

Article

## ‘Living Well’ as a Path to Social, Ecological and Economic Sustainability

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### Abstract

While there is wide agreement on the need to move towards fairer and more sustainable societies, how to best achieve this is still the source of some debate. In particular, there are tensions between more market-based/technological approaches and more redistributive/social approaches. Living Well, a strategy which falls into the latter category, has been proposed as a path to social, ecological and economic sustainability by several state governments of the Global South. This paper examines the Living Well paradigm as implemented in Bolivia through the lens of the recently agreed Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The article is based on a 3 year, ESRC funded project on transitions to sustainability and reports the findings of documentary, policy and secondary data analysis, participant observations and semi-structured interviews with local stakeholders. The work indicates that, despite constraints and set-backs, in just a decade, Living Well has achieved a major shift towards social, economic and ecological sustainability in Bolivia. This seems to be primarily a result of the emphasis on redistributive policies, an intention to live in harmony with nature, respect for traditional values and practices, local control of natural resources, and participative decision-making. It is, therefore, argued that other nations might achieve more success in transitioning to sustainability by focusing on these factors, rather than continuing to emphasise the technological/growth/market approaches which are currently dominating global sustainability debates and activities.

### Keywords

Bolivia; Buen Vivir; environment; global south; green economy; human needs; Living Well; sustainability; sustainable development goals; Vivir Bien

### Issue

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## 1. Introduction

In the face of multiple environmental and social crises, a step change in our way of living seems imperative. Recent studies indicate that we have just twenty years within which to create the social practices that will enable us to avoid irreversibly overstepping planetary boundaries (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, 2013; Rockström et al., 2009; Steffen et al., 2015). At the same time, there is an urgent necessity to begin to address a number of widely unmet basic human needs. For example, approximately 60% of people globally were still without access to safe sanitation systems in 2015 (World Health Organization [WHO] & UNICEF, 2017); 15% lacked access to electricity (World

Bank, 2017); 30% were without safe drinking water (WHO & UNICEF, 2017); and 11% had insufficient food to meet the minimum daily energy requirement (Food and Agriculture Organisation, 2015). Furthermore, since 2008, many countries have been impacted by a deep economic recession and austerity measures which have widened and deepened poverty and inequality (Hardoon, Fuentes-Nieva, & Ayele, 2016; Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development [OECD], 2014; Piketty, 2014). As a result of these multiple crises, a fundamental and urgent transition to sustainability is required so as to avert further human suffering and catastrophic harm to all species of the planet.

Burke and Shear (2014, p. 130) advocate researchers contribute to our understanding of how to achieve a tran-

sition to sustainability through investigating the diverse ‘already-existing experiments’ with other ways of organising society. This article, and the research project upon which it is based, responds to this challenge, contributing to the literature on state-led strategies to achieve sustainability (see, for example, Duit, Feindt, & Meadowcroft, 2016; Gough, 2016; Koch & Fritz, 2014; Sommerer, 2016). Recent macro-‘experiments’ in new ways of bringing about eco-social transition at a state level include *Green Economy* (e.g. South Korea), *Ecological Civilisation* (China), *Sufficient Economy* (Thailand) and *Living Well* (e.g. Bolivia). All claim to address environmental, social and economic crises simultaneously, yet are diverse in terms of emphases, priorities and implementation methods. Living Well, in particular, represents a radical alternative to dominant global values. It has emerged from the Global South, particularly Ecuador and Bolivia, but has a much longer history in the customs and beliefs of the indigenous people of the Andes (Gudynas, 2011). There are a number of different interpretations of the concept, as will be discussed, but it generally implies redistribution of wealth and meeting human needs in harmony with nature.

The article begins with a description of the emergence of the Living Well paradigm in Bolivia and its theoretical underpinnings. Section 3 follows with an outline of the methodology for the study. Section 4 reports on the implementation of Living Well in Bolivia through the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) primarily drawing on quantitative and documentary data to give the macro-picture. Finally, Section 5 analyses the underlying factors that have enabled the achievements to date by utilizing qualitative data to give the micro-level view. The research indicates that the Living Well approach is generally successful, even in this early stage, in relation to the SDGs. However, it is difficult to fully integrate all of its aspects because of elite internal and external economic interests and Bolivia’s post-colonial context.

## 2. The Bolivian Context of Living Well

As a result of 500 years of colonial and neoliberal domination Bolivia became severely environmentally, socially and economically impoverished. The economy increasingly focused on extractive industries, especially silver, gold and tin mining, with profits going to the rich and dominant countries of the globe. This caused land degradation, deforestation and pollution in Bolivia, leaving vast regions desertified and communities sickened, destitute or displaced. However, in late 2005, Bolivia took a radical change of direction when the Movement towards Socialism (*Movimiento al Socialismo* [MAS]) won the national election. MAS emerged out of social movement protests to the neo-liberal market reforms of the 1990s and early 2000s with a discourse critiquing neo-liberalism and classical development strategies, and supporting a resurgence of indigenous knowledge and tra-

ditions that had been marginalised and repressed for centuries (Fabricant, 2013; Gudynas, 2011). With Evo Morales as its leader, the MAS government embarked on a major programme of ‘decolonisation’—throwing off the practices and institutions of the colonial era. This process was initiated with the first official MAS development strategy—the National Development Plan (Ministerio de Planificación del Desarrollo [MPD], 2006)—and further embedded in Bolivian institutions and culture with a new constitution, approved by the majority in a national vote, ‘based on respect and equality for all, with principles of sovereignty, dignity, complementarity, solidarity, harmony and equality in the distribution and redistribution of social goods’ (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2009).

Within this context, the MAS government began a project to address the severe environmental challenges through an approach known as *Vivir Bien* or *Buen Vivir* in Spanish, also sometimes referred to as *Suma Qamaña* in Aymara, *Sumaj Kawsay* in Quechua, or *Ñande Reko* in Guaraní. The nearest equivalent translation into English is ‘Living Well’. *Vivir Bien*/Living Well is defined by Law 300 as ‘a civilizational and cultural alternative to capitalism based on the indigenous worldview (cosmovision)’ that ‘signifies living in complementarity, harmony and balance with Mother Earth and societies, in equality and solidarity and eliminating inequalities and forms of domination. It is to Live Well amongst each other, Live Well with our surroundings and Live Well with ourselves’ (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2012, art. 5.5). Many of the social movements in Bolivia frame Living Well similarly as inherently critiquing the perceived separation of humans from nature and the modernist idea of infinite progress through technology. They characterise it as promoting respect and care for humans and the rest of nature in a spirit of solidarity, implying that we cannot achieve true well-being if other humans are suffering, or at the expense of destroying the environment (e.g. the World People’s Agreement on Climate Change and The Rights of Mother Earth, 2010).

There is, however, a great deal of contention about the term *Vivir Bien*/Living Well (see e.g. Gudynas, 2011; Villalba, 2013) which leaves it open to a variety of interpretations and framings. Even so, as Calisto Friant and Langmore (2015, p. 64) point out *Vivir Bien* ‘...has core elements that can be found in all definitions...’ in that ‘...it does not divide between nature and society; it places people as equal inhabitants of the earth alongside other species; it is strongly communitarian, ideally promoting participation and power over decision-making; and is less hierarchical and competitive, instead encouraging solidarity and reciprocity’. Based on this common understanding, the Bolivian government was the first government in the world to fully embrace this philosophy, with Ecuador following closely behind.

As well as controversies around definition, some have questioned the actual existence of Living Well, feeling that it is more of a government discourse than a set of indigenous values or concrete policies (Carlos Cre-

spo [Sociologist, University of San Simon, interview, January 9, 2017]. Others have characterized Living Well as somehow mystical, and difficult, if not impossible, to implement (e.g. Fabricant, 2013). However, as this paper makes clear, it does exist and it can be implemented. There are numerous examples of practical policies and programmes focused on, and arising from, the Living Well paradigm in Bolivia. According to the new Bolivian constitution, all development projects are to be evaluated in terms of their ability to fulfil the goal of Living Well and the concept is central to the new body of legislation that has been passed since 2006. It is particularly a key component of Law 300 with its main objective to ‘establish holistic development in harmony and balance with Mother Earth to Live Well...’ (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2012, art. 1). This law set up a new institution: the Plurinational Authority of Mother Earth (art. 53) which now focuses primarily on mitigating climate change. Living Well is also the cornerstone of successive MAS National Development Plans e.g. ‘...Bolivia Sovereign, Productive and Democratic to Live Well’ (MPD, 2006) and ‘...Framework of Integrated Development for Living Well’ (MPD, 2016). The Living Well programmes and policies discussed below in relation to the SDGs are all aligned with, reflect, or in some cases, can be directly attributed to, these overall legislative changes and policy documents.

As Ranta has noted ‘While considerable academic interest has developed in the concept of *Vivir Bien/Buen Vivir*, critical ethnographic examination of what is concretely done in its name *within the state apparatus* is scarce’ (2017, p. 1604). Hence, with the MAS government now in place for over 11 years, it is useful to consider how effective this policy paradigm has been and to consider its propensity for implementation elsewhere. There have been a few prior assessments of specific policies associated with Living Well in Bolivia. Many report on the progressive leaps made—Andersen (2014) on deforestation, Farthing and Kohl (2010) on illicit use of the coca plant, and Simarro and Antolín (2012) on income distribution—whilst highlighting some of the constraints that restrict further progress or create negative impacts elsewhere. However, there has not formerly been a systematic analysis of Living Well, as a whole or in relation to a recognized framework, such as the SDGs as reported and discussed here.

### 3. Methodology

The article is based on a three year, ESRC funded, research project entitled *Fair and Inclusive Environmental and Social Transition Alternatives* (FIESTA). The research methodology encompassed both secondary (macro-level) and primary (micro-level) data collation/collection and analysis to enable a robust, contextualised and in-depth understanding of the effectiveness and viability of the Living Well approach. Data was derived from SDG relevant longitudinal statistical data from a range of sources

to provide macro context, as well as participatory observations in four communities and interviews with local stakeholders.

The secondary aspect used a range of reputable, longitudinal international and comparative surveys as well as national datasets, where available, to investigate specific issues. The factors tracked primarily related to morbidity and mortality, emissions, energy consumption, inequality, poverty, access to environmental resources, green investment, quality of living environment, waste production, labour rights, employment levels, political empowerment, subjective well-being and social protection. The participatory observation component entailed living in the communities of interest and attending relevant meetings and events for a three-month period overall. In Bolivia, the four communities were two cities—La Paz and Cochabamba—and two villages—Mecapaca (in the state of La Paz) and Tarata (in the state of Cochabamba). These communities were selected because they represented a range of sizes, political contexts (Cochabamba had an opposition led local government), dominant ethnic groups (*Aymara* in La Paz and *Quechua* in Cochabamba) and environmental and social issues. The interview component included 50 participants, made up of a range of experts, government officials, NGO representatives, trades union organisers, community leaders, programme beneficiaries, and the wider public. The interviews were intended to understand how people conceptualized *Vivir Bien*, whether and how they were contributing to its implementation and whether and how they considered that the policy was making a difference to their lives or the lives of others. For example, people were asked ‘What does *Vivir Bien* mean to you?’ or ‘What has changed here as a result of the *Vivir Bien* policy goal?’. Interviewees were selected using the following sampling strategies: *Purposive sampling*, using participants who have particularly relevant knowledge and experience, *snowball sampling*, using networks to gain access to information-rich participants, *opportunistic sampling*, making the most of opportunities to meld the sample around the unfolding fieldwork context, and *maximum variation sampling*, selecting participants who lived and worked in the maximum diversity of environmental and social situations (in order to increase the opportunities to identify the varying factors and influences). The interviews were analysed thematically, using *Nvivo*. These methods aimed to comprehensively capture needs, visions, objectives, processes, impacts, as well as the barriers to implementation and impact of the Living Well paradigm.

The SDG framework, the centrepiece of an intergovernmental agreement intended to guide global development efforts to 2030, is utilized here as a means of operationalizing ‘sustainability’ or ‘sustainable development’, which remain contested and vague terms (Giddings, Hopwood, & O’Brien, 2002). This is a controversial approach because the SDG framework has been criticized on a number of grounds, in particular for its lack

of binding commitments and, with 17 Goals, 169 associated targets, and 304 proposed indicators, its complexity (e.g. *The Economist*, 2015). It has also been argued that the SDGs inherently reflect neoliberal interests (Pingeot, 2014; Scheyvens, Banks, & Hughes, 2016). Whilst not disputing that the SDG framework has many shortcomings, it is an internationally recognized measure of sustainability achievement, widely endorsed by 193 national governments in consultation with civil society and businesses. With so much international funding, discourse and activity now taking place in relation to the SDGs, it is important to identify the most rapid, effective and integrated way to achieve them. It also makes sense to start with the dominant framing (i.e. the SDGs) because, if we want to make comparisons between different pathways, it is useful to have a common benchmarking tool.

Some might also consider the SDG framework to be an inappropriate yardstick for capturing what is most valuable about *Vivir Bien*, a paradigm which is often posited as an alternative to mainstream notions of development. The most obvious contradiction between the two is with regard to the SDG for economic growth, which would appear to go against the limits implied in Living Well's aspiration to live in harmony with nature. Globally, humans are clearly not living in harmony with nature because we currently need the regenerative capacity of 1.6 Earths to provide the goods and services we use each year (World Wildlife Fund, 2016). Since we are already overstepping planetary boundaries, continuous economic growth would inevitably make this situation worse. As key figures in the degrowth movement have predicted (e.g. Daly, 1977; Georgescu-Roegen, 1971) the increasing use of resources and production of waste means there will be accelerated, irreversible planetary destruction. Hence, unlike the SDG framework, Living Well does not prioritise growth or propose growth as a specific goal. However, it does allow space for appropriate growth—that which is necessary to meet human needs. Therefore, Living Well has some general commonality with even the most apparently contradictory SDG.

Living Well has not been assessed in terms of all the specific targets and indicators of the SDGs as this would be highly complex to report comprehensively in the context of an article. Only particularly marked achievements or failings are mentioned here based on data availability and relevance. Current quantitative data, or the most recent available data are compared with 2005, prior to the election of the MAS government which sought to implement Living Well at the state level.

#### 4. Living Well and the SDGs

##### *Goal 1: End poverty in all its forms everywhere*

There has been significant progress towards achieving this goal. Absolute poverty levels in Bolivia fell from 59.6% in 2005 to 38.6% in 2015 (World Bank, 2017) and extreme poverty more than halved (National Statistics In-

stitute, 2017). The eradication of poverty is a stated key goal in the Bolivian National Development Plans for Living Well (MPD, 2006, 2010, 2016). The main programmes for reducing poverty and inequality have been transfer payments targeting the most vulnerable groups, including an annual stipend for children who stay in primary school (*Bono Juancito Pinto*), a national pension and social security scheme (*Renta Dignidad*), a national health insurance programme for under-25s, a supplement for women who are pregnant or have young children (*Bono Juana Azurduy*), and long-term investments in health and education, particularly in rural areas (Simarro & Antolín, 2012). The MAS government has also approved annual increases in the national minimum wage of between 5% and 20% each year. In addition, redistribution of wealth has occurred through land reform, though any radical transformation has been prevented by fierce opposition from the Bolivian oligarchy, which controls the agricultural and industrial sectors in the East (Simarro & Antolín, 2012).

##### *Goal 2: End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture*

The 2017 report of the International Food Policy Research Institute reports sustained reductions in Bolivia's hunger indices since 2005 (IPFRI, 2017). The eradication of hunger is one of the principal objectives of all the Bolivian National Development Plans for Living Well. In addition to the measures to reduce poverty, enabling families to buy more and better-quality food, there have been specific policies to reduce hunger, including establishing local councils for food and nutrition (Dávalos Saravia, 2013) and the 'National Programme on Complementary School Feeding to Implement Food Sovereignty and Living Well'. The latter aims to ensure the human right to adequate food, to strengthen the development of local production, increase school attendance rates, enhance school performance, promote student engagement in the education system and provide healthy, adequate and culturally appropriate food. The programme entitles all of the school children in the country a breakfast and/or lunch and local producers must be prioritised as suppliers (Estado Plurinacional de Bolivia, 2015). The government aims for Bolivia to be fully self-sufficient in food by 2020 through enhancing local capacity for production, via programmes such as *Bio-Cultura* (Weyer, 2017) which supports small and medium scale farmers.

##### *Goal 3: Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages*

Bolivian life expectancy at birth increased by approximately 3 to 5 years in the decade from 2005 (World Bank, 2017). In the same period, infant mortality rate dropped from 46.6 to 30.6; under 5 mortality rate dropped from 61.4 to 38.4; and both female and male adult mortality also fell significantly (United Nations Development



Programme, 2016). Health has been one of main pillars of the National Development Plans for Living Well and there has been a major reform and extension of health care since the MAS government were elected. This includes a new national health policy, initiated in 2008, called *Salud Familiar Comunitaria Intercultural*—SAFCI. The SAFCI policy, based on principles of equality, access, and respect for indigenous principles, explicitly calls on the principles of *Vivir Bien* (SAFCI in Bernstein, 2017). The health improvements made over the last decade or so have generally followed a trajectory that started much earlier so it is not clear whether they would have happened anyway because of factors other than the Living Well policy. However, we would expect that the SAFCI extension of health services, as well as the reductions in poverty and hunger, described above, and improvements to water and sanitation services, as described below, would have a very positive impact on health.

*Goal 4: Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all*

Illiteracy, which stood at approximately 14% in 2006, has now been eradicated (UNESCO, 2009) and the primary school drop-out rate, at 25.6 in 2000 (there is no data for 2005) has dropped to less than 3.3 (UNICEF, 2017). These educational achievements link to the ‘Yes I Can’ literacy programme and the stipend the government now provides for children who stay in primary school (*Bono Juancito Pinto*), both policies of the National Development Plans for Living Well. The Bolivian education reform act of 2010 is also radically transforming education towards the ‘Critical Pedagogy’ of Paulo Freire (1970) and the broader philosophical foundation of *Vivir Bien* (Reimão & Taş, 2017; Schipper, 2014). This includes retraining teachers and revising the curriculum according to four general principles or objectives: (1) decolonial, (2) intra- and intercultural along with plurilingual, (3) productive and (4) communitarian education (see Schipper, 2014). There has also been an expansion and improvement of the educational infrastructure (MPD, 2016, p. 22).

*Goal 5: Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls*

The United Nation’s Gender Development Index (GDI) records an overall improvement for Bolivia in terms of female relative to male development from 0.917 to 0.934 in the period 2005 to 2015 (UNDP, 2016). Similarly, their Gender Inequality Index (GII)—a composite measure reflecting inequality in achievement between women and men in three dimensions: reproductive health, empowerment and the labour market—shows a marked reduction in inequality from 0.559 to 0.446 (UNDP, 2016). In 2008, the National Plan for Equal Opportunities entitled ‘Women Building the New Bolivia, to Live Well (*Vivir*

*Bien*)’ was launched (Ministerio de Justicia, 2008). Developed through a process of discussion between the national government and the Bolivian women’s social organizations, it set out to identify the priority issues and to design a long-term strategy to overcome them. In the case of the GDI and the GII Indexes, there is not enough previous data to show whether this is a change that can be related to the Living Well policy or whether it was an ongoing trend arising from other factors. However, other indicators do exceed the prior trend. For example, while the proportion of women in parliament increased slightly from 11.5 percent in 1999 (the earliest data) to 16.9 percent in 2005, following the election of MAS there was a sharp increase to 53.1 percent in 2016 (World Bank, 2017). The government cabinet appointed in 2010 was, for the first time in the country’s history, comprised of 50 percent women, though has fluctuated since (World Bank, 2015a). However, despite government effort, there is still some way to go to achieve this SDG. For example, despite new legislation in 2013 to stop intimate partner violence and a specific Police Force Against Violence to counteract gender abuses, gender based violence remains widespread (World Bank, 2015a).

*Goal 6: Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all*

There has also been significant progress towards meeting this goal. According to the latest World Bank data, 90% of the Bolivian population had access to a safe water source in 2015, up from 82.9% in 2005 (World Bank, 2017). Improved sanitation stood at 50.3% in 2015, up from 42.2% in 2005 (World Bank, 2017). Safe water and sanitation services are part of the National Development Plans for Living Well. Access to water was a primary goal of the MAS government with its roots in the ‘water wars’ against water privatization in Cochabamba and El Alto in 2000 and 2005 (see Baer, 2015). In 2010, the United Nations voted unanimously to accept Bolivia’s proposal to make access to water and sanitation services a human right. At a domestic level, the new National Constitution of Bolivia (2009) states that every citizen has a right to water (Ch. 1, art. 16) and the right to water has been part of all the national development plans for Living Well. ‘MiAgua’, a programme to increase the funding invested in water and irrigation projects was launched in 2011 and, since then, investment in the water sector has almost tripled (Baer, 2015). There has also been an improvement expansion of sewerage systems and construction of ecological toilets using local labour. Citizen participation in water management is not yet wholly fulfilled (Baer, 2015), however, and, in December 2016 and January 2017, there were water shortages in parts of some cities, mainly as a result of climate change related glacier shrinkage, but also some local mismanagement of resources.

*Goal 7: Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all*

In 2007, total access to electricity in Bolivia was 80.2%, and this has now increased to 88% (96% in urban areas and 74% in rural areas) (International Energy Agency, 2015). In the National Development Plans for Living Well universal electrification was defined as a priority, alongside energy sovereignty and independence. Similarly, the 2009 Constitution established universal access to services such as electricity as a fundamental right. In 2008, the 'National Energy Efficiency Programme' was initiated, establishing 'policies, projects and necessary actions for the rational, efficient and effective use of energy' (MPD, 2016, p. 20) with a goal to reduce Greenhouse Gas emissions. This included, for example, the 'Energy-Efficient Light Bulbs Programme' which distributed over 8 million light bulbs to the population (MPD, 2016, p. 30). Despite its reserves of gas, Bolivia is also committed to extending the provision of renewable energy photovoltaic systems and wind turbines (Roberto Calzadillo Sarmiento [Bolivian Ambassador to UK], personal communication, November 14, 2016).

*Goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all*

Bolivia's GDP has increased from \$9.54 billion in 2005 to \$33 billion in 2015 (World Bank, 2017). The country's GDP growth rate, averaging 3.6% from 1990 to 2005, increased to an average 5.1% after 2005 (MPD, 2016, p. 169). Like growth, GDP as a measurement is controversial (since it does not necessarily represent useful growth; it could arise from bombing and then rebuilding a country, for example). Though referred to in the National Development Plans for Living Well, neither GDP nor growth represent a specific goal, unlike, for example 'Joy and Happiness'. Though growth is not a goal, it is being used to improve the living conditions of the population. The government asserts that the growth has occurred in part as a result of increased domestic consumption enabled by better wages and benefits, increased public investment, social programmes for children and mothers and monetary transfers for the elderly (*Renta Dignidad*), increased wages (mainly due to the national minimum wage), and the creation of new public companies (MPD, 2016, p. 47). These are all policies associated with the National Development Plans for Living Well. In particular, the nationalisation of natural resources enabled the government to mobilize the country's resources toward Living Well projects. The tax and royalties gained by the state as a result of nationalization increased from an average 18% of profits to as much as 82% (Postero, 2010). These funds have been used to initiate social programmes, develop the local economy and create useful jobs.

*Goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation*

Bolivia's industrial growth rate has increased from an average 2.7 in the years 1997–2005 to 4.9 from 2006 to 2014 (MPD, 2016, p. 39). In its National Development Plans for Living Well, the Bolivian government has placed significant emphasis on infrastructure and industrialization which fosters inclusivity. Specific programmes have included the 2014 launch of the country's first telecommunications satellite into space. As well as generating an income from services from the satellite, it has also enabled greater connectivity for citizens and created less dependence on other nations. Also, since 2014, successive phases of a cable car system have been built, beginning with connecting the capital La Paz with neighbouring El Alto city. Similar transport infrastructure is planned for Oruro, Potosí and Sucre. The project is reducing local air pollution, providing affordable transport, and connecting low income neighbourhoods with jobs and services. State-sponsored science and technology projects are increasingly prominent in Bolivia and much is being done to foster work in these fields, though with an emphasis on using local sustainable materials and methods and respecting indigenous or ancestral knowledge (Centellas, 2010). For example, the government is intent, not only on creating a national system of traditional medicine, but on ensuring that it has the same status as Western allopathic medicine (Johnson, 2010; Ministerio de Salud y Deportes, 2006).

*Goal 10: Reduce inequality within and among countries*

This goal is also being met. According to World Bank data, the Gini Coefficient dropped from 58.47 in 2005 to 48.4 in 2014. In 2005, the richest 10% of the population earned 128 times more than the poorest 10%, a situation that was reduced to the richest earning 39 times more than the poorest by 2014 (MPD, 2016, p. 15). Reducing forms of inequality and discrimination are major goals of the National Development Plans for Living Well. The policies to reduce economic inequality have included the cash transfer payments mentioned earlier with 40.6% of the population benefitting from at least one of these payments in 2014 and the dramatic rise in the national minimum wage year on year from 2006 (MPD, 2016). Law 045, 'Against Racism and All Forms of Discrimination', passed in 2010, prohibited discrimination by public and private institutions and individuals, created a governmental Committee, and barred the dissemination of racist and discriminatory ideas through the mass media. MAS has also greatly increased indigenous participation in decision making and legislated for the recognition of indigenous rights. In terms of reducing inequality between countries, Bolivia has been a strong advocate of industrialised nations repaying an ecological debt to the poorer nations for the harm done to the planet over the last 200 years of their 'development'.

*Goal 11: Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable*

Successive National Development Plans for Living Well address urban issues. For example, a priority goal in the latest Plan states that there should be ‘access to dignified housing with basic services’ including a focus to recover the traditional housing construction technologies of indigenous people (MPD, 2016, p. 83). Bolivia’s State Housing Agency has constructed thousands of social housing units which are given to those who lack decent housing or who have lost their homes in natural disasters. There has been a reduction in the proportion of the urban population living in slums in Bolivia (that is, dwellings that are overcrowded, made of non-durable material, or without access to improved water or sanitation services) from 50.4% in 2005 to 43.5% in 2014 (World Bank, 2017). However, with conflicts over contracts and priorities, it has been noted that ambitious social housing goals ‘...have been constrained by underlying economic and market forces and the need to accommodate opposing political interests’ (Achtenberg, 2009, p. 1).

*Goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns*

This SDG focuses on the ecological footprint of nations and their citizens and compliance in waste disposal accords. Although Bolivia’s Global Footprint has increased since under MAS governance, which is unsurprising given the scale of infrastructure developments, it has been less than that of the surrounding nations (see Table 1). In terms of waste disposal compliance, Bolivia is party to most of the multi-lateral agreements on waste disposal (e.g. the Montreal Protocol; the Basel Convention; and the Rotterdam Convention). The National Development Plans for Living Well emphasise the implementation of sustainable policies for the disposal of waste and community environmental education and training. With regard to consumption and production patterns more generally, there is the action to promote ‘The construction of a less consumerist and less individualistic society’ (MPD, 2016, p. 65). There has also been a general government orientation toward changing consumption so that it is less environmentally damaging. For example, nutritious indigenous crops that can be grown locally but have fallen out of widespread popular consumption (for example, grains such as quinoa and amaranth) are being promoted (Johnson, 2010). In addition, Municipal Committees of Ecological Production have been set up to strengthen ecological production. Yet production in all sectors has increased dramatically since 2006 (MPD, 2016, p. 26) and hydrocarbons and minerals make up the majority of exports (69.9% in 2014). Whilst this extractive production is intended to be a time limited means to generate income while programmes are set up to diversify the economy ‘...promoting knowledge economies, creative and sustainable, beyond the exploitation and processing of

natural resources’ (MPD, 2016, p. 100), for the time being it undermines the achievement of this SDG.

*Goal 13: Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*

Since the MAS government came to power, Bolivia’s total Greenhouse Gas emissions have shot up and this would seem to contradict the Living Well paradigm but, to put this in context, the country is still one of the world’s smallest contributors to climate change. The population take climate change seriously as the country is already being severely impacted, experiencing rising temperatures, melting glaciers and more frequent extreme weather events, including floods, droughts, frosts and mudslides (see e.g. Ramirez et al., 2011). Glaciers that lie below 5,000 m are expected to disappear completely within 20 years, leading to severe water shortages that will affect agricultural production. Hence, the Bolivian government has taken a principled position in the United Nations climate change negotiations, pushing for a binding, ambitious and justice-based agreement. For example, in December 2009, at the UN Conference of the Parties in Copenhagen (COP15), Bolivia advocated climate reparations from the Global North to the South, and called for a 1°C maximum limit on temperature increases.

*Goal 14: Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development*

This Goal is currently not directly relevant to Bolivia. The country lost its coastline in the 1879–84 war of the Pacific, though it has recently gained a small stretch from Peru.

*Goal 15: Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss*

Where Bolivia formerly had one of the highest deforestation rates in the world (UN-REDD, 2010), this has now dropped dramatically—by 64% since 2010 (Andersen, 2014). Fuentes (2015) points out that 2010 is the year the government officially opposed carbon offset schemes, set up a state body to protect forest areas, and put large areas of forest under the management of local indigenous people—all programmes that fit with the principles of Living Well. The latest National Development Plan for Living Well claims a reversal in the trend of forest ownership where, between 1997 and 2005, only 3 million hectares were managed by indigenous and peasants, this is now more than 7 million (MPD, 2016, p. 37). The intention to protect ecosystems is laid out in the ‘Framework Law of Mother Earth and Integral Development for Living Well’. This national legislation establishes 11 new rights for nature, including: the right to life and to exist; the right to continue vital cycles and

processes free from human alteration; the right to pure water and clean air; the right to balance; the right not to be polluted; the right to not have cellular structures modified or genetically altered; and the right not be affected by mega-infrastructure and development projects that affect the balance of ecosystems. However, as has been touched upon, there are constraints and tensions in terms of there being an undiversified economy which mean that this Law is not yet fully implemented.

*Goal 16: Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels*

This SDG focuses on anti-corruption measures and inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels. According to World Bank Governance Indicators, Bolivia has improved in control of corruption over the last decade (25.4 in 2005 to 29.8 in 2014) (World Bank, 2015b). The National Development Plans for Living Well emphasise the importance of this, for example, stating that there must be ‘Transparent public administration with ethical, competent, and committed public servants fighting corruption’ (MPD, 2016, p. 156). The government has made significant efforts to enhance transparency and accountability, including passing a new anti-corruption law in 2010. Evo Morales declared ‘zero tolerance’ against corruption and, according to Transparency International ‘...his government has created an institutional and legal framework that appears robust’ (2012, p. 1). In terms of promoting inclusive decision making, it is considered that the involvement of social movements and local people is essential to the success of the MAS project (Dangl, 2010). Article 7 of the 2009 Constitution states that the democratic system is exercised both directly (that is, communal self-government) and via representation (that is, through the representative democratic system). The Constitution protects freedom of expression, laying out an expansive right to communicate freely (art. 2), while also imposing a duty to communicate with ‘truth and responsibility’ (art. 107).

*Goal 17: Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development*

In 2010, in response to the perceived inadequacy of the COP15, Bolivia hosted the World Peoples’ Summit on Climate Change and the Rights of Mother Earth. Living Well was prominent within the ethos and approach of the conference which brought together 35,000 people (of which 9,000 were from outside Bolivia), made up of social movements activists, government representatives, scientists and academics. Discussions went beyond the impacts and effects of climate change to identifying its structural causes. Bolivia has also led a campaign for universal acceptance of the rights of Mother Earth. In 2009,

the General Assembly of the United Nations passed a Bolivia-led resolution proclaiming April 22 as ‘International Mother Earth Day’. The government continues to campaign for a Declaration on the Rights of Mother Earth at the UN level.

## 5. Discussion

The above analysis suggests that Bolivia is making great strides towards sustainability under the banner of Living Well. However, some might argue that the changes since 2005 were not necessarily the result of the Living Well policy, itself, but of other national policies, supra-national policies or numerous other possible confounding factors. For example, when the MAS government came to power, it joined the socialist and social democratic ‘ALBA’ regional pact which maintains a similar vision of social welfare, the rights of indigenous peoples, protection of the environment, social participation and solidarity (Muhr, 2010). Therefore, ALBA could also have been a steerer or facilitator of the above gains. As an overarching paradigm, rather than a discreet and limited policy, there is no way to take account of all the multiple variables that could have influenced the outcomes over the time period.

In order to further understand something of the contextual factors, it is useful to look at Bolivia’s performance in relation to other countries in the area. If we compare Bolivia’s progress with those of other South American countries according to 4 widely recognised and respected indicators we can see that, though there are general regional trends in terms of reduction in absolute poverty, greater life expectancy and improved sanitation, Bolivia is above the average in all dimensions (see Table 1). In terms of Bolivia’s comparison with the average, it has reduced absolute poverty by 21%, compared to the average 18.1%; increased life expectancy by 2.6 years, compared to the average 1.8 years; and expanded sanitation coverage by 8.1%, compared to the average 4.9%. All this has occurred with an increase in the Global Footprint score that is less than that of the other South American countries (0.52, compared to 0.6 for the other countries).

These are only four indicators, selected here to cover a wide range of aspects of both *Vivir Bien* and the SDGs. However, taken together with the evidence from the various aspects of the study, this comparison does indicate that Bolivia is delivering on some of the social elements of the SDGs whilst still managing to balance this with less overall ecological harm than its neighbouring countries.

To some extent we can expect similar trends across South America because the Latin American countries adopt policies from their neighbours—Living Well is not a new ethos or set of policies but attempts to integrate, prioritise and promote a particular package of policies at the state level. It is the attempt to integrate the policies and the government and society commitment to them that is the essence of Living Well. For example, the ‘Na-



**Table 1.** Regional comparisons with South American countries (2005–latest data) on 4 indicators.

	Absolute Extreme Poverty Levels <sup>1</sup>		Life Expectancy at Birth <sup>2</sup>		Improved Sanitation <sup>3</sup>		Global Footprint <sup>4</sup>	
	2005	2015	2005	2013	2005	2015	2005	2015
<b>S. America</b>	38.3	20.2	72.5	74.3	82.6	87.5	2.7	3.3
<b>Bolivia</b>	59.6	38.6	64.7	67.3	42.2	50.3	2.54	3.06

Source: Author based on World Bank, UNDP, WHO and Global Footprint Network data. S. America = average of other South American countries with data.

<sup>1</sup> National poverty headcount ratio is the percentage of the population living below the national poverty lines.

<sup>2</sup> Number of years a newborn infant could expect to live if prevailing patterns of age-specific mortality rates at the time of birth stay the same throughout the infant's life.

<sup>3</sup> Improved sanitation facilities—% of population with access.

<sup>4</sup> The GF is 'A measure of how much area of biologically productive land and water an individual, population, or activity requires to produce all the resources it consumes and to absorb the waste it generates, using prevailing technology and resource management practices' (measured in global hectares) (Global Footprint Network, 2017).

tional Programme on Complementary School Feeding to Implement Food Sovereignty and Living Well 2015–2020' is emblematic in this, impacting simultaneously on many of the Goals, notably 1 (Poverty), 2 (Hunger), 3 (Health), 4 (Education), 11 (Settlements), 12 (Consumption) and 13 (Climate Change). This is not to imply that integration is always successful but this comparison with other countries, alongside the previous data, suggests that Bolivia has had some success in balancing social and ecological goals. Analysis of the qualitative data reveals some of the factors that could have played a role in this achievement, as discussed below. These are primarily: the emphasis on redistributive policies, an intention to live in harmony with nature, respect for traditional values and practices, local control of natural resources, and participative decision-making practices. Each will now be discussed briefly.

### 5.1. The Emphasis on Redistributive Policies

Redistributive policies, such as income transfers, increase in public goods and wealth taxation have been an important element of the Living Well paradigm in Bolivia. As well as helping to meet the social goals, redistribution aids ecological goals since inequality links to environmental degradation because a) it encourages more consumption (Dorling, 2010a, 2010b; Dorling, Barford, & Wheeler, 2007; Wilkinson & Pickett, 2010); b) it reduces the demand for environmental protection policies (Franzen & Vogl, 2013; Johnstone & Serret, 2006); and c) it reduces the likelihood of engaging in environmentally friendly behaviour (Boyce, 1994, 2003, 2007; Ekins, 1999). A number of interviewees attested to the importance of redistribution for achieving these sustainability goals. For example, one of the political leaders said:

Living Well requires that...all live equally that is, there are no rich or poor...If one person has basic services, everyone has basic services...There is respect between humans but there is also respect for Mother

Earth. (Interview, 3rd January 2017, Leonardo Loza, President of MAS-IPSP, Cochabamba Department)

Therefore, redistribution of wealth and income is an important basis for the Living Well policy and appears to have been a key part of its success. The addition of '...but there is also respect for Mother Earth' in Leonardo Loza's comment links to the next theme and indicates the inter-linkage of the themes.

### 5.2. Intention to Living in Harmony with Nature

Though some have characterized *Vivir Bien* as harking back to pre-industrial times and being anti-modernist, in essence its orientation is towards healing the rupture between humans and nature, whether using traditional or modern ideas and ways. Many of the interviewees and informants discussed the importance of this for themselves, their communities and the government. For example, a young activist in the social movements stated:

Living Well means to be well with equals, with brothers, with Mother Earth...the President said a very, very, very important sentence...“Earth does not belong to us, we belong to it”. Living Well implies that, we respect the earth and do not harm it. (Liss Gutierrez [Youth Leader], interview, February 16, 2017)

Some argued that, historically, there has been a denial of the rights of Mother Earth in the name of 'development' and, consequently, that Living Well can only be achieved by taking a different path, away from the classical notions of development, and putting the environment first.

With Mother Earth, with ourselves, we aim for real development—communitarian socialism—where we have reciprocity with our ancestral cultures and, in this way, develop with a new approach, not a consumerist approach that is crushing us every day... It is a struggle for a change of attitude... (Juan Martinez,

[Project Co-ordinator, Unified Syndicate of Rural Workers of Bolivia], interview, February 15, 2017)

Some of the middle-class interviewees, those who had the finances to implement their own local level transition, were constructing eco-homes and household water recycling projects, shopping at health food shops and making other environmentally beneficial lifestyle choices. The less well-off generally continued to live low impact lifestyles, though sometimes with aspirations for more consumer goods. Some interviewees stated that the MAS government, despite their rhetoric, are still dedicated to an environmentally and socially harmful industrialised development process, as have some academics (e.g. Bebbington, 2009; Postero, 2013). Evo Morales's election campaign for his second term promised an 'industrial leap forward', alongside the physical integration of the country. His critics allege that the MAS government has developed its own interpretation of *Vivir Bien* and extraction and industrialization are contradictory to the true meaning. However, this is because, in general, social movements in Bolivia have asked for more, not less, of this kind of development (Bell, 2014). For many, decolonisation can be accomplished only through industrialisation accompanied by redistribution. Therefore, in the MAS strongholds, protesters have tended to march for access to basic services, for more factories and for roads. In order to provide these services and facilities, the government currently has to depend on natural resource extraction. They could have raised income and wealth taxes to raise the finances to provide the infrastructure and services but it is likely that they do not want to antagonise the Bolivian elite who have tried to topple the government since they came to power.

### 5.3. Respect for Traditional Values and Practices

This is a fundamental aspect of 'decolonisation' and it has allowed sustainable practices to be revived. Whilst decolonization traditionally refers to emancipation from 'the political control, physical occupation, and domination of people over another people and their land for purposes of extraction and settlement to benefit the occupiers' (Crawford, 2002, p. 131), some Latin American theorists, including Escobar, argue that decolonization also addresses current economic globalization, neoliberal development paradigms and discourses, practices, structures and institutions from the dominant world (Escobar, 2010a, p. 9). This includes questioning current cultural norms and replacing them with pre-colonial understandings and knowledge. In Bolivia there has been a renewed appreciation and valorisation of pre-colonial knowledge, as one interviewee explained:

We have a process of change that has even been raised in the United Nations, to take care of Mother Earth, to recover the customs of our grandparents. They had knowledge, before the colonial invasion,

a more advanced scientific knowledge, perhaps 100 years in advance. They had knowledge of astrology, biology, mathematics. They understood a form of agriculture, today called ecology, and they had food sovereignty and security...We have remained as guardians of agro biodiversity. (Elias Ramirez Toribio [Red Tinku, environmental and social activist organisation], interview, December 25, 2016)

Bolivia is often portrayed as proudly, even defiantly, anti-modern, and against science and progress. Yet, appreciating and valuing traditional ways and knowledge does not mean that the Bolivian government is any of these as it combines new and traditional technologies, as appropriate. At the household level, people told me, and I saw for myself, that some now adorn their houses with traditional images, materials and representations of Andean spirituality where this had once been 'unfashionable'.

### 5.4. Local Control over Natural Resources

Linked to decolonization is local control over natural resources. This has been an important aspect of enabling sustainability in Bolivia, providing the funds to deliver on many of the SDGs and the freedom to make decisions which may go against the dominant trend. Many interviewees pointed out the need for this freedom. For example, stating:

They [the neoliberal countries] take advantage of third world countries, so that we must, not only ideologically, as our brother President says, we must liberate ourselves financially, not depend on the neoliberal countries, the great world powers that manage countries, that even control our governments...They govern, manage, manipulate, imposing their same ideology, their same way of managing the economy...only through decolonization we can, perhaps, create our own great homeland... (Pascual Huallpa [Executive Secretary of 6 federations, Youth Section, MAS], interview, February 16, 2017)

These perceptions are in line with those of Dependency (Frank, 1967) and World Systems (Wallerstein, 2004) development theorists, as well as decolonization theorists (e.g. Escobar, 2010b), who point out that the global economy has long been structured around the mass extraction of resources in the periphery nations of Latin America, Africa and Asia for consumption in Europe and the United States. Despite the progress made in terms of nationalising resources, Bolivia remains part of this periphery as MAS has been unable to alter the extractivist, primary export model of the colonial and neoliberal era (Simarro & Antolín, 2012). However, while private multinational firms continue to extract the majority of the country's natural gas and minerals, the share of income from these industries that goes to the state has increased significantly under the MAS administra-

tion. This has enabled the government to introduce new programmes in health, education and social security and helped to reduce rates of extreme poverty (Kohl & Farthing, 2012). Local control over natural resources not only enables internal investment but also has meaning in terms of identity construction and pride, knowledge orientations and power relations. Even so, in Bolivia resource extraction can generate conflicts because, while taxes from natural resource exploitation go to boost national or sub-national budgets, there are environmental and social costs, often felt at the point of extraction. Analysts have pointed to the constraints that limit moving beyond extractivism, not only due to the lack of economic diversity resulting from a history of resource plundering colonialism, but also neo-liberalisation of trade in the decades prior to MAS governance and subsequent path dependency and globalized economic pressure (e.g. Kaup, 2010).

### 5.5. Participative Decision-Making Processes

The 2009 Bolivian constitution refers to a ‘participatory, representative, and communitarian’ model of democracy (art. 11). The people I interviewed were very aware of the need to participate in the Bolivian process of change and to take charge of decisions and resources. For example, one interviewee remarked:

We must understand that...a revolution is not only what the government does, but it implies also a challenge to society...we have to organize people...to generate wealth but to manage it in a communitarian way, not in individual terms...these small manifestations of the common, of the community, we must take hold of and empower, give strength and take forward. That is, I believe, the fundamental challenge now...(Alvaro Zuleta [*Red Tinku* activist], interview, February 15, 2017)

Through the local decision-making bodies, the Organizaciones Territoriales de Base (OTBs—Base Territorial Organisations) and other federations, syndicates and social movements, citizens take part in direct local democracy. I witnessed these decision-making processes, and also heard, through the interviews and informal discussions, about some of the decisions that citizens were able to make about aspects of their local environments, such as whether to tarmac over stone roads in the neighbourhood or make the local woodlands into a golf-course (Cristina Arcos [environmentalist and OTB member, Cochabamba], interview, February 10, 2017). It seems that creating inclusive decision making processes has been fundamental to the shift to sustainability. As one interviewee remarked:

Before we [the indigenous rural people] were highly discriminated against, humiliated, marginalized. Today we are involved in the different political spheres,

in the administrative sector. This is really very important. We have positions in all the various committees and political decision-making structure...In this process of Living Well, we hope that all are taken into account, we are all part of this Pachamama [Mother Earth] and we all have to listen and be listened to. (Maribel Santamaria Mamani [National Secretary of *La Confederación Nacional de Mujeres Campesinas Indígenas Originarias de Bolivia ‘Bartolina Sisa’*, Federation of Rural Women], interview, January 27, 2017)

The government also often directly consults the population on major issues. For example, in the case of the construction of a road through the Isiboro Ségure Indigenous Territory and National Park (TIPNIS) in the central lowlands of Bolivia. This proposal was debated around the world via the international media who focused on the supposed hypocrisy of the government, in particular, Evo Morales, in wishing to build a road through a sensitive ecosystem. The government, as well as unions and some indigenous groups, considered the road to be essential to connect the states of Beni and Cochabamba and to bring services to the people living in the TIPNIS region. Yet, international environmental NGOs, as well as some local organisations, argued that the construction of the road would be ecologically and socially very damaging. The government set up a dialogue with stakeholders and a consultation process regarding whether the road should be constructed. Many saw the process as a triumph for participatory democracy, while others continue to allege that the consultation was manipulated (see Bell, 2014). This situation highlights the importance and the difficulty of integrating the various aspects of Living Well.

## 6. Conclusion

As Giddings et al. (2002) argued ‘Sustainable development, to have long-term meaning, will be an integrated and principle based outlook on human life and the world we live in’. Implementing an integrated and principle based Living Well paradigm is difficult, and made more so by elite interests, economic pressures and colonial history.

Living Well, as discourse and policy in Bolivia, has enabled the country to make a major shift to sustainability as evidenced by its progress in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals. However, there have been some limitations to its effective implementation and integration. In particular, a continued dependence on extractivism is undermining the vision to live ‘in harmony with nature’ and elite interests restrict raising revenue through other means, such as increased taxation, or redistributing wealth without raising revenue, such as through land reform. Yet, since MAS has been in power for only eleven years, it does not seem fair to expect the Living Well paradigm it promotes to correct the legacy of almost 500 years of colonial and neoliberal rule and the rupture between humans and nature in such a short time.

The key features that have underpinned the gains that have been made in terms of sustainability appear to be the emphasis on redistributive policies, an intention to live in harmony with nature, respect for traditional values and practices, local control of natural resources, and participative decision-making practices. This suggests that other nations might achieve more success in transitioning to sustainability by pursuing these themes, rather than continuing to emphasise the technology/growth/market approaches which are currently dominating global sustainability debates and actions. Bolivia did not focus on technological fixes, commodification of nature or growth for its own sake as promoted by the dominant sustainability discourse of the Global North. It chose a politically, economically and culturally radical alternative based on redistribution, inclusion and thoughtful use of natural resources.

Whether the Living Well model could be transferable to other situations is debatable. Policy transfer between countries is far from straightforward and not always successful. Fabricant points out that the Living Well discourse, once detached from concrete projects, may not work in other contexts and may become '...commoditized, and refashioned to advance corporate/rightist agendas' (2013, p. 173). On the other hand, the global majority who still struggle to eke out a very difficult existence might welcome a Bolivian-style Living Well transition. Even the wealthier and more comfortable, in the face of the most severe environmental crises that have ever faced humanity and increasing levels of global inequality, might support such a transition out of a sense of urgency or even guilt. Bolivia has invented and implemented a social and governance model that demonstrates how we can move toward an ecologically harmonious, efficient, and equitable society. Living Well could guide us to a new reality of reciprocity and solidarity by encouraging us to remember that we cannot live well if others do not.

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