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Radical ruralities in practice: Negotiating *buen vivir* in a Colombian network of sustainability

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the emerging concept of *buen vivir* – interpreted as integrative and collective well-being – as it is being envisioned and practiced by a network of sustainability initiatives in Colombia. As an example of a transition narrative currently taking place in Latin America and beyond, *buen vivir* represents a turn towards a more biocentric, relational and collective means of understanding and being in the world. Yet despite the many discourses into *buen vivir* (many of which tout it as an alternative to neoliberal models of development), there is a general lack of research into its varied forms of application, especially in terms of lived experiences. Drawing on the new ruralities literature, this paper explores the extent to which *buen vivir* visions and practices represent radical new ruralities – so-called alternatives to development. Data were collected from individuals and ecological communities in predominantly rural areas who are members of the Council of Sustainable Settlements of the Americas (CASA), a network which promotes many of the principles of *buen vivir*. Through participatory methods, results demonstrate that CASA visions are based on constructing territorial relations through intercultural knowledge exchange and experimentation into alternative lifestyles. Despite the substantial challenges and contradictions of putting these visions into practice, we argue that lived experiences promote processes of self-reflection on what *buen vivir* really is or could be. We hold that the inclusive nature of *buen vivir* offers opportunities for diverse peoples to cohere around shared meanings of the 'good life,' while providing the freedom to live variations depending on social and ecological context.

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1. Introduction: the 'good life' of *buen vivir*

Latin America is one of the few regions in the world where important counter-hegemonic processes are taking place at the state level (Escobar, 2010). Beginning with the 'pink tide' (Bull, 2013) of post-neoliberal projects in the late 1990s, this has culminated in the Andean nations of Bolivia passing a new constitution refounding the country as a plurinational State based on the concept of *vivir bien*; likewise, Ecuador passed a new constitution based on the concept of *sumak kawsay* and the legal recognition of the rights of nature. The above concepts are conventionally referred to as *buen vivir*, which roughly translates as the 'good life.' As an

example of a transition narrative in Latin America and beyond, *buen vivir* represents a departure from the modern development narrative through a turn towards a more biocentric, relational and collective means of understanding and being in the world (Gudynas, 2011a).

Central to the notion of *buen vivir* is the age-old search for what it means to live a good life. In the western world, "well-being" has become a popular way to measure this, with the increasing recognition that current well-being and its long-term sustainability are the ultimate goals of development (Boarini et al., 2014). Yet frameworks for exploring well-being are usually based on universal quantitative indicators of subjective well-being so as to inform public policy. *Buen vivir*, on the other hand, is conceptualized as collective and integrative well-being, where the subject of well-being is not the individual, but the relation between an individual and his/her specific cultural-natural environment (Gudynas, 2011a; Guardiola, 2011). *Buen vivir* can thus be seen as an alternative to neoliberal models of development, the latter of which lack this

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relational focus (Acosta, 2008; Farah and Vasapollo, 2011; Escobar, 2011; Gutiérrez, 2012; Kauffman and Martin, 2013; Villalba, 2013).

Yet as Deneulin and McGregor (2010) point out, well-being (and *buen vivir* as well) may mean different things to different people – turning it into a potential source of conflict. This is especially pertinent in current debates on sustainability, with the increasing recognition that well-being strategies based on high-fossil fuel lifestyles are detrimental to the environment, leading to the collective need to develop more sustainable meanings of well-being (Deneulin and McGregor, 2010). In Ecuador, resulting conflict can be seen, for example in the government's recent approval of oil extraction in the Yasuní National Park which arguably contradicts the Constitution's principles of *buen vivir* by privileging economic development over the supposed rights of nature.¹

The above example demonstrates the contested nature of *buen vivir*, which have led many authors to question the extent to which the term really offers an alternative paradigm to development (Walsh, 2010; Escobar, 2010; Villalba, 2013). To use the expression of Escobar (2012), is *buen vivir* an alternative modernity, or an alternative to modernity? While much research into *buen vivir* has taken place at the level of the state, Escobar (2010) points to the discourses and strategies of sub-state social movements – both indigenous and non-indigenous (Gudynas, 2011a) – which mobilize the term to search for the radical possibilities that inhere in alternative ways of connecting (and not separating) nature and culture. Emphasizing the plural nature of *buen vivir* that goes beyond indigenous conceptions, Gudynas (2011a) opens up the debate of non-indigenous 'good lives' of, for example, rubber tappers in the Amazon or the residents of a favela in Brazil.

The search for these other possibilities led our research to actively follow a Colombian network of sustainability initiatives called CASA (The Council of Sustainable Settlements of the Americas) in its quest for *buen vivir*. Established in 2012, CASA is a self-financed and self-governed network that evolved out of the Colombian ecovillage² movement and now comprises a broader network seeking to articulate diverse visions and practices of sustainable living such as those between Indigenous communities, neo-rural settlements and urban initiatives (see CASA, 2015). Within CASA, members repeatedly but differentially use the notion of *buen vivir* when discussing community, territory and sustainability issues. This plurality of meanings of *buen vivir* offered a unique opportunity for us to investigate and experience first-hand the ongoing struggles and negotiations to define and help shape alternative lives based on the concept.

Well-being is an increasingly accepted means of capturing the human experience of development (Boarini et al., 2014) and critical to the development paradigm that such universal indicators are situated. The objective of this article to explore the extent to which the concept of *buen vivir* can provide visions and experiences of new relations between individuals, society and nature. We do so by making use of lived human experiences in the cultural-ecological context of Colombia and the CASA network.

In what follows, we introduce the key concept of radical ruralities, and provide contextual background on *buen vivir* and the CASA network. We then outline our participatory approach, and

present our results in two parts: one on the *buen vivir* visions that circulate within CASA and one on how these visions are put into practice. We discuss the radical ruralities of CASA practices, and close off with concluding remarks.

2. Radical ruralities and *buen vivir*

As a result of transformative processes in the countryside brought about by neo-liberalism and globalization, new narratives of rurality have emerged which branch away from conventional notions of the productivist countryside. Halfacree (2007) identifies four ideal type narratives to describe these trends: The first is *super-productivism* in which moral dimensions of 'countryside' make room for the commodification of nature (Katz, 1998; McAfee, 1999). *Consuming idylls* describes the romance of an agricultural backdrop based on consumption-oriented uses such as amenity migration whereby properties are bought in the countryside for recreational purposes (McCarthy, 2008). There is also the *effaced rurality* in which the rural, in effect, has been effaced by the geographical development of capitalism, becoming a 'free floating signifier' used whenever a marketable identity is needed (Hopkins, 1998).

At the periphery of the above narratives are the *radical ruralities* with which this article engages. These expressions diverge from the inherently capitalistic logic of the other narratives by striving for the production of truly different forms of rural space, which not just extend the scope of rural possibilities but also concern the issues of the ideological underpinnings of the forms of rural space currently debated. Such radical ruralities have three key elements: first, a strong community discourse; second, they promote diverse meanings of land beyond that of simple means of production; and third they give great importance to ecocentric and deep ecological beliefs. While Halfacree (2007) focusses on back-to-the-land movements, community-based ecovillages, and peri-urban co-housing (mainly in the global North), Kay (2008) describes the strong Latin American roots of these radical rural expressions, employing the term *communitarian* proposals to describe community-based peasant groups developing grassroots post-capitalist relations. These he relates to the Zapatistas of Mexico and to the *Movimento dos Trabalhadores Rurais Sem Terra* (MST) in Brazil.

Certain manifestations of *buen vivir* share these key elements of *radical ruralities* by striving to create different forms of being in the countryside. Several of these attempt to return meaning and control over territories to local populations by redefining relations to place³ (Gudynas, 2011a; Escobar, 2008). In this way territory has become essential for articulating a defence of alternative worlds in rural areas by several social movements who use the term to construct an identity of their 'otherness' as a political strategy (Koop, 2014). A good example of this is the work carried out by Escobar (1998, 2008) who shows the articulation between Afro-Colombian social movements and biodiversity-environmentalist discourses through what he describes as the negotiated construction of territory.

The concept of 'territory' plays an important role within *buen vivir*, integrating the natural and spiritual diversity of all forms of life through customs, traditions, languages, worldviews, principles and values (Huanacuni, 2010). These expressions of *buen vivir* furthermore promote cultures based on the bond and respect with 'living territories' (Farah and Vasapollo, 2011), where a territory is

¹ As Borón (2012) notes, however, the situation is more nuanced, with the Ecuadorian government having made an international appeal for funds to abstain from carrying out the extraction (itself post-extractivist in theory). With the lack of international response, the government decided to go ahead with the extraction, justifying the decision by arguing that the revenue generated was needed by the country to invest in the country's national plan for *buen vivir*.

² Litfin (2009:125) defines an ecovillage as "a planetary knowledge community grounded in a holistic ontology and seeking to construct viable living systems as an alternative to the unsustainable legacy of modernity".

³ Here we use Escobar's (2001:40) definition of place as "the experience of a particular location with some measure of groundedness (however unstable), sense of boundaries (however permeable), and connection to everyday life, even if its identity is constructed, traversed by power, and never fixed".

understood as a living dynamic system made up of biotic networks ranging from the cellular world to the *ayllu* – the Aymaran word for cosmos (Medina, 2011). In this sense, *buen vivir* prioritizes the interdependent rights of the cosmos and humans, relating to the land as a 'Mother that one would not hurt' instead of as an objective commodity (Puentes, 2011).

This integration of human and non-human worlds signals a rurality increasingly cast in relational terms (Heley and Jones, 2012), and in which the notion of plurality plays a fundamental role in *buen vivir* (Gudynas, 2011a; Walsh, 2012). In this context, plurality goes beyond the dividing connotations of 'diversity' to imply the relations between people (ethnicity, culture, world-views), beings (nature, spirits, entities), and diverse knowledges (scientific, local, traditional). This is exemplified by the recognition of the multiple political communities within the plurinational state of Bolivia, and more regional expressions such as *küme mongen* (living well in harmony) from the Mapuche in the South, or *volver a la maloka* (to return to the ceremonial house) of the Indigenous people of the Colombian Amazon in the North (Gudynas, 2011a). Crucially, the plural notion of *buen vivir* is derived not only from Indigenous cosmologies, but also from urban, academic and *mestizo*⁴ claims. Also western strains of critical thinking have been linked to *buen vivir* such as degrowth economics (Thompson, 2011), ecofeminism (Svampa, 2015), and deep ecology (Gudynas, 2011a).

Rather than the idea of a universally defined good life, Gudynas (2011a) therefore suggests we refer to *buen vivires* in plural to emphasize how different formulations of the good life are adopted for each social-ecological context. This echoes research in rural studies which, by concentrating on place, allows for a more nuanced understanding on how global processes are remaking rural space through new hybrid forms and relations (e.g. Woods, 2007). So as to provide a framework for understanding *buen vivir*, we have synthesized characteristics put forward by its leading advocates into a set of shared principles: (1) an ethics based on bio-centric perspectives; (2) the proposition that non-human actors are also considered subjects; (3) the idea that intuition, feelings and spirituality rather than individualism and commodification are paramount; and (4) a focus on the decolonization of knowledge through the creation of spaces of intercultural dialogue (Gudynas, 2011b; 2014; Villalba, 2013). To avoid confusion, we use the expression 'good life' when referring to peoples' subjective ideas on living a satisfactory life, and employ the term *buen vivir* when referring to it conceptually as an alternative paradigm based on the four principles above.

Importantly, we stress the contested nature of living the good life, where the 'radical' involves a politics of contested space (rather than politics of the state) – in what Halfacree describes as *trials of space*. The overall aim of this article is to explore the competing notions of non-conventional 'radical' visions that circulate within CASA, and the habits and structures of modernity which restrict these visions from being put into practice.

3. Participatory approaches to exploring *buen vivir*

To explore the lived experiences of *buen vivir*, an epistemological perspective of knowledge as socially constructed is taken. Three participatory methods were employed to capture the meaning and subjective experiences of *buen vivir*. The first method entailed 12 months of ethnographic research by the first two authors in an ecovillage called Atlántida, located in the southern department of Cauca, Colombia. In this community the research objective was to understand what the good life means in the context of members'

realities by living with them and sharing in their everyday lives. Participant observation allowed first-hand experiences of the dilemmas and paradoxes of enacting a good life in a community of people explicitly trying to do so – all with different backgrounds, ideas about the good life and strategies.

The second method used was participatory photography (PP) among 10 initiatives in the CASA network (see Table 1 below), representing a balance between those most engaged in the network (initiatives 1–4) and to represent the diversity (initiatives 5–10). After visiting each initiative and getting to know its people and environment, interested members were asked to take five photos using a simple digital camera, in which each photo represented an aspect of living a satisfactory good life. Examples of these photos can be seen below (Figs. 2–6), with the caption below each one stating the good life aspect provided by the respective author. As participatory photography can cause discomfort (e.g., suspicion, timidity and ridicule amongst participants; see Prins, 2010), we paid special attention to ethical concerns and obtained informed consent prior to participation and permission to publish the photographs. Gaining trust through participating in day-to-day experiences in the communities, participants opened up to the PP and elicited points of view and issues which could not have been obtained through interviewing alone.

The third method was to actively participate in three consecutive CASA gatherings (2013–2015) called *El Llamado de la Montaña* (The Call of the Mountain), where around 300 network members meet annually for five days of communal living, workshops and panel discussions. During this intercultural event we conducted semi-structured interviews with members of different organizations and communities from all over Colombia and abroad who are interested in sustainable living. To capture diversity in ideas, interviewees differed by age, gender, ethnicity and rural/urban residence. In total we interviewed 65 members of the network about their everyday practices, ideas of the good life, and challenges encountered in putting these into practice.

The data collected through these methods were analyzed as follows. Fieldwork notes as well as data from transcribed semi-structured interviews were coded by the first author employing a multiple cycle approach, as suggested by Saldana (2011). Using the program Atlas-ti, data for the first cycles were coded for different principles and contested meanings of *buen vivir*, as well as using 'memoing' to keep track of emerging theoretical and analytical insights. When more established categories were found, Excel was used for later coding cycles to analyze the different frequencies of codes using filters and representativeness of responses. Atlas-ti was then used to code quotes which represented the most frequent responses.

4. Building territorial relations through envisioning and enacting *buen vivir*

In this section we present the results of this investigation. Section 4.1 presents an overview of the network initiatives outlined in Table 1, followed by their territorial visions elicited through interviews conducted during the network event *El Llamado de la Montaña*. Section 4.2 displays some of these visions through the participatory photography methodology and participant quotes, as they relate to the *buen vivir* principles outlined in section 2. Section 4.3 explores CASA practices of *buen vivir* through ethnographic methods, focusing on the tensions and reflections of four representative challenges of the network.

4.1. 'Territories of peace' and the spiral of relations

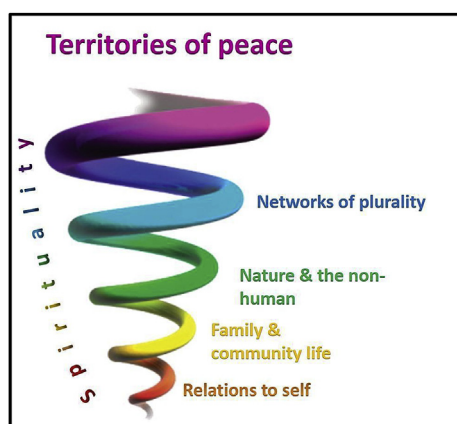
The most established initiatives in the CASA network are those

⁴ People of mixed European and American Indigenous ancestry (Villalba, 2013).

Table 1

Location and type of community which participated in the participatory photo methodology.

| Initiative/web page | Location in Colombia | Characteristics | Denoted as: |
|--|-----------------------------|--|------------------------------|
| 1. Aldeafeliz Ecovillage www.aldeafeliz.org | San Francisco, Cundinamarca | Intentional community | Aldeafeliz |
| 2. Anthakarana Ecovillage ecoaldeanthakarana.blogspot.com/ | Salento, Quindío | Family-based community | Anthakarana |
| 3. Atlántida Ecovillage ecoatlantida.blogspot.com/ | Cajibío, Cauca | Intentional community | Atlántida |
| 4. Varsana Ecovillage www.varsana.co/ | Granada, Cundinamarca | Hare Krishna community | Varsana |
| 5. Nashira Ecovillage www.nashira-ecoalde.org/ | El Bolo, Valle del Cauca | Low-income, female heads of households | Nashira |
| 6. El Retoño, Kunagua http://semilladeroble.blogspot.no/p/el-retono_20.html | Silvania, Cundinamarca | Family farm. Is part of a network of 25 private farms partaking in a watershed conservation effort | Kunagua |
| 7. Pachamama Ecovillage | Calarcá, Quindío | Intentional community | Pachamama |
| 8. La Pequeña Granja de Mamá Lulú granjamamalulu.blogspot.com/ | Quimbaya, Quindío | Campesino (peasant) farm | Mamá Lulú |
| 9. Community of Rosario Islands | Caribbean coast, Bolívar | Afro-Colombian community | Community of Rosario Islands |
| 10. Misak University | Guambía Territory, Cauca | Native indigenous university | Misak University |

**Fig. 1.** Diagram representing the construction of 'territories of peace' through harmonizing relations to the different territories. Spirituality connects the different relations. Figure drawn on the basis of interviewees portrayals.

of neo-rural ecovillages characterised by its members having moved from the city to seek a more holistic lifestyle in the countryside. A strong presence is also made by the Hare Krishna community which also describes their settlements as ecovillages. Despite sharing many of the characteristics of the ecovillages above, Hare Krishna is a religious movement whose devotees adhere to strict hierarchical rules regarding food, clothing and religious rituals and thus contrast with the horizontal relations of ecovillages.

CASA is, however, much more than a network of ecovillages. Adding to this diversity are peasant families such as Mamá Lulú, with a focus on ecotourism and dignified labor, as well as urban-based members, many of whom represent organizations working for environmental and social justice. These members participate in events within the network, and often spend time visiting and living in different communities. In addition there are Indigenous peoples from around Colombia including the Embera people in the West, Wiwa people of Santa Marta in the North, the Misak people of the South, and communities of the rainforest of the Putumayo region. There is also the afro-community of Rosario Islands in the Caribbean, as well as allied networks, such as *Kunagua*, which is a network of farms united around the conservation of a river basin in the department of Cundinamarca, and *Agenda Caribe* in the

Caribbean, a network of organizations focused on social justice and peace.

Through the initial stage of ethnographic fieldwork, and based on semi-structured interviews and informal discussions during the network event, we have identified a common narrative in CASA visions based on the metaphor of weaving territorial relations. Sandra from the ecovillage Pachamama describes the importance of weaving these relations as this is how “... everything becomes bound in a community; each pulse, each strand has a meaning and manifests its energy through the hands of the other.” The greater territorial relations of Atlántida were explained by co-founder Ana María in this way: “The territory is the set of beings that inhabit and coexist in a multidimensional space of a defined piece of land where energy relations are established ... its main energy centers are as our heart, liver, kidneys ... it is not an isolated organism ... it in turn becomes a small organ of the body Colombia, which in turn is like an organ of the planet.”

The importance of *buen vivir*, and the relational connection to territory, was asserted by other members of the network during *El Llamado de la Montaña* of 2015. Taking place at the Indigenous Misak University, the theme of the event was ‘*Minga*⁵ of Territories and Territorialities’, it featured extensive discussions on relationships to territory, including a panel discussion on *buen vivir* and the construction of peace. As an intercultural event, a central issue raised was the role of territorialization for both indigenous and non-indigenous *mestizo* individuals.⁶ Noting that indigenous members have a strong sense of place, with traditional knowledge to draw upon in negotiating everyday life, Jorge, in his presentation of *buen vivir* from the perspective of the ecovillage network, stated that such ancestral knowledge is lacking in neo-rural and urban based peoples: “From a *mestizo* point of view, we are deterritorialized not only in the relations with the space around us, but also in our lack of historical roots ... we do not have such deep and wide roots as the Indigenous peoples. As urban or neo-rural people we have the key task of territorializing ourselves.”

This process of ‘territorialization’ can be illustrated by the desire

⁵ *Minga* is an indigenous term commonly used to denote a community coming together to carry out a collective project.

⁶ Although the Spanish word *mestizo* is generally used in the *buen vivir* literature to describe European descendants who are predominantly urban, white and educated (see for example, Villalba, 2013), the term is often used in the CASA network in a broader and more decolonized sense to describe all people of mixed race and heritage.



Fig. 2. “The good life is to walk my interior path, in all my being as a woman, to recognize my own medicine and share it with others.” (Tatiana from Aldeafeliz).

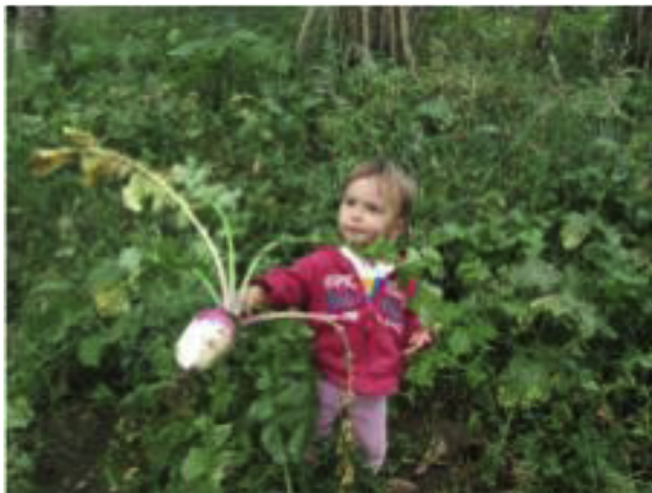


Fig. 3. “The good life involves the legacy of knowledge in day-to-day life” (David, from Kunagua).

of members to (re-)build harmonic relations between each other and nature. The most frequent answers to the interview question: “What is needed for you to lead a satisfactory good life?” involved



Fig. 4. “For us Misak people, the territory is fundamental because we live in her. She gives us life with which to live an everyday *buen vivir*. Furthermore, for the Misak it means “el NøPIR” which is our mother earth” (Liliana, from Misak University).



Fig. 5. “The good life is focused on good food and nutrition, which is varied and healthy, and organically grown by us” (Taita Trino, from Misak University).

the following aspects: harmonizing relations between people (72%); building new relations with nature (49%); developing relations with self (43%); and exerting new values (43%). Some respondents described how these relations for building a good life could be visualized through different interconnected levels. Sofia from *colectivo Talanquera* described these levels as different circles, stating that: “*The beginning of everything is the relations with oneself, then the family ...*” and going on to explain the third circle of relations with nature and ended with network relations. David from the community Kunagua described similar levels of relations, but placed them in a dynamic spiral, whereby achieving a good life involved moving back and forth between different relations.

As a synthesis of these different ideas, we present a representation of these territorial relations in Fig. 1 below. We have named this figure ‘territories of peace’ based on the recurring term used during the 2015 network gathering to describe territorial relations which promote harmonic and peaceful coexistence. As will be illustrated in the following sections, ‘territories of peace’ take many forms in the network, with subjects describing a vivid presence of ideas, rituals, symbols, and ways of knowing and living that have



Fig. 6. "The good life is being able to resolve my economy in the place I live" (Maria Yibi, from the community Nashira).

permeated the lives of its members. Connecting the threads of these territorial relations is the loosely defined notion of spirituality, with several participants asserting that the loss of spirituality, especially in youth, was causing disharmonization within their territories.

4.2. Territories of peace and *buen vivir* principles

The first territory from Fig. 1 above is described as encompassing relations to self, with an emphasis on personal development. For some CASA members this means connection at a spiritual level, and combining different cosmologies, deities and practices. In Fig. 2, Tatiana from the Aldeafeliz community is beating a drum under a dream-catcher, both symbols from North American cultures. The caption captures her idea of the importance of finding her own path through connecting with her feminine inner self, to be able to recognize her own ways of healing this relation and then share this insight with others.

Healing relations and reconnecting with the more intuitive emotional part of the self (or their feminine side, as some call it) was a well-articulated vision within the network, and linked up to the third *buen vivir* principle of promoting intuition and feeling over rationality. A trend in the network is to use 'women circles'⁷ as a tool to do so, which is a ritualistic environment of sisterhood where women sit in a circle to share feelings, ask questions and give advice on topics related to the reconciliation of their sacred femininity and their caring role for the environment.⁸

The second territory relates to family and social community. Family is an empowering source of change, and many members started their journey towards unconventional lifestyles through the desire to spend more time with their children in a natural environment (see Fig. 3). The vision of community members helping each other through an ethics based on cooperation and reciprocity is very strong, and is perceived as a means of sharing costs and responsibilities so as to release oneself from the idea that money is the central pillar of life. This relates to the first principle of *buen*

vivir which describes a new ethics for assigning value.

In a similar vein, maintaining loving and trusting relations with neighbors and between community members is important, with some describing the community as a container of emotions which keeps members together, providing a sense of belonging and purpose. As John of Aldeafeliz states: "The [communal] kitchen gives me happiness and generates happiness, it makes me feel useful. We all have a space in the ecovillage according to our tastes and qualities." Moreover, an ethics of voluntary simplicity was also a popular vision, with some members focusing on connecting to nature and reducing one's impact on the environment, while others saw it as a means of reaching a higher spiritual or religious level of consciousness. Hare Krishna devotee Maha-Vakya of the community Varsana describes this as "the good life is to live a simple life with elevated thoughts."

The third territory relates to nature and the role of non-human entities. This can be seen through the space nature gives for development: 'That our children have access to spaces for their development, where they can recognize wild fruit and the sounds of animals' (Eliana, Atlántida); of wisdom: 'The child's faculty of being amazed by the magic of nature, where a kernel of corn is multiplied into a cob of corn' (Anonymous, Pachamama); or as a colleague: 'To have nature as a great companion which makes everything balanced within oneself' (Govinda Jaya Jaya, Varsana). In some cases, the personal connections that members create with nature were blurred with the territory where they live, whereby non-human 'beings' are related to in a similar way as to another person (as in the quote of Ana María in section 4.1 and Liliana in Fig. 4 below). This relates to the second *buen vivir* principle, whereby extended communities of relations are formed between human and non-human agents.

Another strategy for building territorial relations in the third territory while sustaining a livelihood is to plant and consume from one's own harvest (see Fig. 5). Many projects strive for food sovereignty also as a means of consuming healthier products and several have found inspiration in the principles of permaculture to achieve this as a means to integrate food production and community with the natural world.⁹

The fourth territory involves (plural) network relations, whereby the broader vision of community is envisioned by several CASA members as a *nuevo pueblo* (a new society) or even a 'new humanity' which entails, in the words of Fernando (Fundación Pacha Vida para el Buen Vivir), 'a global community that is fraternal, respectful and understands what it means to complement one another.' In this way the relations to territory are broadened from communities of people to networks of people and territories across regions and countries. As stated by Sofia from the initiative Colectivo Talanquera: 'the last circle of the good life involves alliances with other territories, with other networks – in order not to be an isolated community, to feel part of not only a bigger territory but to really know myself in a larger territory.' This is enhanced by CASA Colombia, which is linked to similar CASA networks in other Latin American countries through the CASA continental network – itself a board member of the Global Ecovillage Network (GEN).¹⁰ Fundamental to promoting these network relations is creating spaces where members of the network can meet and share experiences. Members, especially from the city, create their relationship with the fourth territory by visiting different initiatives for limited periods of time, participating in events, or volunteering – thereby exchanging

⁷ In many of these circles men are also invited to connect to their inner feminine side. For more information about these circles of women, see the webpage circulokillawasi.blogspot.com.

⁸ Through sustainable practices such as using menstruation cups and cloth pads instead of disposable items.

⁹ Permaculture can be defined as a method for designing sustainable land-use systems (Mollinson, 1988).

¹⁰ GEN is an umbrella organization for ecovillages, transition town initiatives, intentional communities, and ecologically-minded individuals worldwide.

practical skills and experiences. These experiences are magnified through the network gathering *El Llamado* where spaces are created and facilitated with a focus on decolonizing knowledge through intercultural dialogue and action.

4.3. Challenges of putting *buen vivir* into practice

In this section we explore the challenges and dilemmas CASA members face when putting into practice their good life visions. We have chosen themes which repeatedly came up in interviews and during participant observation, and which we feel best represent the tensions and contradictions of lived experiences of *buen vivir* within the network.

4.3.1. Ritualism as a form of territorialization

The desire to form a territorial identity can be seen in the ways *mestizo* members of the network develop close relationships with native communities and ancestral customs as a means for learning how to reconnect to a territory. The community Atlántida, for example, promotes the North-American self-development path of *camino rojo* (red path), which is a native American tradition of 'walking the good life.' One important practice in *camino rojo* is the *temascal* of the North American Indians, and in which participants take 'power plants' such as *rapé* (tobacco powder snorted through the nose), coca leaf powder and/or the hallucinogenic San Pedro¹¹ for the ritual of entering the 'womb' of Mother Earth (the sweat lodge) to be 're-born' as a healed being. Stones representing the 'feminine seed' are heated up in the 'masculine' fire symbolizing sacred impregnation. Water with medicinal plants is poured over these heated stones to create a healing steam, while participants sing and play instruments as a means of connecting to the territory of Mother Earth.

Although rituals are celebrated by many network members, there are those that follow less 'mystical' paths; indeed, some argue that 'ritualism' can at times be imposed upon others in the network, and takes away the importance of connecting to the divine through simple day-to-day practices. For example, it may seem paradoxical to make offerings to Mother Earth, using purchased food, instead of showing one's connection to Mother Earth by growing the food oneself.

Another problematic aspect of connecting to territory through ancestral rituals is the eclectic manner in which members pick and choose what suits them without a grounding in a specific tradition. Some Indigenous elders expressed concerns about the misuse of 'power plants' during rituals. One elder stated that it had taken her 20 years to understand and master the usage of 'power plants' in the rituals she practiced, and was thus worried that members of the network were misusing them as they did not have the proper training in this art. This lack of seriousness and care is not only disrespectful to the spirit owners of the 'power plants' but it also can be dangerous, she stated. Clearly some CASA members are exploring and experimenting with new ways of relating to other ways of thinking. However, there remains a tension in the extent to which participants are genuinely entering processes of territorialization and hence transforming their relations, rather than superficially dabbling with traditions which need long term commitment.

4.3.2. Economic solidarity

Another commonly used strategy to promote the good life was through alternative forms of economic solidarity. Such strategies

were constrained, however, by a commonly expressed fear of losing economic security. In trying to remove themselves from the modern nine-to-five workday, many members have found themselves in stressful situations economically, and few have been willing to let go of the security of receiving a monthly paycheck. One reason is that it is difficult to establish a reliable source of income from their initiatives (often deep in the countryside), and thus feel compelled to continuously 'leave' the good life for periods of time to generate income – often in the city.

An example of these challenges comes from the ecovillage Nashira. As an ecovillage project for low-income single mothers with backgrounds of poverty and domestic violence, Nashira is very different from other intentional communities (See Fig. 6).

As became apparent through the photographs taken by members of Nashira, and the accompanying interviews, economic security and trust are highly prized aspects of the good life – more so than ecological or healthy food habits. Through collective enterprises, Nashira residents try to create opportunities to support themselves from where they live. Divided into nuclei, groups of women share enterprises such as quail egg production, compost production, recycling, fish farming and small shops. During our interviews, however, the tensions inherent in this shared economy became obvious. The intrigues of people living and working together, and the time that goes towards group activities such as meetings and resolving communal issues takes a lot of their energy. This leaves little space for personal and family time, which to some extent defies the purpose of living in a community to begin with. There are also the power struggles and jealousies between members whose businesses are going well and those whose businesses are not. Some respondents claimed to be trapped in their shared economy – either by having to subsidize free-riders or by being too dependent on others – and experienced a loss of liberty. Many enterprises have thus ended in the hands of only one member of the starting group because of internal conflicts where the rest have decided to search for income outside of the ecovillage.

Yet even though it is energy-consuming and difficult to achieve, a common reflection was that the solidarity economy has given at least some of these women the opportunity to acquire group-work and conflict resolution skills, and the possibility to work from home and be closer to their children. This would otherwise have been almost impossible to achieve individually.

4.3.3. Food sovereignty

Despite the highly valued notion of growing one's own food, few communities have managed to reach a significant level of food sovereignty, and those that succeed are struggling to make it economically viable. A common story is the initial fever of enthusiasm where members come together to plan and implement productive enterprises. This enthusiasm fizzles out, however, with the realisation of the time, commitment and skills needed for the project to start bearing fruit – and people begin dropping out. Walking around many communities this is witnessed by abandoned fields, nurseries and fishponds. Mentioning these observations to one neo-rural ecovillager, the reply was enlightening: 'We aren't peasants.' This reflects the fact that although ecovillages and other sustainable initiatives may be hotbeds of alternative living and experimentation into sovereignty, there exist day-to-day challenges which are difficult to overcome – like a person from the city with visions of living in nature, doing the hard work needed to actually grow his or her own food. To overcome these challenges several members choose to pay laborers to work the fields, while others establish strategic alliances with neighboring peasants to provide local food, and some settle with planting token herbs and vegetables in their garden.

An interesting case of a community that is producing its own

¹¹ The term *power plants* is given to plants used for rituals which have the property to induce other states of consciousness, for example, coca and tobacco.

food is that of the peasant community of Mamá Lulú. Situated on one hectare of land, this farm was once a monoculture coffee plantation which has been converted into an agroecological project of permacultural food production, eco-construction and conservation. According to its residents they are easily able to feed themselves from the farm, yet they need to earn extra money to pay for other expenses such as electricity, internet access and university education for the children. To accomplish this, Mamá Lulú has opened up to tourism and gives courses on sustainable living. However, as a tourist enterprise, the local government has substantially raised their energy costs and taxes, and Mamá Lulú now struggles to reconcile its income with its operational and commodity costs – resulting in more effort and time being taken away from working their farm as they are increasingly forced to rely on tourism to make ends meet. One member reflected that they had originally searched for food sovereignty so as to free themselves from working as day laborers on other farms but, because of the costs of modern commodities, and university education, they now find themselves back to working for others in the form of tourism: ‘Was it worth sending my children to the university to learn theory and abstract ideas?’ this member asked himself; ‘Could they not have learnt more working on the farm?’

4.3.4. Living the ‘simple life’ in community

Voluntary simplicity is a lifestyle strategy that attempts to move away from consumerist habits of modern society towards what Elgin (1993) describes as an outwardly simple and inwardly rich way of life. In practice this can be seen in the lifestyles of Hare Krishna devotees living in a group economy, where individuals do not earn money, own the bare minimum of possessions, share all living spaces including sleeping quarters, and live a strictly vegetarian diet. Another example are individually owned, relatively small and simple houses often encountered in intentional community with a communal kitchen and other common spaces. Yet despite the strong focus placed on community by CASA members, a surprisingly common phrase was that ‘living in a community is tough.’ Common challenges in practicing community relations are finding the balance between individual and communal interests, the articulation of different working rhythms, and levels of compromise.

Through one year of participant observation in the ecovillage Atlántida, living in a rustic 12 m² house, the first two authors experienced the tensions involved in communal struggles resulting from the different ideas of what it meant to live a ‘simple’ life. This involved the mundane impracticalities of waiting for one’s turn to use the communal washing machine, to the realities of living in the countryside, which included frequent power-cuts, poor internet connection and outbreaks of lice. Strongly missed was cooking their favorite meals comprised of relatively expensive ingredients which the community usually did not buy collectively, and food which was often not local (for example, mushrooms, lasagna, and different type of cheese and chocolate). The authors eventually decided to invest in a small fridge and kitchen in their house, where food could be stored and cooked away from the communal kitchen. However, they were soon questioned by some of the residents because of their increased energy consumption, and fewer communal meals. Through community sessions, the authors agreed to pay more towards communal energy costs, but stressed their need for more private space in their day-to-day lives. This type of pressure to be ‘ecological’ in a certain kind of way was echoed by many CASA members who mentioned being questioned not only by other community members, but also being judged by visitors as not living up to the label of being self-sufficient or sufficiently communal.

As we hope to have shown, putting visions of the good life into practice is not an easy task. Ideas of living with nature, in a fraternal

community of like-minded people, together constructing ‘territories of peace’ are inspirational visions, but in practice the strong pull of modern legacies places substantial restrictions on these endeavors. Below, we explore the extent to which these visions and practices represent ‘radical ruralities’, and what we can learn from the contested nature of *buen vivir* as lived experiences.

5. Discussion

We can interpret CASA visions and practices as a synthesis of cultures through the configurations of people, communities and ideas coming together to bring about their good lives. If we return to the *buen vivir* principles stated in section two, then we can see that overall CASA members’ good lives articulate well with the general concept of *buen vivir*. To varying degrees, and expressed in different ways, there is a desire amongst members to live a harmonious life, closely related to nature and other beings, based on values of solidarity and personal development. Influenced by the strong links to Indigenous wisdom and practices, the relations which are being (re)constructed have a strong territorial emphasis, with the focus on intercultural dialogue being witnessed, for example, in the yearly network gathering *El Llamado*. Yet as emphasised above, the translation of these visions into everyday practices raises many dilemmas and conflicts which we will discuss below.

5.1. Radical ruralities and the ‘rupture’ with modernity

Alternative paradigms of living, such as the ones portrayed by CASA, are important because they have the power to stimulate reflections on current rural transformations (Kay, 2008). There is a need, however, to move beyond reflection into concrete actions which help bring about changes at all levels of society. By looking at the key elements of the radical ruralities in section two we can gain insights into how this process is unfolding. First, a strong *community discourse* is ubiquitous in CASA. Yet although gatherings such as the annual *El Llamado de la Montaña* demonstrate community building at the network level, the ideals of day-to-day communal living are hard to reach. We clearly see the individualistic signs of modern life such as private property, competition and individual profit competing with, for example, a solidarity economy in the community of Nashira.

Second, the promotion of *diverse meanings of land* beyond that of simple means of production is prevalent with initiatives showing the plurality of functions as well as meanings which can be generated in rural spaces. Though prevalent, such multifunctional views of the countryside are problematic. Something as ‘radical’ as attempting to produce one’s own food and living a simple life in the countryside is beyond the reach of most people who lack the skills or financial resources; this in turn leads many CASA members to adjust their dream by paying somebody to work in the garden, for example, or returning to the city.

Third, the importance of *ecocentric and deep ecological beliefs* is a strong cohesive glue in the network in the sense that this biocentrism provides a foundation for the themes of network discussions such as food sovereignty, genetic modification of food, and extractivism. The difficulties of enacting biocentric relations are, however, evident in giving up needs and comforts in favor of those of other non-humans. It is easy, for example, to get stuck in acts of ritualism, and forget the more practical actions that can give a place to the ‘other’ in the current modern world, such as growing your own food. It is also interesting that the majority of visions still separate nature from people – albeit as a subject instead of an object (see section 4.2). However, unlike Halfacree’s rather homogenous model of the radical rural, CASA has a strong spiritual

focus with people of different worldviews attempting to articulate a good life together, where what it means to be sustainable goes beyond a simple biocentric worldview to include religious doctrine and competing knowledge systems.

An area Halfacree does not discuss, but which Kay (2008) heavily critiques on his analogous concept of *communitarian* proposals, concerns economic challenges. With the stand *buen vivir* takes against modernity and the capitalistic system, and the desire by CASA members to live a less conventional life, the fear of living without a monthly pay-check, and the need to pay for basic living costs poses great obstacles to maintaining the good life. This is well illustrated by the example of the peasant family Mamá Lulú, who are self-sufficient in food, but have to employ an increasing amount of resources from tourism to pay for the amenities of a modern life.

Considering how Gudynas (2011a) describes *buen vivir* as a 'rupture' with the mindset of modernity – where there is no space for a reformed or adjusted modernity – one may wonder how 'radical' CASA enactments of *buen vivir* really are in the face of the challenges above. We argue, however, that rather than being able to achieve a *buen vivir* – and advocating 'truer' *buen vivires* (Gudynas, 2014) – more importance should be placed on lived experiences and the reflection process involved. In the CASA network this involves a process of territorialisation where many members have turned to philosophies with various historical roots, incorporating new ideas and practices into their good lives through critically choosing what works from their own life experiences. This promotes processes of self-reflection on what the *buen vivir* really is or could be: does living the good life mean growing one's own food, living in community, and connecting to indigenous traditions? Although this may be the case for some, the plural (and hence inclusive) nature of *buen vivir* offers opportunities for diverse peoples to cohere around shared meanings of the 'good life,' while providing the freedom to live variations depending on the social and ecological contexts.

With Geels (2010) positing radical innovations as occurring in 'niches,' we can also view CASA as a network that links niches of radical ruralities. Although struggling to find coherence in practicing the good life, CASA members act as focal points of social innovation in their social and working environments, acting as bumblebees cross-pollinating society with ideas and best practices, while at the same time going through processes of personal transformation as they are exposed to different ways of seeing the world (see Chaves et al., 2015).

6. Conclusion: an alternative to modernity, or a modern alternative?

Put forward as an alternative to modern development by many authors, *buen vivir* has a lot of expectations resting on its shoulders. Yet although *buen vivires* of intercultural harmony resonate for many, putting them into practice highlights the contradictions and challenges of transitioning to new ways of living and being. By way of conclusion, we therefore see it as pertinent to reiterate what Gudynas (2011a) stresses about *buen vivir*: it is a concept in construction. It has the potential to articulate diverse societal groups such as indigenous and non-indigenous groups around shared values of *buen vivir*, contributing to reflections on novel ways of building peaceful relations between people and nature.

In terms of *buen vivir* as an alternative to modernity, it is important to state that CASA is challenged by the considerable work that needs to be done to reach its objectives. However, our case illustrates the continual process of negotiation and sacrifice, where visions – and hence expectations – are continually being adjusted to the realities on the ground, implying a willingness to change ingrained habits of living. Yet CASA's *buen vivir* is not an

alternative modernity either. Although we can add rabbit ears to 'radical' ruralities to emphasize that some expressions may not seem so radical in 'rupturing' modernity, members are at least asking themselves fundamental questions about what the good life means, and enacting to the best of their abilities novel relations which challenge modern notions of the good life. If we think of *buen vivir* as a concept in construction, then it could be useful to think of alternatives to modernity in the same way: a process where critical thinking and learning based action is needed to negotiate competing ways of knowing and being.

We want to finish this paper by highlighting the importance of context-based good life research. In the context of Colombia, currently undertaking the difficult task of peace negotiations after more than 50 years of internal war, new human-nature narratives are needed to rebuild a fragmented society. Networks such as CASA play an important role in articulating and promoting novel territorial relations, and with an integral rural reform a central pillar of the peace accord, CASA experiences of building 'territories of peace' will be a great asset for post-conflict reconstruction.

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