

Commentary

# Traditional knowledge in the approach to sustainability: Making sense of Bhutanese gross national happiness and Buen Vivir in Bolivian constitution

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**Abstract:** In the past few decades, due to the global environmental crisis humanity is facing, a sudden growth in environmental policies and sustainability strategies has been registered. This article discusses two of such policies, namely that of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in the Himalayan country of Bhutan and the inclusion of the concept of Buen Vivir (BV) in the Bolivian Constitution, through a critical analysis—based on political ecology approaches—of their implementation within state policy and their wider implications within the global discourse on the so-called “sustainable development” paradox. This paper highlights the role that the aforementioned policies might play in the path to decolonisation, seeing as how they draw inspiration from their own local contexts and values instead of those provided by the Global North, more specifically focusing on their ancestral and traditional knowledge to supposedly guide the countries’ policy-making process. Although several points of criticism are identified in both policies, innovativeness is detected in their potential to offer alternative views on human wellbeing, both for global southern and global northern contexts, as their original intent would be to remarkably operate outside of the Western framework of development based on Gross Domestic Product (GDP) and economic growth. GNH appears to be mostly oriented toward supporting political national budget discussion and allocation, while BV acts at a higher level (constitutional), thus also inspiring overall politics.

**Keywords:** sustainable development; decolonisation; global south; paradigm shift

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## 1. Introduction

*“Fiction isn’t bad. It is vital. Without commonly accepted stories about things like money, states or corporations, no complex human society can function. [...] But stories are just tools. They shouldn’t become our goals or our yardsticks. When we forget that they are mere fiction, we lose touch with reality. Then we begin entire wars ‘to make a lot of money for the cooperation’ or ‘to protect the national interest’. Corporations, money and nations exist only in our imagination. We invented them to serve us; why do we find ourselves sacrificing our life in their service.”—Homo Deus: A Brief History of Tomorrow [1].*

In the past few decades, there has been an increasingly prominent insurgence of concepts originally devised in what is today known as the “Global South”, mostly in reaction to the pervasive Western, capitalistic way of thinking the West’s one-size-fits-all agenda, a sort of logic that no-matter-what prioritises economic growth and encourages an individualistic approach to work, the failures of which, due to its inability to be applied to any geopolitical area whatsoever and to the evident widening of inequalities currently taking place on a global scale, are now being analysed by countless scholars coming from all around the world [2]. Recently, in the Global

South, some innovation models created and led by indigenous organisations have been making their way into state legislation; likewise, widespread religions have been showing their deep influence within political contexts.

Throughout this brief paper, we will be illustrating and analysing two cases of environmental policies that supposedly adopt a decolonial approach [3,4] to innovation, challenging mainstream environmental narratives while pursuing greater social balance and justice, namely the Bhutanese government's policy of Gross National Happiness (GNH) and the Bolivian Constitution's policy of *Buen Vivir*. First, we will provide a historical, cultural, geographical and economic context of the environmental policy and the country in question. Secondly, we will illustrate the policy's highlights and state the tools we will be using for our critical assessment. Finally, we will be engaging in a discussion regarding such policies with a more attentive focus on their strengths and weaknesses within the context of Western economic and ideological domination, linking such discussion to our findings and personal knowledge.

Our critical assessment of the aforementioned policies presents itself with the goal of analysing possible values and assumptions that underlie innovation in these alternative development-based conceptual and practical frameworks. More specifically, we will be placing the focus on the role of Buddhist beliefs [5] in the implementation and operationalisation of GNH for the case of Bhutan and on the difficult translation of informal indigenous beliefs within state institutions in the process to cultural decolonisation and plurinationality for the case of Bolivia.

A matter that is of great concern which we will be trying to critically analyse is the following: Can the hereby presented policies serve as a practical tool for aiding communities, leaders and governments in the implementation of measures centred on both human and environmental wellbeing? How do they operate on the grounds of a capitalist economy? Additionally, what if such state endorsement of indigenous and/or alternative approaches to development were actually an exploitation of the inclusion and diversity rhetoric and a disguise for maintaining the business-as-usual Western-style approach to development?

## **2. Materials and methods**

The assessed policies are illustrated in sections 2.1 and 2.2 by using a selection of political ecology approaches [6,7] for critical thinking and assessment; where available, further details on approaches are provided on the occasion of their first appearance throughout the following sections.

### **2.1. Gross national happiness in Bhutan**

Starting from Gross National Happiness, this term originated and is currently employed in the tiny Asian country of Bhutan (38,117 km<sup>2</sup>), situated in the Greater Himalayas and enclosed by the two most populous nations on Earth (China and India), with a population of under 800,000 [8] (distributed 38% in urban areas and 62% in rural ones), mainly professing the Mahāyāna branch of Buddhism (which has been the dominant religion there since the seventeenth century), and a territory covered for the 71% by forest [9]. The World Bank has ranked Bhutan as a lower middle-income developing country [9], and the United Nations classified Bhutan as one of the world's

“Least Developed Countries” (LDCs), even though there have been some critiques aimed at the indicators employed by the UN for determining which countries are to be considered LDCs [10].

Historically, Bhutan purposely limited exposure to the outside world, taking advantage of its geographically remote location [11]. One element of Bhutan that makes it stand out on a global level is that not only it is the only carbon-neutral country in the world (and has pledged to continue to remain so in the future), it is even “carbon negative” [12], as it absorbs three times more carbon emissions than it emits; additionally, the Bhutanese Constitution requires that 60% of the country’s land be covered with forest [11].

When western economists started visiting Bhutan in the beginning of the 1970s, they regarded it as “poor” when analysed under the lens of its Gross Domestic Product (GDP) [13]. In response to this, in 1972, Bhutan’s fourth king, Jigme Singye Wangchuck, coined the expression “Gross National Happiness” (GNH), but it was not until the late 1980s that it started being widely employed as the country’s guiding philosophy for managing economic development and embracing the inevitable oncoming modernisation process while preserving the country’s traditions, institutions, spiritual values and sovereignty [14]. This was deemed extremely vital, as Bhutan’s political and economic opening to outside ideas and institutions had already begun a few decades earlier through diplomatic ties with (mostly) India and admission to the United Nations in 1971 [11]. In 2004, Bhutan started operationalising the GNH policy, and in 2008 it had developed a GNH index based on country-wide surveys [13].

The King wanted the country to embrace the idea that sustainable development should take a holistic approach towards notions of progress and give equal importance to noneconomic aspects of wellbeing, placing the focus on prosperity and happiness as the main aims of development [15]. GNH represents a new approach to measuring a nation’s wealth, promoting education and human capital within a human-centred framework of development, rather than a profit-centred one; as remarked by Bhutan’s 5th King, it is a sort of “development with values” [11]. According to a global study conducted in 2007 on subjective well-being, “Bhutan ranked eighth out of 178 countries”, also being the only country in the top 20 “happiest” countries that has a very low GDP [13].

Because of its peculiarity, the philosophy of GNH received international recognition when the UN General Assembly made “the conscious pursuit of happiness a fundamental human goal in the resolution “Happiness: Towards a holistic approach to development” [13], and it is being widely discussed internationally as a plausible development alternative to the Western framework of GDP.

## **2.2. Buen Vivir in the Bolivian constitution**

Bolivia is an ethnically heterogeneous South American country that has experienced economic inequalities and hierarchical power relations since its colonial conquest [16]. Some of the country’s history can be analysed in order to understand what led the government to recently adopt policies related to the concept of “Buen Vivir”, a general grasp of which is needed in order to understand the current political, cultural and economic framework in Bolivia.

Buen Vivir (BV, sometimes also referred to as “Vivir Bien”) is a concept derived and inspired by Andean Indigenous cosmologies, specifically from the Quechua and Aymara Indigenous Peoples of Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru [17]. It is derived from the Kichwa “sumak kawsay” (roughly translating into “a life in plenitude”), a concept that, along the Aymaran one of “suma qamaña” (a harmonious balance of material and spiritual elements), has gained popularity within popular discourse since the indigenous social movements of the 1990s [18] and the election of “governments of the Latin American new left”, that “allowed the expression of indigenous knowledge and traditions that were oppressed, minimised or subordinated over centuries” [19]. It is a living practice that, since its beginning, has put the focus on attaining collective well-being through a few main principles, such as reciprocity, complementarity and relationality, which are to be applied to humans as well as non-human and cosmological beings. BV also endorses a multi-directional, non-linear progression of history and development [19]; it distances itself from the mainstream idea of progress, usually perceived as a notion “based on a productivist path and a mechanistic vision of economic growth” [20]. A central concept of BV is that of the “pachamama” (Mother Nature), a living entity to be safeguarded through respectful and reciprocal engagement between human society and nature [18].

Because of its plurinational descent, BV is not a homogenous philosophy, as it encompasses a diversity of knowledge and philosophies, therefore potentially engendering multiple interpretations of BV itself [18], which interact in dialogue with each other without hierarchies [19]. As described by Gudynas [19], BV “is not a static concept, but an idea that is continually being created”, and can thus work as a unifier between heterogeneous political demands [16]. BV’s wisdom can be explicated through the Andean cross “Chakana” (Figure 1), which illustrates its main constituents engaging with each other in accordance with natural elements.

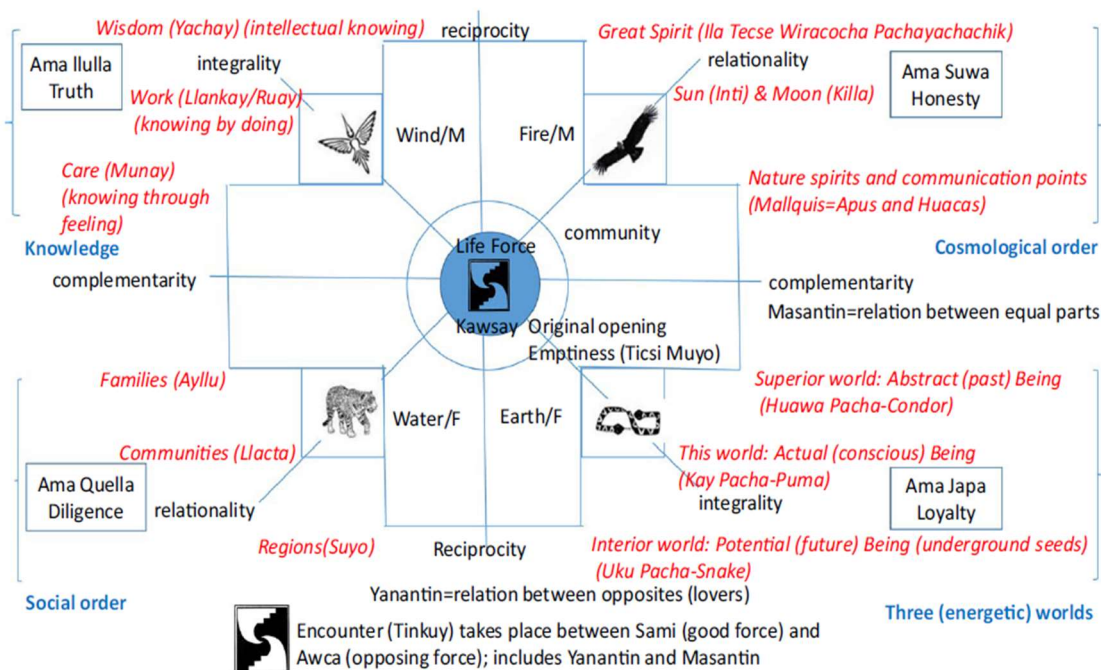


Figure 1. The Andean cross “Chakana” [21].

### 3. Results

#### 3.1. Gross national happiness in Bhutan

First and foremost, in order to contextualise the concept of GNH, it is important to deliver a general account of how exactly the term “happiness” is to be understood in the context of Mahāyāna Buddhism and its teachings, to which is attributed the emphasis on happiness as the central goal of human life [14]. Happiness is a multidimensional concept, focussed on a collective pursuit of it rather than merely on subjective well-being [22], which sees material and spiritual development as complementary [9]. GNH is then meant to orient the Bhutanese people towards happiness substantially by improving their current conditions and, therefore, decreasing the insufficiencies measured in the system that we will shortly go on to explain.

The GNH policy rests on 4 main pillars (showcased in **Figure 2**) that very much resemble the way in which leadership and power relations are rooted in the traditional Buddhist context [13]: Good governance, sustainable socio-economic development, cultural preservation and environmental conservation. These get further broken down into 9 domains: psychological wellbeing, health, education, time use, cultural diversity and resilience, good governance, community vitality, ecological diversity and resilience, and living standards [15]. Within the framework of these 9 domains, 33 indicators and 124 variables can be identified, with each variable representing a building block of the overall wellbeing of the Bhutanese people [15]. For instance, some of the most relevant indicators related to their domain of belonging might be “Literacy” for Education, “Political participation” for good governance, “Cultural participation” for Cultural diversity and resilience, and so on [23].



**Figure 2.** The four pillars of Gross National Happiness (GNH) in Bhutan.

Source: [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gross\\_National\\_Happiness](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Gross_National_Happiness).

The GNH index is measured through data drawn from periodic surveys, the results of which are analysed through the lens of gender, age, occupation and region [22], which clearly are crucial factors that contribute to such a measure's multidimensionality and depth. Needless to say, people aren't expected to be sufficient in each of the 124 variables in order to be registered as happy: diversity in how one attains a fulfilling life is also taken into account [22]. The domains of GNH can be weighted by the Bhutanese government by using two kinds of thresholds [15]:

- Sufficiency threshold: The minimum an individual needs for meeting sufficiency in each of the 33 indicators;
- Happiness threshold: Poses itself the question "how many domains or in what percentage of the indicators must a person achieve sufficiency in order to be understood as happy?".

It is also important to note that self-report indicators are weighed as less important than others, since they are subjective. The following table (**Table 1**) helps understand the different weights ascribed.

**Table 1.** Weights ascribed by the GNH index to different domains [23].

Domain	Indicators	Weight
Psychological wellbeing	Life satisfaction	33%
	Positive emotions	17%
	Negative emotions	17%
	Spirituality	33%
Health	Self reported health	10%
	Healthy days	30%
	Disability	30%
	Mental health	30%
Education	Literacy	30%
	Schooling	30%
	Knowledge	20%
	Value	20%
Cultural diversity and resilience	Zorig chusum skills (Thirteen arts and crafts)	30%
	Cultural participation	30%
	Speak native language	20%
	Driglam Namzha (Etiquette)	20%
Time use	Work	50%
	Sleep	50%

**Table 1.** (Continued).

Domain	Indicators	Weight
Good governance	Political participation	40%
	Services	40%
	Government performance	10%
	Fundamental rights	10%
Community vitality	Donation (time and money)	30%
	Safety	30%
	Community relationship	20%
	Family	20%
Ecological diversity and resilience	Wildlife damage	40%
	Urban issues	40%
	Responsibility towards environment	10%
	Ecological issues	10%
Living standard	Per capita income	33%
	Assets	33%
	Housing	33%

After calculations have been made, the population is differentiated into four sub-groups, namely: unhappy (under 50% of the highest scores set out), narrowly happy (50%–66%), extensively happy (66%–77%) and deeply happy (77%–100%) [15].

GNH has even been inscribed in Article 9 of the Constitution of Bhutan (2008), by which “The State shall strive to promote those conditions that will enable the pursuit of Gross National Happiness” [15]. Thus, policies and programmes advanced by Bhutan’s constitutional monarchy have to be coherent with the aforementioned article. Such a mindset dates back hundreds of years: citing a Bhutanese legal code instituted after the country’s unification in 1729, “if the government cannot create happiness for its people, there is no purpose for the government to exist” [15].

In order to analyse the hereby presented policy of Bhutan’s GNH, we will be employing several tools that are of common use within the field of environmental politics and policies, namely the Easterlin paradox [24], leverage points, the systemic reality of sustainability and the three pillars of sustainability, the human-nature dichotomy, integrated approaches, cultural paradigms and, finally, the GDP-GNH dilemma.

### 3.2. Buen Vivir in the Bolivian constitution

Originally born as an indigenous belief, BV has recently made its way into several fields—such as political theory, political economy and legal studies—but, most importantly, into Ecuador and Bolivia’s state legislation. In Bolivia, BV has been employed since 2016 as the guiding value (and a sort of backbone of state policy-

making) of the National Development Plan (“Plan Nacional de Desarrollo”) [16], and it was finally inscribed in the Constitution of 2009, when the country’s plurinationality and interculturality (“Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia”) were finally recognised, which translated into a set of ethical and moral guidelines for the government to comply with in the process of decolonisation [25], intended as “the elimination of racial and cultural discrimination and the strengthening of indigenous knowledge and ideas” [16]. Bolivia’s Constitution promotes a “plurinational framework that recognises Indigenous Peoples as nations with territorial rights” [17], while Law 71—*Ley de Derechos de la Madre Tierra* “regulates the rights of nature and the environment in accordance with the principles of Buen Vivir” [26]; this last law has been proven to be modestly effective in supporting national forest cover, thus displaying how the institutional recognition of indigenous principles can aid in the protection of the environment [26].

Such remodelling of legislation came about during Evo Morales’ administration (2006–2019), Bolivia’s first president of indigenous (Aymara) descent who, by “combining an indigenous cause with increasing anti-globalisation sentiments”, set out to translate political alternatives of indigenous origin into state policy [16]. His electoral win in January 2006 represented a victory for several social movements, indigenous groups and peasant unions, and so “high hopes were expressed for a radical, democratic, state-transformation project based on indigeneity” [16].

In order to analyse the challenging implementation of indigenous discourses within state policy, innovative conceptual tools are needed, and so we will be resorting to decolonialism, bottom-up approaches and inclusivity, sustainable development (and the extractive exploitation of indigenous territories), the Pluriverse (post-development thinking frameworks [2]), philosophy of science, the Kuhn Cycle [27], Barry Commoner’s Laws of Ecology [28], cultural appropriation and political translation, the indigenous experience and the systemic thinking iceberg [29] for conducting our critical analysis of the Buen Vivir policy in Bolivia.

## 4. Discussion

### 4.1. Gross national happiness in Bhutan

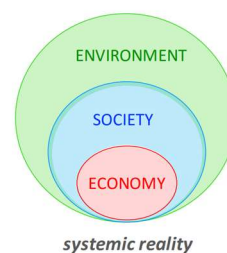
For our discussion regarding the policy of GNH, we would like to start from the Easterlin paradox [24] which, as significantly studied in the past few decades, proposes that increases in income do not translate into increases in happiness over the long term [11]. According to the Easterlin paradox, despite higher incomes generally implying higher levels of life satisfaction in the short-term, when considering long-term growth happiness will not increase directly with income, mainly due to external causes such as social comparison [24]. Indeed, income and happiness go together only up to a certain point, because pursuing materialistic growth is actually associated with lower levels of well-being and life satisfaction, being detrimental to both the individual and the environment [30]. A better understanding of subjective aspects of well-being, which GNH is proposing to do, would be favourable in regards to recalibrating development towards an economy that sees economic growth as a means through which to achieve human potential, with individuals being put at its very centre.



Talking about income increases, one of the most significant challenges that Bhutan may encounter in the near-future is managing consumption levels in a society currently undergoing rapid urbanisation and modernisation (which are nonetheless swiftly changing cultural identities), trying to embrace the aspects of modernity that “provide individual and societal benefits while avoiding those aspects that lead to undesirable social, cultural, and environmental change” [30]. Furthermore, as outlined by Munslow and O’Dempsey [31], globalisation is known to increase inequalities, nationally and internationally. This last point is also linked to the notion of “degrowth”, which proposes that Humankind, instead of struggling to grow constantly, should re-define development by resizing its economic and social systems so as to make them more long-term sustainable.

As reported by Brooks [30], Meadows et al. [32] suggest that, in order to achieve large-scale change, before a shift of deeply ingrained beliefs and practices that affect behaviour there must first be an envisionable alternative to the present situation. In Bhutan, such change is being achieved through formal and informal political institutions, as well as through social institutions such as Buddhism in which Bhutanese identity is rooted, whose beliefs shape values and perceptions and can promote sustainable ways of living. The state has made active efforts to link Buddhist teachings with environmental conservation, as can be seen from the many references to Buddhist philosophy in several government documents [30] and the emphasis that has been placed on the concept of “Buddhist leadership” [13,33], that goes beyond Western leadership definitions. These institutions’ far-reaching potential within Bhutanese society can thus serve as an effective leverage point for achieving change in the development discourse. Another identifiable crucial leverage point would be that of campaigning, which in Bhutan has likely played an important role in “making the public aware of the efforts to maximise GNH” [30], and the same goes for the periodic surveys, the answers to which promptly highlight which factors the State can work on for introducing policies in line with the recommendations made by the public. Curiously, in Bhutan, it seems that the public’s understanding of Buddhism is actually increasing with development rather than dissolving because of it [30], which represents a peculiar trend when analysing the general relationship between economic growth, globalisation and religions’ spread.

Amongst the strengths displayed in the GNH policy, we can surely notice a strong view of mutual interdependence between ecology, society and economy, with the planet taking precedence over the people, which form healthy ecosystems that in turn provide the basis for economies to flourish [13]. All this is strictly abiding to the systemic reality of sustainability, as displayed in **Figure 3**.



**Figure 3.** Own re-elaboration of the strong sustainability approach.

Source: Internal educational re-elaboration of public domain images.

By conceiving the world's system in such a way, GNH deviates from the human-nature dichotomy that has led humanity to become alienated in relation to nature, and instead "more optimistically assumes the possibility of harmonious co-existence of mankind and nature" [13]. Further elaborating on this, GNH actually adds a fourth dimension to the systemic reality of sustainability, that of governance, which has the role of balancing the three other pillars through policy-making [13]; as outlined by Grugel and Uhlin [34], the marginalised and poor communities in the Global South "do not figure prominently in mainstream accounts of global governance", so there is an urgent need for more inclusive state governance. Through GNH, the State provides Bhutanese citizens with enabling conditions for participating actively in the development of the nation and in the attainment of both individual and collective well-being [11].

By conducting the period surveys for measuring GNH in several regions throughout the country, considering several multidimensional indicators as well as taking into consideration the personal context of each individual, the Bhutanese government is able to gather information on national distribution of resources (and act upon it if they aren't being distributed fairly) and different needs in different contexts [15], thus deploying an integrated approach in its assessment techniques, which should serve as an adequate method for defining environmental policies. Over time, periodical measures of the national GNH Index will provide, as stated by Ura et al. [22], a "nuanced picture of the composition, diversity, and evolution of GNH across Bhutan", which can be analysed by experts for determining what can be improved.

For what concerns the weaknesses, first of all, there is great concern over the reliability of the surveys' answers, for a variety of reasons. Self-reports, for instance, may not be wholly trustable because people may be strongly biased due to their current emotional and mental state and thus base well-being assessments solely on the information at hand in that moment [14]. Subjective well-being indicators are quite tricky because they might be interpreted (and misinterpreted) in several fashions by their receivers, who would thus be giving out answers difficult to generalise, which is a crucial step in understanding the bigger picture of the case-study in question and acting upon its shortcomings.

One must also bear in mind that, if the GNH Index surveys were used for international comparisons, a "cultural translation" would be required along with the obvious linguistic one, because happiness is a cultural trait too: the extent to which it is shown and expressed depends on cultural norms, just like the way in which questions are phrased and terms with slightly different connotations are used can change the content of the question entirely [14]. In relation to this, Brooks [30] actually argues that, despite Buddhist principles clearly not representing universal values, equivalents of these may be found in many world religions (and even within Western secular contexts), which could be employed by other nations for supporting alternative visions of progress.

Still focussing on the surveys' reliability, there might be other negative influences in the data-gathering process: The survey takes at least 5–6 h to complete, a time length that could easily bore respondents, therefore lowering the possibilities of receiving genuine feedback [15]. Bhutan's geographical and cultural homogeneity also play an important part in the process, because carrying out surveys in a much more diversified

country (i.e., China, India or the US) would present experts with several more challenges [15].

For what concerns cultural homogeneity in Bhutan, though, this is not entirely true, as the 33 GNH Index indicators do not take into consideration the cultural values of 25% Hindus and 5% of other faiths (Muslims and Christians) living mostly in southern Bhutan, which shows a clear case of cultural intolerance: while trying to preserve Bhutanese culture, the government is also strictly defining what Bhutanese culture is merely in relation to Buddhist-centred values [15]. Even in instances where religion may serve as a means through which to gain strong social cohesion (and thus help lead to more just and sustainable societies), there is a risk that it might impact negatively in achieving social equity considering how many wide-spread religions rely on very strict biases (which might take the form of patriarchy, discrimination based on race, casteism, and so on), thus resulting in a marginalisation of countless minorities and communities.

As with most major innovations and approaches for measuring human well-being, Bhutan's policy of GNH is proving to be flawed under a series of social, ethical, cultural, political and practical perspectives. At the same time, one must not forget that the expectations coming from international recognition of this policy would be too high to meet even for fully-developed countries, and so we must take into consideration that Bhutan is currently welcoming the arduous challenges that accompany the development process in an unconventional way that puts the focus on human and environmental capital rather than on economic growth.

It is imperative to recognise the value of Bhutan's current development model, and even more so to envision how it could also be integrated with and improved through more recent, international research-backed reports such as the OECD's "Guidelines on Measuring Subjective Wellbeing", which represents one of the first official attempts at measuring subjective well-being [15].

Finally, Bhutan's experience with GNH provides evidence of how GNH and GDP should work as complements instead of substitutes. Many are the problems associated with GDP economic progress pursued through GDP may indeed "encourage activities that reduce rather than enhance long-term well-being" [35], with rising GDP not necessarily resulting in a higher quality of life since it is a "misleading indicator of progress in the sense of well-being" [2], but by combining these two systems, innovative frameworks for both economic and human growth could be tested out and, eventually, employed.

## **4.2. Buen Vivir in the Bolivian constitution**

Today, re-interpreted In a modern connotation, BV has the potential of renewing both social and economic relations on the basis of the stated values, especially for indigenous communities, which are generally known to experience marginalisation on the basis of lack of or limited access to basic public services [17], as well as in relation to the discussion on societal alternatives, resulting in an evident case of epistemic ide [36]; additionally, poor communities tend to suffer the most the negative effects of globalisation and climate change [31]. Through the reconstruction of traditional BV-related worldviews, indigenous movements are seeking to reappropriate their rights of

self-determination and territoriality [25], as well as strengthening cultural identities [19].

BV represents a decolonial approach to development in its questioning of the problematic assumptions about the homogenising, disempowering conception of power and the socio-ecological systems underlying development as intended by the Westernised world, which has historically disregarded indigenous knowledge in light of its foreignness to the functionings of scientific knowledge coming from the West [17]. As argued by Lang [36], colonialism may be over, but coloniality that is, “all the cultural colonial legacies that persist and multiply even after colonialism as such has ended”, on the other hand, still very much persists to this day as the “darker side of modernity”. Global injustice, as argued by Grugel and Uhlin [34], “is embedded in political, economic, social and cultural processes that have a global dynamic”, even though, clearly, “it is difficult to trace and allocate responsibility in any simple fashion”. In the BV worldview, Western knowledge isn’t predominant to indigenous knowledge, but the two are complementary and in discussion with each other.

BV also breaks with Western assumptions regarding the society-nature dichotomy, adopting a systemic perspective that makes us rethink the way people and nature become political [25]; their separation isn’t feasible, as one contains the other. By criticising development, BV causes tensions at a deeper level and questions the very foundations of modernity, or rather the ontology (a particular worldview) of modernity, which has been ruling the world for the past centuries. On these political grounds, many ontologies that are considered alternative can meet and interact [19].

Most BV initiatives function through a system of indigenous grassroots organisations that promote innovation from below; seeing how innovation is the process of developing goods and services for the collective good, they believe that the decision-making process has to be carried out from the bottom-up [17], also by taking into account the voices of the communities most marginalised. A great emphasis is placed on the concept of innovation which, since it is deeply entwined with politics and history, may very naturally “perpetuate the logic and ideals of colonialism” [17], i.e., considering “developing” countries to be less wealthy than developed countries due to their lack of innovation while not questioning the centuries of colonisation that have culminated in nowadays’ distribution of wealth amongst the world’s continents. BV goes directly against such a colonial perspective by reimagining what it means to innovate.

Moreover, for the moment being, the countries belonging to the Global North do not seem to be engaging in discussions regarding BV practices and their implementation within governmental frameworks [37], thus not showing interest towards development paths that stray from their own standards. The UN system, which is based on the paradigms of the most developed countries in the world and abides by their rules, has failed to “provide a financing mechanism to help developing countries achieve the structural transformations required for broad-based economic growth”, due both to the economic interests of the North within the South as well as to the difficulties of identifying where to invest in the developing nations for obtaining the biggest benefits in terms of development [38]. As described by Gray and Gills [39], even though the debates on South-South economic cooperation and emancipation from the North are increasing, some are still skeptical regarding the fact that, even though

South-South cooperation, the countries belonging to the Global South would still be operating under the global capitalist development paradigm, thus still placing them in a position of submission to the Global North. In this regard, by analysing the rise in global carbon emissions linked to the emergence of some countries historically belonging to the South (mainly India and China), Fuhr [40] argues that it might be too inaccurate to still cling onto the term “Global South”, as it encompasses an extremely vast array of nations which contribute to and are effected by global change in very different ways and which do not share a common view nor pursue the same interests on the international political stage.

Passing onto the next point, BV principles might appear similar to those praised by Sustainable Development (SD) (An economic and political concept that started being applied after the 1992 Rio Declaration on the Environment and Development [18]; it is described by the Brundtland Report [44] as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”), but their core implications are different: while BV is at the heart of an indigenous knowledge-based framework of development and growth, SD does not differ nor detaches itself from Western notions of (purely economic) development, as it views nature as a commodity and economic growth as a driver for wellbeing; it is dominated by global institutions that aim at global conformity to Western ideals [18]. BV can then try to succeed in the areas where SD has failed, i.e., achieving long-term sustainability and communal wellbeing.

As for the present, the main challenge rests in the state implementation of BV. Even though BV’s advancers haven’t properly addressed Bolivia’s political economy [25], it should be understood as in constant dialogue with diverse contemporary outlooks in search of a sustainable future. For instance, the notion of BV is certainly envisionable within the context of a Pluriverse, which brings together several post-development thinking frameworks that aim at reversing the key legitimising assumption of Western development, which sees indigenous knowledge as incompetent and believes it must be replaced with Western knowledge [2].

If indigenous knowledge is to be acknowledged and applied at national and international levels, the epistemological branch of philosophy of science, which delves into the complex relations taking place between scientists, politics and the public, must ponder on what sort of knowledge can be considered true scientific knowledge (put in other words is the Western empirical method for conducting research the only possible one?), and ask itself how to quantitatively or qualitatively assess indigenous communities’ scientific literacy to determine whether their critiques to and suggestions for research production are well-founded or not. Clearly, the practice of science itself often raises philosophical questions [41], and this also applies to indigenous knowledge.

In relation to this last point, we might take as a reference the Kuhn Cycle, which serves as a representation of what just stated. The Kuhn Cycle, outlined in his work “The Structure of Scientific Revolutions”, is used to represent the cycle by which the so-called “normal science” continuously comes to exist. Generally speaking, “normal science” will experience a “model drift” due to the input of “pre-science”, leading in turn to a “model crisis” and, therefore, to a “model revolution” and a “paradigm change”; this new paradigm will, inevitably, come to be considered itself as the new

“normal science” [27]. As for nowadays, “normal science” consists in Western-compliant knowledge which, considering its proven inadequacy to address the global environmental crisis we’re currently facing, seems to be undergoing a period of serious “model crisis”; in the meanwhile, the so-called “model revolution” might eventually be triggered by indigenous knowledge (or, for the sake of the example, by any other post-development thinking framework) which, after leading to a “paradigm change”, would start to be perceived as “normal science” again, and so on. This goes to show that Western science, despite being predominant nowadays, will probably come out of its current crisis deeply altered, thus leading many societies to adopt a new paradigm on development.

Yet another important issue to be addressed is that of measurement: for BV-based policies to become internationally recognised and, eventually, implemented, there must first be some indicators that quantitatively demonstrate the system’s efficiency; otherwise, they will be always overlooked by quantitative data-driven governments [18]. Under this perspective, the aforementioned Bhutanese policy of GNH is proving to be more effective because it exhibits clear results obtained through national surveys.

Passing onto the cultural side of BV, an important aspect of the *suma qamaña* view, autochthonous to Bolivia, is that it is deeply linked to the natural, cultural and social landscape of the region [36], and so it cannot be directly applied to other contexts; peoples belonging to different cultural contexts will have to establish and employ their own view of BV [19]. Bolivia, though, can serve as a case-study for other countries in adopting a critical approach towards the challenges and advantages that adhering to a similar developmental framework might imply.

Due to the recent deep political perpetration of BV concepts within Bolivia’s state institutions, BV discourses have been to some extent appropriated by the state, despite indigenous movements and social organisations’ attempts at reappropriating them and using them as “self-emancipatory tools” [25]. Even though national elites are known for conceiving indigenous knowledge as a backward and folkloric way of thinking that must be “tolerated as a sign of respect for the past but not valued as a knowledge system that might truly contribute to address current and future humankind challenges” [17], it did not take them long to recognise the true potential of BV narratives for maintaining and even perpetuating the business-as-usual development framework, thus appropriating it for their policy agenda [25]. Although BV principles inscribed in the Bolivian Constitution advocate for the importance of bottom-up approaches and inclusivity of the marginalised over a logic merely centred on economic growth, which can significantly reduce potential shortcomings and oversights thanks to the several points of view (or paradigms) taken into account in the policy-making process, all BV-related policies introduced so far have been decided by a single actor, the State, thus directly going against “the idea of BV being a plural construction from actors at all levels” [18]. Likewise, in Ecuador, despite the BV approach already being implemented in the new Constitution, the State still seems to be following in the footsteps of former development strategies, still being far from attaining the goals it had previously set for itself [37]. It seems that the governments were able to convert spaces formerly claimed by indigenous groups into spaces now dominated by the state itself, thus limiting the indigenous peoples’ ownership in the decision-making process as well as their understanding of it [42]. Such a state

centralisation of the decision-making process can also come across as a sign of “continuing coloniality” [16]; the governments of Bolivia and Ecuador, thus, were not actually willing to “engage in intercultural dialogue and truly change how state decision-making takes place”, as this would have required them to reconsider the status quo in development processes [42]. Policies that adopt bottom-up approaches should then directly stem from the needs of the people living in a certain context, rather than from those of policy-makers in the upper part of the political hierarchy who may not be fully aware of how their policies could go on to concretely impact people’s lives.

Through the means of the same mechanism of inclusivity that has enabled indigenous leaders to be appointed at the head of governmental offices, indigenous representatives have also been forced to comply with state institutions and restrain their more radical demands, otherwise running the risk of being strongly criticised or even criminalised by the state [16], resulting in a problematisation of power relations between different political actors and in a governmental control of social movements, a silencing of critical political voices [16].

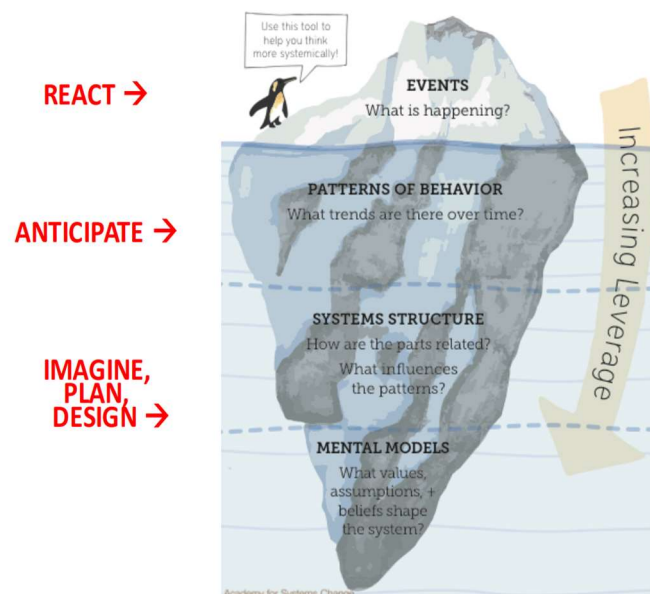
An even bigger issue can be identified: the BV framework in Bolivia currently coexists with the Western mainstream developmentalist perspective, that simultaneously allows for the extractive exploitation (mainly mining, oil and gas) of indigenous and Amazon territories apparently “on behalf of the national interest”, therefore resulting in “state dispossession of territories and livelihoods” and a “profound economic dependence on natural resource exploitation”, despite many articles of the Bolivian Constitution asserting the country’s need to move away from such destructive practices (articles 1, 2, 290, 316, 319) [25]. Since the State has complete ownership of natural resources, indigenous groups, who tend to perceive the territories they live in as inalienable, are not asked to provide their consent before the State engages in practices that are destructive to their environment and harmful to their people [25]. The indigenous peoples’ right to consultation and to be informed, as Flemmer and Schilling-Vacaflor argue [42], should represent “the basis of the new global model shaping state-indigenous relations”, as it enables indigenous people to play an active part in their own development, especially when it concerns significant socio-environmental impacts on their lands.

At this point, a parallel can be drawn between the South-american indigenous perspective on nature and Barry Commoner’s Law 1 and Law 4 of ecology which, respectively, assert that “Everything is Connected to Everything Else” and “There Is No Such Thing as a Free Lunch” [28]. The indigenous experience in South America is, indeed, deeply linked to conceiving nature as a living, sentient being, which should not be treated as a commodity for exploitation [17]; it is a whole, comprehensive system that is deeply associated with human activities (be they be preservative or destructive), and it is cherished as an ensemble of elements to utilise and recycle in a respectful way (since nothing in nature can be regarded as a “free lunch” and everything comes with a consequence) that allow human populations to grow and flourish.

Despite BV’s “radical critique of the foundations of the idea of development” arguably going as far as to represent not an “alternative to development” but an “alternative to alternative development” [25], it seems that the mainstream economic

model has not yet been challenged in Bolivia, maybe on account of BV's assimilation into Western developmental frameworks. BV's transformative potential has been vanishing in the process of translation into concrete political practices, a process that poses a great risk to these indigenous beliefs' so-called "indigenoussness" [2]. There are still several contradictions and inconsistencies between official pronouncements regarding the indigenous cause and environmental protection and actual exploitative governmental practices [16].

Before concluding, and after having explained the complex social, political, economic and environmental challenges that the policies of GNH and BV seem to pose, we would like to relate all of the aforesaid to an useful tool for systematically assessing any sort of system in a methodological and thorough fashion, namely the systemic thinking iceberg (**Figure 4**), which breaks down any system into sections on the basis of their "depth" or, rather, the increasing leverage that would result in acting on certain factors of the system in question. Such a tool can also be taken into account in relation to any environmental policy for analysing whether it'd be possible to operationalise said policy to a context different than that of origin, especially for what concerns the underwater tip of the iceberg, which consists in identifying the values, assumptions and beliefs that intrinsically shape the system and make it what it is. Thus, advancing an open question, would identifying such variables for the policies of GNH and BV give insight into how to harness their potential in countries other than those of origin? And if so, in which fashion could such research be carried out in order for it to be as objective and unbiased as possible for what concerns intrinsic cultural views and beliefs of researchers?



**Figure 4.** Systemic thinking iceberg.

Source: own additions (in red on the left) to the original image of Academy for Systems Change (1996). The Iceberg model [43].

## 5. Conclusion

As all the above points have demonstrated, nowadays more than ever, there is a concrete need for the Global South to influence the North in terms of how development



might be envisioned in the future, moving away from unsustainable practices solely focused on GDP and towards more holistic views of wellbeing and growth. More and more Global Southern countries are starting to transcend the North-South dichotomy and reshape the definition of development through their own distinctive societal and environmental paradigms on change, growth, and betterment, ultimately aiming to build more sustainable and inclusive futures for themselves while setting the example for other nations to follow. Nevertheless, the dominant GDP-based approach to development is still reluctant to welcome a new set of metrics able to merge knowledge coming from several aspects of sustainability, societies, and collective wellbeing with mainstream development worldviews. Further research in such a complex field is needed in order to better comprehend how the Western canon in innovation thinking could be decentered so as to make space for alternative epistemological perspectives that are better aligned with environmental and social concerns than the ones currently being employed, such as the above-explained policies of Gross National Happiness and Buen Vivir. Ideally speaking, the key question should be more of “How can the state engage with indigenous and traditional knowledge and redefine itself according to it?” rather than how to assimilate such knowledge and maintain the primacy of economic growth, but this does not reflect the world that we have so far created for ourselves. As with any radical decolonising project that questions the very foundations of Western-type power relations, an increased degree of self-criticism and introspection is needed for the policies of GNH and BV, with an accurate analysis of the implications and challenges that they might bring adopted as the focus of new research on this subject. The most relevant adversity for the time being is to assess the most effective way to successfully operationalise such tools in their countries of origin (especially for the case of Bolivia, as we have seen) and, eventually, in other countries that might perceive measuring wellbeing and safeguarding the natural environment, as well as the people living in it, as the new development frameworks going forward if humanity is to hope avoiding the looming environmental crisis that is currently threatening not only humankind’s extinction but also that of countless other species in the process and a whole planet’s ecological balance. All in all, alternative epistemologies from the Global South, such as the two ones discussed in the present manuscript, offer insights on how the very notion of development and wellbeing can be meant and implemented in both the Global South and the Global North, within a wider understanding of decolonial thinking, i.e., not only an economic one but also philosophical and political.

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