
***Sumak kawsay* beyond Latin America: a proposal for debate and action in South Africa**

PhD. Salimah Valiani

REAL - University of the Witwatersrand
valianisalimah@gmail.com

Recibido: 13 de diciembre de 2019

Aceptado: 20 de mayo de 2020

Much thinking on 'development', or the problematic of the persisting need to build the productive forces for the social, material and spiritual benefit of the majority around the globe remains confined to what I suggest is the project of 'emulation'. 'Progressing' from an economy driven by agricultural production and resource extraction to one driven by industrialization is the most pervasive formulation of the emulation project. Whether emulating a handful of Western European countries or, more recently, a smaller handful of Asian countries, this project is based on the perception of largely apolitical, technical, linear processes that evolve within individual nations unaffected by processes unfolding in other nations. Even notions of sustainable development are engaged by the project of emulation, though allowing for some recognition of the consequences of reifying 'nature' as a 'resource'.

The goal of emulation is an instance of what Boron terms "possibilism", or thinking that lacks imagination or will to see "the future as something distinct from the infinite extension of the present" (2015: 8). Underlining that all thinkers are social actors, Boron argues that "the possibilist" is "defeated ideologically and consequently gives up the battle and simply tries to accommodate to the unfortunate circumstances of the present" (2015: 8).

In South Africa, where I am based, a current example of possibilism is Denel, the state-owned military technology firm and its reported 6.3 billion ZAR export deal -undetailed to the public- involving Egypt's navy and vessels of the German firm, ThyssenKrupp Marine Systems (Jika y Skiti, 2019). Not only is the stated goal to produce and export military goods to Egypt, it is to obtain new technology to attempt to conduct more of such business in the future. As Denel board chairperson, Monhla Hlahla put it, "This is the largest contract. Now imagine if we can repeat such and what we can do with the new technol-

ogy. We are open for business, as long as no one wants to buy Denel.”

Such a limited vision for a public enterprise in a country with a 2015 consumption spending Gini coefficient of 0.63 -a rise from 0.61 in 1996 (World Bank, 2019)- puts into stark relief the stranglehold of the emulation project. It begs the collective question: What should be produced, why, and how? Beyond critiquing the weak morality and ecological devastation inherent in the capitalist world economy driven largely by war, or the limited socioeconomic benefits of importing capital-intensive technology to the south, *sumak kawsay* offers an entirely different compass with which to navigate answers to this question. It also moves far beyond responses possible through the science of sustainability.

Emanating from pre-Colombian philosophy of the Andes, *sumak kawsay* (*buen vivir* in Spanish) can be taken as an approach to the (re)organisation of society -including the economy- in which the central category of analysis is *life*. The fundamental social goal is harmony: between humans and nature, and between individuals and communities, with collective satisfaction of basic needs as key.

As Peña and Uribe (2013) and others emphasise, *carework* -both unpaid and paid labour involved in the cultivation and upkeep of humans- is a basic need in *sumak kawsay*. Human need is seen as multidimensional, consisting of material elements, affection, care, and the interdependency of humans and nature. Vulnerability is embraced rather than denied, and *care* is bidirectional: everybody needs care and is responsible for contributing to its provision. Care for humans and care for nature are fundamentally linked given the human and non-human aspects of reproduction.

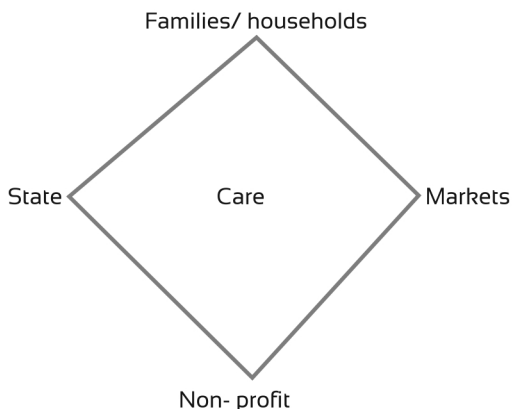
Using the compass of *sumak kawsay*, all aspects of production and reproduction may be considered through the lens of how they contribute to, or prevent, the maintenance of human and non-human life. As definitions and specifications around the central category of *life* vary with different contexts, Gudynas (2011) suggests that the plural form, *buen vivires*, is appropriate. Like Gudynas, Chaves, McIntyre and Verschoor (2018) see these processes as part of the decolonisation of knowledge where space is made for intercultural exchange, drawing on indigenous knowledge and practices. Intuition, emotion and spirituality based on respect for human and non-human life together compose the driving force of social relations, replacing individualism and commodification.

I propose that different formulations of *buen vivires*, reflecting different socioecological contexts around the world, could produce a new area of inquiry to help reorganise *the socioeconomic* so as to (re)build the productive forces to benefit the majority in various countries. Industrial and other activities to

produce material goods may be evaluated through the costs and benefits entailed for human and other life forms. Paid and unpaid carework, and other services, may be evaluated in the same way. Following from this, *time* can be allocated to the activities deemed most beneficial. I apply such an approach to South Africa here, using Shahra Razavi's conceptualisation of reorganising carework as a springboard.

In a 2007 article, Razavi presents *the care diamond*. She sees the reorganisation of various facets of carework between households (family members), the market (employers), the state (various levels), and the non-profit sector (nongovernmental organisations and religious groups). Employers and the state are the financiers. The state is also responsible for regulating care. Central to providing care are households and the non-profit sector.

Figure 1. The Care Diamond - Socialized Carework



Though radical in placing care of humans squarely in the realm of political economy, Razavi's care diamond remains within *possibilist* thinking, assuming the market as a cornerstone in the diamond, along with the household, non-profit sector, and state as other cornerstones. As I have argued extensively (Valiani, 2012) the undervaluing of carework is inherent in the capitalist world economy, even in countries where care is highly socialised via public provision. This is due to the "historical stamp" of wage-less housework as trivial, which Fee argues (1976: 8) laid the roots for women's secondary place in the paid labour force.

Combining Razavi's mapping of human care as a fundamental element of political-economic planning with the centrality of life and basic needs in *sumak kawsay*, I propose overlaying Razavi's diamond of care with a triangle and different nodes so as to arrive at a vision of *economy* that responds to immediate need in South Africa today. The particularities of South Africa I am grappling with include:

- deindustrialisation and a shrinking public sector where between 1995 and 2014, the only area of growth was in the financial and business services sector, rising from 16 to 22 per cent of GDP¹;
- 6.7 million people unemployed, not including those no longer searching for jobs²;
- 9.5 per cent of employed men, and 20.5 per cent of employed women earn less than ZAR 1,000 Rand/month, with the per capita upper-bound poverty line being 779 Rand/month³;
- those employed work the most in Africa: 2209 hours per year (Roser, 2019);
- working days lost to strikes rising from 1776 in 2014, to 1158945 in 2018 - the majority due to private sector wage, benefit and working conditions disputes⁴;
- the top 10 per cent of the population collects 58 per cent of income, and holds 95 per cent of wealth⁵;
- "the most unhealthy nation in the world" ranking in the 2019 Indigo Wellness Index⁶;
- 78 per cent of Grade 3 students unable to read for meaning (Davids, 2019)
- 18,000-22,000 teachers exit the profession annually and 15,000 new teachers join (Arends, 2011);
- historically rooted violence as the key social problem underlying high mortality and premature morbidity (Coovadia *et al.*, 2009);
- water scarcity and more than 6,000 disused, 'ownerless' mines seeping acid and other pollution.

1- Source: stats sa – Department: Statistics South Africa – Republic of Sotuh Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

2- Source: stats sa – Department: Statistics South Africa – Republic of Sotuh Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

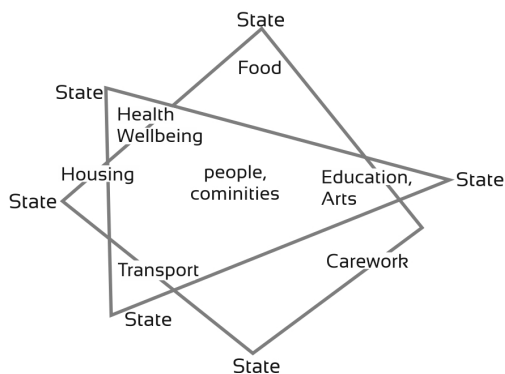
3- Source: stats sa – Department: Statistics South Africa – Republic of Sotuh Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

4- Source: stats sa – Department: Statistics South Africa – Republic of Sotuh Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

5- Source: stats sa – Department: Statistics South Africa – Republic of Sotuh Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

6- Source: Statistics South Africa <http://www.statssa.gov.za>

Figure 2. Economy of Life - Socialised, Care-driven Economy



This vision may have resonance in other countries. But in the spirit of specificity of *sumak kawsay*, I stress that a model is not what I am proposing. Rather, I am proposing a vision of transition out of South Africa's century long history of extractivism and inequality, a transition which could unfold over one to three decades.

Central to the vision, for the various nodes, is collective definition of programs and activities, as well as daily management, at the grassroots, with the state providing coordination and finance. All of this represents a broadened notion of *the public sector*. Without a coordinating role for the state, it is unclear how the necessarily diverse choices and action at the grassroots can be multiplied into coexistence and beyond. With regard to industrialization, rather than a panacea or goal in and of itself, needs-based, culturally appropriate, eco-friendly manufacturing is strategically defined for each node.

Food

Food is arguably the most basic element of building a country's productive forces; nutritious food and access to it allow individuals to live richer lives and contribute more effectively to society.

Malnutrition has been identified as one of four epidemics facing South Africa (Coovadia *et al.*, 2009). This is rooted in a history of dislocating the majority from land and replacing health-sustaining, indigenous food cultivation with industrial agriculture and meat production.

In terms of land, the principal basis of food production, an estimated 13

tons/ha/year of soil is lost to grain crop production in South Africa, which is much higher than the natural soil formation rate of less than 5 tons/ha/year (Abrahams, 2017). Concerted effort is required to rehabilitate soil and implement life-sustaining, organic farming, which, in turn, requires research and training in indigenous and place-specific, practical knowledge. As economic historian turned farmer, Yvette Abrahams (2017: 12) puts it, given depleted soil and climate change, farming that “rationally productivity in accordance with what the ecology can manage” is key to food security in South Africa.

Abrahams envisions small scale, labour and knowledge intensive seven layer farming as the means to producing carbon neutral food, other basic crops, and sustainable fuel. All of this would make way for small scale agro-processing. Given that in 2014, 228 000 women and 514 000 men were employed in agriculture, Abrahams estimates an additional 222 000 new jobs could be created merely by switching from large to small scale production. If all 122 million hectares of arable land were used in this manner, some one million new jobs could be created (Abrahams, 2017, 16-17).

Similarly, Samir Amin (2016) emphasises the goal of *food sovereignty* as the basis for reviving agriculture and using agriculture to drive manufacturing for all countries with rural populations of 30 per cent or more. Like many countries of the south, South Africa is not self-sufficient in food. Linking back to industrialisation, food sovereignty was not the goal in South African and other import substitution strategies of the 1960s and 70s.

Health and wellbeing

Decommodified universal healthcare is one part of a comprehensive response to poor population health in South Africa (for full elaboration, see Valiani, 2020). Another is ongoing, health literacy groups tailored to the varying mental and physical health needs in communities and including traditional healing methods. Over and above these, improvements in food, housing and transport are essential, along with environmental clean-up. As with the restructuring of food production, the public sector must take the lead in investing in environmental clean-up, including place-based research and training. The latter includes tracing the owners of disused mines to collect long overdue reparations to fund clean-up work.⁷

7- The broad question of financing is seen here as technical, to be resolved after the overall vision of what to produce and how is collectively determined.

Housing

In 1994, government's housing white paper estimated an urban housing backlog of 1.5 million units which was increasing by 178,000 units yearly due to population growth. These numbers excluded serviced plots of land and hostels that needed upgrading with water and other infrastructure. Statistics South Africa's 2017 General Household Survey found that 2.2 million households lived in shacks or shanties in informal settlements or in backyards — a figure similar to the backlog of 2.1 million units quoted by the Minister of Human Settlements in 2018.

Currently a responsibility of the state, housing and basic infrastructure can be reinvigorated if shifted from state subcontracting to private firms to the state financing grassroots-driven construction. Public funding can be redirected to research and training in eco-friendly materials and designs appropriate for climate conditions of various South African locales, with implementation by those living in locales.

Culturally appropriate, eco-friendly household appliance manufacturing is another aspect of housing which would improve quality of life, particularly for females carrying out most of home upkeep. Research, development and training in this area would contribute to strategic industrialization.

Once basic housing and infrastructure -including building homes to eliminate overcrowding and reconstructing those homes containing asbestos- have been concluded, energies and skills gained may be shifted to the building of schools, community centres, music halls and other housing for collective use.

Transport

Transport is an instance where strategic industrialization is crucial, requiring investment in research, development and training. Time -an important resource for each individual and society as a whole- is currently lost in large quantities due to transport shortages and inadequacies faced by the majority.

Investment can be directed to manufacturing bicycles with child-carrying accessories, an eco-friendly, healthy form of transport for shorter distances. For longer distances, eco-friendly, collective transport could be manufactured. Extractive activity, including retrieving metals from waste -as per Fioramonti's (2018) vision- could be directed toward the required raw materials. These forms would rule out much of the use of environmentally destructive automobiles, the production of which continues to be dominated by a small number of companies globally.

Education and arts

From early childhood education to tertiary, a major goal of education would be to teach the theory and practice necessary for the production and reproduction outlined here. The rationale and history leading to the economy of life would form another major thrust of formal education. Combined, these would constitute a sound step toward decolonizing knowledge.

Such a curriculum would require collective, ongoing, construction and re-construction. Education would take form in mother tongue languages of instruction, long neglected in South Africa despite international research demonstrating that learners require at least six years of instruction in their own languages prior to shifting to world dominant languages.

The arts are another aspect of education and communication that could be made accessible to all, on a lifelong basis. Linking back to health, Tsitsi Dangarembga (2018) envisions creative industries as key means of undoing intergenerational trauma and social division throughout Africa.

Carework, labour, time and wages

Much is made of Africa's large global share of youth and its economic potential. Rarely considered is the paid and unpaid carework fundamental to shaping young human beings into social actors. Concerted collective effort is needed to assure this foundational work is performed well, in a sustainable manner.

In South Africa, women on average spend 48 minutes daily on unpaid person care while men spend an average of five minutes daily. Women spend 252 minutes daily on unpaid housework, also part of person care, while men spend 86 minutes daily. Creating more public institutions to provide care -crèches, care for the mentally and chronically ill, care for the elderly, including training for workers and regulation of these institutions- will help assure adequate and sustainable care to all in need.

An entirely new approach is also needed. Radically re-interpreting a 1986 United Nations recommendation that employers allow workers flexible time to perform unpaid reproductive labour without penalty or salary reductions, all workers in the economy of life would have two hours of an eight hour workday to perform carework. In other words, each worker would spend six hours producing at the workplace and two hours producing care in the home or/and community. The importance, value and skills of carework would be imparted to all from early childhood education onward, encouraging collective responsibility via a non-gendered division of labour in this area.

Wage levels would be set at regionally adjusted living wages. All workers would be paid for a full day's work, though spending only six hours in work-

places. To help assure adequate production levels, daily production in workplaces would occur in two shifts: for instance, one extending from 7 h to 13 h, the other from 13 h to 19 h.

Caveats

The economy of life sketched here would constitute the bulk of the public sector. Private firms could continue to operate but would have to compete with the public sector for labour. Such competition has the potential to strengthen private sector wages and working conditions which have been worsening as evidenced by the massive rise in working days lost to strikes in the private sector since 2014.

Again, rather than a model, this vision is a proposal requiring broad debate, detailed fleshing out and strategising. Connecting several issues and needs, the economy of life could be a means to unite individuals as well as existing movements including but not limited to women organising against violence, the Unemployed Workers Assembly, Abahlali baseMjondolo, Mining Communities United in Action, and Equal Education.

Marta Harnecker (2017) speaks of the need for a *new revolutionary subject*. She contrasts Brazil with Venezuela; where Bolsa Família was a plan in which millions of poor Brazilians passively received a gift from the state -not unlike social grants in South Africa- while in Venezuela the emphasis is on creating spaces where people discuss their needs and plan to resolve them. Similar to what Harnecker argues is at the essence of the communes, communal and worker councils defending 21st century socialism in Venezuela, a new revolutionary subject needs nurturing in South Africa to create the collective power that can elaborate, erect and defend the economy of life.

Bibliographic references

Abrahams, Y. (2017, July). The future of agriculture: absorbing labour in agriculture through the creation of community (Paper presentation). Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection Priority Research Project Seminar, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Amin, S. (2016, April 17). The concept of a national sovereign project of development in the perspective of a negotiated globalisation. Retrieved from: <https://www.facebook.com/notes/samir-amin/111-s-a-the-concept-of-a-national-sovereign-project/797165230384072>

Arends, F. (2011). Teacher shortages? The need for more reliable information at school level. *Review of Education, Skills Development and Innovation*.

Human Sciences Research Council. Retrieved from: <http://www.hsrc.ac.za/uploads/pageContent/2702/RESDI%20newsletter,%20November%202010%20issue.pdf>

Boron, A. (2015). Buen vivir (sumak kawsay) and the dilemmas of the left governments of Latin America. In Boron, A. *América Latina en la geopolítica del imperialismo* (Translation Richard Fidler) Buenos Aires: Ediciones Luxemburg (2012). Retrieved from: <https://climateandcapitalism.com/2015/08/31/buen-vivir-and-dilemmas-of-latin-american-left/>.

Chaves, M., Macintyre, T., & Verschoor, G. (2018). Radical ruralities in practice: Negotiating buen vivir in a Colombian network of sustainability. *Journal of Rural Studies*, (59), 153-162.

Coovadia H., Jewkes R., Barron P., Sanders, D., & McIntyre D. (2009). The health and health system of South Africa: historical roots of current public health challenges. *The Lancet*, (374), 817-834.

Dangarembga, T. (2018, March). Nervous conditions: The burden of race, class and gender in the construction of the post-colonial order. Mapungubwe Annual Lecture, Johannesburg, South Africa.

Davids, N. (2019). Solving SA's literacy crisis. University of Cape Town News. Retrieved from: <https://www.news.uct.ac.za/article/-2019-01-11-solving-sas-literacy-crisis>.

Fee, T. (1976). Domestic Labour: An Analysis of Housework and its Relation to the Productive Process. *Review of Radical Political Economics*, 8(1), 1-8. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1177%2F048661347600800101>

Fioramonti, L. (2018). The future of mineral mining: Pathways for a wellbeing economy approach. In S. Valiani (Ed.) *The Future of Mining in South Africa: Sunset or Sunrise?* Mapungubwe Institute for Strategic Reflection (pp. 358-380).

Gudynas, E. (2011). Buen Vivir: germinando alternativas al desarrollo. *América Latina en Movimiento*, (462): 1-20. Retrieved from: <http://gudynas.com/publicaciones/articulos/GudynasBuenVivirGerminandoALAI11.pdf>

Harnecker, M. (2017). A New Revolutionary Subject: Marta Harnecker interviewed by Tassos Tsakiroglou. *Monthly Review*, 68(11), 58-61.

Jika, T., & Skiti, S. (2019, November 8). Denel's secret R6.3bn export deal. Mail and Guardian. Retrieved from: <https://mg.co.za/article/2019-11-08-00-denels-secret-r63bn-export-deal>

Peña, X., & Uribe, C. (2013). *Economía del cuidado: valoración y visibilización del trabajo no remunerado*. Lima: Instituto de Estudios Peruanos.

Razavi, S. (2007). The Political and Social Economy of Care in Development Context, Conceptual Issues, Research Questions and Policy Options. United Nations Research Institute for Social Development. Retrieved

from:[http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/\(httpAuxPages\)/2D-BE6A93350A7783C12573240036D5A0/\\$file/Razavi-paper.pdf](http://www.unrisd.org/80256B3C005BCCF9/(httpAuxPages)/2D-BE6A93350A7783C12573240036D5A0/$file/Razavi-paper.pdf)

Roser, M. (2019). Working Hours. Retrieved from: <https://ourworldindata.org/working-hours>

United Nations. (1986). Report of the World Conference to Review and Appraise the Achievements of the United Nations Decade for Women: Equality, Development and Peace. Retrieved from: <https://www.un.org/womenwatch/daw/beijing/otherconferences/Nairobi/Nairobi%20Full%20Optimized.pdf>.

Valiani, S. (2012). Rethinking unequal exchange: the global integration of nursing labour markets. Toronto: University of Toronto Press.

Valiani, S. (2020). Structuring sustainable universal health care in South Africa. *International Journal of Health Services*, 50(2), 234-245.

World Bank. (2019). *The World Bank in South Africa - Overview*. Retrieved from: <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>