

How to Imagine a Good Life? What *Buen Vivir* Means to the German Degrowth and Climate Justice Movement

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Introduction

In the conflicts about the socio-ecological crisis, critical actors from civil society and academia are positioning themselves with demands for fundamental alternatives to the primacy of economic growth. The comprehensive critique of the status quo initiated a process of searching for models of society beyond the paradigm of development and modernization theory. Within these post-development debates, the concept of *Buen Vivir* (“good life” or “living well”) has a particular position, as it was developed in the context of indigenous movements in Latin America. The inherent decolonial approach makes *Buen Vivir* an attractive point of reference for seeking alternatives to the growth-based development model commonly understood as “Western.” In our paper, we focus on the adaptation of *Buen Vivir* by the German degrowth and climate justice movement. In doing so, we elaborate to what extent, for what reasons, and despite what challenges the movement actors have used the concept to create attractive counter-hegemonic imaginations of the good life.

Following Acharya (2004), we assume that ideas find their way into other discourses only if they are, first, translated and, second, actively re-localized. We understand translation as a reception of ideas that retains a referential and/or explanatory character. Re-localization goes beyond that. Re-localizing a notion implies “developing significant congruence with local beliefs and practices” (Acharya 2004, 245). Acharya defines the criterion for successful localization as follows: “

Localization is indicated when an extant institution responds to a foreign idea by functional or membership expansion and creates new policy instruments to pursue its new tasks or goals without supplanting its original goals and institutional arrangements (Acharya 2004, 253).

In the case of the movement actors we studied, this includes integrating an idea into the political interpretive framework and linking it to articulated demands.

After explaining our method, we summarize the origins of *Buen Vivir* in Ecuador and Bolivia and the globalization of the concept in the 2000s. Afterward, the introduction of *Buen Vivir* into German discourses will be analyzed following three theses: 1. Political struggles have influenced the attention to *Buen Vivir*. 2. *Buen Vivir* has provided a strategic and political opportunity for social movements in Germany. 3. *Buen Vivir* has remained an abstract reference for the German degrowth and climate justice movement and has not been successfully localized.

Methods

The empirical basis of our paper consists of references to *Buen Vivir* in texts, event announcements, and other written sources of the German degrowth and climate justice movement. Furthermore, we conducted expert interviews and a group discussion with relevant translators and localizers. Those had a substantial impact on translating *Buen Vivir* to German discourses and/or have actively participated in the reflections on the *Buen Vivir* discourse within the degrowth and climate justice movement. We coded the interviews with MAXQDA to structure and condense the interpretations and explanations of our interview partners. On the one hand, the coding followed a deductive logic. It consistently related to our research question and was theoretically sensitized by taking up the medium-range theory by Acharya (2004). On the other hand, it followed an inductive logic since the concrete code families were formulated closely to the empirical material and were constantly developed further during the coding itself. The interpretation of the collected data aimed—in the sense of abduction (Strauss and Corbin 1990)—at discovering combinations of characteristics for which no explanation or rule has been available so far. In the following, we use the abbreviations listed in tables 1 and 2 at passages in the text where our arguments are based on the interview material.

Table 1. List of extensive expert interviews

Name	Affiliation and relevance	Abbreviation
I.L.A. collective	Group of young activists, publishes books on socio-ecological transformation (including <i>The good life for all. Ways to the solidary mode of living</i> , translation PA & TK)	ILA
Josephine Koch	Member of YASunidos Ecuador (2013-2014), founder and coordinator of YASunidos Germany, activist in the climate justice campaign “Ende Gelände”	JK
Miriam Lang	Member of the Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo, former head of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation’s regional office in Quito (Ecuador), author on the topic	ML
Tadzio Müller	Long-time activist within the climate justice movement	TM
Thomas Fatheuer	Former head of the Heinrich Böll Foundation’s regional office in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil), author on the topic	TF
Ulrich Brand	Member of the Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo, fellow of the Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, author on the topic	UB
Ute Koczy	Member of the German Green Party	UK
Young Friends of the Earth Berlin	Group of young activists, promotes “the good life for all”	YFE

Table 2. List of short interviews and other forms of exchange (personal meeting, mail contact, etc.)

Name	Affiliation	Abbreviation
Alberto Acosta	Former President of the Constituent Assembly of Ecuador	AA
Carmen Ibáñez	Free University Berlin	CI
Julia Schünzel	Solidaridad e.V.	JS
Marco Rieckmann	University Vechta	MR
Michal Osterweil	University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill	MO
Phillip Knobloch	Catholic University Eichstätt-Ingolstadt	PK
Rodrigo Nunes	Pontificia Universidad Católica de Río de Janeiro	RN
Silke Helfrich	Commons Institute	SH
Stefan Knauss	Solidaridad e.V.	SK

***Buen Vivir*—From an Indigenous Movement Concept to a Globally Discussed Notion**

Sumak Kawsay, or *Buen Vivir*, has a long history in the indigenous movement of Ecuador. Since the 1920s, indigenous organizations have formed a social movement in the modern sense. While their immediate interest was to improve their socio-economic situation, fight for their rights, and push for agrarian reform, those organizations also took into account the ethnic and antiracist background of their struggle. In this context, the term *Alli Kawsay* (another version of *Buen Vivir*) appeared in 1939 and 1940 in a newspaper of the indigenous movement, referring to the good life Indigenous peoples lived in the past due to the knowledge they had. This should be recovered through education in indigenous schools and would allow emancipation in the future. In the 1980s, the Amazonian version of *Buen Vivir*, *Sumak Kawsay*, appeared in the context of a comprehensive government literacy and primary education effort. Still, during that time, it connected education to indigenous knowledge and was related to the struggle for land and an ethnic organization of the Indigenous peoples (Inuca Lechón 2017).

The concept was inserted into the political discourse of the movement in 1992 when the “Plan Amazanga” of the indigenous organizations of the Pastaza province discussed the idea of sustainable development and presented their strategy for an autonomous self-management in their territories around the concept of *Sumak Kawsay* (Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2019; Krüger 2018). In 1993, the corresponding concept in Aymara, *Suma Qamaña (Vivir Bien)*, was introduced by Simón Yampara into Bolivian debates (Nikolaus 2012, 4). *Buen Vivir* had become a political concept that contains precise demands and is part of the broader discourse of the indigenous movement. It is linked to the demand for a plurinational state with territorial autonomy for indigenous nationalities. However, it goes beyond these demands and fills the idea of autonomies with specific content: *Buen Vivir* is a life in balance with oneself, the community, the wider society, and nature. It is based on ancestral ways to maintain this balance but open to modern technology and foreign ideas that could help in this endeavor. Yet, it was not until 2000 that the strong political version of this concept was discussed nationwide (Inuca Lechón 2017, 171), and it was only since around 2008 that the national indigenous organizations employed it. By then, the initiative had already passed to other actors. *Buen Vivir* plays a significant role in the new constitutions of Ecuador (2008) and Bolivia (2009). This led to international attention.

The worldwide spread of *Buen Vivir* was related to translation processes that involved an abstraction from the uses in Ecuador and Bolivia, namely the centrality of territory and indigenous cosmovisions (Krüger 2018). Instead, connections to global discourses critical to growth-based development models were highlighted. In 2009, the first influential texts in English and German appeared. Alberto Acosta, president of the Ecuadorian constituent assembly until shortly before its end and, afterward, an influential critic of the government, published a text on *Buen Vivir* in English in an issue of the journal *Critical Currents* of October 2009, edited by Ulrich Brand and Tadzio Müller (Acosta 2009b). The journal addresses an academic-activist audience and, thus, has prepared the ground for two overlapping reception strands. In his text, Acosta interprets the inclusion of *Buen Vivir* in the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008 as an important step in acknowledging the presence of indigenous nationalities and the rights of nature. He connects it to post-development and the rejection of a growth-oriented economy (Acosta 2009a, 110) and defines *Buen Vivir* as “a harmonious relationship between society and nature” (Acosta 2009b, 111).

In German, debates on *Buen Vivir* were first presented in an issue of the Austrian journal *Juridikum* in late 2009. It focused on the recent constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia and the discussions held during the conference of the Austrian Institute for Latin American Studies in July 2009 (Schilling-Vacaflor, Koza, and Schacherreiter 2009, 193). Acosta defines *Buen Vivir* in his contribution to the issue as a critique of dominant theories of development that surges from the Indigenous peoples. Their worldviews and the decolonial dialogue between traditional knowledge and supposedly universal and modern ideas allow for an introduction of different ways of understanding the relationship between society and nature (Acosta 2009a, 219). Therefore *Buen Vivir* is the result of an interrelation between indigenous and occidental visions (Acosta 2009a, 220). That same issue also contains one of the first texts of Eduardo Gudynas that refers to *Buen Vivir*. For him, the holistic approach of the Ecuadorian constitution of 2008 that relates human rights to rights of nature and rights of *Buen Vivir* is key (Gudynas 2009, 216).

It is worth noting that none of the texts cited until now had a great career influencing academic texts. Their influence does not reside in a wide reception amongst academics but in reception amongst social movements (TM). These three publications gained relevance through their connection to credible local actors—be it long-time activists such as Brand and Müller or movement-related journals and institutions. In the following years, there was a growing number of publications on the borderline between academia, activism, and political actors.

In 2010, the German Rosa Luxemburg Foundation founded its office in Ecuador, from where the Permanent Working Group on Alternatives to Development (Grupo Permanente de Trabajo sobre Alternativas al Desarrollo) was created, with Acosta and Gudynas as members, as well as other propagators of the *Buen Vivir*, such as Maristella Svampa. This group published open-access books on debates around post-development, neo-extractivism, and *Buen Vivir*. These books were translated into several languages and widely discussed in academic-activist circles (ML). Overall, left-of-center political foundations were crucial in translating *Buen Vivir* into German debates (JK, ML, TF, UB, UK). The Rosa Luxemburg Foundation, the Heinrich Böll Foundation, and the Friedrich Ebert Foundation (in that order) created numerous opportunities for exchange on the concept of *Buen Vivir* through publications, events, and collaborations with Latin American intellectuals.

Until 2013, *Buen Vivir* was integrated successfully into academic debates on post-development and degrowth. A local definition of *Buen Vivir* developed into a global idea (Acharya 2004, 243-244), which was spread transcontinental by a group of translators. Scholar-activists like Ashish Kothari or Federico Demaria started to publish articles, handbooks, and dictionaries that included collaborations with Acosta, Gudynas, and other translators from Latin America. A recurring motif here is the exploration of the relationship of *Buen Vivir* and other similar concepts of different world regions to degrowth research. For example, Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta contrast *Buen Vivir* as a pluralistic concept with development as a monocultural one. They also state that *Buen Vivir* does not reject modernity but “enables the formulation of alternative views of life that encompass harmony with nature (as a part of it), cultural diversity and pluriculturalism” (Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2014, 367-368) in the sense of a civilizational change. Gudynas makes a similar argument in his contribution to the *Degrowth Dictionary*. While he highlights the indigenous and Andean origins, he believes *Buen Vivir* is closely linked to the degrowth debate, as *Buen Vivir* “represents an ‘alternative to development’” (Gudynas 2014, 202).

The Reception of *Buen Vivir* by the Degrowth and Climate Justice Movement in Germany

The following addresses how *Buen Vivir* has been taken up in the German degrowth and climate justice movements. We developed three theses that condense our results from the analysis of our empirical material.

Thesis 1: The attention to *Buen Vivir* has varied over time, depending on political struggles both in the Andean countries and in Europe itself.

During the so-called pink tide, left-wing parties took over the governments of *Buen Vivir*'s home countries. In 2006 the party Movimiento al Socialismo with President Evo Morales took power in Bolivia. And in 2007, the party Alianza País with President Rafael Correa formed the government in Ecuador. Both parties initially cooperated closely with social movements, especially indigenous ones (Altmann 2020; Hidalgo-Capitán, Cubillo-Guevara, and Masabalín-Caisaguano 2019). This led to a window of opportunity for social movements to integrate their visions into government policy, amongst them *Buen Vivir*. The fact that social movements

could influence fundamental social change was attractive and inspiring to many (in particular left-wing) individuals and groups in Germany (JK, ML, TF, UB).

In this context of profound change and real political power, *Buen Vivir* represented a new, innovative politics that received special international attention (ILA, JK, TF). *Buen Vivir* offered a radical contribution to the controversy over growth. It was a novelty for German debates to recast societal relationships with nature, recognize the rights of nature, envision a plurinational state, and pursue practices of the community-centered economy. Crucial to the rise of *Buen Vivir* in Germany was the combination of innovative ideas and concrete successes or policy proposals. Symptomatic is the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative, which was justified and legitimized with the concept of *Buen Vivir* (JK, TF, TM, UK). It was launched in 2007 with support from Acosta. The Ecuadorian government proposed that it would refrain from extracting oil from the ITT field in the Yasuní National Park if the international community was willing to pay for half the revenue generated by the sale of the estimated oil reserves. With this, greenhouse gas emissions could have been prevented, biodiversity protected, and the way of life of the Indigenous peoples living in the national park respected. The unique proposal has received a great deal of international attention.

The project gave so much hope. It was a time of awakening when people thought they could create a different world with these movements, these ideas of *Buen Vivir*. And that sparked everyone (UK, translation PA & TK).

The initiative was appreciated in German-language discussions, among others, by Fatheuer (2011), as a successful concrete implementation of *Buen Vivir*. Many events informed about the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative, showed solidarity and pressured the German government to commit itself. With YASunidos Germany, an organization was founded that campaigned in Germany for the success of the concept of the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative and the *Buen Vivir*—even after the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative was officially canceled by Ecuadorian President Correa—in solidarity and exchange with the parent organization YASunidos in Ecuador.

The German parliament also took up the issue and voted in favor of financial participation by the German government. A central actor in this was Ute Koczy, a member of parliament between 2005 and 2013. Koczy understands *Buen Vivir* as a holistic way to improve individual and collective quality of life and promoted the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative (UK). Thus,

Buen Vivir opened debates even within the German state. As early as 2010, a text in a journal published on behalf of the Ministry of Education and Research discusses *Buen Vivir* in the context of the project Yasuní-ITT. The authors apprehend *Buen Vivir* as a “guiding principle for the foundation of a sustainable society” (Kuhn and Rieckmann 2010, 9) that offers inspiration for sustainable development in Germany. In this context, they point to the potential of *Buen Vivir* as a constitutional goal.

The implementation of *Buen Vivir* in the constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia in 2008 and 2009 was a great success for the social movements that had campaigned for it and gave hope to many progressive actors worldwide that a radical change was possible (ILA, JK, TF, UB, UK). Even though everyone knew that realizing the new constitutional goal would be challenging, the implementation was proof that alternative concepts of society could become hegemonic. Our interview partners agree that emancipation processes need positive visions and lived alternatives (ILA, JK, ML, TM, TF, UB). Since the mid-1990s, beginning with the Zapatista uprising, there has been a trend to increasingly take up impulses and ideas from the Global South (ILA, TM, UB). Our interviewees give three reasons for this. First, a transcontinental exchange is sought to overcome entrenched patterns of thought and to be inspiring—especially against the background that the growth-based and exploitative development model is closely linked to neocolonialism (ILA, JK, TF). A second aspect is the strong material basis of the lived alternatives in Latin America. This refers to the linkage of ideas and concrete struggles that mobilize broad segments of the population—for example, for a right of access to water, for the autonomy of Indigenous communities, or for the defense of territories. The material basis of this is found in concretely lived alternative ways of life, in a more widespread autonomous reproductive capacity alongside capitalism (JK, TM, UB). And third, a lack of positive vision in the Global North is stated. The reception of *Buen Vivir* in Germany and other European countries was fueled by a thirst for positive visions (ILA, ML, TM, TF).

Buen Vivir was especially attractive at a time when left-wing politics in Europe was not united by a common positive narrative but rather by the rejection of neoliberalism. *Buen Vivir* provided an answer to a question that had remained open since 1989, that is, “What do we do now if socialism is no longer the way?” (ML).

Thesis 2: The notion of *Buen Vivir* has filled a void in the framing strategy of social movements in Germany. It has a utopian surplus. The reference to *Buen Vivir* has represented an opportunity for many protagonists to make positive visions thinkable and expressible.

Buen Vivir was considered an authentic alternative to neoliberalism and capitalism. The concept was much-discussed at international movement events starting with the World Social Forum in Belém and the Acampamento dos Povos Indígenas in Brazil in 2009 (TF, RN). The decolonial background of *Buen Vivir* was part of its appeal. Nevertheless, this was always accompanied by transmission problems. The question was how to adapt the political language of indigenous organizations for European discourses and how to make voices from the Global South heard without exoticizing them.

For the globally networked climate justice movement, highlights in debating *Buen Vivir* were the first climate camp in Germany in 2008, the mobilization for the protests at the climate summit in 2009 in Copenhagen, and the subsequent conference in Cochabamba in 2010 (TM). For the demonstrations in Copenhagen, *Buen Vivir* functioned as a positive horizon—especially since indigenous cosmovisions were a central basis of internal and external criticism of the negotiated contents of the climate summit (TM). In reaction to the failed climate summit in Copenhagen, Bolivian President Morales invited to a World People’s Conference on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. Its manifesto¹ was an important reference for the climate justice movement (TF, UB). Through this text (and activists like Müller, who took part in the discussions in Cochabamba), *Buen Vivir* became an integral part of the German climate justice discourse.

However, the global scale lost relevance for the German climate justice movement. The summit protests in Copenhagen did not bring the hoped-for boost that, for example, the so-called “Battle of Seattle” had provided for the anti-globalization movement. Therefore, the European activists changed their strategy. Summit protests were no longer considered a promising approach. Instead, climate justice was to be fought for at the concrete sites of destruction (TM). In Germany, climate camps and the “Ende Gelände” campaign protested at open-pit coal mines and coal-fired power plants. These struggles were based on strategic localism and

1 <https://celdf.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/03/UNIVERSAL-DECLARATION-OF-THE-RIGHTS-OF-MOTHER-EARTH-APRIL-22-2010.pdf> (last accessed March 10, 2022).

concrete demands for an immediate coal phase-out and the protection of villages threatened by forced displacement. With the focus on locally defined goals and the means of direct blockades at the concrete sites of destruction, the question of the big alternatives, like *Buen Vivir*, receded into the background—and when it was asked, it was increasingly answered with ideas from the Global North (TM).

An important text of 2011, written by Thomas Fatheuer and published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation, close to the Green Party, succeeded in introducing *Buen Vivir* to German environmentalist organizations on a bigger scale. It might be the most successful text in bridging the gap between the specialist discourse and a wider audience—and it also led to Fatheuer often being invited by local groups to give presentations (TF). The text focuses on State action and the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia, highlighting the indigenous background of this political renewal (Fatheuer 2011, 9-10). It shows possible correspondences and contacts between the Andean *Buen Vivir* and European thought and political action.

At the same time that attention in Europe for *Buen Vivir* was steadily increasing, the differences between governments and movement actors were growing in Bolivia and Ecuador. Even if the governments took innovative positions at the international level, they did not question the strategy of (neo-)extractivism for their countries (Kothari, Demaria, and Acosta 2014). Instead, they regarded resource exploitation, the export of fossil fuels, and economic growth as the central basis for financing welfare state programs, reframing this as *Buen Vivir*. This effect is particularly evident in the case of the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative. In that case, there was a double disappointment. Contrary to a resolution of the national parliament and earlier promises by the German government, Dirk Niebel, then German minister for economic cooperation and development, refused to pay into the fund. Moreover, as the financial commitments did not reach the minimum level until 2013, Ecuador's President Correa approved oil drilling in the national park. Despite the continued mobilizations to preserve the national park, in Germany, interest and enthusiasm decreased noticeably (JK, UK).

If it had been possible to save Yasuní-ITT from oil exploitation, if there had been this fund, if the world would have been ready for such a change for the first time, if, for the first time, an oil field would not have been exploited, *Buen Vivir* would also have continued to grow (UK, translation PA & TK).

A dispute comparable to the one over Yasuní in Ecuador is the Tipnis conflict in Bolivia that erupted in 2011. In Bolivia, the plans to build a highway

through an indigenous territory and national park became a major conflict. Parallels between Bolivia and Ecuador are also evident in how conflicts are addressed. The governments of Bolivia and Ecuador have responded to criticism from social movements with increasingly authoritarian measures. In 2010 and 2011, important indigenous organizations broke with the ruling parties in Bolivia and Ecuador. They accused the governments of using the rhetoric of *Buen Vivir* to legitimize a policy that harms Indigenous communities and nature. One effect was that they shifted from *Buen Vivir* to using other concepts, for instance, *kausak sachá* in the Ecuadorian Amazon (Altmann 2020, 169). These processes dampened the appeal of *Buen Vivir* in Germany, as the Andean countries could no longer unconditionally serve as a model for emancipatory politics. Furthermore, the struggle between different camps for interpretive sovereignty over *Buen Vivir* made the engagement with the concept more difficult—especially for people without specific Latin American expertise or curiosity (JK, ML, TF, TM, UB).

Despite the government's appropriation of *Buen Vivir*, activist networks continue to promote the idea. The Degrowth Conference 2014 in Leipzig² was probably the highlight of these debates (ML, TF, TM, UB). It helped spread *Buen Vivir* in academic debates and social movements connected to degrowth. Based on this broad discussion, our interview partners conclude that *Buen Vivir* has made its way into the German debate on degrowth (ML, TF, TM, UB). Until today, *Buen Vivir* plays an important role in the degrowth movement. It is frequently cited as a reference for the existence of alternative social designs (often in line with *Ubuntu* and other concepts).

Thesis 3: The concept of *Buen Vivir* has been a source of inspiration and had an empowering effect on the German degrowth and climate justice movement. But it has always remained an abstract reference, successfully translated but not re-localized. The degrowth and climate justice movement has not filled the globalized, abstract notion of *Buen Vivir* with specific local content.

The reasons for the discrepancy between a successful translation and an almost complete lack of re-localization lie in how the term is received by the degrowth and climate justice movement and the resulting decisions regarding framing strategies. The reception of *Buen Vivir* is characterized

2 <https://www.degrowth.info/en/conference/leipzig-2014-3>, (last accessed March 10, 2022).

by ambivalent tensions that can explain the combination of attractiveness and lack of re-localization. Following the interviews, there are two different modes of approaching and using the concept of *Buen Vivir*:

- a) An intuitive approach emphasizes the universality and general connectivity of *Buen Vivir* to everyday worldviews. This approach tends to be found in addressing a broader audience.
- b) Another mode of reception emphasized the decolonial background as well as the political demands and lived alternatives. This understanding tends to prevail in academic-activist movement circles. This reception mode aims, at least partially, at a transcultural dialogue.

This is an analytical separation. Looking at the concrete practices of integrating *Buen Vivir* into self-understanding and framing strategies, both modes of reception can overlap. Nevertheless, this distinction has heuristic value because it helps unravel the difficulties that the re-localization of *Buen Vivir* in Germany has encountered so far.

ILA and YFE stand for the first form of reception. Both groups are aware of the concept of *Buen Vivir* and incorporate it into processes of self-understanding, publications, or events (ILA, YFE). However, it is interesting to note that there was no debate about the concept's origin:

The term appears in the book, but we didn't discuss it deeply as a collective or make a big effort to explore the concept somehow. It was more of an intuitive way of dealing with it; everyone could relate to it a bit (ILA, translation PA & TK).

One important reason to use the concept of *Buen Vivir* (either in Spanish or in the German translation 'Gutes Leben') in external communication is the acceptance of the concept. No one objects to the good life. Instead, it is assumed that most people intuitively can relate to the term and associate something positive (ILA, JK, TM, YFE). "Because at first glance it's actually an easy-to-understand, accessible concept, where everyone at first says, 'Wow, great!' and 'Interesting'" (JK, translation PA & TK).

Our interviewees agree that there is a kind of intuitive understanding of *Buen Vivir* in wider circles, and that the term evokes positive associations (ILA, JK, ML, TF, TM, UB). Especially during the economic crisis of 2007/08, a debate developed around good life beyond GDP (gross domestic product), in which *Buen Vivir* can easily be integrated (UB). Evidence of this is the success of the "Day of the Good Life,"³ celebrated in

3 <https://tagdesgutenlebens.koeln> (last accessed March 10, 2022).

Cologne yearly since 2013 with up to 200 actions and 140 000 visitors, shows. Despite the name of the street festival, there are only superficial references to the indigenous origins of the concept and its political demands. In 2019, a network was formed to expand the “Day of the Good Life” into a nationwide initiative. The network has written a charter calling for a shift from the growth paradigm towards cultural diversity and a balance with human beings’ inner and outer nature. There are implicit references to the debates on *Buen Vivir*, although the term itself only appears as affiliation behind Acosta’s name, who contributed to the charter.⁴

Another case of this mode of reception is in the field of education. *Buen Vivir* has found its way into teaching material in various political education offers and within schools. The engagement with *Buen Vivir* is promoted and embedded by the “Education for Sustainable Development,” a UNESCO program that in Germany has been transformed into a national action program led by the Federal Ministry of Education and Research (PK). *Buen Vivir* is understood in the teaching materials as an impulse to reflect on one’s lifestyle and notions of a good life (Recknagel 2018a). Other goals are the development of empathy for the way of life of other people (primarily Indigenous people) and the practice of a change of perspective (Recknagel 2018a, 35–40). Between 2012 and 2017, the mentions of *Buen Vivir* in school textbooks increased while the general mentions of *Buen Vivir* decreased after 2016 (Recknagel 2018a, 36; 2018b).

In this reception mode, an intuitive understanding of the good life is predominant. It focuses on processes of reflection on the question: What could a good life (for all) look like? There can be an explicit reference to *Buen Vivir* or a vague, implicit one. If there is a clearer reference to *Buen Vivir*, it is usually made via the translation work of Acosta, who regularly talks about *Buen Vivir* in Germany, including on tours of the music group Grupo Sal. This kind of reception does not result in concrete demands or relations to political struggles but in formats of (self)education, (self)reflection, and (self)enlightenment. Due to the decoupling from the decolonial context and the political demands, there are also loose interpretations. In our interviews, the danger of mistranslations or trivialization of *Buen Vivir* as a lifestyle is also pointed out (ML, TF).

4 <https://www.tagdesgutenlebens.berlin/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/TDGL-Charta-A4-190925-vs.pdf> (last accessed January 2, 2025).

However, this reception strand did not lead to integration into local discourses. There were no “credible local actors (‘insider proponents’) with sufficient discursive influence” (Acharya 2004, 249) that would implement *Buen Vivir* into their discourses and political demands over a long period. Compared to the second reception mode, this intuitive and universalizing approach to *Buen Vivir* is somewhat less dependent on the political successes associated with the concept. Because here, it is more about (self)reflection and less about political strategies. *Buen Vivir* is taken up (e.g., in the context of the “Day of the Good Life” or in education), but it does not have a discourse-shifting effect. Instead, *Buen Vivir* is interspersed in the more dominant discourse around sustainability, wealth alternatives, and a not further defined good life. The term “das Gute Leben” (in the German wording) functions here in its abstractness as a positive framing to which nobody can object (ILA, JK, YFE). It fulfills this function without having to be re-localized. This mode of reception, emphasising the universalistic content of *Buen Vivir*, reaches its limits from the point of view of certain academic-activist movement circles.

At some point, it becomes exhausting because you can use it as a catch-all term for all kinds of things, and then people don't really go into depth anymore. I believe that if *Buen Vivir* does not develop further conceptually or is not specified through concrete implementation, it loses a bit of its radiance and credibility (JK).

This quote reflects the motivations of the second mode of reception, emphasizing political demands and lived alternatives. According to our interview partners, if *Buen Vivir* is to have a politically mobilizing effect, it needs concrete demands or implementations. Accordingly, *Buen Vivir* has political potential for them when it stands for achieved emancipatory successes (such as the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador) or struggles towards climate justice and degrowth (such as the Yasuní-ITT-Initiative) (ILA, JK, ML, TF, UB, UK). This homeomorphism was aiming for a transcultural dialogue. In this regard, the decolonial context of *Buen Vivir* is considered a factor of attractiveness (ILA, UB, UK). The particular political significance of *Buen Vivir* is based on its empowering potential, as it is a positive vision associated with emancipatory successes in Bolivia and Ecuador. Here, one focus is on *Buen Vivir* as a lived alternative in the Global South. Indigenous communities and organizations are seen as evidence that alternative ways of life are possible. In this reception mode, the focus is on finding successful political strategies.

This strategic focus corresponds with the actors who have made decisive translational contributions to this strand of reception. Important translators were academic activists, political foundations, and individual activists who integrated the term into their political work. This form of engagement with *Buen Vivir* was also firmly pushed by specific events, such as the Yasuní campaign 2007-2013, Copenhagen 2009, Cochabamba 2010, and Leipzig 2014. The degrowth conference in Leipzig marked a peak and, simultaneously, a turning point with which successful re-localization in Germany has become less likely. At the conference and in other arenas, ideas with Western provenance were discussed, with which positive visions transcending the status quo became conceivable again. We refer to the increased use of terms like degrowth, climate justice, and utopia. With degrowth and climate justice as dominant frameworks for socio-ecological demands, the importance of *Buen Vivir* for debates about necessary and desired social changes in the Global North probably has diminished (ILA, TF, TM). This shift to Western concepts is justified pragmatically by our interview partners. On the one hand, these terms were now available (again), so a utopian horizon became expressible again in German wordings. On the other hand, the perception was that terms from one's everyday life could have greater resonance (ILA, TM).

Because I don't know what material practices the *Buen Vivir* is based on. When someone asks me, "What are the working hours like in the *Buen Vivir*? What does the pension insurance look like there?" I just don't know (TM, translation PA & TK).

There could have been an alternative to the switch to Western concepts, namely the attempt to re-localize *Buen Vivir* in German discourses. However, this re-localization failed. This is partly due to the defeats of emancipatory politics in Bolivia and Ecuador. The second mode of reception, in which political demands and lived alternatives play an important role, is closely linked to political dynamics. *Buen Vivir* had empowering effects. However, the empowering effect has diminished. The appropriation of *Buen Vivir* by governments, the conflicts between social movements and leftist governments, and the failure of the Yasuní initiative have led to a more confusing situation. At a certain point, German movement actors no longer saw *Buen Vivir* as having the potential to increase their legitimacy and influence. In addition, re-localization has always been accompanied by the problem that transmitting indigenous cosmovisions into political

campaigns, local discourses, and local struggles is a rather ambitious task (ILA, ML, TF, UK).

It's not that simple. You can't just transfer words. You really have to make a cultural translation so that somehow what is meant by it comes across. I noticed that this transfer of *Buen Vivir* to Germany does involve some challenges (ML).

How to Imagine a Good Life?

Buen Vivir could bridge a moment of discursive weakness in the German degrowth and climate justice movement associated with the formative phase of those movements in the 2000s. During roughly a decade, *Buen Vivir* introduced an utopian surplus into the political discourse—at a time when capitalist realism seemed to have absolute hegemony. Nevertheless, it remained something external. A successful localization, in the sense that local proponents achieve to combine external with internal notions (Acharya 2004), never happened. The movements in Germany switched to other, more locally relevant concepts and left *Buen Vivir* behind.

So what is the current situation regarding the reception of *Buen Vivir* in Germany? The interest in ideas from the Andean countries has been an interest in successful ideas. And with every political defeat, the interest in the content of the ideas diminishes further. What remains is a more explicit search for positive visions. The terms degrowth and climate justice play a role but also terms like care revolution, solidarity, and utopia, and the demand for a good life for all, *ein gutes Leben für alle*.

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