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# Radical Ecological Democracy

Searching for alternatives to unsustainable and inequitable model of 'development'



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## How an Ecuadorian Community is Showing Its Government How to Really Live Well

📅 December 16, 2017   👤   🗑️ Capitalism, Climate, Community, Democracy, Development, Environment, Politics, Power Dynamic

By **Neema Pathak Broome** and **Ashish Kothari**

A decade ago, Ecuador became the first country in the world to formally include rights of nature into its constitution. Soon after, along with Bolivia, it also declared itself to be “plurinational”, an unequivocal commitment towards recognizing the immense internal diversity and autonomy of its people. Ecuador was also in the forefront of a continent wide Latin American endeavor to seek “peace with the earth”.

### Democracy a Poem

Democracy will  
not come  
Today, this year  
Nor ever  
Through  
compromise and  
fear.

I have as much  
right  
As the other  
fellow has  
To stand  
On my two feet  
And own the land.

I tire so of  
hearing people  
say,  
Let things take  
their course.  
Tomorrow is  
another day.  
I do not need my  
freedom when I'm  
dead.  
I cannot live on  
tomorrow's bread.

Freedom  
Is a strong seed

hares

Other countries like Bolivia, Venezuela, Nicaragua and Cuba were active participants in that determined attempt. These were bold, unique steps, and showed the potential of the revolutionary Left, which had swept into power in parts of Latin America, almost simultaneously, around that time. Ten years on, is the excitement waning?

wavy

Ecuador's Constitution committed its people to the worldview of 'Buen Vivir', a Spanish adaptation of 'Sumak Kawsay', meaning 'living well' in the Quechua Indigenous peoples' language. The acceptance of plurinationality was seen as a victory of struggles of indigenous peoples for territorial autonomy and self-determination. President Rafael Correa appeared to be living up to the promise of the revolutionary Left.

It was against this backdrop that we eagerly seized upon an opportunity to visit Ecuador this summer. Once there, however, we quickly found that progressive laws and revolutionary rhetoric do not always translate to ground-level transformation. President Correa appeared to have had become highly unpopular, and in elections, which had concluded a month ago in, his party colleague Lenin Moreno barely scraped to success over right wing candidate Guillermo Lasso. Correa had won three mandates to govern since 2007 with what appeared to be progressive policies and social welfare programs; so why was the Left's hold weakening?

We got glimpses of an answer in our visit to communities south and north of Quito, and in discussions with a diverse group of activists and academics. Our first visit was to the Nabón municipality in Azuay Province, with a population of 18,000. Over the last twenty years, a succession of women mayors in Nabon has successfully tackled a dire situation of poverty and distress migration in the municipality. They have implemented an agenda of food security, diverse livelihoods, water sustainability, high education levels, and reduction in tension between the indigenous and mestizo (those with

Planted  
In a great need.

I live here, too.  
I want freedom  
Just as you.

by Langston Hughes



Analysis Ideas

## Radical Ecological Economics

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Mayor Magali Quezada of Nabon. Women representatives in Ecuador have insisted upon making public institutions accountable to people. Pic. Ashish Kothari

mixed ethnic lineage, particularly Spanish) peoples. On most human development indicators, there has been a massive improvement. In no small part is this transformation due to the feminization of politics, the integration of caring and persuasion rather than brute patriarchal power, as well as the explicit focus on livelihoods, health, and other things that matter to ordinary people.

Justice Nature New  
Economy New Politics  
Policy Politics Power  
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Seeds Sharing Economy Social  
Society  
Sustainability

Tribal Urban

Two successive mayors brought in much greater democracy in decision-making, including through community assemblies. Each village has delegated coordinators, conveying decisions of the village assembly to the Municipality. A significant portion of the budget is allocated for self-planning by each village, whose decisions are mandatory for elected representatives at district/municipality level. Villages also apply the principle of solidarity, e.g. lending a part of their budget to another village in greater need. One continuing hurdle, however, is that the Municipality remains dependent on the Central government funds, making it susceptible to regressive policy changes. For example, a 2013 decentralization law conferred many powers of municipalities/districts to provincial or central agencies.

The Nabon municipality has declared itself off limits to mining and other destructive activities, using its official status as a 'Decentralized Autonomous Municipality'. Unfortunately, the Ecuador government, belying its 'revolutionary' image, has given mining concessions, including within areas declared protected and crucial for water security. Many community members, including women, who are opposing mining, are facing repression and threats. While travelling to villages north of Quito and in discussions with groups like Accion Ecologica, we learnt that other regions and peoples who are protesting against extractivism are facing similar repression.

Another inspiring story in Nabón emerged from Ecuador's conceptualization and practice of bilingual and culturally appropriate education and health care. From the 1970s and 80s onwards, indigenous communities have been running bilingual intercultural schools, incorporating traditional wisdom, indigenous identity and indigenous worldviews, in the context of an intercultural education system supported by the government. The Correa government reportedly never approved of this system, and towards the end of its

tenure began to see this as a threat, and as the breeding ground of indigenous dissent. Consequently, it began pushing uniform, centralized and standardized education and health programs insensitive to indigenous cultural diversity. As Mama Juana, a 90 year old community leader in Nabón said, “it was in these schools that I learnt to be a community worker and leader, and learnt what it means to be human.... closing them down would mean that our youth who already feel alienated would never know “Sumak Kawsay”.



Jardín Botánico, Nabón. Many agro-ecological initiatives are facing apathy from the federal government, but learning to survive on their own.

Pic. Ashish Kothari

Travelling north of Quito towards Otavalo, we met members of several inspiring agro-ecological initiatives. But, here too, we found that there was either no significant support for them, or they just faced active discouragement. Alberto Acosta, who headed the Constituent Assembly that brought in the revolutionary Constitution, told us that the government was simply not interested in empowering communities to be autonomous. Acosta served briefly as minister in Correa’s government, quitting when he realized that there was no serious attempt at implementing the



## Constitution.

What explains the mismatch between Constitutional and party rhetoric and ground reality? It's quite apparent that the government's use of *buen vivir* and *sumac kawsay* was a misappropriation. Most importantly, there was little fundamental change introduced in the development and economic model followed by the new leftist government. The economy was heavily dependent on oil revenues, which in turn were used to support politically crucial social welfare schemes. That, however, increased the economy's vulnerability to fluctuations in global oil prices. Given the capricious nature of the international oil business, Ecuador (like Venezuela) is looking desperately for other revenue sources, with minerals appearing to be attractive options, given the interest that Chinese investors have shown in them. Meanwhile, with little effort being made to create a local productive base, rural areas face huge distress outmigration.



The people of Nabon have refused to let their ecological treasures be defiled by neoextractivism. Pic. Ashish Kothari

A large number of people in Ecuador, however, have a

different notion of well being for themselves. For them, “Sumak Kawsay” encompasses the idea of living well not only for human beings but for all life forms, and denotes autonomy, self-reliance, and respect for diversity. Extractive industries do not fit into this paradigm. As one of the roadside posts in Cotacachi canton, which has declared itself an environmental region said, “Our wealth is in our people, not under the ground”.

Will the new President, Lenin Moreno, who took over on the 24<sup>th</sup> May 2017, breathe fresh life into Ecuador’s Constitution? It was with this hope and to express solidarity with Nabon’s people, that we, as part of an international group visiting Ecuador, wrote a letter to President Moreno. We urged him to ensure, “that the constitutional mandate of protection of nature or Pachamama (mother earth) is respected; that no mining is allowed in fragile and mega-biodiverse areas, or areas crucial for the well-being of indigenous peoples and other local communities; and that bilingual and culturally appropriate education and health care in the indigenous communities in Ecuador is preserved”. Moreno’s government could take such a path, but grassroots mobilization will have to continue pushing it. By July 2017, the new President has acknowledged a severe economic crisis, and is showing openness to dialogue. Perhaps Ecuador can still demonstrate a powerful new model of well being for our beleaguered planet, if it can combine community action as shown by Nabón’s people, with Constitutional safeguards for nature?

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