

# Building up alternative economic spaces

## *A comparison of concepts in the Global North and South*

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**Abstract:** Rural societies around the world face numerous challenges related to containing market pressures on agro-food production, which is causing a loss of competitiveness of small-scale agriculture. The outlook for the future is unclear for the rural population while an increase in new capitalized actors is visible in the Global North and South. However, there is also a display of resistance and innovative actions by many groups in rural societies. This paper introduces some of the conceptual approaches underlying these development paths. We provide an overview on the problem definitions, goals, means and central actors that are nurturing these alternative economic spaces. In doing so, we seek to bridge some aspects of the North and South, co-creating the world we want.

## Introduction

For a long time rural regions were hardly connected with distant countries. The elimination of trade barriers, the rise of new communication media and a high mobility of people and goods however have connected these peripheries to global processes, particularly with global production networks (Neuburger, 2014). Therefore, rural communities in peripheral areas all over the world are confronted with a particular challenge: The increasing globalization and industrialization of food production and trade provokes a decrease of small-scale agriculture's competitiveness and makes the sustaining of agriculture-based livelihoods an ever more complex process. This does not only have

far-reaching economic but also, and crucially, social, cultural, and ecological consequences in mountain regions of the Global North and the Global South. In order to confront out-migration and the loss/non-viability of traditional cultural and agricultural practices, social movements in these areas have started to make visible their problems and continue to build up alternative economic pathways. Even though these social mobilizations are often ‘only’ small niche innovations, we argue that their importance goes far beyond that.

The search for alternative spaces – societal transitions away from the dominant development and growth-oriented capitalist accumulation model – has gained strong momentum in scholarly and activist debate in the Global North as well as in the Global South. First of all, the critiques to a unique model of the modern reason have been part of the emergent paradigm that Boaventura de Sousa Santos calls Epistemologies of the South (eg. Sousa Santos & Meneses 2014). In Latin America, critiques of the neoliberal and/or neo-extractivist development model and the consequent uneven insertion of Latin American countries into the world economy have been a crucial driver for debates over *Buen Vivir* (as a postdevelopment model) and social and solidarity economy (e.g. Gudynas & Acosta 2011; Corraggio 2007a). In the Global North, persistent problems like global climate change, ecological pollution, and the financial crisis have been key drivers for debates over a shift away from the current growth-oriented capitalist regime. The question of how to deal with immediate forms of crisis and long-term environmental challenges has been driven by different economic narratives (Deichmann and Zhang, 2013; EEA, 2013; Geels, 2013; OECD, 2011; UNEP, 2011; UNESCO, 2011). Discussions over transitions towards sustainable development and de-growth have been particularly influencing in this context.

In what follows, we will introduce these recent approaches originated in the Global South (particularly Latin America) and the Global North, which can be included into a broadly defined field of transition studies. Transition, because their central aim is to initiate a (radical) shift away from mainstream economic thinking based on the ideals of contemporary capitalism (individualism, [individual] profit-maximization, growth, development). Hence, they not only envision an economic but broader “ecological and civilizational transitions” (Escobar 2015: 451). Notwithstanding this common goal, their origin, their

world-view, and the way transitions are imagined, are rather different. We therefore provide an overview of these schools and compare them by their problem definition, goals, means and main actors. We outline the central arguments of selected transition approaches from the Global North and Global South, which particularly focus on local innovation/action.

## Transition Approaches

### *Epistemologies of the South*

The dominant paradigm of modernity was the belief that only one possible answer to all problems exists. From this on it was deduced that the world could be controlled and ordered if only we were able to describe and represent it correctly (Harvey, 1999). Dichotomous concepts represented the supremacy of one over the other, and the resulting universalism is a product of the political, economic and military intervention of colonialism and modern capitalism imposed on non-occidental and non-Christian people and cultures, discrediting and suppressing all social practices and knowledge opposed to ruling interests (Sousa Santos, 2009).

The radical rupture with the restricting dualism of this dominant paradigm is the combined result of a plurality of scientific and social conditions that initiates with Einstein and builds on diverse scholars such as Foucault and Lefebvre. Sousa Santos (2009) affirms that a future paradigm cannot only be a scientific one, but also a social too. The author stresses that it should be based on non-dualistic visions surpassing dichotomous distinctions between nature/culture, natural/artificial, countryside/city, animal/person and others. At the same time, knowledge is simultaneously local *and* total bearing in mind that it is constituted around topics adopted by concrete social groups with concrete local living projects, which makes it exemplary, and in this way could be transformed into global knowledge.

The current circumstances have shown the necessity of alternatives while at the same time the dimension of political and cultural obstacles, which prevent its realization, have become clearer. Today the visualization of cultural and epistemological diversity in the world is more varied and due to this, it is

more convincing for a wider and more diverse audience (Sousa Santos and Meneses, 2014).

Sousa Santos (2009) proposes to make the diversity of knowledge in this new emerging paradigm visible and by doing so consolidating an “Epistemology of the South”. As a central point of this knowledge diversity, he speaks of five types of ecologies, of which one is the ecology of productivities. The ecology of productivities aims at recovering and valorising alternative production systems of popular economic organizations, working cooperatives, self-managed enterprises, solidarity economy etc. which the capitalist production system hides or discredits. Values such as environmental preservation and democracy stand at the forefront of this change. Hence, the ecology of productivities counterpoints the logic of capital accumulation and the model of rational development. This is also the case with the *Buen Vivir* concept which has gained strong importance in South America in the last years.

### *Buen Vivir*

*Buen Vivir* is a plural and multidimensional concept still in construction and a counterhegemonic movement that questions the occidental concept of well-being. Its different expressions share common ideas and goals such as the rejection of (Western) developmentalism, the construction of its own ethic, as well as a decolonial attitude in search of alternatives to development (Acosta, 2016; Gudynas and Acosta, 2011). As such, *Buen Vivir* is a genuinely Latin American transition proposal, which is mainly discussed (and fostered) by postdevelopment scholars (Escobar 2015).

*Buen Vivir* builds on different forms of indigenous knowledge bearing in mind that *sumak kawsay*<sup>1</sup> is not the same as *ñande reko*<sup>2</sup>. These and other indigenous concepts, have their particularities steaming from different cultural backgrounds. *Buen Vivir* cannot be reduced to notions of *sumak kawsay* or *suma qamaña* of the Andes because similar ideas are existent in different indigenous and creole cultures, not least also because of contemporary

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1 Ecuadorian *Sumak kawsay*, following Luis Macas, is a communitarian space where reciprocity, conviviality with nature and social responsibility exist (Gudynas y Acosta, 2011).

2 The *Ñande Reko* guaraní, refers to the virtues of good life, liberty and happiness oriented towards the “earth without evil” (Gudynas y Acosta, 2011).

hybridizations. At the same time, occidental traditions nurtured *Buen Vivir*. They question the dominant modernity and its development model, proposing an exploration of alternatives to the idea of development (Gudynas & Acosta 2011).

*Buen Vivir* does not know a condition of under-development to be overcome or a condition of development to be reached. Social improvement is a category that is always in construction and reproduction, because it is at stake the people's life (Acosta, 2016). The basic value of the economy in a *Buen Vivir* system is solidarity (social and solidarity economy) and its aim is to construct relations of production, exchange and cooperation that generate sufficiency (more than efficiency only) and quality. Instead of solely focusing on the arbitrary aggregation of individualities common in mainstream economic paradigms, systemic productivity and competitiveness are measured in the advances for the collective (ibid.).

### *Social and Solidarity Economy*

As with *Buen Vivir*, scholarly work in the field of solidarity economy has been developed by the empirical analysis of alternative forms of socio-economic organization. This type of economy correlates neither with the public economy nor with the traditional capitalist economy (Chaves and Monzón Campos, 2001). Research on social economy started to become consolidated a quarter of a century ago, when in France the National Liaison Committee for the Activities of Mutual Companies, Cooperatives and Associations (CNLAMCA) was constituted. In 1982, the committee approved the Charta of the social economy. It is defined as an economic system, which is not linked with the public sector. They build a special regime where the management, rights and obligations are equality shared between partners, securing the surplus for the group (Chaves and Monzón Campos, 2001).

The social and solidarity economy moves capitalism from the center of economic thinking, de-building the capitalist economy and seeking to articulate „an economy where many economies can fit“ (Coraggio 2008). Inspired by Polanyi's thinking (Polanyi, 2005), it is based on the multiple forms of popular economy that exist among communities, including cooperative, associative, mutualist, autonomous, redistributive, non-capitalist, alternative

to capitalist, and so on. Productivity and efficiency are holistically redefined and not in terms of growth alone (Escobar, 2015).

The discussion on the meaning and value of the social and solidarity economy contains a wide spectrum of perspectives. These can include:

- studies highlighting that socio-economic organizations, which generate jobs, do not have the possibility to avoid dependence on capital, to which they finally are functional due to their role in reducing the social pressure on the labour market/the state;
- perspectives that focus on the emancipatory and counterhegemonic potentials of the social and solidarity economy (Hintze, 2010).

Various Latin American authors such as Nuñez Soto (1995), Coraggio (2007; 2014) and Vázquez (2011) see the social and solidarity economy as an alternative to capitalism. For the Nicaraguan Orlando Núñez, associative and self-managed work represents a strategy of resistance and at the same time an alternative political project (Nuñez Soto, 1995). In line with Nuñez, Coraggio defines the social economy as a proposal of transformative economic actions with the aim to generate another economic system organized through the principles of amplified reproduction of life of all citizens-workers (Coraggio, 2007). For Vázquez (2011: 218): “There is indeed a potential for the construction of political projects starting from the experience of associative and self-managed work but the development of this potential depends on the articulation between the different initiatives and with other actors and social movements.”

Coraggio (2014) synthesizes the common elements that characterize the economic organization of the social and solidarity economy by differentiating between two different levels:

1. Concerning micro-economies, workers’ organizations that associate are characterized through:
  - market production not oriented towards profit but generation of self-employment and monetary income
  - joint purchases that improve the negotiation power in the market
  - socialization of risks

- self-provision of credits
  - joint production of livelihoods that can sustain their own reproduction (e.g. food and housing but also cultural elements like celebrations) or that of the community (like productive infrastructure and public services).
2. At the systemic level:
- non-separation between work, property, and management of means of production and products
  - free association
  - self-management and cooperative work
  - organization of economic factors with priority on the factor work, being interpersonal relations part of the social production relations
  - the value of exchange, even though it does not disappear, tends to be subordinated under the use value; concept of efficiency not reducible to productivity.

### *Transitions towards sustainability in a Northern perspective*

The term transition is widely used in different scientific disciplines and social politics (Brand, 2014b; Hinrichs, 2014). The phrase “transition” is based on the latin root *transire* which means “to go across”. A sustainability transition is therefore a movement of one state to another, in this case from unsustainable to sustainable modes of practice. At the bottom, it is described as a fundamental change in the fulfilment of societal needs. While often strongly connected to technological innovations it is likewise related to social innovations and transformative changes in structures, culture and practice (Frantzeskaki et al., 2012; Schermer, 2015). This definition still remains rather fuzzy. Indeed, as Brand (2014b, 2016) points out the term is used in a large number of meanings and interpretations. The author states that it is not clear what should be transformed, how it should be done and by whom (Brand, 2014b). What is important is that transitions are expected to arise out of a problem definition by natural scientists – Brand (2014b) calls it a ‘naturalistic regime of truth’ – in order to solve problems of mankind. We argue however, that sustainability transition is a social choice that can be very diverse on different scales, from region to region and agent to agent.

Using transition and transformation as synonyms Schneidewind and Augenstein (2016) distinguish between three schools of thinking: idealistic, institutional and technological innovation oriented. The idealist school of thought claims that collective ideas or shared beliefs are essential to induce change processes. Thereby, even though the circumstances for regions can be quite similar they can lead to different problem definitions and pathways of development according to societal ideas. Closely related to this stream of thought is the institutional perspective. Here the trajectory of transition depends on the institutional set-up and the formal and informal rules that shape society (Schneidewind and Augenstein, 2016). Societal change can be achieved by building appropriate institutional frameworks. As a last school the technological innovation field is mentioned. Radical innovations are seen as a main driver for transitions as they affect socio-technical systems, which are overall structures like markets, user practice or infrastructure on different levels. The whole idea of innovation as engine for structural shifts is strongly influenced by Schumpeter's term *creative destruction* (Schumpeter, 1934). Transition itself is as a set of processes that lead to a fundamental shift or "system innovation" in a societal system driven by coevolutionary processes in economy, culture, technology, ecology and institutional development (Rotmans and Loorbach, 2010). Underlying the research of transition is the multi-level perspective (MLP; Geels, 2002). It consists of three levels of interest (landscape, regime and niche) and the processes, which lead to a reconfiguration of mainstream practice. Niches can initiate systemic change (Geels, 2011). They are defined as deviations of the current regime, marked by individual or collective actors, technologies and routines. They are "protected spaces" (Smith and Raven, 2012) created on the local level where innovative action happens. Here variations to and deviants from the status quo can occur as a result of new ideas and new initiatives, techniques, alternative technologies and different social practices (Loorbach and Rotmans 2006).

### *Debates on post-growth economies*

In the course of the discussion about a green economy, green growth, smart growth or qualitative growth in Europe alternative concepts have emerged (e.g. Daly, 1996; Jackson, 2009; Martínez-Alier et al., 2010; Paech, 2010, 2012).

The authors criticized that the answers to our multiple crisis – neoclassical or keynesian politics for growth – are insufficient. Influenced by Serge Latouches ‘decroissance’ (Latouche, 2006) it is argued that the dominant paradigm of constant economic growth to establish welfare is a central cause of the crisis in the first place (Brand, 2014a). It is necessary to establish new and alternative economic configurations which contest the current regime and secure a “welfare without growth” (Jackson, 2009). The present forms of production and (mass)consumption including its spatial organization as well as the use of certain products is questioned (Schulz and Affolderbach, 2015). Out of this a huge variety of different trends have emerged (for a detailed list see *ibid.* p. 7) including regional value chains, sharing systems, extension of product life cycles, cooperatives and community initiatives. Out of this list, it is clear that innovation plays a significant role but cooperation, sufficiency, moral values, social justice and fairness are equally important.

By now, these initiatives do not replace the mainstream economic path. In terms of the multi-level perspective, they can be placed on a niche level where they capture certain landscape changes and interact with the regime. In doing so they extend the capitalistic system to a diverse economy (Gibson-Graham, 2008). While they are still small and local they are also very well connected (Schulz and Affolderbach, 2015). A good example which is positioned somewhere between transition and post-growth debates is the transition town movement (Hopkins, 2008). The fact that it arose out of the assumption that the local is the appropriate scale to tackle climate change, peak oil and the end of growth shows that it is clearly connected to idealistic transition debates.

## Discussion and Conclusion

The discourse on the causes and solutions to unsustainable economic arrangements are quite different in the Global North and South. We highlight some of the differences in Table 1. It is interesting to see that our mentioned approaches mainly cover the areas where they were elaborated, that means in the North or South. Southern initiatives tend to be more concerned with the social and cultural problems in the South than with a global environmental

crisis. On the other hand, sustainability transitions and post-growth debates focus on new production and consumption patterns in the North, leaving out such things as uneven distribution of resources or power mechanisms therefore accepting injustices. This divide is of course not a new phenomenon. Norgaard (1995, p. 12) already noticed that “[...] *people in industrialized countries [...] have tended to glorify nature, to decry its defilement, and to propose ‘back-to-nature’ type solutions. As a consequence of their colonial history, Third World peoples have tended to be much more concerned with the social origins and human consequences of environmental degradation.*” It is certainly important to have plural forms of knowledge and paths for development. A lot of social movements, politicians and economic actors that work with our mentioned principles have achieved great things embedded in the spheres of North and South. However, as Escobar (2015) points out that thinking of ‘one earth’ will help us to overcome the modern binary of North and South and to establish ‘pluriversal’ perspectives.

A precondition for this is a change of thinking in terms of space: from territorial to relational. As our findings have shown, despite all differences there are certain similarities. An important one is that Universities resp. researchers play an important role in every transitions approach. This creates cognitive and social proximity which Coenen et al. (2010) have declared as very important for innovations in niches. It indicates that although initiatives can be very small in certain areas around the world, they can be of global importance. They could gain momentum when they are based on shared values, visions and trust.

In line with Gibson-Graham (2008), we argue that making these alternative (economic) spaces visible is an important step, as they are generally marginalized and hidden against the backdrop of a globalized economy where development and growth are unquestioned principles. Demonstrating that diverse economies actually exist; that economies of life and work and not only of capital are actually built up, is a performative statement, co-creating the world we inhabit (Gibson-Graham 2008: 2).

Table 1: Comparison of different transition approaches

<b>Transition approaches</b>	<b>Buen vivir</b>	<b>Social and Solidarity Economy</b>	<b>Sustainability Transitions</b>			<b>Post-growth economies</b>
			<i>idealist</i>	<i>institutional</i>	<i>technological</i>	
Problems definition	(Western) concept of well-being	Current economic system based on the all-dominant logic of capital (accumulation)	Multiple crisis, persistent problems: climate change, environmental pollution (carbon economy) etc., global perspective			All-dominant well-being concept based on the principle of growth
	Western civilizational model of 'One-World' ; Idea of one development for all people (developmentalism)					
Goal	Building up a plural and multidimensional world based on indigenous knowledge and ideas of <i>buen vivir</i>	To build up a diversity of economies (of life and work) based on the principle of solidarity	Induce large systemic change processes; concrete			'Welfare without growth'
Means	Strengthening social and indigenous movements that provide alternatives to development	Fostering and creating cooperatives, self-employment, socialization of risks, focus on use not exchange value	Collective ideas	Policies, shared rules	Industrial revolution	New forms of production and consumption (e.g. regional value chains, sharing systems, cooperatives, community initiatives)
	Latin American social and indigenous movements (mainly from rural areas) and postdevelopment scholars	Latin American scholars and social movements (mainly urban based; e.g. worker's take over and self-management of bankrupt companies in Argentina)	Civil society, Social movements, Individuals, organizations	Individuals, Organizations, Policy makers	Firms, entrepreneurs,	Social movements (mainly from urban centres of the Global North) and scholars
Key actors			Scientific community, NGOs			

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