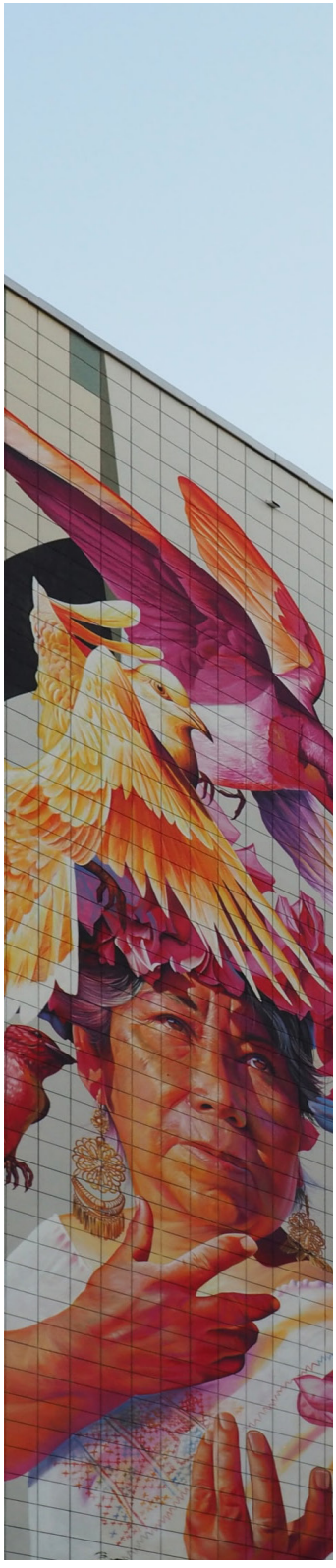
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

ISSUE BRIEF 12
April 2022

Going Beyond the Social

COMMUNITARIAN IMAGINARIES AS INSPIRATIONS FOR RETHINKING THE ECO-SOCIAL CONTRACT?

This brief explores three communitarian imaginaries, or world views, as potential inspirations for a new eco-social contract. What are the benefits, but also the potential pitfalls, of applying the principles of *Ubuntu* (southern Africa), *Eco-swaraj* (South Asia) and *Sumak kawsay* (Latin America) to rethinking economic models, life systems and forms of solidarity in order to bring more ecological and social justice to the 21st century?



UNRISD's call for a new eco-social contract is based on the recognition of the failures of the 20th century social contract, which did not benefit everyone in the global North, and much less so in the global South. It outlines a bold vision of a new eco-social contract for the 21st century—based on human rights for all; larger freedoms for all; and transformation of economies and societies to halt climate change and environmental destruction—if the UN's 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is to be realized.

Yet, as Gabriele Dietrich (Dietrich 1994) noted decades ago in critiquing the notion of expanding the economic pie for more inclusive development in India, the metaphor of the pie itself was problematic in a country where most people could barely afford rotis (flatbreads, a staple in parts of India). The eco-social contract recognizes the importance of going beyond expanding the pie and trickle-down economics and acknowledges the need for participatory processes to enact economic and social transformations through legislations and policies that include a contract with nature and new forms of solidarity. Still, old metaphors of contract and development, however sustainable and inclusive, remain. So, what might a roti-based rethinking look like?

This brief reviews three communitarian imaginaries from different areas of the globe which could function as potential inspirations for a roti-based, or bottom-up, radical reimagining. Communitarianism is a world view which sees human beings as social and shaped by multiple communities of which they are part. Hence, moral and political judgment, policies and institutions should reflect this understanding. But even within communitarian thinking there are different conceptions. For example, the *Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador* (CONAIE) defines it as follows:

> "Communitarianism has to do with the territorial, the political and the cultural, it is a different economic model and life system, it is the principle of life of all the original Nations and Peoples, based on reciprocity, solidarity, complementarity, equity and self-administration. This is why communitarianism constitutes a regime of property and systems of economic and socio-political organization of a collective character that furthers the active participation and the well-being of all members" (*Confederación de Nacionalidades Indígenas del Ecuador*, CONAIE 2013: 29 cited in Altman 2020:753).

Unlike the human-centred approach of the global North, this definition offers a relational world view that goes beyond the social to encompass economic, political and cultural relations based on reciprocity, respect and equity with all living and non-living entities within a territory. Such a capacious understanding of communitarianism is common to the principles of *Ubuntu* (Xhosa for shared humanity), *Eco-swaraj* (Hindi for self-rule) and *Sumak kawsay* (Quechua for living in harmony). In these approaches neither the individual nor the community precede each other but are produced in reciprocal relations.

Yet, communities are not homogenous and marginalized groups, such as women, are often not accorded the same respect and equity as dominant groups, making social justice scholars and activists, and particularly feminists, wary of communitarianism. Other scholars have noted that mobilizing communitarian principles for development purposes can amount to the appropriation or recolonization of knowledges from specific historical and geographical contexts. While these concerns are justified, our current moment calls for careful consideration of these conceptions in respectful dialogue with the communities in which they have animated political struggles for dignity, autonomy and land; reflections which are all the more necessary as integrated world capitalism (Guattari 2001) threatens the survival of all species, including our own.

"...a relational world view that goes beyond the social to encompass economic, political and cultural relations based on reciprocity, respect and equity with all living and non-living entities within a territory."

Ubuntu

In southern and eastern Africa, communitarianism has been associated with concepts such as *Ubuntu*, often defined as humanness or human dignity (LeGrange 2012) and referring to shared humanity and interrelatedness (Waghid, 2014). There are various ways of referring to this concept in different African languages:

> "*Ubuntu* in Nguni languages (Xhosa/Zulu/Ndebele), *uMunthu* in Chichewa, *Botho* in Tswana, *Vumunhu* in Changani, *Utu* in Swahili, or *Unhu/Hunhu* in Shona" (Mawere and van Stam 2016:290).

Despite the linguistic differences, there is a shared sense of "togetherness", as expressed in the Xhosa saying "*umuntu ngumuntu ngabanye Bantu,*" translated as "an individual's humanity is ideally expressed in relationship with others and in relationships individuality is expressed" (LeGrange 2012:61).

Thus, the individual and the community are not autonomous or separate entities at odds with each other, as is often posited in liberal philosophies, but are in relation with each other and share common goals of togetherness and love for each other (Mawere and van Stam 2016). As Ngcoya (2015) notes, *Ubuntu* begins with the equality of all humans and therefore all those who are considered human are entitled to rights, justice and fairness, not only those who may be members of a particular community. Equally, rights, justice and fairness are not bestowed by a pre-existing state but through becoming a human being via one's relationships with others: "Giving and receiving, (a) reciprocal process of mutual recognition (is) important to the cultivation of selves...Personhood is achieved via one's responsibilities to the self, household, and community" (Ngcoya 2015:254).

Community extends to *muntu* (beings with intelligence) and *hintu* (beings that are inanimate) and includes ancestors and God via the concept of *ukama* (Murove 2009 cited in LeGrange 2012). *Ubuntu* therefore emphasizes the interconnectivity of humans, the environment, ancestors and God (LeGrange, 2012). Cultivating *Ubuntu* means maintaining the relationships towards all these entities with respect, hospitality and generosity.

Mobilizing *Ubuntu*?

What happens when Indigenous knowledge is taken up and applied to contemporary contexts? The example of South Africa has some celebratory, but also cautionary elements.

Ubuntu was mobilized and contested in political struggles in South Africa in the 1970s. The Inkatha National Cultural Liberation Movement formulated *Ubuntu-Botho* for school curricula but most teachers and students resisted it because they were opposed to Inkatha's conservative ideology and interpretation of it. But when Stephen Bantu Bike integrated it into the fight against apartheid it was embraced by many (Ngcoya 2015).

In post-apartheid South Africa, *Ubuntu* has been mobilized by the state, civil society and corporate actors. The state has mandated that it be taught in school as Indigenous knowledge. As McDonald (2010 cited in Ngcoya 2015) notes, it is sometimes even used to express the state's commitment to social justice, even though most of the neoliberal policies in post-apartheid South Africa have not resulted in justice for most people. Similarly, in the corporate sector, marketing materials refer to "*Ubuntu* capitalism and *Ubuntu* consultants", which violates the very spirit of *Ubuntu*. On the other hand, when in 2008 a wave of "Afrophobia" led to violent attacks and killings of migrants and refugees from other southern African countries, organizations like the International Women's Forum drew upon *Ubuntu* and one's responsibilities to others to stop such atrocities and support the migrants (Ngcoya 2015).

As these contemporary examples demonstrate, when *Ubuntu* is mobilized instrumentally and rhetorically but without "cultivating *Ubuntu*", it only exacerbates existing, systemic inequalities. But it also suggests that engaging with these imaginaries is not about going back in time, contrary to what some critics say. Rather, a variety of actors draw upon such imaginaries to call people to action for social justice in the present. There is, then, some reason to remain hopeful about a creative recovery of *Ubuntu* as a social value that can shape social transformation in South Africa (Eliastram 2015).

Eco-Swaraj or Radical Ecological Democracy

Eco-swaraj (ecological self-rule or self-reliance), as conceptualized by Kothari (2014), combines the concept of *swaraj* with ecology to create an alternative paradigm for ecological and social justice in the 21st century. By upholding the primacy of nature rather than humans, it puts humans in their place within nature, and humans' self-rule is thus linked to that of nature.

In so doing it builds on Gandhi's model of development based on *gram swaraj* (village self-rule), India's traditional village governance systems with *gram panchayats* (village councils) as the basis for developing a social contract for local, self-sustaining economies. The *eco-swaraj* conception, however, goes further by putting the self in relation to others and nature. The relational self of *eco-swaraj* is multidimensional, social, cultural, intellectual and spiritual. Together with the community, it is at the centre of local governance and economy. Kothari therefore defines it as radical ecological democracy akin to Shiva's Earth Democracy, "... a new pact with the earth, as members of the earth family, a pact to create a new non-violent economy and Earth Democracy" (Shiva 2016:208).

Eco-swaraj thus begins with ecological sustainability in which humans, as part of nature, ensure its thriving. Given its origin in local struggles for equity and justice, particularly around land, gender and

climate change, *eco-swaraj* emphasizes rights and representation for all. It focuses on social well-being and justice that is multidimensional and inclusive of rights for all; direct political and economic democracy in which individuals and communities decide at the local level what ensures their well-being; and cultural and knowledge plurality in which diverse forms of knowledges are valued and in dialogue for the good of self-reliant communities.

> "Ecological Swaraj is an evolving worldview, not a blueprint set in stone. In its very process of democratic grassroots evolution, it forms an alternative to top-down ideologies and formulations, even as it takes on board the relevant elements of such ideologies. This is the basis of its transformative potential" (Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2014:368).

Use and abuse of ancient texts

Other scholars in India, such as Dhiman (2016), have sought inspiration from the spiritual vision of *Vedānta*, the non-dual philosophy in the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā Sanskrit texts, to address the current crises. In these texts, all life is understood to be one limitless reality, and one sees oneself in everyone and everyone in oneself. Thus, the well-being or "bliss" of the individual is coterminous with social harmony. As such, relations among humans, and also between humans and non-humans, are defined as "I-We" rather than "I-Thou". Like *Ubuntu*, this feeling of oneness must also be cultivated through praxis. This often focuses on individual actions such as vegetarianism and practice of yoga *asanas* which are inspired by nature. But these individual actions are usually not linked to collective action nor do they focus on socio-economic and political democratic practices. Rather there has been a commodification of such practices, which—again as for *Ubuntu*—violates their very principles.

Even more troubling has been the use of ancient Sanksrit texts by nationalist governments to construct Hindu nations. Not only the Upaniṣads and the Bhagavad Gītā, but also ancient Sanskrit concepts like *vasudhaiva kutumbakam* (the whole world is one family), *jivanmukti* (embodied liberation), and *brahmisthiti* (state of being established in brahman) have been mobilized in this way, in gross violation of the spirit of these conceptions. As a result, grassroots movements which do not associate themselves with ethno-nationalism tend to focus on local struggles rather than Sanskrit texts for their inspirations.

Sumak Kawsay

While *Sumak kawsay* (living in harmony or life in plenty as translated by CONAIE) or *Alli kawsay* (living well) have been part of Indigenous imaginaries for centuries, they have been mobilized as political concepts for local, decolonial struggles rather than ecological ones more recently. In Ecuador, *Sumak kawsay* originated in the Amazonian province of Pastaza, while *Alli kawsay* became dominant in the highland areas. These concepts also appear in earlier Indigenous movements of the 1930s and 1970s in Ecuador (Altmann 2020).

Each formulation is linked to specific territories and comprises three interconnected principles.

1. *Sumak allpa* (land without evil), the basic principle that links human beings and nature through use of territory in equilibrium, which can only be achieved via decentralization;
2. *Sumak kawsay* (clear and harmonious life), which regulates egalitarian, reciprocal and communitarian principles;
3. *Sacha kawsai riksina*, or how to "understand-comprehend-know-convince oneself-be sure-see" (Silva 2003:86 cited in Altmann 2017:796). This is a place-based concept that links a community to its land. Consequently, "there cannot be life in harmony without a land in harmony as its material and spiritual basis" (Altmann 2020:90).

Sumak kawsay, while place based, is a dynamic conception open to interaction with other ideas and visions—and expressed using different terms in different places—so long as the relational and harmonious core values are maintained, as the quote below suggests.

> "We have been in constant movement, allowing us and the other forms of life to continue their circle. *Mushuk allpa*, the land in permanent renovation, has been the fundamental premise of *Sumak kawsay*.... This living together and harmony taught us to understand the multiple dimensions that compose the *Sumak allpa*." (Sarayaku 2003:3-4 cited in Altman 2017:755).

There are similar conceptions among non-Amazonian Quechua communities such as *omepo warenemente kiwina amopa* in Wao Tereo, and *pneler nunka* meaning "good land" in Shuar Chicham (Altman 2017: 796). And it was through the Indigenous movements of the 1990s and after 2000 that *Sumak kawsay* began to circulate regionally and globally.

Reductionist appropriation

While *Sumak kawsay* was mobilized as part of Indigenous communities' struggles for autonomy and power, when the constituent assemblies of Bolivia (2006-2009) and Ecuador (2007-2008) incorporated it into their new constitutions, it began to travel elsewhere as part of the discourse on alternatives to development. Given *Sumak kawsay*'s focus on living in harmony with land and the other species living there, it became easily reduced to the ecological and lost its link with the Indigenous communities' struggles for decolonization and autonomy. Indigenous communities both welcome the attention to their cosmologies and knowledges but are also disheartened by its reduction to only an ecological concept. As critics (such as Benalcázar and de la Rosa 2021) note, it has been appropriated as a de-territorialized and universal vision of a good life, and re-named "*buen vivir*". It has been removed from the specificities of local struggles, the very basis of their existence, and has morphed into a technocratic concept.

"All three imaginaries are eco-centric as opposed to anthropocentric, in the way that they uphold the primacy of nature rather than humans."

What Rolling Out a Roti-Based Rethinking Entails

The appropriations and misappropriations of the imaginaries outlined above remind us of our ethical responsibility as we reflect on how place-based, communitarian conceptions can inform global projects such as a new eco-social contract. With due caution and respect, there are lessons that can be drawn from these different ways being in relation with human and non-human entities.

All three imaginaries are eco-centric as opposed to anthropocentric, in the way that they uphold the primacy of nature rather than humans. They are also based on a relational ontology, which means that relations with the self, others—both inside and outside the community—and non-humans are based on reciprocity, generosity, respect and equity. The relational ontology also requires the cultivation of the self and of socio-economic and political organizations that ensure equity and justice for all. The eco-social contract shares this focus on developing new institutions based on equity and justice. Given our current integrated world capitalism dominated by the imaginaries and organizations of the global North, local communitarian imaginaries might seem utopian. Yet, they gesture to several issues for consideration.

First, if we are to take the relational world view seriously, then it needs to be reflected in our language and metaphors. For example, the term "eco-social" connects two spheres that were seen as distinct. In so doing, it moves in the direction of *Ubuntu, Eco-swaraj* and *Sumak kawsay* which do not have an anthropocentric world view in which humans and their socio-cultural and political organizations are seen as separate from non-human entities.

Second, all three raise the conundrum of scale. The local is the terrain where these world views originate and are actualized in dialogue with the community. Yet, the local, as Massey (1994) reminds us, is never just local but always constituted by extra-local social relations. Nonetheless, the local and global logics cannot be put together without thinking through the ways in which articulations among them might be possible. This is particularly important as communication technologies give us a false sense about the possibilities of communications across local communities. But these technologies are not available equitably nor are local communities homogenous.

Finally, all three specifically entail a fundamental rethinking of the self as relational, in which a person's relations extend to human and non-human entities alike. Such a rethinking would be critical in restructuring our socio-economic and political organizations to be equitable, fair and just to all humans and other living and non-living entities.

References

Altmann, Philip. 2020. "The Commons as Colonisation—The Well-Intentioned Appropriation of Buen Vivir." *Bulletin of Latin American Research* 39(1):83–97.

—. 2017. "Sumak Kawsay as an element of local decolonization in Ecuador." *Latin American Research Review* 52(5):749-759.

Benalcázar, Patricio Carpio, and Francisco Javier Ullán de La Rosa. 2021. "The institutionalized Buen Vivir: a new hegemonic political paradigm for Ecuador." *Revista Brasileira de Política Internacional* 64(1).

Dhiman, Satinder K. 2016. "Ethics and Spirituality of Sustainability: What Can We All Do?" *Journal of Values-based Leadership* 9(1): 135–.

Dietrich, Gabriele. 1994. *Reflections on the Women's Movement in India: Religion, Ecology, Development*. New Delhi: Horizon.

Eliastram, John. L. B. 2015. "Exploring Ubuntu discourse in South Africa: Loss, liminality and hope." *Verbum et Ecclesia* 36(2).

Etzioni, Amitai. 2017. "Communitarian Antidotes to Populism." *Society (New Brunswick)* 54(2):95–99.

Guattari, Felix. 2001. *The Three Ecologies*. London: The Athlone Press.

Kothari, Ashish. 2014. "Radical Ecological Democracy: A path forward for India and beyond". *Development* 57(1):36-45.

Kothari, Ashish, Federico Demaria, and Alberto Acosta. 2014. "Buen Vivir, degrowth and ecological swaraj: Alternatives to sustainable development and green economy." *Development* 57(3-4):362-375.

Le Grange, Lesley. 2012. "Ubuntu, Ukama and the Healing of Nature, Self and Society." *Educational philosophy and theory* 44: 56–67.

Massey, Doreen. 1994. *Space, place, and gender*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Mawere, Munyaradzi and Gertjan van Stam. 2016. "Ubuntu/Unhu as Communal Love: Critical Reflections on the Sociology of Ubuntu and Communal Life in Sub-Saharan Africa." In *Violence, Politics and Conflict Management in Africa*, 287–. Bamenda and Buea: Langaa Research and Publishing Common Initiative Group.

Ngcoya, Mvuselelo. 2015. "Ubuntu: Toward an Emancipatory Cosmopolitanism?" *International Political Sociology* 9(3): 248–262.

Shiva, Vandana. 2016. *Earth democracy: Justice, sustainability and peace*. London: Zed Books.

Vivekananda International Foundation. 2019. *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam: Relevance of India's ancient thinking to contemporary strategic reality*. New Delhi: Vivekananda International Foundation.

Waghid, Yusef. 2014. *African Philosophy of Education Reconsidered: On Being Human*. London: Routledge.

About Issue Briefs

This Issue Brief was prepared by Manisha Desai. Dunahay Pereyra provided research assistance. UNRISD Issue Briefs flag ideas and contribute knowledge that can improve the quality of development debates, policy and practice.

ISSN 2518-6817

Palais des Nations
1211 Geneva 10
Switzerland
info.unrisd@un.org

UNRISD
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development