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# BUEN VIVIR AND THE SOCIAL AND SOLIDARITY ECONOMY IN THE ANDEAN REGION OF ECUADOR

## *Buen Vivir y la Economía Social y Solidaria en la Región Andina de Ecuador*

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### **Abstract**

In 2008, the new and controversial political paradigm Buen Vivir (BV) was introduced in the Ecuadorian Constitution. The drafting of a new constitution was a presidential campaign promise, and the concept of BV became a central objective of the government's development plan. To implement the principles of BV into state policies, the government launched an alternative economic system known as Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE). The objective of this study was to analyze how indigenous and non-indigenous people from the rural areas of the Ecuadorian highlands experienced BV and SSE at the community level. For this, face-to-face interviews and focus groups were used for data collection, and Thematic Analysis (TA) was chosen for the analysis. This study suggests a strong association between the implementation of governmental policies based on BV principles and a reduction in levels of poverty and inequality over the past decade. However, not everybody has perceived this transformation as progress, raising concerns about the role of the state as a provider and regulator.

### **Keywords**

Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, Social and Solidarity Economy, Ecuador, Andean Region

### **Palabras clave**

Buen Vivir, Sumak Kawsay, Economía Social y Solidaria, Ecuador, Región Andina

### **Resumen**

En el año 2008 se introdujo en la Constitución ecuatoriana el nuevo y controvertido paradigma político: Buen Vivir (BV). La elaboración de una nueva Constitución fue una promesa de campaña presidencial y el concepto de BV se convirtió en un objetivo central del plan de desarrollo gubernamental. Para implementar los principios del BV en las políticas estatales, el gobierno lanzó un sistema económico alternativo llamado Economía Social y Solidaria (ESS). El objetivo de este estudio fue analizar como las comunidades indígenas y no indígenas del área rural de la sierra ecuatoriana experimentaron el BV y la ESS a nivel comunitario. Para ello, se utilizaron entrevistas cara a cara y grupos focales para la recolección de datos que fueron analizados mediante la utilización del Análisis Temático (AT). Este estudio sugiere una fuerte asociación entre la implementación de políticas gubernamentales basadas en los principios del BV y una reducción de los niveles de pobreza y desigualdad durante la última década. Sin embargo, no todos han percibido esta transformación como progreso, lo que provoca preocupación sobre el papel del Estado como proveedor y regulador.

## 1.

**Introduction**

The implementation of BV as the main principle on which the government based its social and economic policies required an alternative economic system, and the system adopted was the Social and Solidarity Economy (Villalba et al., 2020). This concept has been used to describe an alternative economic model, presenting a focus on the generation of benefits oriented on social impact and based on the scoop on people before capital (Duque et al., 2021). This study aimed to analyze how indigenous and mestizo people from the Andean region of Ecuador, specifically from Tungurahua and Chimborazo provinces, have experienced the introduction of the SSE as a tool to achieve the principles of BV at the community level. The study used a qualitative approach together with non-probability techniques.

Tungurahua and Chimborazo were chosen since, in those provinces, there is a large number of indigenous people. Indigenous people have a long history of opposition to traditional economic models that have failed to construct a more egalitarian society. Ecuador is trapped in a turning point developed by the constant social change caused by complex dynamics that especially confront capitalist development, which has failed to address sensitive issues such as inequality, unsustainable resource depletion, and climate change (Veltmeyer, 2020).

When the new Constitution of Ecuador was approved in 2008, one of its crucial features was a new understanding of human wellbeing. This notion came in the form of *Buen Vivir* (BV), a concept that, according to Acosta (2008), has its roots in an

Andean way of living known as *Sumak Kawsay* (SK). In recent years, the two concepts have attracted a great deal of scholarly attention (Arampatzi, 2022); however, the meaning of the terms is still evolving, and the connection and interaction between BV and SK remain contested (Cubillo & Hidalgo, 2019).

On the other hand, the SSE emerged as a mechanism to transform the economic and social system that includes the public and private sectors (Léglise, 2022), turning it into an alternative to economic growth and other capitalist economic practices (Morell et al., 2020). It challenges the assumption that producing goods and services will automatically improve living conditions and that economic growth leads to a better and happier life (Baruah et al., 2023). The need to steer away from traditional economic views towards a new model that prioritizes social and environmental objectives has been a significant concern for governments in the Global South (Broad & Fischer-Mackey, 2017). In Latin America, post-neoliberalism gained traction during the first decade of the 21st century, where social and indigenous movements played a key role by questioning traditional development approaches (Villalba & Etxano, 2017).

The role of the indigenous movement questioning governments across Latin America has been studied in detail (Gómez Müller, 2018). However, not much attention was paid to the views and experiences of people at the community level (Bretón et al., 2022). This raised concerns considering that Ecuador is a multicultural country, where 7% of the population identifies as indigenous (INEC, 2023). During the last few years, Ecuadorian governments have promoted a liberal agenda that focuses on individual rights. Meanwhile, indigenous populations emphasize ancestral thinking, which is eminently collective (Radhuber & Radcliffe, 2023).

## 2. Methodology

This research employed a qualitative approach. Using of a qualitative method was particularly relevant to further the understanding of the BV and SSE based on the views of indigenous, non-indigenous people, and government representatives. The study was focused in the central Andean highlands of Ecuador; more specifically, data collection took place in Tungurahua and Chimborazo provinces, where indigenous principles of how to live well and the Andean reciprocity concept have contributed to the development of the BV and SSE concepts in Ecuador (Aguiar & Reis, 2023).

Data was collected from villages located in the Tungurahua and Chimborazo provinces in the form of 23 face-to-face interviews and nine focus groups with indigenous people as well as 19 face-to-face interviews and nine focus groups with mestizo people. A semi-structured interview technique was used for the face-to-face interviews, while an unstructured interview was used for the focus groups. People who participated in this study were chosen using convenience sampling, which is a non-probability technique that can be used when the members of the population cannot be individually identified or contacted or the population is too large (Stratton, 2021).

Regarding government representatives, five people were interviewed in face-to-face meetings.

The composition of participants, considering their ethnic origin and gender, are presented in Figure 1 and Figure 2.

**Figure 1.**

*Ethnic composition*

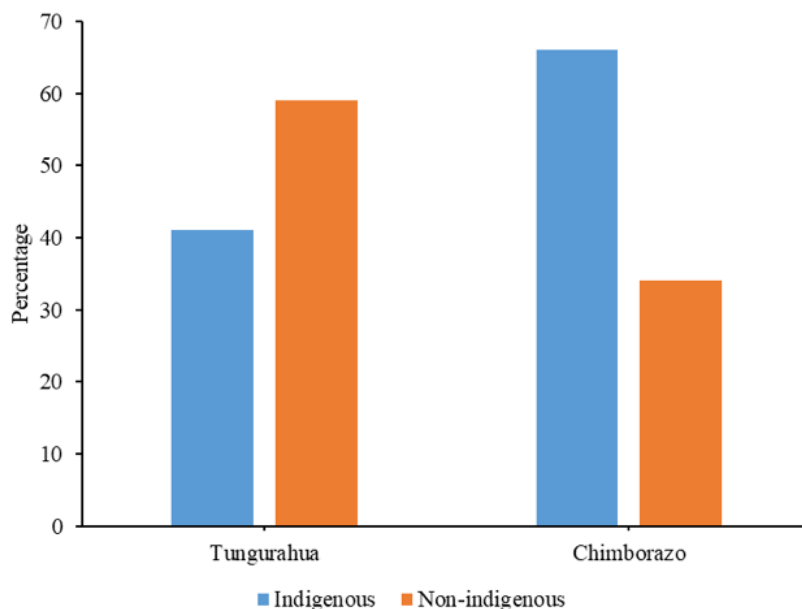
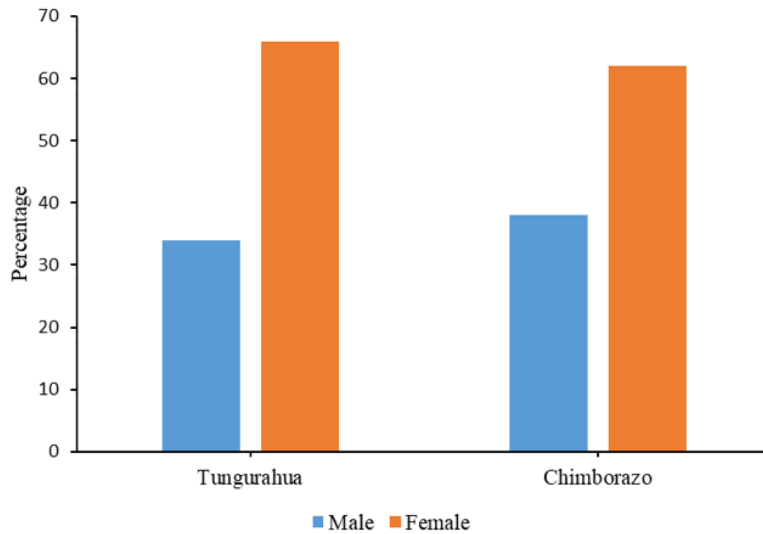


Figure 2.

*Gender composition*

As can be seen from Figure 1, there is a greater percentage of indigenous people in Chimborazo, while in Tungurahua, the majority are mestizo. Figure 2 indicates that women showed a greater predisposition to participate, while the participation of men appears to be increasingly difficult to obtain unless there is a tangible benefit for them. This is consistent with the experiences reported from international and local NGOs.

For qualitative analysis, there are two broad strategies: Analytic Induction and Grounded Theory (Robson & McCartan, 2016). Analytic induction, also known as Thematic Analysis (TA) (Braun & Clarke, 2023) was chosen for this study. TA is a method for developing themes, which can also be complemented by quantitative analysis (Proudfoot, 2023). In this study, face-to-face interviews and focus groups were analyzed by identifying themes. The software used for this was NVivo, which allows the researcher to group themes using codes. NVivo is one of the most advanced programs for qualitative data analysis and coding is commonly used when qualitative data is being analyzed with Grounded Theory (Mohajan et al., 2022), however, it can also be used when data is being analyzed with TA (Braun & Clarke, 2021).

### 3.

## Literature review

### 3.1. Social and Solidarity Economy

In the last few years, the focus on the SSE has received considerable attention (Lee, 2020). The different organizational forms encompassing the SSE can be found worldwide (Borzaga et al., 2019). The words social and solidarity come together to emphasize the importance of people working together in solidarity (González et al., 2022). Solidarity as a modern invention could be traced back to the 19<sup>th</sup> century, when Europe experienced several revolutions. During the first part of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, solidarity was expressed as people organizing themselves collectively in associations to gain some respect and demand their rights (Kohn, 2022).

On the other hand, indigenous people understand solidarity differently. Despite colonization, the Andean idea of solidarity is reciprocity, described by Macas (2010) with the Kichwa expression *ranti-ranti*. This tradition dates to the Incas and represents an indigenous version of solidarity. Indigenous people have practiced what is known as an emergency solidarity, a term described by Cantero (2012) as staying together only when necessary. This form of collective action is well-known as the *minga*, a collaborative work system very common among peasant societies that has been practiced when people in rural areas need to get one project done. According to Coral et al (2021), the *minga* is the basis of the social organization of the indigenous communities and, at the same time, is a key element of collective action for the development of activities of common interest, thus promoting production, savings, and dynamics in the generation of work.

The principles of the indigenous form of solidarity economy have been part of the way of living in the Andean region long before the Spanish conquered Latin America (González et al., 2022). However, how the solidarity economy is currently conceived establishes that it must strengthen local communities, redesign the relationship between

nature and human beings, prioritize people over capital, and guarantee access to resources services instead of seeking profitability (Villalba et al., 2020). The core idea behind the solidarity economy indicates that everybody should have access to whatever is needed to live a happy life (Bauhardt, 2014).

Solidarity economy can be explained as a process to enable people to challenge the principles of the economy and democracy (Laville, 2023). This view is popular in France, Latin America, and Québec (Canada), where the concept is being used to emphasize the fundamental purpose of solidarity as opposed to the traditional view of market economy (Fonteneau et al., 2011). According to Laville (2015) solidarity economy merges the principles of economic behavior, market, redistribution, and reciprocity proposed by Polanyi & Maciver (1944). Moreover, the solidarity economy represents initiatives that are innovative, more participatory, and smaller. Activities within the solidarity economy rely on mixed resources: monetary and non-monetary, market-based, and non-market based, paid jobs, and volunteering (Laville, 2023).

The literature reveals different definitions of solidarity economy and social economy (Arampatzi, 2022). The SSE is a concept that is still in evolution since there is still no consensus for a single accepted definition about this alternative economic model (Battisti et al., 2020), which could explain the reason behind the similarities between social economy, solidarity economy, popular economy, plural economy, and non-profit organizational concepts. These terms are being used depending on physical and theoretical backgrounds (Fonteneau et al., 2011). For the Latin American region, the origin of the SSE concept can be traced back to the cooperative movement and the various experiments in workers' self-management. With time, the concept has evolved. More recently, SSE has been described as an alternative to capitalist development (Veltmeyer, 2018), which is probably one of the most popular and accepted descriptions.

The rise of economic activities that are more concerned with a social and environmentally friendly agenda is more evident among peasants and indigenous people that are organized collectively in the Andean region (Barkin, 2019). In this region, the term SSE is being used to describe organizations

and enterprises dedicated to the production and exchange of goods and services, which have little dependency on the government and are oriented to prioritize social well-being, cooperation and solidarity (Segovia-Vargas et al., 2023).

There is no a fixed definition for the SSE, the concept is disputed, and for this reason, it can be found in the literature with different names. A consensus among scholars about the correct terminology for the SSE is challenging to reach. Some authors refer to SSE as social economy, while others prefer to use the term popular and solidarity economy. Nevertheless, all of these terms refer somewhat to the same concept (Corragio, 2015).

### 3.2. Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay

The *Buen Vivir* (BV) and *Sumak Kawsay* (SK) concepts have provoked much interest among scholars worldwide. The concepts are based on indigenous principles of how to live well and their origin, it has been argued, can be found in Bolivia, Ecuador, and Peru (Léglise, 2022). The term BV can be roughly translated as ‘living well’, or ‘living well together’ although ‘good living’ and ‘collective wellbeing’ are also found in the literature. In Bolivia, the term is slightly different, and it is known as *Suma Qamaña* in Aymara language or *Vivir Bien* in Spanish. However, Ecuadorian and Bolivian concepts shared the same anti-neoliberal agenda to challenge traditional thinking in social development and welfare regimes (Radcliffe, 2012). A well-known figure in the study of Andean indigeneity in Bolivia is the former long-term Minister of Foreign Affairs and elected Vice-President of Bolivia, David Choquehuanca. He summarized the concept of *Suma Qamaña* in twenty-five postulates, widely accepted in Bolivia (Gómez Müller, 2018). The postulates describe how to live in harmony with nature.

The genesis of BV has its roots in the SK (Castañeda et al., 2023). Perhaps for this reason, it is very common to find BV and SK being used interchangeably in the literature, as the two terms represent the same

concept. Nevertheless, several differences between the two approaches should be considered before one can conclude that the two terms represent the same concept (Altamirano, 2019). A more detailed distinction between the two terms is described later in this document. Some important literature on the study of BV have published using ‘living well’ as the English version of the term, which appeared to be the more accepted and accurate translation of the BV among scholars (Gerlach, 2017; Guardiola & García-Quero, 2014; Radcliffe, 2012; Walsh, 2010). However the use of ‘good living’ as the English translation is also accepted as correct (Houtart, 2011; Mattioli & Nozica, 2017; Vanhulst & Beling, 2014). Regardless of the name that is being used, it is widely agreed that the BV concept emerged as an alternative to confront traditional development thinking (Jimenez et al., 2022). The concept offers an opportunity for cultural alterity and critique of the Euro-Atlantic cultural constellation (Beling et al., 2018). In fact, BV has been related to the 21<sup>st</sup> century socialism<sup>1</sup> and the ‘pink tide’<sup>2</sup>.

According to Lalander and Cuestas (2017), the study of BV can be approached from three different angles: indigenous-culturalist, post-development-ecologist, and socialist-statist. The first indigenous-culturalist approach is based on the idea of preserving the original Andean indigenous concept of SK. The most common and accepted notion of SK is ‘fulfilled life’. Although ‘beautiful life’, ‘life to the fullest’, ‘harmonious life’ and ‘living in harmony with nature’ are also commonly used among indigenous intellectuals (Villalba & Etxano, 2017). The indigenous-culturalist approach is the preferred option of indigenous people, who have claimed that BV represents a distortion of SK (Lalander & Cuestas-Caza, 2017).

The second approach, post-development-ecologist is the most widely accepted view among scholars (Villalba & Etxano, 2017). In this approach, the terms BV and SK are conceived as the same. However, authors who follow this view tend to use BV more often than SK. This preference might be explained by the fact that BV represents a critique of the modern

<sup>1</sup> A political ideology that involves a reversal of neoliberal policies. It is based on Marxist philosophy and economy. It was first advocated by German sociologist and political analyst Heinz Dieterich and taken up by Hugo Chávez in Venezuela and other Latin American leaders.

<sup>2</sup> Also known as ‘turn to the Left’ is used to describe a tendency to turn towards left wing governments in Latin America, which was popular in the early 2000s.

Eurocentric, anthropocentric, and capitalist societies, which is not evident in SK (Lalander & Cuestas-Caza, 2017). Another explanation for this preference for the use of BV over SK is that the former represents a new intercultural political project (Vanhulst & Beling, 2014), while SK represents the ancient philosophy on which the new political project is based. The core discourse of the post-development-ecologist approach is based on a biocentrism view of the world, in which nature must be preserved by humans and indigenous people play a key role in the conservation of biodiversity (Waldmueller & Rodriguez, 2018).

The third perspective, socialist statist, is considered the most disconnected approach to the indigenous concept of SK. Similarly, there is a tendency to use BV over SK, because ancestral knowledge is considered less relevant or important. The Ecuadorian government has used this approach in an attempt to institutionalize the Kichwa term in the governmental discourse (Cubillo-Guevara et al., 2016). The different positions described above only demonstrate the different views of different people about BV and SK. However, there is a common ground, a critical position of the three approaches about development (Gudynas, 2016). Perhaps the most simplistic and widely accepted definition of SK lies in the concept as of Andean understanding of wellbeing (Quijano, 2000).

Lalander and Cuestas (2017) remind us that not even in Sarayaku<sup>3</sup>, considered the intellectual birthplace of SK in Ecuador, people have reached an agreement OF. A scientist who lived in Sarayaku for several years during the 1990s, long before SK was introduced in the political agenda, indicated that people from this village have very different and diverse views of what SK means to their lives (Sirén, 2004). Another important aspect of Andean indigeneity, which is necessary to explore the concept of SK in more detail is how indigenous people perceive nature. Houtart (2011) believes that before the colonization of Spaniards, indigenous people in Latin America used to live autonomously in a way that most of the basic needs were met while respecting nature. Houtart also indicates that indigenous people decided to revere nature as a goddess, the 'Pachamama'<sup>4</sup>.

The Pachamama provided all the resources required for a living if it was not disturbed, this is understood as living in harmony with nature. The indigenous cosmovision does not separate humanity and nature. Any attempt at separation is considered antithetical (De la Cadena, 2020).

The BV term is difficult to connect with indigenous principles (Jimenez et al., 2022). BV and SK, in theory, represent the same views and positions regarding nature, economy, and society. However, in practice, this is not the case. Although there are clearly some similarities, such as criticism of traditional development approaches, recognition of ancestral knowledge, and the importance of nature. Alonso & Vázquez (2015) indicate that SK represents the social indigenous project that is based on institutions and ways of living from Andean and Amazonian regions and BV represents just another way to understand Aristotelian wellbeing<sup>5</sup>.

## 4. Results

### 4.1. Social and Solidarity Economy

In a face-to-face interview with a government representative from MIES (Ministry of Social and Economic Inclusion), the official terminology used for SSE was described in this way:

The Popular and Solidarity Economy (PSE) is the same thing as the Social and Solidarity Economy; the former is how we called it in Ecuador because we want to make sure this important sector [informal economy] is visible, and the latter represents the name that is recognized internationally. But basically, we can use both terms interchangeably, both mean the same to us.

<sup>3</sup> A village located in the Pastaza province, which is in the southern part of the Amazonian region of Ecuador.

<sup>4</sup> The term has been translated from the Kichwa language as 'earth mother', although 'mother nature' is more commonly used.

<sup>5</sup> For Aristotle the notion of wellbeing was known as 'eudaimonia', which could be also translated as 'flourishing' or 'doing well'.



Popular economy refers to the informal economy (Fonteneau et al., 2011) but also relates to some accepted forms of enterprise that include family, domestic, autonomous, community, associative and cooperative. The last three are part of the popular economy and the social and solidarity economy (Corragio, 2015).

A few participants from Tungurahua and Chimborazo provinces indicated that they had never heard about the PSE term, while others identified the concept as an alternative way to organize the economy. Indeed, interviewees had a shared perception that PSE was introduced to assist poor people in generating income through the establishment of small enterprises.

Yes, I know what it is, another type of economy. An alternative to the traditional [economy], which has been proven to be ineffective for working people, and only good for the pockets of rich people... [PSE] is a project from the government to help poor people to come together as an association and sell their products.

(Indigenous man, 28 years old, Chimborazo province)

When asked about PSE, an interviewee, indicated that he was not very familiar with the term, but quite familiar with the practices involved. Interviewees recalled that in the past, people used to exchange goods for other goods without money involved. The word 'barter' was mentioned on several occasions.

In the past, people did not need money to buy or sell their products. Every Monday and Saturday they used to meet at the markets and exchange their products. There was no product more valuable than another. This was an ancient economic practice that worked just fine for many, many years, you know in the form of a solidarity economy. For example, look at what they did in Salinas de Guaranda<sup>6</sup>.

(Mestizo man, 47 years old, Tungurahua province)

As expressed in the quotation, the respondent indicated that barter represented an ancient economic practice, very common in the past but not

practiced nowadays. However, the respondent has yet to experience this practice. In fact, his grandfather shared this information and provided details of this system. Another example of PSE was revealed when interviewees routinely recalled the experiences from Salinas de Guaranda in relation to the community cooperative-based projects.

The case of Salinas de Guaranda has been described as a process of sustainable innovation with identity within the framework of cooperativism and the social and solidarity economy (Vargas & Cadena, 2021). The success of this type of project can be traced back to 1971, when a several community enterprises were established in Salinas de Guaranda with the support of the Catholic church. The first of these community enterprises was a small cheese factory. Over time, other enterprises also developed, and community members began to produce and sell chocolate, yarn, woolen clothing and essential oils, among other products. The key of these enterprises is the cooperative nature of the businesses, which, according to Bateman (2015), is the core of the SSE model.

In Ecuador, the savings and credits cooperative societies operate under the label of PSE. Community cooperative enterprises and the savings and credits societies should be distinguished. The former constitutes the model in which Salinas de Guaranda enterprises are based and represents a clear example of a solidarity economy (Cantero, 2012). The community cooperative projects are owned and controlled by all members, who are usually small producers and farmers (Bateman, 2015). On the other hand, savings and credit societies, also known as 'cooperatives', have proven to be working under a model that seems closer to the private banking system. However, the PSE Act, approved in 2011 and described by Corragio (2015) as the most highly developed legal institutionalization of the SSE in the region, includes the savings and credit societies as part of the solidarity economy. In this regard, one of the participants indicated:

For me, those cooperatives [savings and credit societies] do not belong to the PSE. Let me give you an example. One cooperative, I do not want to

<sup>6</sup> Salinas de Guaranda is a town in the Bolivar province that shares borders with Tungurahua and Chimborazo provinces. The population of this town is predominately indigenous and it has been labelled as the cradle of the solidarity economy in Ecuador for the numerous and successful community cooperative based projects that can be found there.

say which one, but it is quite big and well-known. Anyway, this cooperative, in its publicity, indicates that it is part of the PSE, but if you need a credit, they ask for several requirements. The credit is not easy to get, and if you are lucky enough to get it, you must work hard to repay the credit, which of course, has a very high interest rate.

(Mestizo man, 38 years old, Chimborazo province)

According to the PSE Act, savings and credit societies belong to the PSE sector, which provides them some benefits from the government, since they are considered as part of the vulnerable groups that require assistance from the social programs. However, as the quote states, they do not follow the solidarity principles, and the inclusion of this type of societies in the PSE sector has been highly criticized.

Whilst perceptions of what really constitutes a solidarity economy may be divergent, the interviews revealed that regardless of the terminology used, most of the practices associated with PSE were already familiar to many of the respondents, however the term in some cases, was utterly unknown. Several interviewees stated that solidarity is a value that has been practiced for a long time and is based on an Andean reciprocity concept summarized in the saying: 'You scratch my back, and I will scratch yours'. The term solidarity seemed to be preferred among interviewees when they were asked to describe what they understood by PSE. Vázquez et al. (2015) confirm this by indicating that the solidarity economy in Ecuador represents a different paradigm that comes from centuries of Andean economic practices based on local and traditional knowledge.

#### 4.2. Buen Vivir and Sumak Kawsay

The difficulty of fully understanding the SK can be summarized in the words of two indigenous women who were interviewed in the Andean highlands of Ecuador.

A young indigenous woman from the Tungurahua province indicated:

SK cannot be translated because there are no right words to describe it in Spanish.

The second statement came from a middle-aged indigenous woman from the Chimborazo province:

SK has been manipulated by the government, I think there is a risk of losing the real meaning of this ideology, and clearly, there is a contradiction on its application, due to the high dependency of the government on oil and mining activities.

All the indigenous interviewees indicated that BV and SK represent two different concepts. There was clearly an identification of BV with access to material goods. At the same time, SK had a more spiritual notion for indigenous people, although mestizo respondents also agreed with this to some extent. In fact, the idea of BV as a re-elaboration of the SK was mentioned on several occasions. In one village in Tungurahua, a male middle-aged indigenous respondent indicated:

The BV is the SK, but updated so that mestizo people can understand the concept.

However, another interviewee, who was a schoolteacher in that village, immediately challenged this statement:

I beg your pardon, comrade<sup>7</sup>, but I think the BV has nothing to do with SK. Remember comrade that the SK is part of our traditions, and has been practiced since ancient times; the BV is just a recent invention of Correa [former President of Ecuador] to fool people.

(Indigenous man, 36 years old, Tungurahua province)

The above statement is one example which shows that BV and SK represent two different ideas. For most of the indigenous participants interviewed, BV is a concept introduced by the government to deceive people. When asked about the reason for this allegedly attempt of the government to deceive people, a middle-aged participant provided the following answer:

<sup>7</sup> 'compañero' has been translated as comrade, a word commonly used in the Andean highlands among indigenous and non-indigenous people to address each other in a kind and friendly way.

Comrade, do not forget that the indigenous movement is very strong, and the government knows it. They [the government] do not want to mess with indigenous people. We can organize street mobilizations and pull down the government.

(Indigenous woman, 41 years old, Chimborazo province)

## 5. Discussion

Between 2007 and 2017, Ecuador experienced a process of political stability cemented by good economic, and social results (Lalander et al., 2019). The levels of poverty and inequality decreased and an agenda for the inclusion of marginalized social groups was incorporated (Goeury, 2021). The Overseas Development Institute (ODI) conducted a six-year research project in Ecuador, published in 2015. This case study concluded that the positive outcomes experienced in the country during former President Correa's administration (2007-2017) were the result of a combination of economic and political factors that enabled social policies to advance human development.

There is little doubt that the principles of BV guided the introduction of several policies that benefitted the most excluded and vulnerable people (Altamirano, 2019). The introduction of BV in the Constitution as the main objective of the public policies influenced the country's progress. However, it is not easy to establish to what extent this progress is a consequence of BV policies and the implementation of SSE.

The interviews, made it apparent that BV and SK are conceived as a notion of wellbeing. It should be stressed that for indigenous people the idea of well-being has a collective view, while mestizo people, usually refer to wellbeing from an individualistic

point of view. This became evident, when, in the audios of the interviews, it was possible to identify that indigenous people used 'we' most often when they described what is needed to live well, while mestizo people used 'I' most of the time for the same description.

The precise meaning of BV and its connection with SK remain contested even at the community level, where it was expected that some clarity of the definition and its application in practice may have been found. There are many different views, even within the same village. However, for indigenous people, the SK represents a series of ancestral practices that lead to living well. On the other hand, mestizo people tend to understand BV as a possibility to have access to material goods, which will allow them to meet their basic needs and, in turn, live well.

During interviews, the term development was barely mentioned. This was something expected to some degree, considering that development is a concept relatively unknown to the people who live in the rural areas of Ecuador, especially indigenous people. However, in one focus group, where most people were mestizo, a respondent described BV as a new way to achieve development. Similarly, in a face-to-face interview with a government representative, one woman referred to the constitution, which indicates that sustainable development and the equitable distribution of wealth and resources will be the route to BV.

As the paragraph above suggests, for people who live in the Andean highlands, the concepts of BV or SK have little or no connection with the concept of development. In the case of indigenous people, this was even more evident, as they never mentioned development as part of their aspirations to live well. In fact, the concept is entirely abstract, and the word 'development' does not have an equivalent in the Kichwa language. The tendency to relate BV or SK to development or well-being is only popular among scholars and politicians.

During face-to-face interviews and focus groups interviewees were asked about their perception of the country's progress. While the situation had improved considerably for some respondents, others indicated otherwise. It was impossible to reach a consensus on whether or not the country's

situation improved. According to the ODI case study, four factors have driven the progress in Ecuador: macroeconomic stability, changes in the labor market, redistribution policies, and social protection for poor people (Ordóñez et al., 2015). The country's economic stability can be considered a key factor for Ecuador's progress. However, the macroeconomic measurements that took place in the country cannot be entirely attributed to BV and SSE principles. Former President Correa has been described as a neo-Keynesian economist (Lalander et al., 2019) trained in American and European universities, which could have influenced the economic policies introduced in the country. During Correa's administration, fiscal austerity was highly criticized. Thanks to the oil revenues, the government was able to invest heavily in different areas, which positively impacted on people experience poverty.

## 6. Conclusion

During the last decade, a political paradigm known as *Buen Vivir* (BV) has become the cornerstone of a new notion of human well-being in Ecuador. After it was enshrined in the 2008 Constitution, the government has based several of its policies on it. BV, it has been argued, originates from an ancient indigenous way of living, *Sumak Kawsay*. BV has been extensively studied, and its meaning remains disputed. In the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, BV is closely linked to an alternative economic system called SSE. This term has been used to describe a large variety of economic activities in which social and environmental objectives outrank profit.

Drawing on the research participants' insights, we argue that Ecuador's progress can be partly explained by the introducing of BV principles into the social and economic agenda of the government. However, it is impossible to determine how much this progress can be attributed to the BV principles. Macroeconomic stability, changes in the labor market, redistribution policies, and social protection for poor people are

also considered important factors that can explain the country's transformations.

The introduction of the SSE as the main strategy to achieve BV can explain some of the most radical changes in income distribution. The qualitative findings of this study indicate that cooperative-based projects are the basis of the solidarity economy in Ecuador, which is in line with existing scholarship. These projects are owned and controlled by all members of the community. After the introduction of the SSE in the 2008 Constitution the government directed a significant number of resources to small and middle-size enterprises that have benefitted thousands of low-income families, especially in rural areas.

This study has provided original insights into how people from the Ecuadorian highlands understand the concept of BV and how they perceive the country's progress. Some indigenous and non-indigenous people agreed that the country's situation has improved and that people are better off. Others disagree. For those participants, BV was introduced by the government to deceive the population, especially indigenous people. This raises concerns about the state's role and what happens when indigenous concepts become part of state policy.

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