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Alternatives from the Ecuadorian Amazon towards an Equitable and Resilient Society

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Traditionally, economic growth has been regarded as the most important requisite for development. However, as growth achieved in recent decades had discouraging effects in terms of equity, environmental sustainability and improved quality of life, a substantial rethinking of this topic emerged, leading even to the notions of a stationary global society or de-growth in the near future, which regard further growth as detrimental to sustainability.

During the last 60 years, almost all developing countries have reached significant improvements in terms of quality of life, economic growth and diversification (UNDP, 2013a.) Despite this, there are three dimensions in which growth has been unsatisfactory at a global level.

First, economic growth has been coupled by a long-term tendency to increase social inequality, both between and within countries. As a result, although global production may allow the satisfaction of basic needs for everybody, about 50 % of the population in developing countries continue living under the line of poverty¹, while the benefits of growth have focused increasingly on a very small fraction of the world population (Piketty, 2014)².

Second, global growth has exceeded the planet biocapacity to sustain the global economy, and the latter cannot continue to expand without affecting, in the near future and in a severe and catastrophic way, the ecosystems that sustain life on the planet.

Although the world's economy continues to grow at annual rates close to 3%, this growth lacks sustainability. In fact, the planet's ecological footprint surpassed its limit to naturally support ecosystems from human activity in 1978, and global ecological problems such as climate change, biodiversity loss and eutrophication, have generated pollution levels already exceeding the planet's ability to regenerate (Rockström et al, 2009, 2015)³. Unless substantial and urgent corrections are applied at a global level, there would be consequences, especially in relation to climate change and biodiversity. Current civilisation is approaching an environmental crisis of great magnitude that endangers the progress achieved since the industrial revolution.

Finally, the association between human fulfilment and increasing consumption of goods and services beyond the satisfaction of basic needs has proven to be weak⁴.

¹ According to World Bank, in 2010 49.9% of the population in developing countries was under the poverty line of 2.5 dollars PPP per day (numbers calculated by PovcalNet.)

<http://iresearch.worldbank.org/PovcalNet/index.htm>. Visited in September 2014.

² Piketty, Thomas. *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. Cambridge. Harvard University Press.

³ Rockström et al, "A Safe Operating Space for Humanity". *Nature* 461, 472-475, September 24, 2009; Steffen, Will et al. "Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changong Planet". *Science*, Vol 347, Issue 6223, February 2015.

⁴ Larrea, Carlos. "Limits to growth and greed line : a path towards equity and sustainability." In: Gustavo Endara (coordinator). *Post Growth and Good Living*. Quito: FES-ILDIS, 2014.

II

The continuous growth of the world's economy beyond the planet's resilience limits is the result of a capitalist accumulation process, driven by the barely regulated search for individual or corporate gain. The current regulatory framework to productive and financial capital has proved so far insufficient and unable to effectively control the trend towards an environmental and social crisis of global proportions.

Given the failure of the current capitalist society to lead to human enhancement in an equitable and sustainable way, innovative visions are required to build an alternative society, in which citizens of the world may have the ability to define and control the global economy, channelling it towards equitable and sustainable satisfaction of human needs. Alternative thinking may come from local, national or global experiences.

The current capitalist economy is driven by the weakly regulate pursue of profit by corporations. A new participatory and sustainable society may be oriented towards satisfaction of human needs, in harmony with nature and within the carrying capacity of ecosystems. A new society, based on a participatory social control of the economy, may be defined as post-capitalist. Nevertheless, there is very little that can be glimpsed today, both on the concrete characteristics of a new society able to overcome the current social and environmental crisis, and on ways to transition to equity and sustainability.

III

Several proposals with a high potential to advance towards an alternative, participative, equitable, and resilient society, have emerged from the Ecuadorean Amazon.

Rights of nature. The 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution is the first in the world to recognise the rights of nature, specifically the right for ecosystems to live and prosper. Every citizen can legally prevent the destruction of nature by filing a complaint under Arts. 71 and 72.

Although the implementation of the rights of nature in Ecuador is still very limited, its recognition has created an international precedent, prompting a paradigm shift in the relationship between human beings and nature, questioning and changing the traditional anthropocentric vision that conceives nature solely as a resource to be exploited, towards an alternative and holistic vision that defines our species as an integral part of nature, and our existence as subject to a harmonious and balanced relationship with the ecosystems that allow life to prosper and evolve. There has also been an increased force in Europe's campaign for recognition of ecocide as a crime against humanity.

Good Living or Sumak Kawsay. The second notion that contributes to building an alternative society is the notion of the *good way of living* or Sumak Kawsay, as it is called in Quechua. This vision is based on Bolivia and Ecuador's indigenous people's worldview, particularly the Amazonian Sarayacu people.

This view has received contributions from mestizo intellectuals and has been systematised in various ways since the 1990s and especially since the beginning of this century. The 2008 Ecuadorean Constitution defines it as an alternative development goal. Although this concept,

which originates from an indigenous worldview and interpretation, has been understood in diverse forms and is fairly ambiguous, some of its central elements can lead to a significant contribution towards the elaboration of an alternative lifestyle with an emphasis on some of its basic elements.

A recent systematisation of the Amazon Indigenous people's worldview emphasises their perception of the good way of living primarily as a form of resistance, and in defence of their territories, language, culture, and their rights to education, health, and self-righteousness. (Seco, 2015.⁵)

The notion of the *good way of living* also includes proactive elements, and it can be understood as a participatory process towards improving the quality of life, not only from greater access to goods and services to satisfy human needs, but also by strengthening social cohesion, community values, and active participation -both individually and collectively- in the construction of their own happiness and destiny, based on equality with respect for diversity. This process is part of a harmonious relationship with nature, which views human society as a constitutive element of an evolving dynamic whole, and whose fulfilment cannot exceed the limits of the ecosystems that allow it to exist.

Therefore, the constitutive elements of the *good way of living* can be summarised as:

1. Equal and universal satisfaction of all human needs. These comprise basic needs such as access to education, nutrition, health, employment and labour, housing and habitat, and also incorporate a participatory way to meet these needs in accordance with human rights and non-discrimination on ethnicity, culture, gender, age, region of origin or residence, nationality, political beliefs, religious and cultural values, or people's health and physical abilities.
2. A sustainable improvement to quality of life that is not reduced to mere possession of material goods and access to services, but rather implies greater solidarity and social cohesion, collective construction of happiness, and consolidation of community ties with universal and equal access to the resources needed for human fulfilment.
3. Respect towards cultural diversity and plurality of world views in accordance with the ancestral traditions of the peoples and their contemporary values.
4. The elimination of social inequity. We must differentiate between the notions of inequality, which refer to any individual or collective difference in access to goods services, property, and individual capacities, and inequity which is related to preventable and ethically unacceptable social differences.
5. A sustainable relationship between economy and nature, which implies that the productive capacity of goods and services, extraction of energy and raw materials, and waste and emissions are kept within the limits that natural ecosystems can support. The notion of sustainability integrates the rights of nature, recognized in the 2008 Constitution, and the right of future generations to a decent life.

The Yasuni IIT Initiative. This proposal, presented by Ecuador in 2007 with support from the United Nations and cancelled in 2013, is still the only formal tool to keep fossil fuel reserves unexploited in areas of high environmental and cultural sensitivity in developing

⁵ Seco, Carmen. "Sumak Kawsay: una forma de caminar la vida". Document not published, 2015.

countries. The Initiative created an international fund to be invested in renewable energy, reducing deforestation, and sustainable social development.

Scientific evidence establishes that in order to keep global warming in the acceptable 2 °C limit by the end of the century, we must keep the majority (two thirds) of the proven oil reserves, natural gas, and coal unexploited⁶. In Latin America, 39% of the oil reserves must remain underground.

If the world must keep a significant portion of the known oil reserves underground, deposits must be prioritised in terms of those whose exploitation involves the greatest environmental and social costs in terms of biodiversity, indigenous peoples, and international heritage. We must also give priority to the conservation of sites whose overall benefits are optimal in terms of mitigation and adaptation to climate change and preserving biodiversity. These groups encompass privileged reserves of great biological and cultural value in developing countries.

The mechanism created for the Yasuni-ITT project could become a permanent instrument under the Framework Convention on Climate Change through the creation of an international fund to which megadiverse developing countries with fossil fuels reserves in culturally and biologically sensitive areas may apply. This fund may be enriched with sufficient assets to start the project preparation and to raise additional resources, with a central body responsible for project coordination, monitoring, control, and evaluation⁷.

⁶ Meinshausen, Malte, Meinshausen, Nicolai, Hare, William, Raper, Katja, Knutti, Reto, Frame, David and Allen, Myles (2009). "Greenhouse-gas emission targets for limiting global warming to 2 °C". *Nature* Vol 458/30 April 2009 doi:10.1038/nature 08017. McGlade, Christophe and Ekins, Paul. "The geographical distribution of fossil fuels unused when limiting global warming to 2 °C". *Nature* 517, 187–190 (08 January 2015), doi:10.1038/nature14016.

⁷ Murmis, María Rosa and Larrea, Carlos. "We can start leaving the oil in the ground right now – here's how", *The Guardian*, February 9, 2015. <http://gu.com/p/45epj>