



# Sumak kawsay in Ecuador: The role of communitarian economy and the experience of the rural communities in Sarayaku (Ecuadorian Amazonia)



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## ABSTRACT

This paper analyzes the concrete experience of a communitarian economy (Sarayaku) from which empirical evidence may be drawn to enhance debates around development, post-development, and *sumak kawsay*. Some forms of land exploitation and social organization in rural communities such as this may better illustrate the communitarian economy and can provide solid and specific clarification of certain aspects of *sumak kawsay*. Analysis of these realities and their theoretical implications within current debates about development are the contribution of this work. In particular, the analysis of Sarayaku allows, first, to identify a non-capitalist economic rationality; second, to show some conditions of biocentrism; and, third, to verify the difficulties of translating these experiences to different territorial environments. On this basis, we conclude with the difficulties of maintaining the communitarian economy, its social organization and its form of land exploitation in rural communities in the future.

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## 1. Introduction

Discussions throughout the previous century around the terms and conditions of development fostered what became known as post-developmental approaches; specifically, the post-developmental notion of 'de-growth' came to acquire prominence within heterodox streams of Development Economics.<sup>1</sup> The eventual overcoming of the Washington Consensus (WC) view allowed for the start of a fruitful period that saw the revival of traditional debates about development, including the role of the State, the effects of international insertion, and national control of natural resources. Along with the recovery of such traditional topics, other important aspects were also brought into question, such as the prevailing notion of development, identified by some scholars and social activists as the expression of a Western worldview, heir to Enlightenment thinking and 19<sup>th</sup>-century European positivism and,

ultimately, responding to the expansion and legitimization of the capitalist economic system. In this way, the traditional heterodoxy of Development Economics was overwhelmed by a new heterodoxy which denounced not a particular form of development (capitalist development) but rather development itself.

As part of these discussions, certain experiments carried out in Latin America (namely the Bolivian and Ecuadorian processes) become relevant. While the revitalization of development as a specific challenge in Latin America may feature its own particularities (most notably the strength of popular and anti-neoliberal indigenous movements), there are elements in these Latin American experiences that connect with broader discussions on post-development: a) the involvement of indigenous populations in the pursuit of alternatives (whether alternative development or alternatives to development) injects something of an ancient (pre-Western) worldview that may attend to the challenges of development (inequality, environmental destruction, poverty, dependence) very differently; b) traditional issues of heterodox Development Economics, such as national control of natural resources and the role of nationalization, constitute part of the theoretical background and policy instruments of the current processes; and c) the experience of nations such as Ecuador allows one to observe (and draw conclusions about) the scope, limitations,

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<sup>1</sup> Arturo Escobar, Serge Latouche, Gilber Rist, or Wolfgang Sachs, among others. Many of these proposals were developed some time ago, including some very remote antecedents such as Ivan Illich or Ignacy Sachs, but they have gained special prominence within current debates around post-neoliberal development.

and possibilities of development models that are being inspired, at least partially, by post-developmental thinking.

In this sense, the Ecuadorian experience of *sumak kawsay* (SK) – or good living – becomes relevant to the debate. Indeed, within the framework of the “citizens’ revolution” of President Rafael Correa, important changes are now being carried out in Ecuador. These changes seek advances within a post-neoliberal model of development, the features of which have not yet been fully defined. SK, proclaimed as an inspiration for those changes, now faces the emerging contrast between its theoretical genealogy and its consideration of measures taken. In fact, many specialists have pointed out a gradual distancing of the specific economic policy practices of the Ecuadorian Government from the original inspirational principles of SK (Acosta et al., 2013; Bretón, 2013; and especially, Economía, 2013; Villalba, 2013).

Following this claim, we have found compelling elements of analysis in the Ecuadorian process – particularly in cases of communitarian economy that respond to ancestral patterns of exploitation of the land and social organization. Analysis of these experiences is especially relevant to answering the following questions: To what extent do these experiences represent strategies that go beyond the capitalist conception of development? To what extent do these experiences permit a biocentric perspective that goes further than the standard anthropocentrism of development? To what extent can these experiences nurture strategies for action in a context of increasingly urban societies (or, to the contrary, in a context that is only rural and peasant in scope)?

In order to attempt to answer these questions, the experience of the communitarian economy in Sarayaku, located in Ecuador’s Amazon region, will be analyzed. Sarayaku is among the most emblematic of the indigenous communities living within Ecuador, due to their ongoing resistance to oil exploitation in their territory (Ortiz Viveros, 2015), as well as their continued adherence to traditional socioeconomic and political organization.<sup>2</sup> In addition, Sarayaku is the community where the social practices instituted as SK were studied for the first time, when the Amazonian *Kichwa* anthropologist Carlos Viteri Gualinga studied and systematized the social practices of the Sarayaku people (Viteri, 2003). From these and other studies related to indigenous communities in the Serania of Ecuador, the term *sumak kawsay* was disseminated, and this notion went from being descriptive of the social practices of the *sarayakuruna* and other indigenous communities to become consecrated as the core principle of the new economic model embraced by Ecuador in its Constitution of 2008. In this way, case-study analysis of the Sarayaku experience may allow us to identify specific aspects of SK which may deepen the current debate on post-development, its limits and its possibilities.

Definition of the main characteristics of the communitarian

economy is subject to academic and political debate in Ecuador, due to three contesting positions. Firstly, an ecological version (Acosta, 2012) posits that the communitarian economy is related to the sustainable use of resources, and the primacy of relations of solidarity and reciprocity. Secondly, the indigenist outlook offers a more radical view, in the sense that territories are seen to form essential ecological units (water, jungle, land) that must be harmoniously integrated with humans and other living beings. Thirdly, the developmentalist version considers communitarian economy to be part of a set of alternative activities in which work and subsistence are the social priority, rather than the accumulation of capital (García, 2013a; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara, 2014). This discussion will be analyzed later in the section related to the theoretical framework.

Starting from the historical and social configuration of this representative indigenous community, this research aims to enrich the analysis of SK as it is here expressed. That objective will be carried out from a central area of focus: the relationship between the communitarian economy and the conception of SK, both from a theoretical view and from the study of the practices and perpetuation of the material conditions of life in the Sarayaku community (through semi-structured interviews with community leaders in the field). Most definitively, *the main aim of this paper* is the analysis of a concrete, current experience of communitarian economy from which empirical evidence may be drawn to enhance ongoing debates around development and post-development. In particular, we believe that some forms of land exploitation and social organization in rural communities serve as illustrative experiences of communitarian economy and can provide a solid and specific approximation of certain aspects of SK. Analysis of these realities and their theoretical implications within current debates about development are the contribution of this work. It is necessary to emphasize that this research does not attempt to deepen the analysis of political and social demands from the Ecuadorian indigenous movement, especially from CONAIE; such a dimension would exceed the paper’s objectives, even though that movement has been recognized as among the most important in the Latin American region.<sup>3</sup>

The article begins with an overview of the current state of development studies, especially the debates over post-development and the place that SK occupies within them. Subsequently, the role of communitarian economy in the conception of SK will be analyzed, and the case-study experience of Sarayaku will be explored. Finally, the results and implications of our study will be systematized.

## 2. Theory: the current debate around development, alternatives to development, and post-development

The years following the WC stage in debates about development, showed a gradual recovery of reflexive impulses vis-à-vis Development Economics, especially strengthening the heterodox and contentious proposals crystallized in the World Social Forum of Porto Alegre (first edition in 2001) and the anti-globalization position that “another world is possible”. Such post-developmental analysis and proposals of ‘de-growth’ also gained prominence with the revival of heterodox positions regarding neo-liberalism, its sequels (post-Washington Consensus), and other legitimizing approximations of the status quo (such notions of human development). Certainly, the cumulative advances in global awareness

<sup>2</sup> In 1996, part of the territory of Sarayaku was given for oil exploration without having consulted its inhabitants. Subsequently, in 2003, the community of Sarayaku lodged an international claim in the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR) alleging violation of their collective rights and asserting that they should have been consulted before the conduct of oil operations within their territories, according to internal legal provisions and those of Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization concerning the Collective Rights of Indigenous Peoples. The Commission, in its judgment of June 27, 2012, found the State liable for violating rights to consultation and cultural identity in allowing private oil exploration activities to take place without popular consultation. This statement was made public in September 2014, and the community received apologies from the Ecuadorian State. Financial compensation is currently being processed. Sarayaku has been home to several indigenous leaders – outstanding as representatives in the Confederation of Ecuadorian Amazon Indigenous Nationalities (COFENIAE), created in 1980, and Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE), created in 1986, or as indigenous politicians and intellectuals, such as Marlon Santi, President of CONAIE in 2007–10, or Carlos Viteri Gualinga, assemblyman for the ruling party and author of several works on Sarayaku.

<sup>3</sup> A wider approach to indigenous thought as related to social, political, and economic demands can be found in Altmann (2013); Becker, (2008); Hidalgo-Capitan et al., editors, (2014).

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