires (Salibova 2020; Forest Entrepreneurs Amazon 2024; Boschemeier et al. 2020).

2.2 Interventions – Buen Vivir, extraction, and the government of Ecuador

Ecuador presents a unique case study for its transformative approach to development in the 21st century. With the election of Raffael Correa in 2007, a commitment was made to marginalized and indigenous populations which was actualized through the formation of a new and more inclusive constitution in 2008. This landmark constitutional transformation has recognized the multiethnic and plural contexts of Ecuador, and concepts of Buen Vivir have emerged as pioneering frameworks for policies and approaches regarding the grounded respect towards nature rights and diverse communities. Significantly, nature has also been acknowledged as a living participant, including constitutional rights to respect, maintenance, and regeneration; these rights can serve as grounds for litigation against the state if the rights of nature are trespassed upon (Caria 2016:8). Since this addition, forest conservation measures have been broadly praised, earning Ecuador UN REDD+ status, for realized, rewarded, enhanced, and connected forest solutions (UN-REDD Programme 2022).

While forest conservation has generally flourished, the legal rights of nature have intentionally excluded subsurface resources. At Yasuni National Park, indigenous populations have been challenged by oil extraction projects for decades. The calls from indigenous groups to suspend the exploitation of oil resources in Yasuni had been unheard since 1995 until 2007, when an imaginative initiative, the Yasuni Plan, was endeavored by the newly elected President Correa. An estimated \$90 billion worth of oil was to be left untouched, in favor of a \$45 billion international displacement funding proposal to invest in alternative energy sources and social development. Unfortunately, the plan failed as wealthy nations such as Germany, in fear of setting a precedent of expensive climate commitments as well as the unprofitable non-extraction of resources approach, failed to fund the initiative (MacNiell 2020: 203-205). Since then, oil and mining have defaulted and continued to be utilized as key resources for national development in Ecuador. In efforts to combat widespread poverty and fund national investments, short-term extraction projects have been acknowledged as a necessary means to a sustainable future which can halt the extraction of raw materials in the long run (Caria 2016: 23). In efforts to adhere to Buen Vivir commitments towards marginalized communities, the extraction profits were intended to benefit those directly surrounding the oil extractions, which was actualized with varying levels of support (Rodriguez et al. 2020; Tome 2024). Nevertheless, criticism from indigenous groups has remained for misrepresenting the ideals of Buen Vivir by continuing to operate upon foundations of extraction for development (MacNiell 2020: 206).

After much criticism towards the nationalized oil extraction efforts in the Manabi region, the project was suspended, however, mining initiatives have remained at the forefront of

sustainable development strategies in Azuay and other regions (Amador 2024; Harnessing Potential Biodiversity 2023; Mestanza-Ramon 2022). Only in 2021, there was a landmark court ruling halted mining in the Los Cedros protected forest on ground of the rights of nature, setting a precedent for potential future legal action in other protected forests (Peck 2024).

2.3 Interventions – The solidarity economy [alternative development]

Starting in the 1980s, imaginative theory for populist economic activity has established the groundwork for ‘the solidarity economy’, “a wide range of microeconomic initiatives... incorporating cooperation, collective sharing, and action” which tendentially break free from ‘sustainable development’ structures (Ruiz-Rivera 2019: 139). Productive activities are linked to social needs and collective empowerment rather than profitability, often realized through collective property and decision-making (Dacheux & Goujon 2012: 206). While specific methodologies vary across space, Ecuador has established the National Institute for Popular and Solidary Economy (IEPS) in 2011 to coordinate with and enable solidary economic organization at local levels. The IEPS states that “sales from enterprises benefiting from the Popular and Solidary Economy (PSE) represent approximately 25.7% of Ecuador’s GDP... and [are] generating close to 60% of total jobs in the country” (Strengthening Solidarity Economy 2022). Still, intermediary project reports have cited moderate unsatisfactory implementation in 2020, with ongoing efforts engaging in how to best foster PSE into the future (FAREPS Supervision Report 2022).

When it comes to nature, PSE networks do not collectively offer structural support, but a local scale propensity to extend solidarity with the natural world. While methodologies and practices vary across PSE organizations, common links with grassroots social movements and ethics-based purposes lead to long-term goods valued over immediate and pragmatic interests (Ruis-Rivera 2019: 154). Research published in 2018 has since supported the otherwise unmeasured belief in the long-term value of nature. International macroeconomic analyses in 140 countries over 24 years found that fossil fuel extraction and natural capital deterioration were the main driving forces of declining wealth per capita in the long-run, as natural capital serves a non-extractive economic benefit (Kurniawan 2018). While intensive macroeconomic research has yet to study the effects of PSE, their values-based decision making appears to be highly promising for sustained economies.

3. Anthropological Perspectives

Through ethnographic account of these development interventions, anthropological perspectives have engaged both specific case studies and broader shifting discourses. On

monetization, the expansion of carbon markets has conflicted with calls to shift priorities away from financial ends. Similarly, conservation and responsible extraction exist balancing delicately between the human development and respect for nature dyads and their ideally mutualistic relationship. To these questions of compromise, anthropologist of development, Arturo Escobar has offered ‘alternatives to development’ and ‘transition discourses’ as a means of subverting the underlying barriers of ‘sustainable development’ by reconstructing the goals and practices of traditional development practices.

3.1 Anthropological Perspectives – Monetization

Surrounding the discussion of monetization in development, anthropologists have offered participant-focused analyses. From the Runa indigenous community who prepared a proposal at COP21, to the western industry and companies, the monetization of nature has displayed widespread consequences.

Anthropologist Eduardo Kohn has drawn on ethnographic experience with the indigenous Runa community of Sarayaku in Ecuador. Together in 2015, Kohn and the Runa community composed a proposal based on Kawsak Sacha (the living forest) principles to present at COP21 in Paris. Guardians of over 135,000 hectares of forest, the broader Sarayaku people have advocated on behalf and defended the living forest’s “communicative ecology” as a shared home. An excerpt from their proposal:

“Whereas the western world treats nature as an undemanding source of raw materials destined exclusively for human use, Kawsak Sacha recognizes that the forest is made up entirely of living selves and the communicative relations they have with each other” (Kohn 2020: 140).

Opposing the circumstantial and bargaining extraction that ‘sustainable development practices normatively engage, the Sarayaku hold firmer beliefs: “Stop oil and mineral extraction on native lands and in tropical forests” (Kohn 2020: 140).

Based on familial Sumak Kawsay principles, anthropologist José Vela has argued that true Sumak Kawsay adherence “requires economic activities to be at the service of happiness and quality of life” (2023: 337). Supporting econometric research on happiness in Ecuador has concluded that happiness and the growth in national wealth, or even personal financial situations and livelihoods, show little correlation. Instead, “social and family life... as well as the availability of free time and fewer working hours” were the “principal domains that produced happiness” (Vela 2023: 328). As happiness and quality of life have been prioritized in Sumak Kawsay ideals, they should also be at the forefront of development efforts, above economic ends.

On the participation of companies in carbon credit systems/carbon markets, anthropologists Will Rollason and Eric Hirsch have described the damage that the compliance and simplification which carbon-centric climate change mitigation narratives have produced. Through directing focus towards the market needs instead of true environmental benefits, such efforts have presented a “dubious proxy” for climate change mitigation, offering performative strategies to reach sustainability targets over practical environmentalism. This sensationalized spectacle has served to placate investing companies into continuing an exploitative, economic growth agenda while irrationally assuring their ethical concerns. Even genuine and well-intentioned western companies can be led to incomplete climate understandings by well-meaning NGOs and consultancies due to the overarching structure of carbon markets (Rollason & Hirsch 2023).

On monetization, these anthropological perspectives have deconstructed the foundational ambitions of development, asking for who and what development’s ends should be. Instead, the prioritization of community values, and learning from marginalized economic strategies and knowledges is highlighted as instrumental to positive transformations.

3.2 Anthropological Perspectives – Buen Vivir, extraction, and the government of Ecuador

As Buen Vivir principles have grounded rights and respect for nature, and Ecuador’s government has made efforts for human development, conservation ideologies which include oil and mining extraction have presented a dynamic relationship between the entangled aspirations towards human development and respect for nature.

In the Manabi and Azuay regions, development anthropologists Denise Rodríguez and Erin Fitz-Henry have highlighted the common authoritarian undertones surrounding both oil and mining circumstances in *After the Pink Tide* (2020). When such extractive development initiatives began under Correa, promises of local redistribution gained the support of nearby populations. However, as the understood benefits failed to materialize, local populations have felt powerless, like subjects imposed upon by “Father Correa”. While the Ecuadorian state has made claims of being participatory and egalitarian, Rodríguez and Fitz-Henry have criticized the government’s stances as exasperating new core-periphery dynamics, entailing modern and elite spaces which make and impose decisions on distant environments. In the same way carbon credit systems have been used to placate pro-environmental movements in favor of economic growth, “the language of Buen Vivir seems to be used most frequently by the government to both justify deepening extractivism and otherwise dismiss the concerns of indigenous and environmental organizations” (91-102). To faithfully engage the egalitarian and Buen Vivir ideals of

Ecuador, national power concentration must be dispersed, and local communities must be included as active participants to offer new hope for the peripheries.

However, it is important to recognize the nuance regarding oil and mining extraction. Ethnographically experienced in environmental movements within Ecuador, anthropologist Veronica Davidov has presented a counter perspective: oil and mining offer two largely separate discussions within Ecuador's development. On the common western environmentalist notion to group oil and mining extraction together as essentially synonymous, Davidov has described the two as "ontologically different... with different materialities, territorialities, and temporalities". While politically convenient to create dyadic environmental positions, Davidov has demonstrated the anti-ethnographic and essentialist danger to grouping oil and mining extraction together. While oil has presented a long history of exploitation and development failure, responsible mining initiatives exist in a different context of populist potential and transition (Davidov 2013: 501-502). Anthropologist Pablo Andrade asserts the like-motion that responsible mining presents a nuanced and viable development future for Ecuador (Andrade 2013).

Parallel case studies have also suggested a balance between economic development and respect for nature. Anthropologist José Vela has presented his ethnographic experience in the Galápagos Islands with fishers in advocacy for the role of conservationist practices which entail working responsibly with nature as opposed to preservation which is understood as fully anti-extraction. This conservation approach has been described as practicing "harmonious coexistence with nature" (Vela 2023: 328). Still anthropologists Reade Davis and Laura Zanotti note the political and managerial agendas that exist within broad conservation movements. Such initiatives have often also reified human-nature binaries and promoted an imposed "optimal use" resource management approach, which may marginalize local participants (2014: 604).

3.3 Anthropological perspectives – Alternatives to development, and transition discourses

Recognizing the prevailing development discourse as in-part the source of 'underdevelopment' and the problematic relationships that confine development, Arturo Escobar has necessitated post-development thought. Primarily situated in 'alternatives to development' as opposed to the institutionally popular alternative strategies within development discourse, his works, *Encountering Development* (2012) and *Degrowth, Postdevelopment and Transitions* (2015) have explored what 'alternatives to development' entail. While traditional development practitioners may be open to development alternatives which continue to exist within the same parameters of traditional development strategies, Escobar's call for 'alternatives to development' has invited entirely new

approaches and ontological grounding into consideration. While the theme of human development with nature is not central to Escobar's arguments, his imaginative propositions for the future have presented holistic pluriverses within which nature is a level and respected stakeholder with man. In this context, 'alternatives to development' have offered revolutionary conceptions of plural worlds where nature and man coexist as mutualistic interconnected beings.

Within the family of 'alternatives to development', 'transition discourses' (TDs) have offered a tangible network of initiatives which aim for the shared foals of decoloniality and holistic good. The principles of Buen Vivir found in Ecuador's 2008 constitution are honored as a prime example of what TDs look like. Some key realms of thought within TDs have explored reimagining the 'third world', subjectivity, and conceptualizing alternatives through practices of empathy and being more human. Still, criticism remains on the (mis)representations of Buen Vivir throughout government policies. These themes will each be briefly discussed to contextualize the permeating ideological approaches which unite these discourses.

As language such as 'the third world' has described nations merely through their subjective lack of development in comparison to 'the first world', TDs have hoped to give new meaning and power to the terms. By valuing precisely how 'the third world' is different, 'the third world' is recontextualized as a space for community innovation which does not inherently aspire to the aspirations of becoming like 'the first world'.

Further, as the largest development agencies such as the World Bank or International Monetary Fund have histories of political and social imposition in 'the third world', TDs have often envisioned more egalitarian and subjectless decision-making structures since the subjects of the decisions would also be empowered participants in its change-process. As histories of decisions made by the core have imposed upon peripheries worldwide, it is asked: can further allegiance to the core ever produce (w)holistically beneficial solutions?

Although TDs have yet to be thoroughly established on global scales, prioritizing values and collective learning has emerged as the basis for building 'alternatives to development'. To craft local and connected solutions, Escobar has asserted that conceptualizing alternatives "must include significant contact" with groups of 'others', as in, those outside of one's own realm of understood reality. Inclusive to nature as well, learning to be human and engaging in what it means to be interconnected, as an individual fragment of a shared whole, TDs are shaped by relationships, communities, and interactions with the broader earth around us (Escobar 2012: 2015).

In reflection on the situatedness of man in geological timeframes, anthropologist Richard Irvine has explored current generations place within 'deep time'. Such timescales have acknowledged human extinction in the context of geological existence, in which the Anthropocene is one part. Within such considerations, Irvine has presented modern extraction as "disembedding humanity from the material conditions of existence" (Irvine 2020: 189). Across scales from locality to geological timeframes, anthropology has offered a loud and desperate call to action: the modernist enterprise of development must break from anthropocentric extractivism to engage holistic longevity together with nature.

Conclusion

Through navigating efforts to synthesize human development with nature in Ecuador, numerous development approaches have emerged, most notably constitutionalizing Buen Vivir principles which have served as a basis for 'alternatives to development'. Implementation pathways including international monetization, populist redistribution, and varying extraction perspectives across spacetime have been evaluated for their mutualistic integration of human development and respect for nature.

Although monetization strategies vary in context and practice, they exist united in a perception of monetary ends within development. Innovative approaches such as the Yasuni Plan have attempted to reimagine the benefactors and sources of development finances. This plan's failure as well as ongoing struggles in 2024 to materialize international funding, force 'sustainable development' efforts to reconsider their institutional capacity to meet the needs of current and future generations, both human and nature.

When it comes to carbon markets, Rollason and Hirsch's criticisms can be extrapolated to global discourses. The commodification and simplification of climate change mitigation as purely carbon exchanges exist emerged in political and institutional discourse surrounding sustainability (2023). While Rollason and Hirsch have enunciated the misleading damage that this has for sociopolitical scales locally and internationally too. Here, diversifying and inviting alternative knowledge systems into discourse and decision-making positions can re-appropriate the ways that 'sustainable development' is conceived and practiced.

The Popular and Solidarity Economy institute in Ecuador has done well to acknowledge plural priorities and approaches beyond national economic ambition. Yet, like the parallel monetization strategies, the Popular and Solidarity Economy has fallen short by maintaining economic ends and purpose, even with distributive means (Dacheux & Goujon 2012).

As outlined by Arturo Escobar (2012, 2015), the state of inequalities that have encompassed global interactions can be seen as parallel to development discourses. As the entire system, language, and structures surrounding development have perpetuated imposition and Western superiority, the ‘third’ and ‘first world’ must be reconceived alongside ‘transition discourses’ for holistic and connected systems of strengthening relations.

As Escobar has pointed out, an underdiscussed actor within new world conceptions is the potential for digital spaces to facilitate TDs (2012: 225-226). Since this assertion, myriads of social movements and initiatives have begun engaging holistic and pluralistic ideologies online. These new avenues have presented, with or without the intention to, TDs to plural worlds, accessible worldwide. Drawing upon Foucault’s post-structural and decentralized perceptions of power, digital TDs have created a tangible network with which revolutionary thinking can spread and transform public discourses worldwide. Exemplary of this is the book, website, and podcasts of ‘Transition Town’ author Rob Hopkins which call for localizing change and expertise through imagination and community (2018). However, even the transition efforts engaged by Rob Hopkins have yet to offer extensive and established methodologies which ‘sustainable development’ practices can apply (although they can certainly find inspiration).

In closing, I invite you to imagine freely with me: ‘sustainable development’ is like raising a scruffy, wide-eyed, and overwhelmingly silly puppy (bear with me!), where ‘owner wellbeing’ represents human development, and ‘puppy wellbeing’ represents nature. ‘Sustainable development’ has constructed an owner’s manual of 17 measurable determinants to achieve the perfect owner-puppy relationship. Engaging long walks, mitigating accidents, and success rates of obeying commands are all defined to support measurable progress. Ultimately however, the great diagnosis, measurement, and defined progress of well-being, seems to be missing a crucial point. Raising a puppy is a complex and context-specific endeavor.

‘Alternatives to development’ and ‘transition discourses’ as proposed by Arturo Escobar have recommended instead an intention and values-oriented mindset to address approaching and treating every owner-puppy relationship as unique. In relation to human development, which is normatively understood as a greater priority than nature, ‘transition discourses’ have questioned the hierarchies which an owner’s manual presents to owner-puppy interactions. It is proposed then that the most mutualistic and holistic system surrounding owner-puppy relationships may be that of equals rather than master-subject.

By spending enough time with the puppy, the owner may begin to see the great wisdom in the puppy's simple joys. Such a transformative understanding can even be seen as a sort of spiritual awakening and newfound appreciation.

However, one may argue that 'the puppy' as it is known today would not exist without its long history of owner's manuals. In that sense, reverting to human-wolf relationships can also not adequately engage the modern challenges of the owner and puppy.

Further, it is valid that 'alternatives to development' have yet to produce comprehensive examples of what the ideal owner-puppy relationships look like. However, as 'sustainable development' has produced new iterations of owner's manuals throughout history, evidently, it too is ontologically incapable of being truly holistically beneficial and context-situated.

Returning to the context of human development with nature, I conclude that 'sustainable development' and 'alternatives to development' are not inherently mutually exclusive but may be navigated in tandem as frameworks or tools in one's genuine efforts for positive change. Together, tangible and established development constructions can metamorphosize and be re-appropriated into holistic approaches through the recognition and reimagination of their true aims. Such a spiritual awakening for 'sustainable development' would then incorporate 'transition discourses' into institutional policies and programs.

Synthesizing human development with nature is not necessarily a binary between 'sustainable development' and 'alternatives to development', rather it must be an embodied and collective journey of seeking beautiful futures through critical and caring use of mind and heart.

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