

Mission 21 Summer School

Decolonizing cooperation and development: A critical perspective from Latin America

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Summary

The presentation will focus on offering critical notions elaborated by indigenous peoples, black peoples, feminist movements and critical academia in Latin America, which allow us to rethink Western visions of cooperation and development. In particular, the concepts of "sumak kawsay or good living/good life (buen vivir)", "living deliciously/deliciously alive (vivir sabroso)", "pluriverse" and "decolonial turn" will be addressed. In addition, the presentation will be accompanied by examples of concrete experiences of Latin American communities and peoples living under a non-Western paradigm, with the idea that participants can approach diverse understandings of the world, and of non-hegemonic relations between peoples, countries and contexts.

1. Decolonial Turn: Epistemologies of the South and pluriverse

The decolonial turn is a theory supported by a group of social science scholars in Latin America, which seeks to rethink the linear reading of history that places at the center the experience of European modernity, as the state of greatest flourishing of humanity. In this line, the works of professors Aníbal Quijano, Enrique Dussel and Ramón Grosfoguel stand out.

From decolonial perspectives, they analyze how Eurocentrism and anthropocentrism have been consolidated at the historical, epistemological and political levels. From there, they define Eurocentrism as "a way of making sense of social reality from a scientific perspective that arose in Europe, with pretensions of universality, which sets itself up as the only valid form of knowledge" (Marañón Pimentel 214, 28).

According to the modern European conception, the center of life and human history is the individual (subject), an active social being, with will, dignity, rights and duties. The family, the nation-state and enterprises are understood as the basic structures of any viable society. And the common welfare is achieved through the ideas of evolution, progress, development, individual and entrepreneurial freedom, representative democracy and recently, sustainability. In this way, European history and ontology has been set as the only possible trajectory for the rest of the human populations, and therefore we have been taught as "universal history", silencing the millenary history of hundreds of peoples and communities in the world.

From this decolonial theoretical vision arise *The Epistemologies of the South*, as a conceptual framework elaborated by Boaventura de Sousa (2014), defined as a way of recognizing that there are different ways of understanding the world, giving a relevant role to non-Western visions about existence. Instead of

elaborating a completely new theoretical framework, the Epistemologies of the South propose to give space to the diversity of forms of knowledge that have remained alien, silenced or invisible to Western understanding and that are based on the daily, productive, political and spiritual experiences of peoples, communities and social movements that are often marginalized.

Arturo Escobar goes a little further by stating that the Epistemologies of the South not only speak to us of diverse and different knowledge, but that this framework also has an ontological dimension (Escobar 2016). It refers to the understanding that there is no single monolithic idea about the world and the universe, but that there can be several perspectives and therefore several possible worlds, what the author calls *pluriverse* (pluriverse) (Demaria & Kothari 2017). This concept is inspired by the Zapatista national liberation movement of Chiapas (Mexico), which proposes as one of its principles to work for "a world where many worlds fit" (Escobar 2016).

Therefore, the dominant, Eurocentric, individualistic, developmentalist worldview is only one among several ways of understanding life, existence and the world. However, this dominant vision has claimed the right to be "the world", subjecting the rest of the visions to its own terms, diminishing them, declaring them as backward, superstitious, or in the worst case condemning them to not exist. Therefore, many times these diverse ontologies are in tension or in conflict, which explains why in Latin America social struggles are being promoted in an attempt to question relations of domination, but also to make visible and propose other alternatives.

3. Other visions of the world and development from Latin America:

Development is a modern concept that emerged after the Second World War and has been transformed historically, with which we socially name that which is expected or desirable for an individual, a collectivity, and even a State (Rist 2003). This idea constitutes a way to differentiate societies and hierarchize them, between those that are better and those that are worse, but that with certain efforts, support and cooperation should reach certain standards that are measured through indicators. In contrast, development has also become a source of desire for some populations who name their ideals of change and prosperity in this way, which implies that development is not only an imposition, but also a demand.

However, from Latin America, indigenous, black, peasant, feminist, academic and environmental movements have gone further and have elaborated theoretical proposals and alternative practices to the dominant ones. From ontologies, daily practices and diversified concepts, but also through experiences of pain, resistance and re-making a life in the midst of adversity and genocide, traditionally excluded populations have become agents of change and social transformation. In this presentation, we will look at two specific ethical and ontological proposals that are being promoted on the continent: Good Living/Good Life (Buen Vivir) and Living Deliciously/Deliciously Alive (Vivir Sabroso).

3.1 Kawysay (life as a whole), suma kawsay (Buen Vivir - good living)

It is a notion based on the ontologies of the Andean peoples of Bolivia, Peru, Ecuador and Colombia, which places solidarity, complementarity and reciprocity among humans and between humans and nature at the center (Gudynas 2011). In other words, it proposes a re-encounter between nature and society that is reflected in different spheres of life, including the productive, spiritual and political spheres, and also in the configuration of the state and the law. Nature and culture in the Andes are closely related through rites, daily practices of dialogue, mutual nurturing, respect for cycles, and regeneration (Gonzales 2014).

The Andean world is a world of nurture, affection and respect, where we are all equivalent living beings (nature/*sallqa*, humans/*runas*, deities/*apus*, *wacas*). In addition, all beings are relatives (*ayllu*) and we form and live collectively in a territory (*pacha*) to care for and regenerate life. The upbringing encompasses everything and everyone, and in it the *chacra*, understood as a space destined to the cultivation of food, must be cared for and tended according to an agro-festive ritual calendar. Rituals are fundamental, because through them life is created and recreated in all its extensions and practices, to seek harmony and balance among all visible and non-visible living beings (Marañon Pimentel 2014).

Good living/good life has positioned itself as an alternative to capitalism and colonialism, by questioning the commodification of nature by assigning it non-economic values and moving away from the Western idea of development (Gudynas 2011). This vision proposes instead a collective idea of well-being that is not achieved through the possession of goods or high levels of income. On the contrary, it is associated with living in community (including non-humans), caring for and respecting nature, cultivating spirituality and promoting economies from and for the people. Good living gives importance to the ancestral knowledge, times and practices of marginalized and excluded communities, and implies a resignification of social life, of the way of producing, consuming, governing, feeling, thinking and knowing.

In the economic and legal field, good living is connected to concrete practices such as agroecology, the defense of collective territories and the recognition of rights to the *pachamama* (mother nature - cosmos).

3.2 Living Deliciously / Deliciously Alive (Vivir sabroso)

It is an ethical bet that gathers traditions, practices and life experiences of the black populations of the Pacific and the Colombian Caribbean, to propose another way of understanding wellbeing, where the center is not the individual but the collective. It is not the self, but the we, and that we, not only includes humans (Quiceno 2016).

This notion was documented and conceptualized in detail by the anthropologist Natalia Quiceno, after conducting a situated ethnography of the understandings of life and death of the black peoples of the Atrato River in Chocó-Colombia. For

the populations of the middle Atrato who have suffered enslavement, war and dispossession, life and well-being do not imply the absence of sadness, mourning or death. On the contrary, it implies a particular attitude willing to recompose in life, to insist on it and its collective enjoyment even in the midst of death, pain and deep conflicts. Living deliciously is a horizon that has been proposed by peoples who have been enslaved, marginalized and beaten and that invites us to find a collective sense of existence (Restrepo 2018).

Living deliciously starts from an understanding of the world in which the different elements of nature (rivers, mountains, stones, trees, jungles, animals, among others), as well as ancestors who have died, are existences that have spirits and participate together with humans in the unfolding of life and death. It is a vision of the world that is always in movement, in constant change and where all living beings are mutually constituted and are necessary conditions for existence. In addition, the concept of people or community is the center of political, social, spiritual, productive and festive action, which distances itself from European individualism, where the subject is the center of life in society and its vital purpose is to accumulate and maximize profits.

The concept of living deliciously is nourished by principles of African heritage, among them the South African philosophy of "Ubuntu", translated as "I am because we are" (Metz 2011). We are a large number of interdependent beings/networks, which leads us to act in community. That is, either we are all or we are no one. In this logic, the welfare of a society and a territory does not depend on the accumulation of goods, but on human solidarity to face misfortune and to build the conditions for the enjoyment of life. This is a historical knowledge that exploited peoples and communities have built in order to live well, collectively, in the midst of adverse circumstances.

4. Reflections on cooperation / aid

The theoretical and practical contributions of the Epistemologies of the South, of the concept of pluriverse and of the non-hegemonic ontologies that I have presented to you (good living and living deliciously) are very useful to rethink (development) cooperation from a decolonial stance (Demaria & Kothari 2017). On the one hand, it allows us to reflect on the role of the actors who participate in it and on the character of the relationship.

In many cases, these are relationships that are built on the basis of non-explicit hierarchies between donor organizations and beneficiaries, where the latter are usually seen as passive, impoverished actors, or in a condition of extreme vulnerability. Therefore, in (development) cooperation relationships, beneficiary organizations are usually recipients of funds to execute projects designed by a foreign logic and alien to their ways and conceptions of life. It is even common for cooperation projects to respond to global development agendas designed and conceived from the dominant ontology, which also employ linear instruments for measuring progress and results or use standardized and imposed Western concepts (United Nations, 2015).

In very few examples are cooperative relationships based on reciprocity. That is, instead of seeing the recipients or beneficiaries as inferior or needy, it is possible to see them as generators of knowledge, wisdom and collective experiences of high value that can teach key aspects to modern European societies. For example, in Colombia, the black communities of the Colombian Pacific, who have experienced enslavement, racism and, in the last 30 years, war in their territories, for a long time were only seen as backward, savage, poor and victims. However, these peoples have great knowledge and experiences of co-existence, management and overcoming experiences of pain, loss and scarcity, and have developed a large repertoire of organizational, political, productive and cultural experiences from which we can learn.

However, development cooperation relations and frameworks often reproduce hegemonic readings that classify between: Northern countries-Southern countries; Center-periphery; Developed countries-Developing countries; culture-folklore; art-crafts; religion-superstition, giving prevalence to linear, measurable solutions, with prominence of the sciences and with little space and participation of localized visions and knowledge.

Cooperation relations can be transformed into more horizontal processes and dynamics, where donor organizations allow the objectives and activities to be co-defined by the beneficiaries in their own terms, or including elements of their own worldviews, without necessarily having to adapt to existing or predefined frameworks. Such cooperation can work by considering reciprocal logics based on an intercultural dialogue of knowledge and of experiences instead of being based exclusively on aid, charity or dependency-generating relationships, centered mainly on the financial support of highly privileged societies to impoverished societies, ignoring the historical processes that have led to these asymmetries.

On the other hand, in cooperation projects carried out with indigenous peoples in Latin America, it is essential to be aware of the language gaps in terms of the differences in meaning and significance between Western languages and native languages. For example, in the case of the High Andean communities in Peru, the concepts of "planning", "biodiversity", "sustainability", "environment" or "agriculture", very typical and common in the agreements and cooperation frameworks, do not exist in the native languages "Quechua" and "Aymara", or do not have the same Western meaning. Therefore, the use of this type of concepts requires immense efforts (often ignored) of intercultural understanding and translation of concepts, which exceeds the mere literal translation from one language to another (Marañón Pimentel 2014).

On the other hand, (development) cooperation could also rethink its own purposes. That is, instead of taking a single vision of development as a point of departure and arrival, in the terms in which it has been conceptualized by the dominant ontology, cooperation could respect, support and strengthen the existence of other worldviews that have been marginalized, so that each people, community or society can reach its full potential, in its own terms and understandings. In that way, cooperation would be a vehicle for diverse ontologies about the world, to articulate and respect each other, and can even

contribute to recognize the deep damages caused by colonialism and developmentalism, supporting strategies that allow healing and recomposing life.

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