

Amerindian cosmovisions and sustainable endogenous development

Cesar Escóbar

University Centre AGRUCO,

Cochabamba, Bolivia

Member of the Latin America Compas Network

Latin American context and the indigenous question

During the last hundred years, the countries of Latin America have followed roughly the same pattern of development. From the first to the third quarter of the twentieth century, most policies followed were Keynesian or nationalist populist in nature, where the state played a fundamental role, not only in the economic sphere but within the social and religious life of the population.

The local driving forces were those that advocated the formation of the nation, including the creation of an internal market and a national economy, the creation of a collective identity, cultural and linguistic homogenisation of the population and the formation of collective beliefs concerning the origin of the nation, collective history and the idea of the nation in the future. The specific mechanism of development was that of industrialisation, in emulation of the countries of the western Northern hemisphere.

The worldwide economic crisis of the 1930s forced the Latin American nations to pay greater attention to their internal markets and less to the international economy. In the absence of clear international pressure, internal development was to varying degrees successful in the different countries. Brazil, Argentina and Mexico were most successful when it came to industrialisation and the formation of the nation state. Colombia, Venezuela, Chile and Uruguay experienced lower levels of industrialisation but were succeeding in laying the foundations for industrial development that would take place later with the neo-liberal wave of development. Bolivia, Peru, Paraguay and Ecuador however did not consolidate their industrial basis or a common national identity.

From the 1970s Latin America experienced a wave of so-called neo-liberal development policies, in which the role of the state in the domestic economy was severely reduced, and development took a more externally oriented path. The failure of industrialisation policies, deteriorating balance of payments and external debt crises were factors that impelled the states of Latin America to search for alternative policies to Keynesianism. The international context of the time caused the countries to look abroad, to the United States and Europe, and neo-liberalism found an easy base in a world with US hegemony, the IT revolution and the trend towards globalisation.

Common to all the countries of Latin America was orientation towards the model of the western Northern hemisphere. This was not a new development, but continued the tradition that had started during the colonial era, of Latin America being regarded as slow in relation to Europe and therefore not developed. The logical

outcome of this assumption was either the extermination of the indigenous population or its definitive alienation from Western civilisation.

The process of alienation of indigenous populations (whether ethnic groups, towns, nationalities, nations or civilisations) is regarded as an indication of the backwardness of these groups in relation to a supposed 'line' of evolution and development of urban centres and cultures. The debate surrounding this assumption has been amply covered by Haverkort et al. (2003). The book cites many examples of other processes of development, which have different visions from the Western vision when it comes to worldviews and cosmovisions.

Eight percent of the total population of Latin America consists of indigenous peoples, with concentrations in Bolivia (62% of the total population), Guatemala (43%), Peru (40%) and Ecuador (35%). The social, economic and political marginality of these groups is inherited from the colonial period but continuing into the present. The situation has devolved into a vicious circle in which the indigenous populations continue to decline, as does the wealth in the hands of the indigenous people, and their political participation. Exceptions are found in the political organisation MAS (Movimiento al Socialismo) in Bolivia and Pachakutec in Ecuador.

Indigenous production is largely bound up with small-scale farming and therefore does not have the same capacity for wealth generation as other forms of production such as capitalist enterprises, cooperatives or even micro-enterprises. There is little concentration of productive assets, which to a certain extent is a result of the low productivity of the cultivation systems. Statistics indicating the contribution of the indigenous economies to the national economies are also lacking. This is an indication that a substantial proportion of the production is neither monetised nor included in the market economy. Much circulates through non-mercantile mechanisms of reciprocity and redistribution in family and communal circles and local regional markets.

The absence of recognition of indigenous forms of economy can be an explanation of why indigenous populations have been largely ignored in the formulation of public policies by the state. The recognition of indigenous forms of organisation offers an alternative to the simplistic visions of 'natives' in contrast to 'Westerners'. It also offers an alternative to racist or religious explanations of the current position of indigenous populations.

We consider that the indigenous question must be approached from two different but complementary angles: first from an ideological vision, building on the traditional concepts of life or cosmovision and its resulting epistemological derivation; and second from specific material, therefore mainly economic level. By combining both of these it is possible to derive a different conception of development.

'Other' conceptions of development

It is no coincidence that the countries with larger indigenous populations are also where the Keynesian and neo-liberal 'models' of development have been less successful. It is in these countries that indigenous cosmovisions and material possibilities overshadow the other options.

Table 1 provides an overview of the most influential cosmovisions in Latin America, those of the Maya, Quechua and Aymara groups.

Cosmovision Theme	Maya	Quechua/Aymara
Principles	Integrity, diversity, harmony, unity and complementarity. The Mayan calendar is the key to understanding the cosmovision since it relates the origin of life, the measurement of time, the movement of life, the possibilities for harmonious relations between human beings, norms for ethical and moral conduct. It is a synthesis of different fields and specialties of human beings.	Balance, complementarity <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • To feel (Spirit) • To think (Knowledge) • To do (Experience) • To be able (Organisation)
Spirituality	The spiritual experience is animistic in sense of a coexistence balanced daily with elements of nature: wind, movement of the air, cold, centre of the cosmos, centre of the Earth, the heart of the fire, body fluids.	The spirituality is animistic because the balance with living beings that surround the community is celebrated: plants, animals, vegetation, hills, etc. Balance between positive and negative energies is sought in nature.
Natural territory and resources	Handling of resources is done in close relation to the Mayan calendar, involving rituals, social relations and ecological balance.	Territorial occupation by ecological levels (maximisation of access to zones of production), continuous or discontinuous. The territory is made up of three parts: the sky (<i>Alajpacha</i>), the earth (<i>Kaypacha</i>) and the subsoil (<i>Ukhuypacha</i>). Harmonic re-creation of natural resources. Production in balance.
Medicine	Integral medicine: takes care of spiritual, psychological, mental, moral and physical aspects of human beings. Health problems arise when advice and norms for behaviour are not followed, or when energy is not channelled completely. Special treatments using plants and elements of the nature also exist.	Inner balance of the body. Balance with nature and natural energies. Treatment of disease takes into account the spirit of the person as much as the physical part, and includes elements of nature: plants, animals, fire, water, etc.

Cosmovation	Maya	Quechua/Aymara
Theme		
Learning	The wisdom: we feel, we live, we think, we engage in a dialogue and we are made well. This is fundamental to autonomous learning.	Internal and external to human beings: to know, to include and understand, to discover, to re-create.
Justice	Conflicts are solved by means of the advice of the most respected elders within the community. The calendar plays an important role because the causes of the conflicts can be found in it.	Communitarian justice: consists of service to the community rather than payment of fines. Responsibility is not only to the family but also to the community.

Table 1 Cosmovisions of various indigenous groups in Latin America

In general terms Latin American Indian cosmovisions do not know dualistic dichotomies between feeling and rationality that are characteristic of Western cosmovisions. In the West spirituality has been relegated to the world of religion, leaving rationality to dominate the other spheres of life. Feeling and rationality are united in the indigenous cosmovisions, which assign living things not only with a use but also the capacity to transmit energy. Following this vision, it is important to maintain balances by means of rituals so that daily life unfolds in an auspicious way for humans.

The aspects covered by Latin American indigenous cosmovisions can be characterised in the following ways:

- They have a totalising character; there is no ontological differentiation between beings that share life: the human, animals, plants and natural worlds have the same value.
- The main paradigms in the cosmovisions are balance, reciprocity and complementarity, which mutually influence each other.
- Religion is regarded as animistic as not only humans but also all living beings are regarded as having souls or spirits.
- Medicine consists of the search for physical and spiritual balance within human beings.
- Justice also carries the same connotation of balance between human beings and nature.
- All these elements seek the totality of life: individual and collective accomplishments in all facets of existence, not only material subsistence but also in the social sphere (prestige, recognition), norms and rituals in balance with nature.

Latin American indigenous cosmovisions have survived throughout history, partly because they are not susceptible to the logic of disruption. They have incorporated elements from the dominant cultures, progressively complementing their own knowledge and experience in the fields of management of land and resources, medicine, education and justice.

Although these practices are sometimes labelled 'archaic' in reference to capitalist development and its social and political institutionalism, the fact is that they have coexisted along with the capitalist system in many countries for a number of centuries. They have resisted becoming dependent on the dominant ideology, but are inserted into the capitalist ideology (liberalism) when circumstances determine (e.g. representative democracy, internal markets and monetisation of labour).

This approach to characterising Latin American endogenous cosmovisions enables us to establish which elements of endogenous development policies have arisen from the cosmovisions.

Elements of sustainable endogenous development

As we have already mentioned, discussion of the model of development requires awareness of the context within which policies are born. This places the discussion on the ideological plane, where Latin American indigenous cosmovisions receive priority and are regarded relative to the material, social and spiritual Judaeo-Christian conceptions.

We refer once again to Haverkort et al., in which some structural characteristics of Christian cosmovisions are outlined. When it comes to superseding these, the Latin American indigenous cosmovisions have an important paradigmatic role to play as they represent the aspirations of a number of different societies.

There is a direct bond between cosmovision and daily life of communities. Indigenous peoples approach daily reality from the point of view of a unity between feeling, thinking and acting. In this sense the elements of sustainable endogenous development (SED) are intimately bound up with the spheres of material, social and spiritual daily life, first reinforcing capacities and local potential (intra-cultural level) and as praxis incorporating exogenous elements in cosmovisions (inter-cultural level) (Delgado et al., 2006).

The material sphere

In terms of economics, surplus production is redistributed among all members of the community. The market works in such a way that collective accumulation takes place. The means of production are thereby redistributed within the confines of the community, and although this reduces the potential for productivity increases, it makes production more sustainable in the medium to long term. The ultimate goal of production is to achieve nutritional sufficiency, and the orientation is in terms of use value and reciprocity.

The territory is inhabited in harmony and balance with the elements and natural resources within it. Therefore low-input appropriate technologies are used that suit the ecological characteristics of each region. Sustainable endogenous development in the material sphere has the following fundamental characteristics that underlie the intra- and inter-cultural method:

- Territory occupied for living and food production is spread over a maximum number of altitudinal levels and ecological niches, to allow for diversification of production (and therefore also nutrition) with use of minimal energy and technologies available in the local context.
- The promotion of plural economic dynamics, not only guaranteeing nutritional security and resource maintenance, but also monetary complementarity and increase of productivity.
- Where possible productivity increase takes place through the productive concentration of assets available at a particular moment (earth, water, seed, technology, income).
- Channelling production that exceeds local needs into market systems at the regional level: strategy to avoid the chaos of the market and the vulnerability of the individual or the group to this mechanism.
- Dynamic regional production can be geared towards the global economy, opening up the potential to expose the global economy to Amerindian principles such as those of sufficiency, reciprocity and complementarity, and conversely to undergo the effects of the global economy at regional level.

The social sphere

The mechanisms of wealth distribution also ensure that there is little social differentiation. Sharing ensures that marginalisation does not occur and that quality of life is maintained. The social organisation and mechanisms involved resemble those of participative democracy. There is also rigorous social control of those holding positions of authority, as these positions are rotated. This is reflected politically in the participative and direct way in which local development planning takes place.

Within the vision of unity and complementarity, the social sphere is directly related to the material dynamics of the community. The characteristics that need to be supported and developed include the following:

- Without denying individuality, the communitarian logic of decision making in communal life and at the municipal level ensures uniformity of benefits. In this way participative democracy transforms into a regional phenomenon which needs to be spread and strengthened through a continuous flow of information towards the communities and training of leaders who have the capacity to extend their influence to the local level.
- Local social organisation must be capable of affecting the regional political level in order to contribute to the democratic deepening of the societies and the establishment of public policies that promote activities in the material sphere in the indigenous communities. This is possible by extending the work area to reproduce the micro-level experiences at the regional level.
- A direct relation exists between social organisation and political activity. For that reason sustainable endogenous development also supports political protagonists of Latin American indigenous communities.

The spiritual sphere

Spiritually, the vision of the sacredness of the natural and social world s provides direction for re-creating sustainable societies. This is a subject of central interest at a time when environmental and social crises have become universal. Rituals imbue deep ethical meaning in both individuals and at the collective level, and it is this ethical element that has been displaced by Western civilisations and their logic of accumulation.

In the same line, sustainable endogenous development can be a central paradigm for the ethical framework of individuals and the collective, with a religious or ritual background necessary for revaluing and searching for the importance of social meaning at regional and national level. The elements of sustainable endogenous development in the spiritual sphere include:

- Revaluing Latin American indigenous rituals and calendars to strengthen the self-esteem and the cosmovisions of the societies that practise them.
- Reconstructing and revaluing the mythical world of Latin American indigenous cosmovisions, because these contain creation myths and describe the mission of societies as they pass within the natural world.
- Increasing awareness of the influence of Judaeo-Christian religions on the essence of Latin American indigenous cosmovision and the dangers of the material and social disintegration of societies as a result of changing principles.

Difficulties facing sustainable endogenous development

Without wishing to idealise Latin American indigenous cosmovisions, it is important to emphasise the main difficulties they face. Attempts to extrapolate these systems from the micro- local level to the macro level have largely failed. As of yet there have been no in-depth studies of the reasons for these failures, but we can outline some points that may be indicative.

The first point is that systems based on the Latin American indigenous cosmovisions must have an ethical base as a precondition. The unity between feeling and rationality is what gives meaning and ethical values. However, if the Latin American system is only seen as a utilitarian and rationalist mechanism, its failure will be guaranteed.

The second point is related to economic rationality. In the Latin American indigenous cosmovisions the logic of accumulation of wealth is not prominent. Economic activity is mainly a means of satisfying the material necessities of subsistence, leaving space for social life, leisure and cultural development. It is not designed to generate mechanisms of accumulation, as these are not the aims in the face of an uncertain future. The endogenous economic rationality is intimately bound up with the sustainability of productive systems. Overproduction for maximum benefit implies the risks that systems collapse, and this is what happens when productive systems are subjected to the rationality of economic accumulation. This is the experience of many rural development policies.

The third point is related to political experience. Participatory democracy is effective under conditions of shared common ethics, values and objectives where political action represents authentic service. When a system that works on the basis of these premises is confused with the particular interests of class, nationality, region or religion, the result is participation that is less democratic than representative.

Finally, the processes that are implemented must be seen from a diachronic perspective, of the medium- and long term, in which social learning is fundamental to the transformation of society. The failures occurred in a logic of immediacy, where the process character is ignored and learning is relegated to repetition and transmission.

It is necessary to deepen and strengthen the insights in the failure of attempts to extrapolate from the micro level to a wider level so that they can be successful and the character of Latin American indigenous civilisations becomes visible.

Following the arguments in favour of complementarity, sustainable endogenous development cannot be achieved unless it is complemented by exogenous or culturally different elements. In that sense, it is important to gather experiences of economic productivity increases that do not do violence to Latin American indigenous rationality. In the social field, the combination of representative and participatory democracy based on the spaces present, is of key importance in the advance of societies that embrace total life.

Sustainable endogenous is not a fundamentalist view of Latin American indigenous society, nor is it a new instrumentalisation of the indigenous cosmovisions for western ideology with Judaeo-Christian origin. It rather is a pluralistic approach that complements indigenous and exogenous perspectives to face the material, social and spiritual reality of the 21st century.

References

- Haverkort, B., Hooft, K. van 't, and Hiemstra, W. (2003) *Antiguas raices, nuevos retoños; el desarrollo endogeno en la practica*, Edition Plural, La Paz.
- Delgado, F. and Mariscal, J.C. (2006) *Educacion intra e intercultural; alternativas a la reforma educativa neocolonizadora*, Plural, La Paz.