

## ***Chapter 11. Overcoming Rural Poverty from the Bottom Up***

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The possibility of overcoming poverty seems like a chimera in today's societies. The definitions of poverty are conditioned by the political contexts in which we operate, or, in some cases, by the proposals of new strategies that we would like to use in order to (re)build the world. In this short essay we focus on the latter: those proposals that can guide us in moving forward to overcome the growing socio-political, economical, and environmental obstacles that prevent us from understanding the possibility that poverty can only be eradicated by promoting a strategy that would free people, as members of communities, to implement their responses to forging their own solutions to the challenge.

Because poverty is presently defined in terms of access to basic human needs, in turn directly related to individuals' ability to obtain employment, which, in turn is tied to their capabilities, in a society dependent on private accumulation to create these opportunities – both in the labor force and in the realm of human development, the possibilities of successfully confronting these challenges are inherently limited by the difficulty of creating social solidarity in the community and the State's inability to supplement the inadequate mechanisms offered by the private sector. Even worse, in the name of generating employment opportunities, the society has implemented important modifications in the received social contract that compromise basic guarantees of a decent wage or minimally acceptable working conditions, enshrined in the original formulation of Article 123 of the Mexican Constitution.<sup>1</sup> This situation is further aggravated by the society's insertion into the "international division of labor" which places workers everywhere in direct competition with each other, wherever they are, regardless of the political or social conditions to which they are subjected. In this process, we are also finding a dramatic "race to the bottom" with regard to environmental standards, as corporations are (implicitly) permitted to disregard environmental standards in the name of competitiveness, even as these same actors shrilly proclaim their commitment to programs of social and environmental responsibility. For this presentation, we consider it important to focus on the underlying factors that people might refer to in their efforts to avoid the problem of poverty.

To begin with, it is useful to present an alternative proposal for measuring well-being, perhaps the most important factor relating to poverty, in contrast to the measures of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) or its components. We refer to the proposal by King Jigme Singye Wangchuck of the Kingdom of Bhutan in 1972, to implement an alternative system to assess a country's richness according to an index of "Gross Domestic Happiness" (GDH). This concept proposes to measure the richness of nations by evaluating the real well-being of their citizens, their happiness, measuring smiles instead of money or material possessions, as does GDP. The initial idea was to assure that "prosperity is shared by the whole of society and well-balanced concerning cultural traditions conservation, environmental protection with a government that responds to the needs of

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<sup>1</sup> As originally written this guarantee was considered a path-breaking guarantee for unions and workers' rights (Compa, 2012).

those being governed” (Revkin, 2005).<sup>2</sup>

Although personal income in Bhutan is one of the lowest in the world, life expectancy increased around 20 years from 1984 to 1998, from 43 to 66 years; the literacy rate jumped from 10% in 1982 to 60% today, and the infant mortality rate fell from 163 deaths per one thousand inhabitants to 43.<sup>3</sup> This change in approach to development has been reinforced by the country’s strong commitment to environmental conservation. Bhutan’s legislation defines 70% of the country as “green areas”, including 60% as forests. Even though this small country faces a very high unemployment rate, the perception of its inhabitants concerning their quality of life as “good” has been significant enough for the indicator GDH to be considered seriously in many other countries.

In the World Values Survey, a project in process since 1995, Ronald Inglehart, a political scientist at the University of Michigan, found that Latin American countries, for example, recorded much more subjective “happiness” than their economic levels would suggest.<sup>4</sup> In the same manner, a multinational team organized by the Inter- American Development Bank published an extensive report evaluating the process, using their own methodology, and concluded that the data regarding individual perceptions and values in a variety of countries of the region reveal huge discrepancies with statistics concerning living conditions or the opinions of government agencies. Certainly there is a large gap between income and people’s level of satisfaction; these differences are not limited to monetary questions, because they include, in accordance with the studies, questions about the nature of the sources of employment and the quality of urban life, among others (Lora 2009). In fact: “The evidence suggests that once people have their basic material needs adequately met, the correlation between income and happiness quickly begins to fade” (Alexander, 2012: 2). We can add, quoting Albert Einstein: “not everything that can be counted counts; and not everything that counts can be counted”. This is because measuring happiness includes subjective aspects, not material ones, such as the influence of social relations, autonomy, and self- determination, among others.

This is not the place to review the endless discussions about poverty indicators or their meaning. In many other circles, scholars are trying to understand what makes people happy and the determinants of a good quality of life. The academic community seems incapable of defining these terms, because of our inability to incorporate concepts of uncertainty. It is clear, however, that there is a growing realization that current definitions dominant in the social sciences do not contribute to an appropriate understanding of the theme.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> We are grateful to Gabriel Torres González of CIESAS-Occidente for our discussions of this topic and his contributions that made include this material in this note. He is in the process of conducting a study of this phenomenon in Mexico.

<sup>3</sup> For recent developments about this approach, including the decision to downplay its importance for policy making, consult the web page of Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness Commission at: <http://www.gnhc.gov.bt/>. Similar achievements were observed during the early years of the Cuban Revolution (Barkin and Manitzas, 1973).

<sup>4</sup> “Human beliefs and values: A cross-cultural sourcebook based on the 1999-2002 Values Surveys,” study conducted at Survey Research Center of the University of Michigan.

<sup>5</sup> In fact, the concern for the divergence between well-being and standard measures of progress is such that in the UK a Royal Commission was charged with providing guidance for public policy to reduce the gap (Scott, 2012). There is also a burgeoning field of the “economics of happiness” that is responding to this concern, albeit principally within the confines of orthodox economics (cf. Figart and Marangos, 2011; Carabelli and Cedrni, 2011).

In this situation, then, a new understanding of poverty is more urgent than ever. An essential question is: What elements are necessary for an individual or a society to escape from poverty? It seems clear that an answer would include some of the GDH's index components, such as education and medical services. This would require a change in emphasis of social policy from simply delivering the services to ensuring that they adequately prepare the people for a productive life in their communities. In Cuba, striking results were achieved in these sectors without particularly stellar results in economic growth (Pollitt, 2009; Backer and Molina, 2010). It is now clear, however, that our efforts to advance towards a better quality of life cannot be limited to these instruments of the social policy. In spite of improvements in education and medical care, it is evident that throughout the world we are suffering a deterioration in our quality of life, resulting from the weakening or destruction of the social and solidarity networks (with a direct increase in personal and social violence) and the accelerated destruction of the ecosystems on which we depend. The inability to guarantee a basic package of social services and economic assistance accompanied by a shocking deterioration of environmental quality have extreme effects on the quality of life in virtually all countries. This is a multi-factorial theme and, for this reason, questioning the essential meaning of progress requires a multidisciplinary vision and revaluing some of the fundamental elements that we normally associate with the "traditional" society.

Generally speaking, when problems such as well-being or poverty are being discussed, we must refer to the development policies that create the social dynamics that prevent improvements in the quality of life. These policies are promoting a transformation that distances us from their stated objectives. It is evident that the principles of economic advance proposed by economists do not offer appropriate solutions. This is clear once we examine the process of development; Gilbert Rist describes this process with an enlightening definition of development in his classic work:

*'Development' consists of a set of practices, sometimes appearing to conflict with one another, which require – for the reproduction of society – the general transformation and destruction of the natural environment and of social relations. Its aim is to increase the production of commodities (goods and services) geared, by way of exchange, to effective demand.* (Rist, 2008: 13, italics in the original).

It is not necessary to analyze this definition in greater detail -as Rist did in his classic analysis of the concept- to realize how inappropriate the present development policies to promote a better quality of life are. Rist offers an interesting explanation, starting by pointing out that although cooperation and international help are necessary and often valuable, they "have little impact, compared with the many measures imposed by the implacable logic of the economic system" (p. xi). Without pretending to reproduce his argument, it is enough to highlight three suppositions in development practice that impede society's advance: social evolutionism, individualism and economicism (p. 9).

In the rest of this chapter we propose to introduce reflections related to two paradigms offering alternatives to "development" and then examine practices beyond official solutions. These alternatives are emerging philosophical and analytical approaches which can stimulate the intellectual work that must accompany the search for new ways of understanding. We begin with an analysis based on academic literature, but then continue with reflections emanating from the social movements motivating and triggering scholarly

work and the resolute resistance of official institutions which continue intransigently in not exploring the possibilities of alternative models. These two important alternatives are: *Degrowth* and “*Good Living*”, as it is called by the Andean groups where the term originated (in *Quechua* and *Aymara*). Two areas of academic work are related to these paradigms: ecological economics (and its close relative, political ecology) and social and solidarity economics.<sup>6</sup> An extensive literature has been accumulating around these two ideas, a process that threatens them as many new contributors are trying to expand their scope in an effort to bring them closer to the methodologies and contents of the mainstream analysis.

## 1. Degrowth

The ‘new’ field of “degrowth” emerged from the critical diagnosis of the current situation:

An international elite and a “global middle-class” are causing havoc to the environment through conspicuous consumption and the excessive appropriation of human and natural resources. Their consumption patterns lead to further environmental and social damage when imitated by the rest of society in a vicious circle of status-seeking through the accumulation of material possessions.<sup>7</sup>

In the international meeting where this statement emerged, its adherents offered a critique that extended to transnational corporations, financial institutions and governments, insisting on the profound structural causes of the crisis. Likewise, they indicated that the measures to confront crises by promoting economic growth will only deepen social inequalities and accelerate environmental degradation, creating a social disaster and generating economic and environmental debts for future generations, especially for those who live in poverty.

Those attending the Conference declared that the main challenge of this moment is how to conduct the inevitable transition (as they see it) to economic degrowth, which have beneficial effects for the environment through a process that will be implemented in an equitable manner at national and global levels. The proposals offered by participants in this

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<sup>6</sup> Some consider “degrowth” to be a response to the disenchantment with the colonization of “ecological economics” by many analysts of a neo-classical (orthodox) tendency who ‘escaped’ from “environmental economics” due to its inability to incorporate matters of biological diversity and social justice into its analysis; frequently, these analysts make this transition or academic migration without transforming their methodologies or even their paradigms (Barkin, *et al.*, 2012). In contrast, political ecology –more firmly rooted in Marxist political economy– suffers less criticism. Similarly, “social and solidarity economics” is suffering from a confusion generated by competing or incompatible social and political objectives; the notions of solidarity and equality that motivated cooperative and union movements of the past are being compromised by present-day social policies of the State, by community organizations at the service of corporations, and by religious charities (Barkin and Lemus, 2011). Recently, other academic and political groups have intensified their attempts to influence the evolution of these alternative approaches by accepting the participation of transnational companies that claim their own right to participate with their “social and environmental responsibility” investments that make them worthy of strictly controlled (by them) rewards as “socially responsible companies” (their Mexican denomination) (cf., Utting and Clapp, 2008).

<sup>7</sup> cf. “Declaration of Barcelona, 2010” produced during the Second Conference on Economic Degrowth for Ecological Sustainability and Social Equity convened in Barcelona in March, 2010. For more information about this paradigm, see <http://www.degrowth.eu> among other sources. Ted Trainer offers a constructive and critical analysis of this school as well as an alternative proposal for a “Simpler Way” (2015).

school of thought embraced all the dimensions of productive and social activity. The adherents to this line of analysis are optimistic with regard to the possibility of implementing changes in life styles and community organization to reduce the ecological footprint of the different social groups, and in this way liberate social resources to attack the root causes of poverty. In their critique of the current model there is a clear tendency to protect and strengthen individuals' rights and to reduce the scale of social and productive activity, emphasizing the local over the global. At this Second Conference on Economic Degrowth, however, there was a persistent effort to focus on the design of reforms that could be discussed and implemented within the current organizational framework of the affluent societies from which most of the participants came; the few efforts to question the possibility of implementing these changes in the current system of capitalist organization came to naught.

Although this school of thought places its intellectual roots in the field of ecological economics, it does not propose mechanisms to challenge the fundamental contradictions arising from current organization of society and its economy. On the basis of their ambiguous commitment to reduce the scale of production and consumption of the wealthy in the "advanced" countries, their proposals are committed to the possibility of a soft transition towards a "de-scaling", towards a "stationary state" economy. This "degrowth" school proposes the possibility of reorganizing "affluent" societies to release resources that would create political and productive spaces so that they could redeploy their energy to their own social fulfillment and guarantee appropriate living standards for their people. Many of their proposals are technological, offering new physical and productive solutions that ignore institutional and corporate structures that would prevent these changes, while also completely ignoring their dependency on the countries from the "south" for even a more austere lifestyle.<sup>8</sup>

## 2. Good Living (*Sumak Kawsay*)

The concept of "Good Living" is a translation or adaptation of the expression in *Quechua*, the language of descendants of Incan peoples in Ecuador, Perú and Bolivia. It is defined in the preface of the new Ecuadorian Constitution as "a new form of citizens' coexistence, in harmony and diversity with nature, in order to achieve a good life or "*sumak kawsay*". Elevated to constitutional principle,<sup>9</sup> *sumak kawsay* recognizes the "Rights of Nature" and a new complex citizenry, "that accepts social as well as environmental commitments. This new citizenry is plural, because it depends on its multiple histories and environments, and accepts criteria of ecological justice that go far beyond the traditional dominant vision of justice" (Gudynas, 2009).

As expressed by Alberto Acosta, one of its important protagonists on the Ecuadorian scene,

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<sup>8</sup> Two additional conferences were held after this paper was completed, in Venice in September 2012 and Leipzig in September 2014. What is striking about the keynote addresses and the available papers from these events is their continued unbridled optimism about the possibility of slowing or even stopping economic growth without generating insurmountable problems for the viability of the capitalist system or the governance institutions which supports it (<http://www.venezia2012.it/?lang=en> and <http://www.degrowth.de/en/leipzig-2014/archive/>).

<sup>9</sup> The Bolivian counterpart, "good living" (from aymara language *suma qamaña*), is in the preface of its new Magna Carta. One of the most prolific writers on the subject is Fernando Huanacuni Mamani, whose works are widely available on the internet (2010). See also Tortosa (2011).

The basic value of an economy, in a Good Living regime, is solidarity. A different economy is being forged, a social and solidarity economy, different from economies characterized by supposedly free competition, that encourages economic cannibalism and feed financial speculation. In accordance with this constitutional definition, they hope to build relations of production, exchange and cooperation that promote efficiency and quality, founded on solidarity. We talk about systematic productivity and competitiveness, based on collective advances rather than individuals who are arbitrarily added together as is often the practice at present (2007).

In contrast to current policies for facing the problem of the existence of growing segments of society that require charity or official transfer payments for their survival, this approach towards a social and solidarity economy offers a stark contrast with the proletarian organization of community life. Its approach far exceeds the reforms proposed by many participants in the debates based on economistic visions which do not consider abandoning individual or corporate accumulation at the expense of collective well-being. *Sumak Kawsay* requires reorganizing social life and economic production, transforming the essential function of the market, shaping it so it can serve society rather than determine social relations, as it does at present.<sup>10</sup>

*Sumak kawsay* is a concatenation of economic, social, and political equalities, which support a different organization of society and its relationship with nature. These equalities, expressed in our political language, would include equality and freedom, social justice (productive and distributive) as well as environmental justice; it is evident that dramatic actions are required to reverse the currently existing inequalities (Acosta, 2010). If this principle were applied, it would constitute a solid base for reorienting the productive apparatus and political and cultural relations, reversing inequalities that violate rights and prevent the possibilities of an effective democracy. Progress, in this sense, would be defined in terms of a social and productive organization that generates equality directly, that produces social justice through direct democracy.

These are just two examples of a broad search for alternative ways of understanding peoples' relationship to their environment and proposals for shaping their communities as well as doing research and implementing proposals for change. What is particularly notable about the virtual flood of these proposals is the legitimacy they have gained in international academic institutions and the intransigence of many existing institutions and the dominant paradigms in the principal disciplines to seriously consider a need for rethinking the way in which social science analysis is conducted. The titles themselves are revealing of the proposals being offered: *An Epistemology of the South: The Reinvention of Knowledge and Social Emancipation* (Santos, 2009); *Decolonizing Methodologies* (Smith, 2012); *Sharing Power* (Borrini- Feyerabend, et al., 2007).

### **3. Operationalization**

The principles examined in this text are an integral part of a long tradition: declarations

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<sup>10</sup> This point is central in Karl Polanyi's (2001) works where the need to "(re)embed" the market in society is emphasized, in place of the current organization of the economy which allows it to dominate social relations. An extensive discussion of the "good living" topic is presented in the magazine, *América Latina en Movimiento*, published in Ecuador and available on line at <http://www.alainet.org>; numbers 452-454 of 2010 and 462 in 2011 are highly recommended.

from and action by social movements reacting to the dramatic changes imposed on the social and economic system designed to reorganize society for the benefit of elites. They take us back to the dawn of the French Revolution in the Paris Commune, to Richard Owens' commune and to the intentional communities of Protestant and Jewish sects, as well as to the workers' struggles in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Most of them were suppressed in one way or another with tragic massacres committed by forces at the service of a particular model of economic organization that repeatedly tries to condemn a growing segment of the world's population to diverse forms of poverty.

Today, individuals who are looking for another model of progress realize that Schumacher's "*Small is Beautiful*" (1973) still has a lot to teach us. We are also obliged to consider that Marshall Sahlins' affirmation might now be truer than ever: hunter-gathers offer a model of a really affluent society:

The world's most primitive people have few possessions, but they are not poor. Poverty is not a certain small amount of goods, nor is it just a relation between means and ends; above all, it is a relation between people. Poverty is a social status. As such it is the invention of civilization. It has grown with civilization, at once as an invidious distinction between classes and more importantly as a tributary relation that can render agrarian peasants more susceptible to natural catastrophes than any winter camp of Alaskan Eskimo (Sahlins, 1972).

Might we not ask, as do some scholars and critics: Did medieval peasants work less than today's industrial working-class?

These reflections pose many questions. Today it is relatively easy to document the fruitless dynamic of anti-poverty programs such as the international "goals of the millennium" effort and their national correlates, such as the widely praised "oportunidades" programme of the Mexican government, or the destructive effects of society's current organization. We can turn to measurements of life expectancy, educational levels, morbidity and mortality rates by age, social or gender groups. Similarly, we can include diverse indicators of social, economic and geographic inequality, and indices of access to social and cultural infrastructures. We can add diverse efforts that document the lack of relationship between increases in production and improvements in human well-being. In turn, the deterioration in working conditions and the restriction of freedom of association in unions and their effectiveness to protect internationally agreed upon working rights is now widely recognized. The degradation of health and safety conditions in the workplace, and the erosion of the social welfare system, particularly for people of advanced age, are also intensifying in the present stage of globalization.

Most of these problems and our improved capacity to measure them, however, avoid the fundamental criticism of alternative visions. In other words, a description of society's current organization and its productive apparatus, with all the symptoms enumerated above, do not consider the way in which the process contributes to the enrichment of a few at the expense of the majority and our ecosystems. After all, while this concentrated (and dynamically growing) control persists, the possibility of the deepening poverty and exclusion of significant segments of society will be minimum (or null).

Nevertheless, efforts to achieve true social and environmental progress and a fuller appreciation of the ways in which society's current organization systematically generates



the conditions that deepen the roots of poverty also require taking note of society's dependence on the extraction of natural resources, both renewable and non-renewable. It would be necessary to reduce this dependency, and the system that integrates people into the labor market in "dead-end" employment. It would also be important to develop mechanisms to identify the need for ecosystem rehabilitation and the possibilities of effectively protecting vulnerable areas and species in danger of extinction, incorporating processes to integrate local populations in these tasks, taking advantage of their knowledge and own organizations, with appropriate recognition that would allow them to live with dignity. Not all these tasks are readily quantified, in spite of our recognition of the importance of revaluing the significance of these environments relative to material production. In the rest of this paper, we will focus on the promises offered by the alternative vision of society derived from the organization and practices of myriad communities throughout the Americas who have explicitly chosen to reject their wholesale integration into the global market system.

To escape from the poverty that oppresses most peasants, many rural organizations propose their own forms of collective organizations to administer the social and natural resources that the communities control. These organizations do not emerge spontaneously; rather, they are the product of concerted and long-term processes of social control and cooperation as well as a collective commitment to the sustainable management of their resources. To do this, the communities must also assure an appropriate and diversified productive structure that allows the members to satisfy their basic needs as well as to produce goods that can be used for exchange with other communities in the region and elsewhere to procure the goods they need to assure their well-being. Although the examples of these alternative organizations of rural society and production abound, most social science thought and analysis focuses on the impoverishing effects of international economic integration on the masses of peasants and rural laborers who have been thrust into poverty by the structural conditions of rain-fed subsistence agriculture. There are at least two different explanations of this process: 1) the proposal offered in the background paper included as the first chapter in this book, based on the seasonal variations in economic opportunities and labor demand; or 2) the semi-proletarianisation of the peasantry, the version favored by traditional analysts and dominant in the FAO, anchored in orthodox economic models that explain their poverty by the structural features of the labor markets in which they can find employment opportunities, albeit in disadvantageous conditions (see note 15, below).

The present analysis summarizes an alternative approach to escape from these bounds of systemic poverty, based on the proposals of diverse indigenous and peasant groups for their own organization of the rural production process as part of their diagnosis of the functioning of the market economy. Their collective commitments to an alternative framework for production and social integration, grounded in the basic principles that shape their social and political organization, offer a realistic but challenging strategy for local progress. These principles, widely agreed upon in broadly based consultations among the communities, are: Autonomy, Solidarity, Self-Sufficiency, Productive Diversification, and Sustainable Management of Regional Resources (Barkin, 2000, 2005). Their emphases on local (regional) economies and the use of traditional and agro-ecological approaches in production and the integrated management of ecosystems are the basis for their guarantee of a minimum standard of living for all their members and a corresponding



responsibility to participate, thus eliminating the phenomenon of unemployment. An integral part of this approach is the explicit rejection of the notion that people in rural communities conceive of themselves exclusively as farmers, or even as resource managers; rather, in these societies, it is more revealing to understand their decisions as the result of a *complex* allocation of their time among numerous activities of individual and collective benefit.

#### 4. Communalism

There are a number of fundamental conceptual principles underlying the organization of the societies involved in constructing structure capable of moving towards the “good life” (*buen vivir*) discussed in the Latin American literature (Huanacuni, 2010) that are facilitating their efforts to eliminate the concept of poverty from their social reality, with a concomitant commitment to productively incorporate all their members into socially useful occupations. In the case of Mexico, these principles have been codified by a number of “organic intellectuals” who have been actively involved in a process of innovation as a part of the process for the consolidation of social capacities in their communities, a self-conscious process of organization contributing to strengthen tradition (Díaz, 2007; Martínez Luna, 2010).<sup>11</sup> They have suggested the category “communalism” to encompass these principles, that include: 1) Direct or participative democracy; 2) The organization of community work; 3) Community possession and control of land; 4) A common cosmology, which includes the notion of the Earth as mother (Pachamama) and respect for community leadership. This development reflects an epistemological contribution that incorporates the appropriation of nature in a dramatically different way than that conceived by the dominant institutions of the Western project of “civilization” that is embedded in most development programs.

Communalism, in this sense, is not simply the aggregation of individual interests into a collective whole as suggested in the historical notion of “social contract” (Hobbes, Locke, and Kant) that should lead to a “just society.” It is not:

An agreement in which each person adheres to the contract to safeguard his own individual interest; if the contract, the political association, does not safeguard them, the individual has the right to break the contract, because (s)he agreed to the arrangement in terms of an egotistical interest, and thus if it does not respond in these terms, the individual may refuse to continue abiding by the contract (Villoro, 2003: 48-49).

In contrast, in the context of a peasant association adhering to the principles discussed above, a social contract is one that:

*Since I accept the contract, on the understanding that I am committed to the well-being of the group as a whole, even if it might advance against my own particular interests, I will continue to respect the terms of the contract.*

Democracy is, in this sense, a political association which, at the same time, is an ethical agreement, because it is the way in which a public group can guarantee the freedom of

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<sup>11</sup> This characteristic was central to the thinking of Eric Wolf, an anthropologist very influential in Mexico, who emphasized that one of the keys to the success of their traditional societies is the leadership’s ability to selectively innovate, carefully identifying what elements can be discarded or modified while staunchly defending others that are judged to be critical for the continuity of the community (1982).

everyone in the group, while also remaining a guarantor of autonomy (Villoro, 2003:49).

Communality, then, is a complex composite concept, one that embodies the totality of the collective commitment to individual welfare in the context of an individual commitment to collective well-being. It is an implicit arrangement to go beyond the limits of material considerations to accept a different responsibility to the community and to its ecosystem, an obligation grounded in tradition, in cosmology, to respect the community within its environment.

Although emerging from the very specific conditions of the struggles in the highlands of Oaxaca to reclaim their forest resources,<sup>12</sup> the doctrine of communality is increasingly recognized as relevant for understanding the many local struggles for self-governance, for autonomy in the management of social organization, and for the right to decide on the best uses for the resources controlled by the people involved in these struggles.<sup>13</sup> As such, the doctrine is a direct challenge to inherited notions of the sovereignty of the nation-state, of the unquestioned right and ability of national governments to decree the disposition of the nation's resources without reference to the considerations of the local peoples, as in the case of Mexico where sub-soil rights are constitutionally conferred on the State.

Without going into more detail, we wish to simply ensure that there be no illusion about the singularity of the Oaxacan version of this conceptual approach. Similar approaches are evident in the current efforts among the Andean peoples to codify and operationalize the heritage of the Sumak Kawsay ("bien vivir"), the explanations of the Zapatistas of their own developments ("mandar obedeciendo"), the struggles of the Huichol people, or Wixárika<sup>14</sup> (in their sacred site, Wirikuta), or the myriad other manifestations of peoples throughout the Americas to defend their customs, their territories, their societies, indeed their very existence.

## **5. Implementing alternative societies**

This book proposes to explain the persistence of poverty among the peasantry. We are examining this phenomenon in the context of the search for alternative explanations – how and why do our societies perpetuate this situation and why do the societies continue to persist in their stubborn ties to the land, to their traditional structures for production and reproduction. Because of this, many of our colleagues are convinced that these societies are condemned to disappear, to sink into a miasma of sub-proletarian misery.<sup>15</sup> They view the peasantry as an antiquated social form, with the fate of its peoples sealed in

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<sup>12</sup> For two detailed studies that offer an historical review of these struggles in Mexico, consult Klooster (2000) and Matthews (2003).

<sup>13</sup> Evidence of this recognition is the inclusion of panels for examining the concepts examined here (*buen vivir* and communality) in the meetings of the International Society of Americanists in Vienna in August 2012 and in the II [Mexican] Congress of Anthropology and Ethnology in Morelia in September 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Smith's (2012) insightful analysis of the development of similar processes among peoples in Oceania and South-East Asia serves to reinforce the argument that there are myriad examples world-wide of peoples with unique ethnic origins in national states asserting the significance of their own proposals for constructing alternatives to global development programs. For detailed examples of case studies of these processes, see collections like that assembled by Apffel-Marglin, *et al.*, (2010) and others cited below in this chapter.

<sup>15</sup> This is an important line of analysis repeatedly emphasized in the meetings of the Mexican Association of Rural Studies (*cf.* Cartón de Grammont and Martínez Valle, 2009) as well as among other groups of students of rural problems (*e.g.* Pérez, 2007).

misery. The explanations for this tragic situation may be those of unequal exchange, or more creative ones like that of the seasonality of agricultural production, offered in Julio Boltvinik's background paper in this volume (Chapter 1).

The approach suggested in this chapter is quite different. What appears as poverty in many rural societies is the result of deliberate choices made by their members to shape or reshape their communities on the basis of different principles, focusing on satisfying their own basic needs and assuring an ever more effective ability to govern themselves and negotiate their autonomy in the face of intensifying efforts to integrate them into global markets and the logic of rationalities based on individual benefit and monetary valuations of social relations and natural resources.<sup>16</sup>

The evidence for this peculiar situation is the concerted efforts by societies throughout the Americas to forge solutions on their own, in alliance with other communities or in collaboration with outside agents. Throughout the world there are numerous social movements in defense of their territory, in proposals for building alternatives that lead to a better quality of life, although not necessarily more consumption. What is striking is the volume of literature documenting these efforts, both those who are "bringing up to date" long traditions of many groups who tenaciously defend their ideological and cultural heritages (Toledo y Barrera Bassols, 2008) as well as those who are searching out new paths, controlled by themselves (e.g., Baronnet, et al., 2011; Zermeño, 2010).

The process is not limited to ethnic communities. It is interesting to note the significance for many peasant communities on the consolidation of one of the largest peasant organizations of the world, Vía Campesina. This group integrates local small-scale farmer organizations from around the world, with a view to promoting local capacities for self-sufficiency based on technologies that combine the benefits of organic cultivation where appropriate with intensive use of the producer's own equipment and knowledge to increase production. This approach, known as agroecology, is widely acknowledged to be appropriate for overcoming many of the considerable obstacles impeding the successful expansion of small-scale farming in the third world (Altieri and Toledo, 2011; Holt-Giménez, 2010). Evaluations of the implementation of these strategies reflect the benefits not just of the productive gains from a production system reoriented to local needs and distribution systems, but their contribution to strengthening local communities and environmental balance (Rosset and Martínez Torres, 2012).

There is no space in this text to delve into the details of these innovative strategies, many of which do not offer material solutions to poverty when measured by ownership or access to a certain package of commodities. Instead, they address a much more thoroughgoing reconceptualization of the possibilities for a different meaning of the concept of "quality of life", and therefore of the social and material significance of poverty. In this different context, then, it might be that much of the poverty to which most of the literature is addressed, has its origins in the individualism and the alienation of the masses whose

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<sup>16</sup> The significance of the rejection of the monetary valuation of social and natural phenomena is enormous; for example, the wide-spread acceptance of apparently value-free concepts like 'social capital' and 'natural capital' that offer a justification for placing prices and values on elements outside the market by asserting the need to assign them 'relevance' also facilitates their transformation into a new category of quasi-'commodities' that contributes to other mechanisms for personal and collective alienation. Fine (2010) offers an introduction to this problem.

behavior is embedded in the Western model of modernity, a model of concentrated accumulation based on a system of deliberate dispossession of the majority by a small elite. The collectivism implicit in the proposals offered by the communities implementing their own areas of conservation<sup>17</sup> is accompanied by the social concomitant of solidarity that pervades the processes inherent in these alternative strategies. The realization of the importance of people becoming involved in identifying and protecting their territories is an integral part of a complex dynamic that examines the importance of the place-based nature of cultures and their survival. As a result, peoples around the world are finding accompaniment in their efforts to protect these areas by a global alliance of such communities and organizations seeking to promote this effort; the Indigenous and Community Conservation Areas and Territories forum (<http://www.iccaforum.org>) is promoting and documenting the process in dozens of countries and hundreds of initiatives where people are able to improve measurably their living conditions as part of processes that enables them to govern themselves more effectively while also contributing to ecosystem protection and rehabilitation (Borrini- Feyerabend, 2010; Ibarra, *et al.*, 2011).

In this context, then, we reiterate the underlying principles for this construction – distilled from the practice of many recent experiences – that contribute to avoid the “syndrome” of poverty: autonomy and communality; solidarity; self-sufficiency; productive and commercial diversification; sustainable management of regional resources (Barkin, 2009). In many of these circles, the collective commitment to ensure that there are no individuals without access to their socially defined basic needs, implies a corresponding obligation of all (and of each one) to attend to the strengthening of the community’s productive capacity, to improve its infrastructures (physical, social, environmental), and to enrich its cultural and scientific capabilities. Poverty, in this light, is an individual scourge – created by the dynamics of a society based on individualism and its isolation – that is structurally anchored in the very fabric of society. To escape from this dynamic, the collective subject that is emerging in the process offers a meaningful path to overcoming the persistence of poverty in our times.

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<sup>17</sup> A recent development in this regard is the recognition of the importance and prevalence of “Indigenous Peoples’ and Community Conserved Areas and Territories.” This has become sufficiently significant to move a number of organizations to create a global ICCA Forum (cf., <http://www.iccaforum.org>).

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