Rethinking sustainable development by following Indigenous approaches to community wellbeing

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ABSTRACT
This article explores two concepts of community wellbeing informed by Indigenous perspectives: Buen Vivir and Comunalidad. We critically examine the current use and practice of these concepts and their potential influence in practices oriented to sustainable development. We argue that instead of continuing to apply the siloed international frameworks of sustainability (a prevalent tendency that to date has marginalized and alienated Indigenous ways of knowing), collaborative sustainable development efforts involving Indigenous communities should be grounded in local understandings of community wellbeing. Such understandings include intrinsically dynamic, interconnected, multileveled, fluid, inclusive, and holistic ideas (from both, Western and Indigenous perspectives) related to what it means to live and be well in terms of the distinctive knowledges of each community. Our findings suggest that this approach can further the success of practitioners and scholars’ collaborative work in the field of sustainable development with Indigenous communities. An overarching dimension in these implications is to emphasize the importance of locally grounded knowledges in informing policies that direct public resources and regulatory frameworks related to the sustainable development of Indigenous communities.

Repensando o desenvolvimento sustentável a partir das perspectivas indígenas de bem-estar da comunidade

RESUMO
Este artigo explora dois conceitos de bem-estar comunitário com base nas perspectivas indígenas: Buen Vivir e Comunalidad. Com base no uso e na prática atuais desses conceitos, bem como em sua influência potencial em práticas orientadas para o desenvolvimento sustentável, argumentamos que, em vez de continuar a aplicar estruturas de sustentabilidade internacionais, os esforços de desenvolvimento sustentável colaborativo envolvendo comunidades indígenas devem ser baseados em conhecimento locais.

KEYWORDS
Sustainable development; collaboration; Indigenous knowledges; community wellbeing

PALAVRAS-CHAVE
Desenvolvimento sustentável; colaboração; conhecimento indígena; bem-estar da comunidade

PALABRAS CLAVE
Desarrollo Sostenible; Colaboración; Conocimientos Indígenas; Bienestar Comunitario
1. Introduction

Our current exploration of community wellbeing informed by Indigenous perspectives was precipitated by a previous case study of the organizing processes and structures that are significant influencers of potentially successful contexts for cross-sector collaboration (Campos Navarrete 2017). This case study examined some of the main reasons and sources of value that built the local culture of a science and green technology innovation park undertaken in the traditional territory of Nogojiwanong, Ontario.¹ This enterprise

¹Nogojiwanong, translated as the place at the end of the rapids, is the traditional territory of Curve Lake First Nation, an Anishnabee community located near Lakefield, Ontario, and is honoured through the Williams Treaties signed in 1923.
was designed by three different sectors (governmental, non-profit, and higher education) and at that time constituted an exemplary case of a project oriented to foster sustainable community development. The study identified organizing processes and structures that are significant influencers of potentially successful contexts for cross-sector collaboration (Campos Navarrete 2017). In the course of this research project, we were intrigued by the discovery of this pathway to furthering innovative alternatives for local economic development. This direction is very timely in the context of Canadian development, where a social transformation is underway through the growing awareness of leveraging economic growth as a means for Reconciliation between Indigenous communities and local Canadian settler communities (OECD 2020). However, during this previous study it was also apparent that the current dominant discourse and understandings of sustainable development remain deeply grounded in Western values, perspectives and practices. Historically, these values have persistently excluded and silenced Indigenous Knowledges and perspectives held by local Indigenous communities (Coburn et al. 2013). The persistent boundaries between the dominant society of Canada and Indigenous peoples continue to hinder the development of respectful and authentic collaboration across this vast cultural divide. As Zohar and Newhouse note, the interaction between Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples has often been conducted through the lens of “coercive tutelage,” in which Indigenous peoples have typically been perceived as having little or nothing to contribute to the understanding of modern human life and how to sustain it (Newhouse 2008; Zohar and Newhouse 2019). This interaction has frequently taken the form of a deep-seated ethic of cultural marginalization and domination of Indigenous perspectives that is not limited to, but includes, those that address issues of sustainable community development.

Our work on the previous case study described led us to reflect on these questions: how can we contribute to building a more inclusive and holistic understanding of sustainable development? How can different cultures, nations, sectors, and ways of understanding the world come together to work in projects oriented to a more culturally inclusive and holistic notion of sustainable development? In this article, we address these questions by discussing different understandings of the meaning of sustainable development beyond the mainstream academic discourses. In undertaking our current collaborative research efforts in Latin America, we decided on starting by reviewing two contemporary Indigenous-inspired concepts from this Region – Buen Vivir and Comunalidad – and describe how these concepts underpin counter-discourses of sustainable development. Based on our findings and experience in the field, in the second part we offer strategies to start rethinking and potentially transforming the mainstream understandings of sustainable development, specifically for practitioners and scholars in the field striving to working in collaboration with Indigenous peoples.

In situating our narrative for this project, we came across different points of view of people and instances working in the field of development in Indigenous territories, from “indigenist” positions, including “critical indigenism” and “integrationist indigenism” (Blaser 2010), to the concept of ethnodevelopment originated by Bonfil Batalla’s criticism of indigenist approaches and policies (Bonfil Batalla 1987 and 1995). Among these ideologies, we found discussions about the distinction between “Indigenous thinking” and “indigenist thinking” central to the issues examined in this paper, in which “indigenist thinking” is recognized as a:
political ideology that recognizes the specificity of Indigenous claims and their right to receive special favourable treatment in compensation for centuries of discrimination and marginalization. (Hidalgo-Capitán and Guillén García 2014, 17)

Although this ideology appears to be appropriate for us as scholars undertaking research in our communities of origin in Latin America and Middle East while enjoying the privilege of currently living and working in Canada, we decided instead to adopt as a point of departure for this inquiry Bonfil Batalla’s critique of indigenist approaches in policymaking and research. In our view, Batalla rightly argues that indigenist approaches often situate Indigenous peoples as poor, vulnerable, and marginalized, usually treated as victims and subjects of assistance (Bonfil Batalla 1987). Bonfil Batalla and others note that these approaches can diminish the Indigenous identity and culture in impacted communities and slowly but persistently foster a position of socio-cultural and economic dependency (Ríos Castillo and Solís González 2009). On the other hand, ethnodevelopment “refers to the development of ethnic groups within the framework of a larger society, but on their own premises” (Buvollen 1989, 130). According to Bonfil Batalla (1995), this framework explores the possibility of situating innovation aligned with traditional protocols, highlighting the relevance of culture in social organization and acknowledging innovation as a necessary strategy for the survival of the traditional culture. Unlike traditional indigenist policies, which often folklorize or romanticize the cultural aspects of Indigenous communities, this approach to an Indigenous-led definition of development focuses on the economic base highlighting the autonomy of Indigenous peoples in resource-control decision making.

We argue that strategies for sustainable development must always include and normalize, local understandings and the Indigenous Knowledges supporting them while at the same time contextualize and continually question and surface Western interpretations of development and sustainability. This approach provides us with a starting point for highlighting significant shortcomings and inadequacies of the current popular perspectives on sustainable community development.

2. Locally based concepts of community wellbeing: Buen Vivir and Comunalidad

Buen Vivir has been discussed widely in the literature, especially in South America. Hidalgo-Capitán (2012) identifies three different forms of discourses and practices of Buen Vivir: 1. Buen Vivir as a political (state-led) socialism of the twenty-first century, which integrates neo-Aristotelean, Christian, and Andean values centering an environmentalist perspective, but prioritizing human development; 2. as a “utopia to be constructed” by combining viewpoints of various international movements (feminists, socialists, ecologists, pacifists, theologists of liberation, unionists, etc.); and 3. an “indigenist” approach in understanding Indigenous ways of living and thinking.

The latter approach includes a diversity of spiritual, ontological, and epistemological dimensions, based on individual and collective practices (rather than knowledges) that
are in constant exchange among Indigenous communities and their allies (Hidalgo-Capitán 2012).2

The concept of Buen Vivir was first discussed in a political setting during the Constituent Assembly of Montecristi, Ecuador, in 2008. It arose as an opportunity to build a society based on a civic and diverse coexistence in harmony with Nature by recognizing the distinct cultural values existing in Ecuador and the world (Acosta 2010). By assuming Buen Vivir as a guiding vision and goal to orient its economic, political, social, and cultural life, Ecuador not only took for the first time a concept inspired from Indigenous traditions and introduced it in a Constitution, but also began to proactively dismantle colonial power through deliberate policy design (Cortez 2010). However, Oviedo (2014) argues that in the Ecuadorian and the Bolivian Constitutions, this concept was constructed following a postmodern style of mixing and combining many concepts into one, in a failed attempt for inclusion. As a result, the so-called Andean concept of Buen Vivir is also seen by many as a combination of Christian and humanist postulates, socialist and ecologist concepts, and a very shallow understanding of Sumak Kawsay. Oviedo (2014) further explains this mixture’s consequences often disrespect and devalue the wise and ancient Andean tradition.

It is critical to acknowledge that there is no simple, clearly definable or “correct” use of the concept of Buen Vivir. As Waldmüller (2014) asserts, instead of seeking a single definition, the significance of Buen Vivir is best understood in opposition to the dominant colonial narrative:

… by ultimately criticizing and opposing itself to western ways of knowledge-making, it intentionally leaves space for reinterpretation, re-appropriation or, as it is frequently called, “enactment” and “reconstruction.” (Waldmüller 2014, 1)

Having situated his commentary within this important qualifying and cautionary context, Waldmüller offers an extensive overview of this concept in terms of the importance of its contribution to development discourses; in this context, he chooses to highlight Walsh’s perspective (2010). Walsh describes Buen Vivir as an idea that:

... denotes, organizes, and constructs a system of knowledges and living beings based on the communion of humans with nature and the spatial–temporal-harmonious totality of existence. That is, on the necessary interrelation of beings, knowledges, logics, and rationalities of thought, action, existence, and living. (18)

Waldmüller (2014) further explains that the ethical dimension included in Buen Vivir from the Indigenous notion of Sumak Kawsay is regarded as “explicitly entailing no aspirations to governance, to rule, to domination, to hierarchies, to competition” (3–4). The reason why there is no notion of “freedom-autonomy-sovereignty” in this concept is simply because all these values are ontologically presupposed and exist only in relation to a notion that simply doesn’t exist in Sumak Kawsay (Waldmüller 2014; Oviedo 2014).

To understand what Buen Vivir implies in policy design, we cannot simplistically associate the term with “Western wellbeing.” Instead, we must begin by recovering the worldview of Indigenous peoples and their locally rooted perspectives. Recovering Indigenous worldviews does not mean denying the possibility of promoting

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2This third approach is commonly differentiated from Buen Vivir and is called Sumak Kawsay (in Quechua “to live altogether in harmony and balance”) in South America (Hidalgo-Capitán 2012).
modernization. For this reason, one of the fundamental tasks lies in building a permanent and constructive dialogue with ancestral knowledges as part of a process of continued decolonization of society (Acosta 2010). The concept of Buen Vivir has generated different approaches to address reductionist visions of economic growth usually based on indicators of social welfare and quality of life (Schlemer Alcântara and Cioce Sampaio 2020). Specifically, many of these approaches consider the subjectivity of the meaning of community wellbeing and focus on “overcoming the limits of mere economic quantification” in developing indicators of community wellbeing (Schlemer Alcântara and Cioce Sampaio 2020, 79). In this way, exploring Indigenous inspired concepts as Buen Vivir and the emerging discussions about their origins, relevance, and practice, can assist researchers across fields in building collaborative theoretical and methodological spaces for dialogue between Indigenous knowledges and Western understandings of local community development.

This argument is compelling, mainly because it stresses the importance of centering Indigenous voices in highlighting core ideas such as the lack of the concept of “development” in many Indigenous communities. As an example, Carlos Viteri Gualinga explains that there is no conception of a linear progression that establishes a vision of a “state of underdevelopment” to be overcome or a “state of development” to be achieved (Viteri Gualinga 2002). In other words, in sharp contrast to Western societies, Indigenous communities usually lack a traditional conception of “poverty” associated with lack of material goods or “wealth” linked to abundance. This idea is also addressed by Martínez Luna (2016), who discusses the Western understanding of “sustainable development” explaining that its implications not only completely destroy our sense of integration with Nature, but also promote an alienating vision, producing problems at all levels that are obvious from the perspective of Indigenous worldviews but somehow unattainable for most societies. In light of these ideas, how can we start building a shared understanding of these concepts? For example, in this case, how can we discuss “sustainable development” without the linear notion of what the word “development” implies? At this point, epistemological models rooted in Indigenous thought, such as Comunalidad, can guide us in building a starting point.

Comunalidad was coined by the Indigenous Mixe thinker Floriberto Díaz (1992), and the teacher, researcher, and Zapotec musician Jaime Martínez Luna (2003). It is a term that defies simple definition. Martínez Luna explains that Comunalidad is:

an experiential concept that allows the integral, total, natural, and common understanding of making (living through) life; it is a natural-logical reasoning based on the interdependence of its temporal and spatial elements; it is the capacity of the living beings that build this reasoning; it is the exercise of life; it is the organic form that reflects the diversity contained in nature in an integral interdependence of the elements that compose it. (Martínez Luna 2016, p.100)

The relevance of Comunalidad in current projects related to Indigenous-led community wellbeing in Oaxaca, Mexico, is fostering the popularity of this term in the designing of models and strategies specifically related to economic development; however, not exclusively. The dynamism of this concept opens multiple possibilities for its understanding and practice. Guerrero Osorio (2016) explains that “Comunalidad is movement. It is life. It is the swirl formed by the current of the river when it hits the root of a tree…” (113). This narrative’s fluidity likens the relationship between the moments of
Comundalidad to a “swirl” or intertwined helix instead of compartmentalizing and isolating each of its aspects through narrow definitions.

Comundalidad can be understood as a way of conducting oneself within community, as a worldview and as a way of life. It is also a model, a system that is intrinsically inclusive and rooted in respect for diversity, generating at the same time locally specific based knowledge and the means to communicate it properly. It is grounded in the principle of reciprocity, and in a way of doing things that allows the survival of the world, proactively including all its instances and elements, achieving holistic wellbeing and especially enjoyment.

Martínez Luna also explains that:

by exercising Comunalidad, a natural philosophy emanates sustained by these four linked and integrated moments: (a) Nature, geography, territory, the land or soil in which we step on; (b) Society, community, the family that treads that nature, geography, soil; (c) Work, labour, the activities carried out by that society, community, the family that steps on that soil; and finally (d) what is obtained from that work that is carried out by society, that in turn treats that nature: enjoyment, wellbeing, festivities, distraction, satisfaction, and exhaustion. (Martínez Luna 2016, 100, the translation to English is ours)

These four moments of Comundalidad open an opportunity to work using this concept as an epistemic category through its four community-grounded philosophical fields: geographic philosophy (the locally specific understandings of Nature, including its spiritual and cultural dimensions), communal philosophy (each community’s notion of Society, understood from the local understandings of identity and their corresponding values), creative-productive philosophy (the locally specific understanding and practice of Economy, driven by and oriented to community wellbeing), and what Martínez Luna (2016) identifies as “the philosophy of enjoyment” (the specific ways in which each community experience their culture, means, and capacities of feeling Joy).

To illustrate better how these four moments work together in practice, Martinez Luna explains that in the case of the Indigenous peoples of Oaxaca, this concept is reflected in the values shared by their communities: living in communality instead of individuality, inhabiting communal territory instead of private properties; prioritizing sharing instead of competing, being polytheists instead of monotheists, exchanging goods and services instead of “doing business,” advocating for diversity instead of equality, and for interdependency instead of freedom, and being guided by authorities instead of “monarchs” (Martínez Luna 2010, 17).

Buen Vivir and Comundalidad are terms conceptualized in the Spanish language. However, these concepts include Indigenous notions that surface and challenge the shortcomings and limitations of the multiple tacit assumptions and embedded worldviews that underlie a Western understanding of sustainable development. These two concepts offer an alternative in designing more diverse models for sustainable development that are in sharp contrast to the unlimited-development-as-growth philosophy of mainstream western development models (Porritt 2012) or structures characterized by social and environmental inequality. This alternative approach to sustainable development incorporates locally designed and owned indicators of community sustainability and wellbeing that can potentially replace the culturally misaligned dominant indicator system.
2.1. Nature

In Acosta’s conceptualization of Buen Vivir, he explains that natural resources cannot be seen as a condition for economic growth, just as they cannot be a simple object in development policies (Acosta 2010). He explains that Nature in Buen Vivir has rights, the Rights of Nature, in which the center is placed in a concept of Nature that includes the human being. It is essential to highlight that these Rights of Nature do not defend the protectionist idea of an “untouched nature.” In contrast, these rights protect the maintenance of living systems; their attention is focused on ecosystems and human collectivities, not on individuals. This conception aligns with Martinez Luna’s narrative (2016), explaining that as long as communities can make sure that their ecosystems are well maintained, alive and functioning along with their native species, people can step on their lands, work on them, and enjoy the outcomes of that work – in other words, exercise Comunalidad.

2.2. Society

This understanding of Nature is grounded in the relevance of the notion of a communal society, which can be understood as the idea of knowing that everything human is built with and within Nature, in function of all the living things in it, including animals and other human beings. The idea of humans “dominating nature” does not exist in Indigenous conceptions of Society. In these times of indiscriminate extraction of natural resources and plundering from Indigenous communities (Machado Aráoz 2016), what was conceptualized by the Ecuadorian constitution as “The Rights of Nature” within the context of Buen Vivir, offers a robust alternative to dominant perspectives on ecological dimensions of sustainable development through counter-colonialist understandings of Society as part of Nature.

In understanding this symbiotic relationship between Nature and Society as an intrinsic part of our human communities, Acosta explains that embracing the Rights of Nature implies the need to revisit traditional definitions for citizenship, grounded in both social and environmental perspectives (Acosta 2010). This revitalized conceptualization of citizenship is pluralistic and interdependent since it depends on the histories of communities and their natural environments, and leads us to open the possibility of reviewing and reinterpreting the concept of Society in its entirety.

2.3. Economy

Machado Aráoz (2016) describes the previously explained reinterpretation of Society as an “eco-socialist revolution” and includes the possibility of enabling a deep socio-metabolic change in which the current social parameters informing concepts of wealth and value need to be symbolically and materially revitalized and transformed. This reinterpretation of wealth generated from labor starts with the understanding that humanity cannot exist outside of Nature and that its de-mercantilism requires the subordination of economic objectives to society’s laws of operation. However, in this context, “Society” refers specifically, almost exclusively, to the local communities living in symbiotic harmony with the local natural systems. As noted
earlier in our discussion about the concept of *Buen Vivir*, this idea does not imply losing sight of respect for human dignity and the improvement of the quality of life of people, “economic growth related to this communion with Nature is just a means, not an end” (Acosta 2010, 17). Martínez Luna explains that in practicing *Comunalidad*, Nature is inherently linked with the local community since the interaction and engagement with the land generate material and intellectual interpretations and shared systems of meaning of the relationships between people and their surroundings (Martínez Luna 2016). Waldmüller (2014) also elaborates on this holistic perspective and emphasizes that material goods are not the only determinants that shape human actions in practicing *Buen Vivir*.

### 2.4. Joy

In addition to material goods, a diversity of elements and other values are at stake, including but not limited to knowledge, social and cultural recognition, ethical codes, spiritual behaviors in the relationship with society and with Nature, human values, and the vision of the future (Waldmüller 2014). This way of understanding life promotes a harmonious relationship between human beings individually and collectively while at the same time grounding what they do to survive and thrive, including having a deep care for Nature. The result of that relationship and its consequence is referred to as *enjoyment* in *Comunalidad*, and can be interpreted in many different ways according to the circumstances, such as spiritual wellbeing, fulfillment, capacity for idleness, and even the feeling of a joyful exhaustion after a good day of work. From this perspective, Joy indivisibly links three elements: the materiality of the results of human labor (such as food or tools), the necessary dynamics for survival (like the practices of sharing and exchanging goods), and culture. The repercussions of braiding together these three components have exciting implications for a fundamental reconstruction of our understanding of sustainable development’s economic dimensions. Acosta (2010) explains that the concept of economy in *Buen Vivir* includes the nuclear value of solidarity and brings down all the theoretical scaffolding that took materiality away from the notion of production and separated economic reasoning from the physical world (p.17). In this regard, “Social and Solidary Economy” is used as a platform to build “joyful” relations of production, exchange, and cooperation that propitiate sufficiency (more than just efficiency) and quality, based on solidarity. On that note, about the construction of an alternative economy based on *Comunalidad*, Martínez Luna explains that

This economy, our economy, has allowed and strengthened our resistance. This economy does not compete, and it does not negotiate. It is reciprocal. It is the result of horizontal relationships between the producers of our communities who also share their lives and future. Communal determination designs the community’s production means in articulated relation within nature. In this process, (our economy) implicitly includes healthy practices and addresses the community’s misfortunes. (Martínez Luna 2016, 112, authors’ translation)

Based on these ideas, a social and solidary economy offers the opportunity of understanding systemic productivity and competitiveness as measurable values but always in terms of being in service of the enjoyment of the collective. This understanding offers a new platform to discuss the idea of “markets,” understanding them as joyful spaces for the
exchange of goods and services using practices aligned with each community’s knowledges, needs, and values, and incorporating their local ways of production and exchange of goods.

3. Building an Indigenous-led approach for sustainable community development

While we have highlighted some of the fundamental contrasts between Indigenous-inspired concepts of wellbeing and mainstream approaches to sustainable development, there are indications that the traditional Western dominant perspective of “development-as-growth” is increasingly being challenged. For example, as researchers deeply interested in sustainability studies, we cannot ignore the resemblance between the four moments of *Comunalidad* related by Martínez Luna and the recent emergence of the concept of four pillars of sustainability. In the mainstream Western literature, the most widely used definition of sustainable development appeared in 1987 in the Brundtland Report: “Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (WCED 1987). This concept was re-interpreted as an organizational strategy encompassing three dimensions, namely social, economic and environmental, commonly termed the “triple bottom line” (Elkington 2004). Over time, the limitations of this definition as a premise of a continuing economic imperative of profitability became increasingly apparent. As Porritt (2012) notes:

More recently, this “plasticity” has come under growing attack on a number of different counts: that sustainable development is so vague and indeterminate a concept as to allow almost infinite abuse by politicians and business people who have no real intention of changing their ways any more than they are absolutely required to . . . and that in its widest definition (embracing social sustainability, equity and justice as much as ecological sustainability) it may even be obstructing the development of sufficiently clear-cut and radical measures to protect the physical environment. (Porritt 2012, 11)

An increasingly prevalent way of describing the critical considerations for achieving sustainability is through an analogy of “four pillars” of sustainability: cultural vibrancy, economic prosperity, environmental responsibility and social justice (Duxbury and Jeannotte 2012). While this emerging approach is far from dominant in the mainstream Western discourse on sustainable development, it nonetheless reflects an increasing interest in challenging traditional approaches to development in Western societies. These include prominent voices from the highest levels of international finance, including Mark Carney, former governor of the Bank of England, and the current UN’s Special Envoy on Climate Action and Finance. Carney (2021) has issued an urgent call for new forms of international collaboration that replace the prioritization of the needs of the elite few with the needs of the many. He argues that we are currently experiencing a period of fundamental systemic transformation at a global level that is being accelerated by the Covid crisis through deepening inequalities. His call for action is directed at revitalizing our narrow Western understandings of economic development with a revitalized vision of a “renewed globalisation founded on the pillars of resilience, solidarity, connectivity and sustainability” (Carney 2021, para. 38).

There is significant evidence that, in the absence of concerted political leadership, an increasing number of Western enterprises are currently seeking new ways of finding a balance and synergies across economic, ecological, political and cultural dimensions of
wellbeing. However, even when these new ways frequently advocate for increasing community wellbeing along social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions, a closer look at Indigenous-led notions of Comunalidad and Buen Vivir shows us how these Western ideas of sustainability are still significantly challenged in finding points of alignment with Indigenous ways of knowing. During this review, we also identified some directions that can potentially offer pathways to more inclusive approaches to sustainable development; the kind that can guide, inform, and illuminate collaborative initiatives undertaken by different cultures trying to work together for the wellbeing of Indigenous communities and their territories.

One of the most vital messages identified in Comunalidad and Buen Vivir is the importance of communicating and sharing the ideas that build these two ways of seeing life. In the case of Comunalidad, Martínez Luna explains that:

> We will achieve it (to be Abya Yala, to be communities of a continent without borders), future generations will achieve it. How? By communicating our natural thinking as a model for harmony, communal work, and reciprocity (not to be confused with fraternity or charity). Thus, we will certainly place it (this model) as a possible future. And we will achieve it if we reproduce and strengthen our models of life. (Martínez Luna 2016, 104, the translation and texts in brackets are ours for reference)

There is a similar approach in terms of the opportunity that Buen Vivir provides as a starting point to collaboratively build a sustainable society:

> Good Living – as a philosophy of life – opens the door to build a liberating and inclusive project, without prejudices or dogmas. A project that, by adding many stories of resistance, struggles, and proposals for change, and by drawing on national and international experiences, can be positioned as a starting point to democratically build a sustainable society in all areas. (Acosta 2010, 28)

Similar to these concepts, other projects of Indigenous resurgence also recognize the need for collaboration with the others; another good example is Zapatismo:

> Zapatismo is delivered as a contribution to critical thinking. To paraphrase the words of Indigenous rebels: Zapatismo is not a new political ideology or a revival of old ideologies. Zapatismo simply is not. It does not exist. Self-management is the foundation, which serves as a temporary bridge to cross from one side to the other. In Zapatismo everyone has a place because it does not refer to an exclusive identity. The Zapatistas are constantly imagining how to get out of the loneliness of the mountains. They know it would be suicide to remain in a state of autonomy without any relations with the world and from this comes their paradoxical strategy of opening and closing. They protect themselves from repression, but they also communicate possibilities for building solidarity with the rest of the world. (Matamoros Ponce 2016, 92, the translation to English is ours)

In light of this invitation for collaboration and co-creation with Indigenous communities, how can solidary allies start looking for points of alignment? We believe that instead of trying to bridge, soften, or close the gap or space between the Indigenous and Western thought worlds, the starting point relies on embracing the differences as the essence of the collaborative process, or exercising proactively what Jones and Jenkins called “working the hyphen” (Jones and Jenkins 2014).

We argue that the first step is being open to suspend certainties and embrace the idea of embedding all collaborative initiatives at the onset in a culture of collaboration that is
aligned with and defined by Indigenous ways of knowing. Building on Ponce’s metaphor of Zapatismo described above, this is the foundational premise for constructing “a temporary bridge to cross from one side to the other” between worldviews. It is critical to keep in mind that Western understandings have been imposed on Indigenous peoples for hundreds of years now. In order to disrupt this dialectic, the primary stage in the path of building a collaborative environment for Western and Indigenous initiatives must be grounded in an understanding and normalization of Indigenous perspectives. As Holthaus (2008) has noted, embracing a culture of collaboration grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing redefines the narrative of collaboration in fundamental ways; and collaboration then becomes a “…story of co-operation instead of competition, of connections rather than fragments, of respect instead of condescension, of openness instead of secrecy, of good health and advantage for all instead of extravagant profit for a few” (Holthaus 2008, 219).

Once this primary stage is established as a basis for collaboration, the next step in constructing the bridge is understanding that sustainable development is a flawed term grounded in Western thought and born in the context of extractivist practices. Nevertheless, there is undeniable evidence that there is an emerging approach to debunk the term and take it away from the mainstream discourse to challenge traditional approaches to community development in Western societies. In this point of alignment, there is an opportunity to start a dialogue with Indigenous perspectives of community wellbeing, which are intrinsically dynamic, fluid, and adaptable.

Another point of alignment is the recent Western understanding of community development as a non-linear process, especially in the context of social change. This view of a dynamic, fluid and emergent process of community development is consistent with recent Western organizational change research on the nature of emergent change processes in social systems (Sawyer 2005; Wheatley and Frieze 2006). These perspectives suggest that change in social systems is a fluid, non-linear and dynamic process that emerges incrementally. The process of systemic social change typically unfolds as a result of relatively small individual and group level mindsets and actions that through time can potentially redirect shared cultures of understandings in new directions, and reverberate and cumulate in their effects across entire social systems (Mintzberg 2015). Similarly, large scale cultural change can be triggered by creating of a small number of community-level projects that connect with each other so that a critical mass of sustainable ideas and understandings emerges within our shared cultural fabric (Morgan and Zohar 1995). This approach, along with Comunalidad, Buen Vivir, and other similar Indigenous epistemological positions, offers a point of departure for mutual understanding between Western and Indigenous perspectives on successful processes of sustainable community development.

Consequently, static concepts and fixed definitions of sustainability, consisting of concepts represented as isolated silos (such as the social as something apart from the ecological, which is apart from the economical, and so on), represent an obstacle for mutual understanding. The use of metaphors as explanatory tools is a promising strategy for effective communication purposes between different cultures. While metaphors are partial ways of understanding, they also have the power to engage holistic meanings. Raworth’s concept of Doughnut Economics offers an example of the power of playful metaphorical thinking in advancing revitalized mindsets addressing our current...
challenges (Raworth 2017). Rather than promoting a series of policies and institutions, it promotes a way of thinking that aims to realize regenerative and distributive economic processes that will meet the deep-seated challenges of our times. Drawing on insights from diverse and alternative streams, including ecological, feminist, institutional, behavioral and complexity economics, it describes a “doughnut-shaped space” in which we can re-imagine how humanity can thrive within both ecologically safe and socially just parameters. Metaphors also help in embracing Indigenous notions, such as the Zapatista “lead by obeying,” or “preserve by changing” (changing in order to prevail and to last), which can seem paradoxical from a Western perspective.

Finally, the idea of a static, universal, “developed” ideal needs to be replaced by a commitment to context-specific and deeply local understanding of sustainable development – and by “deeply,” we mean rooted profoundly in the distinct culture of each community. The possible outcomes of any attempt of collaboration are always adapting to the local context which is always transforming:

The key lesson to be learned is that culture is constantly changing, that it evolves rapidly, and that it cannot be regarded as an inherent genetic trait. Many countries around the world have indigenous populations and, while their culture often provides a framework for maintaining the community, the assumption that all hold to the same cultural values cannot be made. The nature-culture nexus is a result of complex and continuously changing cultural, social and political connections built up over long periods of time. (Dessein et al. 2015, 67)

Moreover, the indicators have to be locally designed and cannot be simply converted into final objectives; they have to be designed as supporting tools, always subject to constant scrutiny, revision, and even replacement by the local communities that are using them. This reasoning is not new; in fact, a well-known example is the concept of Gross National Happiness coined in Bhutan in 1972 as a counter-discourse to the international trend of positioning the Gross National Product as an indicator for development:

The issue has become sufficiently pressing that international organizations now speak of “cultural genocide,” by which they mean the cultural cost of introducing socioeconomic change that does not factor into its processes the question of the development of culture as well. (Mancall 2004, 26)

In this regard, there are emergent efforts in developing indicators that acknowledge and promote the linkages between culture and sustainable development (Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn 1991; Dessein et al. 2015; Schlemer Alcântara and Cioce Sampaio 2020). These efforts have identified that “development is about people and not about objects” (Max-Neef, Elizalde, and Hopenhayn 1991, 16); that conceptual coherence, citizen participation, and methodological transparency are keys in developing plural concepts and indicators that go beyond the mainstream understanding of development (Schlemer Alcântara and Cioce Sampaio 2020); and that promoting collaboration between researchers, practitioners, organizations, and local communities is crucial in developing indicators that, besides measuring change, can also potentially generate it in fostering local sustainable development, especially in Indigenous contexts (Dessein et al. 2015; Campos

\[^{3}\] Mandar obedeciendo is a communal authority practice in which a General Assembly composed by representatives of each family is the highest governing body in the community territory. This means that the community authorities are not above the General Assembly but are only the executors of the explicit agreements of the General Assembly.

\[^{4}\] Quote by Arturo Guerrero Osorio in explaining the communal paradox (Esteva 2016).
Navarrete 2021). An important aspect of this point of alignment is that the generation of participative approaches enable “collective learning and potential change while being grounded in the local traditions of the participant communities” (Campos Navarrete 2021).

These basic points of alignment can potentially build a space in which Indigenous and Western parties can effectively co-create projects oriented towards furthering community wellbeing in shared territories, and approaches that advocate for Indigenous-led definitions, visions, and values. By promoting these approaches, it is possible to meaningfully ground collaborative enterprises in local Indigenous ways of knowing, values, and beliefs. This is not a simple task. From the many examples that we as practitioners have witnessed in our careers, and just as Jones and Jenkins explain (2014), we understand that working the hyphen in these collaborative processes is uncomfortable, and takes time and lasting loyalty, as well as humility and trust, mostly among the non-Indigenous collaborators.

The central role played by individual-level collaboration strongly resonates with one of the central findings of the case study that inspired this inquiry into meaningful sustainable development (Campos Navarrete 2017). In this study, we identified that one of the most important factors shaping successful collaboration was actually the individuals’ skills and the approaches taken by the people directly working together in the co-creation process. In our experience, while projects’ participants come together from different sectors, cultures, and values, successful processes of co-creation are usually guided by individual collaborative initiatives rather than institution-level policies and top-down directives. The ability to embrace and enact critical adaptive skills and ongoing learning, a heightened capacity for building meaningful relationships, and the ability to find ways to enjoy the collaborative process are central characteristics of these successful interactions. In other words, we found that the most crucial collaborative processes happen at the inter-personal level by people open to learning new ways of understanding and that is not afraid of building engagement and dialogue with others. Over time, these individual-level abilities and interactions shape a shared culture of collaboration and understanding between the participants that in turn fosters the generation of creative solutions and new directions for resolving complex challenges.

4. Conclusion

Indigenous Knowledges and ways of seeing life invite us to look at the aspects and models of sustainability using the lenses of local communities in understanding and practicing their wellbeing. In this article, we offer a brief perspective of how to start rethinking the idea of sustainable development through the four moments of the epistemic category of Comunalidad and integrating relevant aspects of the vision of Buen Vivir. With this vision, the concepts of Nature, Society, Economy, and the overarching dimension of the concept of Joy become interconnected and interdependent. Comunalidad as an epistemic category opens pathways for harmonic ways of understanding the locally grounded creative-productive dynamics of each community by creating a system with all the aspects involved that at the same time sustains and strengthens itself. In this perspective, enjoyment becomes a necessary value that emanates from the diversity of possibilities offered by the communal connectedness with the territory, the emotional-intellectual
capacity of the people inhabiting it, and the result of the creativity exercised in each and every moment and spaces in which each distinct community lives. In this scenario, the concepts of sustainability and sustainable development become radically re-interpreted and in turn make a case for positioning community wellbeing at the center of our inquiries, starting by exploring what each community understands by having a good and joyful life in their own terms.

Supported by this opportunity, we offer a few considerations for practitioners and scholars trying to align Western and Indigenous views as a pathway to mutual understandings of wellbeing. We propose starting by embracing the uncertain territory of locally grounded, intrinsically dynamic and interconnected, multileveled, fluid, inclusive, and holistic ideas from both Western and Indigenous perspectives. Far from being linear, the advancement of community wellbeing is an ongoing practice that is more consistent with processes of social change. In this regard, the study of Indigenous epistemological positions provides dynamic frameworks that are more suitable to this field’s complex realities. We argue that the incremental accumulation of experiences following this approach can effectively debunk outdated paradigms and promote more holistic and inclusive understandings of sustainable development.

Our findings suggest that in collaborative initiatives oriented to sustainable development involving Indigenous communities, the primary stage should focus on understanding and normalizing local Indigenous ways of knowing. In this point of departure, the inter-personal level of ongoing relationship building is crucial. We describe this interpersonal capacity as the ability to collaboratively negotiate and resolve inherent points of difference and diversity through face-to-face interactions by centering the importance of dialogue and aligning with local communication practices. Our findings suggest that the use of metaphors has proven useful in this context, providing significant implications for understanding factors that can play a meaningful role in furthering collaboration across cultures.

It is important to note that Indigenous notions of community wellbeing encompass social, cultural, spiritual, environmental, and economic intersections that are deeply rooted in distinct and locally based traditional knowledges. We believe that research endeavors in this field should specifically address the socioeconomic aspects of the local perspectives on community wellbeing. However, researchers and practitioners should also be prepared to address the inherent and dynamic interconnections across all the aspects involved in the many ways in which Indigenous communities experience and envision their very specific way of being and living well. This effort includes an ongoing adaptation to the local context, encompassing its ever-changing factors and applying the same flexibility to the initiatives collaboratively pursued.

We have spent most of our careers working with communities that live below the international poverty line in their territories, in moderate to extreme poverty. In our experience, the initiatives and practices undertaken to address this situation are usually designed to tackle their urgent needs and are centered on socioeconomic indicators based on sustainable development frameworks designed by international agencies. Despite the fact that such initiatives have been continually implemented for the last hundred years, Indigenous peoples are still among the poorest in almost every country, while living in territories with 80% of the biodiversity of the world (Hall and Patrinos 2012; Hall and Gandolfo 2016). An overarching dimension of contributing to emphasize
the importance of locally grounded knowledges in the field of sustainable development is the prospect of informing policies that redistribute public resources and to form regulatory frameworks. We believe that by reframing the current understanding of sustainable development through the inclusion and normalization of local Indigenous ways of knowing, we have the opportunity to genuinely co-create successful collaborative projects oriented to community wellbeing. Only by continuing building relationships of trust and loyalty between Indigenous and non-Indigenous parties we can potentially generate a virtuous cycle of reciprocal support, solidarity, and even enjoyment.

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Marisol Campos Navarrete has a BSc in Engineering, a MA in Sustainability Studies, a PhD in Indigenous Studies, and 20 years of experience working with Indigenous communities in Mexico, Central and South America, and Canada. Her current research interests address collaborative initiatives that aim to further locally-led sustainable development and exploring different approaches and perspectives of what sustainability means for Indigenous communities and how it is practiced in their territories, especially in initiatives oriented to economic development. In this context, Dr. Campos Navarrete characterizes sustainable development as jointly embracing social, cultural, economic, and environmental dimensions of community wellbeing.

Asaf Zohar’s research examines the processes and enabling conditions that promote the translation of visions and missions of sustainability into successful organizing strategies and actions. He has co-authored a series of international publications on organizational learning and change management that build on the insights of the new science of chaos and complexity. These works outline an innovative approach to realizing large-scale organizational change initiatives through a critical mass of high leverage individual actions. He has developed and facilitated numerous academic and executive development programs in Canada, the Middle East, and the US. on how we can create sustainable organizations that self-organize – continually creating new, emergent learning structures and processes that effectively respond to current needs.

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