



ROUTLEDGE  
ENVIRONMENT AND  
SUSTAINABILITY  
HANDBOOKS



# Routledge Handbook of Degrowth

Edited by Anitra Nelson  
Editorial Adviser Vincent Liegey

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# ROUTLEDGE HANDBOOK OF DEGROWTH

*Edited by Anitra Nelson*

EDITORIAL ADVISER VINCENT LIEGEY



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# LATIN AMERICAN INDIGENOUS PERSPECTIVES MEET DEGROWTH

*David Barkin*

Indigenous peoples around the world are drawing on their rich heritages to continue resisting their incorporation into the ‘modern world system’.<sup>1</sup> Today, more than five centuries after the invasion of the ‘Americas’ by the colonial forces from Europe, descendants of the original communities are reasserting their claims to recognition and respect for this legacy and for a proper place in the societies in which they live. A significant part of these claims comes from the realisation that their traditions and ‘cosmovisions’ (worldviews)<sup>2</sup> contribute to the success of their prolonged struggles for survival. I use the Spanish term throughout to reduce the possibility of misunderstanding, given the considerable difference from the way in which the term is generally used in English. Cosmovisions refers to a multidimensional and historically grounded but dynamic corpus of beliefs that is continually revised on the basis of experience. In the recent period (differing among regions) their success in asserting their claims is rooted in the strength of their communal organisations and lifestyles that constitute important models for confronting the challenges provoked by the world system and responding to the crises facing the societies in their countries. In this chapter, I explore how the interaction of beliefs, traditions and organisations are forging different perspectives and creating innovative solutions for overcoming the challenges posed by the modern crises that the modern world system seems incapable of managing.

In sharp contrast to today’s globalised societies, peasants and indigenous communities are creating new visions for the future, firmly anchored to their territories and integrated into alliances with like-minded groups in their regions or even on a planetary scale. These new social models address the profound contradictions that they faced during centuries of colonisation imposed by the expansion of military and economic forces that subjected them to myriad forms of exclusion, attempts at assimilation and campaigns of extermination. As a result, peoples around the world are deliberately searching for different approaches to organise themselves and guide their decisions on how to assure their basic needs while caring for their territories and assuring that nobody gets left behind.

Today’s discussions of degrowth diverge greatly from these conceptions of social organisation. Framed in the context of the profound triad of economic, social and environmental crises that many consider to threaten the very pillars of human existence, degrowth discourses pose the need to reorganise society in order to reduce material consumption and alter the very social relations that shape today’s globalised societies. Degrowth emerged from a concern about the dominant impact

of affluent societies (even when substantial portions of their people are mired in poverty) on the planet's ability to sustain them. While there are some points of congruence with the organisation of the societies we are describing, fundamentally related to the material impacts of globalised societies, a divergence worthy of exploration is the lack of inclusion of cultural and spiritual dimensions in reordering society and relationships.<sup>3</sup> Even when there is explicit recognition of the importance of 'relocalisation', community-based autonomy, holistic care economies and the commons, there is insufficient attention to reshaping society in the hands of the people, promoting models of radical democracy in every dimension of collective life. The degrowth movement could learn much more from indigenous experiences, perspectives and practices in these transformative directions.

These 'new' indigenous visions of society are profoundly rooted in ancient traditions, a variety of histories or mythologies of the ways in which the world was created, and a recounting of their own origins. This wealth of creation stories underpins the extraordinary diversity of cultures; it is part of the explanation of the persistence of so many groups that continue to thrive in the multiplicity of ecologies in which they live. Here I explore some of the elements that support this remarkable ability to assure the integrity of their communities while also caring for the territories which they call home. As will become evident, these peoples are not simply organised into communities dedicated to their own survival but rather have structured themselves in such a way as to ensure the continuity of their traditions, to provide for the basic needs of all of their members, to care for their environs, and to defend themselves against the continuing onslaught of the 'outside' world – be it the nation-states in which they live or the global market economy that covets their resources and/or seeks to incorporate their members as new workers and consumers. The belief systems that organise the panoply of institutions, activities and production involved in assuring their survival can be thought of as 'cosmovisions' – philosophical systems that embrace the totality of their relationships to life on the planet. As we shall see, however, most of these communities do not propose to pursue their goals alone; rather they are generally involved in complex processes of collaboration and exchange with other like-minded groups in their immediate regions or in alliances that are developing regionally or internationally.

### **Building local communities**

Many communities in Latin America are directly confronting important pressures from outside to assimilate, to adopt internationalised systems of production or to incorporate themselves into global patterns for their organisation and accept the institutional arrangements that have historically integrated so many into the ranks of the poorest echelons of local and global societies. In response, they are adopting processes of change to promote their own paradigms, 'communitarian paradigms of a culture of life', a culture that is known as the 'good life', sustained on the basis of a practice of harmony, respect and balance among themselves and with their surroundings.<sup>4</sup> This involves an understanding that everything is interrelated and interdependent, including and especially, many non-human beings and features of the planet on which we are so dependent. This is the point of departure for an understanding of a Latin American indigenous perspective on the question of organising life in today's world.

Thus, for the communities to which we are referring, the question is not one of assuring an adequate basket of goods for people but rather a problem of a collective commitment to the welfare of all the members of the community while also assuming responsibility for the care of their environs. This obligation is not simply one of attending to the material needs, for in many societies their underlying beliefs also encompass an obligation to care for all elements in the natural world – be they other living creatures (flora and fauna) or physical and geological features. These

indigenous approaches offer an inspiring alternative to the global market, economic growth, corporatism, capitalism and consumerism, which are to varying degrees the root causes of the serious social, economic and political crises that the degrowth paradigm is also trying to address. A common element among these cultures is their attachment to the territory, to the geographical space they occupy, a space that has a deep meaning, transcending the concept of property or belonging transformed into (private) property.

The character of solidarity within the communities is of paramount significance – in contrast to the heightened individualism of the ‘globalised’ societies in which they exist. This local solidarity facilitates the ability of individuals to pursue their own interests while contributing to the consolidation of the communities of which they are a part; solidarity, in this sense, involves obligations of reciprocity among members of the community. Unlike globalised societies, many of these communities enjoy a long history and a communal dynamic, despite the social forces that were pressuring them towards individualism and assimilation; in some cases, efforts to recover this heritage derive from the blows they suffered in trying to maintain their autonomy or rescue it after unhappy experiences of following the lure of developmentalism of past eras (Wolf 1982). They are forging collective organisations and dynamics for decision-making by consensus involving the participation of all their members, including women and youth; the significant importance of women’s presence is reflected in the flourishing ecofeminist literature to which I later refer. This participatory or direct democracy enabled the integration of new voices in the formulation of strategies and programs. Of particular note in this regard is the relatively long history of the Zapatistas in southern Mexico (Villoro 2007, 2015; Esteva 2021).

Another characteristic worthy of further elaboration is the radical ontological difference of what in the Western world is known (and misunderstood) as ‘nature’. In this relationship where everything is related to everything, many non-Western peoples do not make a distinction between the ‘I’ and the phenomenal world. They do not separate human beings and other species since, among many indigenous and afrodescendent peoples, they not only consider themselves part of nature but that *they are nature*. This profound difference stems from a great diversity of stories rooted in long traditions to explain the origins of the world and societies (as in Kopenawa and Albert 2013; Nenquimo and Anderson 2024). This reverence for the planet goes beyond recognising the omnipresence of the dialectical relationship between human and non-human natures of the *oikeios* or the web of life, where there is ‘the creative, generating, and multidimensional relationship of species and the environment’ (Moore 2020, p. 18), to its importance for determining our lives and the organisation of social life and its institutions.

### **The unique place of indigenous communities**

A prominent Mexican indigenous leader recently published a book in Spanish, the title of which would read *We are, therefore . . . we think* – turning the well-known Cartesian aphorism *cogito, ergo sum* on its head (Martínez Luna 2023). This is perhaps the most apt way to introduce a discussion of the significance of indigenous cosmovisions in broaching the theme of sufficiency, challenging some Eurocentric formulations of degrowth and enriching the debates present in this volume, incorporating a need for the decolonisation of the dominant imaginaries. We are learning more about the implications of the myriad philosophical heritages of communities around the world, as they exert their rights for self-determination and autonomy. In Latin America, some of the best known are *Sumak Kawsay* among the Andean peoples, *comunalidad* in the Oaxaca highlands of Mexico, coined by Martínez Luna (2023), and *Lekil Kuklejal*, an expression of the Tseltsales in the Mayan region of southern Mexico (Mora 2017). In other parts of the world,

expressions such as *Ubuntu* ('I am because we are') – mentioned by Roland Ngam in Chapter 13, this volume – *Swaraj*, invoked by Mahatma Gandhi in his call for self-determination from the British, and *Kaupapa maori*, the guiding belief of the Maori people in New Zealand (Marsden 1993).

Myriad communities around the world actively involved in shaping their own 'brave new worlds' are deliberately strengthening cultures that privilege the 'collective' over the individual. In this way, they are creating models of society involved in distancing themselves from the dynamics of the nation-states in which they are located that have discriminated against them, often violently, displacing them from their original settlements, trying to erase their cultures through assimilation and marginalisation. Their perseverance and growth are testimony to the strength of their cultural heritage and their flexibility in adapting their traditions in the face of changing circumstances (Wolf 1982).

There are several overriding factors that explain their emergence as an important force to be reckoned with on the international scene. One of the first developments was the ratification of Convention 169 – the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention, 1989 (No. 169) – by the International Labour Organization, and 24 countries, principally in Latin America (ILO 1989). It noted that the social, cultural, religious and spiritual values and practices of these peoples shall be recognised and protected. It bestowed the right to prior, free and informed consent with regard to legislative or administrative measures regarding their territories and the natural endowments therein.

Following on this development, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 2007) adopted the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (UNDRIP) and welcomed 'the fact that indigenous peoples are organising themselves for political, economic, social and cultural enhancement and in order to bring to an end to all forms of discrimination and oppression wherever they occur'. The UNDRIP delineates and defines the individual and collective rights of indigenous peoples, including their ownership rights to cultural and ceremonial expression, identity, language, employment, health, education and other issues. Their ownership also extends to the protection of their intellectual and cultural property. The declaration 'emphasises the rights of Indigenous peoples to maintain and strengthen their own institutions, cultures and traditions, and to pursue their development in keeping with their own needs and aspirations'; and it 'prohibits discrimination against indigenous peoples' and 'promotes their full and effective participation in all matters that concern them and their right to remain distinct and to pursue their own visions of economic and social development' (UNGA 2007).

Subsequently, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA 2018) adopted the Declaration on the Rights of Peasants and Other People Working in Rural Areas. This UNGA (2018) process emphasised a characteristic that is particularly important in the present discussion, by recognising 'the special relationship and interaction between peasants and other people working in rural areas and the land, water and nature to which they are attached and on which they depend for their livelihood' and, furthermore, their:

past, present and future contributions . . . to development and to conserving and improving biodiversity, which constitute the basis of food and agricultural production throughout the world, and their contribution in ensuring the right to adequate food and food security, which are fundamental to attaining the internationally agreed development goals.

These diplomatic recognitions reflect a belated acknowledgement of the unique character and contributions these peoples are making to the global struggles in the face of the social, economic and environmental crises facing humanity and other living beings on the planet. In this short text, I explore some of the particular features of many of these societies that enable them to be models

for the alternative organisation of social and political life, of production and of environmental management that prompted the international community to adopt this body of jurisprudence. The latter still only represents a series of pronouncements of good intentions in the face of resistance by powerful political and economic forces that continue controlling their territories and populations as they have done for millennia.

### ***Cosmovisions: worlds in conflict***

An important point of departure for this presentation is a discussion of the concept of cosmovision. Belief 'systems' everywhere are fundamental in defining relationships among community members and with their surroundings. These belief systems are the product of generations of social practices and cultural heritages that reflect the most profound convictions of how the 'world' functions and its origins. Today, however, this very formulation is the object of fierce philosophical controversies that pose the question of how the planet functions and, therefore, the possibilities of confronting the profound environmental imbalances that humanity has provoked during past centuries.

On the one hand, there is the 'dominant' paradigm in the Global North of a world organised around a productive system in which it is said that individual initiative and unbridled competition among social actors can create the greatest well-being for society as a whole. This paradigm was gradually imposed on European societies as the political and military might of the local 'lords' overcame the fierce and sustained resistance of peasants and urban workers who had won an important measure of autonomy with agreements like the Magna Carta centuries before (1215) (Linebaugh 2008). The political counterpart of this system is embodied in a 'social contract' in which individual members cede their autonomy to a governing body, or individual chosen by various methods of representation, depending on the histories and struggles of peoples and elites in the political units of the global system. This doctrine evolved from its original formulation by Thomas Hobbes (1651) to a better-known formulation by Jean-Jacques Rousseau (1762). As the social and political system expanded, the world suffered the birth of capitalism with its consequent attacks against peasant and indigenous societies and the beginning of the environmental degradation that presently threatens the very survivability of humanity.

This paradigm became the foundation on which the European powers began their trans-Atlantic voyages of exploration and conquest, later spreading across different maritime and terrestrial routes to encompass virtually the whole planet. The result of this colonial expansion was not only the wholesale subjugation of peoples across the globe and the beginning of a centuries-long process of imperial appropriation of their territories and nature's bounty. It marked the beginning of the imposition of a new epistemology, deeply rooted in the philosophical tenets of individualist achievements and competition that set the stage for an unprecedented concentration of wealth and the generation of hitherto unfathomed depths of poverty for much of the world's population. It precipitated the advent of productive systems that generated this wealth and wrought the environmental crises that are now the concern of peoples proposing the need for a new culture of degrowth. From its very beginnings, it also provoked philosophical and political challenges (including from Karl Marx, William Jevons, Rachel Carson, Kenneth Boulding and Nicholas Georgescu-Roegen) that highlighted planetary limits, as well as human and ecological degradation, while also generating myriad forms of social resistance that were the forerunners of today's degrowth movements.

On the other hand, many indigenous peoples are discovering new strategies to resist their incorporation or even to reverse the historical processes of assimilation to which they were victims

during what many consider to be the dark heritage of colonial subjugation. This political and philosophical renaissance has its roots in the many alternative cosmovisions deeply embedded in their cultures. Although varying across the world, most of these belief systems share common roots that are only now being explored, as common traits dating back to the Paleolithic era are being examined critically by scholars engaged in trying to trace their origins to some of the earliest signs of communal life by humans on the planet. Perhaps one of the most significant for present purposes is the place of society – in contrast to the prevailing view that considers the natural world to be apart from people, a bounty to be explored and exploited for the benefit of humanity, many ‘traditional’ peoples consider themselves to be a part of nature, enjoying a mutual interdependence that calls for significant energies to be devoted to the care of the living (non-human) beings and physical features of their territories that play an important role in ensuring their well-being.

Today’s cosmovisions reflect an amalgam of the teachings surviving from past epochs and the adaptations incorporated as a result of more recent practice. A Spanish language translation of Andean practices has emerged as a catchword that is now widely understood as encompassing the current vitality of this indigenous approach to organising society and life itself – *buen vivir* (good life). Although codified in the constitutions of Bolivia and Ecuador, it is now clear that this recognition is not sufficient to assure the implementation within the institutions of the ‘modern’ nation-state of a complex philosophical understanding of the multidimensional lived experience that emerged from within the practice of individual communities. These cosmovisions evolved from the practice of a diversity of communities in their struggles to assure their well-being and the integrity of their territories. In the process they have developed collective processes of governance and communal mechanisms to provide an adequate quality of life for their members while also attending to the needs of the territories in which they are settled.

An important feature of life in these communities, dating back to pre-conquest times, is their continuing dynamic of relationships with others, be they of the same ethnic origins or of others. There is ample evidence that complex networks of political, social and trade relations emerged many thousands of years ago, promoting intense cultural exchanges as well as technological and scientific advances rooted in the varying resource endowments of the diverse communities (Cossens 2019). The astronomic advances of the Mayan peoples are known to have contributed to the development of ceremonial calendars in many other regions that were involved with them in material and cultural exchanges.

A very significant development that illustrates this intense interaction of a local and long-distance collaboration is the invention of maize (‘corn’ in North America). Developed by generations of peoples involved in seed selection from its origins in Teosinte in Mesoamerica, some 8,000 years ago (or more), the seeds travelled to South America and back again, spawning numerous varieties that are the forerunners of this very important grain for human and animal consumption today around the world. Perhaps as important as the development of the seed varieties was the emergence of the cultivation system known as the *milpa* in Mexico, a complex agroecological system involving the intercropping of maize with varieties of beans and squash in a symbiotic whole that contributes to increased yields and biotic protection against predators that would endanger the crops if sown separately (Pennisi 2024). Another technological development that has not proved to be as widely shared is the process of ‘nixtamalisation’ in which maize is cooked with lime, a process that releases the amino acids ‘locked’ in the grains to make a perfect combination with the amino acids in the beans to produce a complete vegetable protein. This contributed to the very satisfactory nutritional status of Mesoamerican peoples, when compared to communities in other parts of the world at that time.

Even today, these interactions among indigenous and rural communities around the world are flourishing. Formal international alliances have emerged during the past quarter century to create

mechanisms of mutual support and prosecute their demands for recognition and protection through international treaties and conventions, like those aforementioned. The largest social organisation in the world today in terms of membership (more than 200 million members) is La Via Campesina (LVC), a group established in 1993 to defend the interests of small-scale farmers, promoting the concept of food self-sufficiency and, more recently, the many agroecological farming systems that also focus on appropriate cultivation systems that are conducive to environmental restoration and balance (LVC 2024). In addition to this agenda, the organisation continues to play an important role in the international diplomatic arena, attempting to counteract the efforts of agroindustrial interests to orient global policies towards promoting large-scale monocropping systems as a way of addressing the challenge of assuring adequate food production, especially for the neediest segments of the world's population. LVC continually points out that it is the small-scale farming groups around the world, and especially its members, who supply on the order of 70 to 80 per cent of the world's food for human consumption (AFSA et al. 2022).

Another important international alliance of indigenous and rural peoples is 'Territories of Life', a membership-based association bringing together Indigenous Peoples and local communities committed to the conservation of their territories. The consortium works to promote the recognition of their diverse rights in accordance with international agreements and national frameworks, while assisting them in fulfilling their responsibilities to their members and the larger indigenous communities of which they are a part. Territories of Life was born out of a concern for supporting the right of their members who are managing and conserving their common heritages, a strategy that is essential for contributing to a healthy planet (ICCA 2024).

This group strives to go beyond the productive achievements of the LVC, integrating communities/peoples guided by the principles of promoting local political sovereignty (autonomy), self-sufficiency, and territorial defence, as well as the consolidation of their cultures. Located in 200 countries, the member organisations have claims on traditional areas equal to more than one-quarter of the planet Earth's surface area (Garnett et al. 2018). Like LVC, these groups are more concerned with addressing the basic needs of their members and reinforcing their ability to fortify and enrich their cultural heritages, developing networks of mutual support (Borrini-Feyerabend and Jaeger 2024; Stevens et al. 2024).

An aligned, but very much decentralised network is the Global Tapestry of Alternatives (GTA), which describes itself in GTA (undated) as follows.

The Global Tapestry of Alternatives is an initiative seeking to create solidarity networks and strategic alliances amongst all these alternatives on local, regional and global levels. It locates itself in or helps initiate interactions among alternatives. It operates through varied and light structures, defined in each space, that are horizontal, democratic, inclusive and non-centralized, using diverse local languages and other ways of communicating. The initiative has no central structure or control mechanisms. It spreads step by step as an ever-expanding, complex set of tapestries. Weavers are woven together by already existing communal or collective webs, building on already existing and new alternatives to dominant regimes. It promotes or joins regional, national and global encounters, when the conditions allow for them, as well as close and synergistic linkages with existing organizations, like the World Social Forum.

These organisations are creating an important bulwark against the dominating system of individualism in which people participate in organisations only to the extent that they offer palpable benefits. Building alliances among communities that are committed to the collective well-being of their members, in which individuals can realise their potential by applying their skills for the benefit

of the whole, offers a different framework for understanding the dynamics of social and political organisations. These alternative dynamics emerge from the underlying forces that are continually being shaped by the interaction of cultural heritage and current pressures and opportunities. It is this complex intertwining of inherited philosophical systems and the continual search for solutions to the ever-present need to guarantee the welfare of the members, the integrity of the community and the viability of their territories.

Cosmovision, in this sense, is more than a received doctrine, carved on tablets given by a superior being, or from the preaching of a group of respected individuals whose wisdom offers an ageless body of teaching for all posterity. The cosmovisions of the peoples whose histories can be traced back millennia are not a static corpus of doctrine but rather an evolving set of practices and a cumulative body of knowledge that has facilitated their perseverance through the centuries. Today, they offer valuable lessons about how their members interact among themselves to strengthen community as well as significant knowledge about the way to coexist with the planet, avoiding the many imbalances that threaten the planet and provoke social and political unrest in today's globalised culture.

In the following sections, I address some specific features common to many of these communities that contribute to their ability to become important models for confronting the challenges posed by the global imbalances facing humanity. Most significantly, in the context of the present volume, their approaches offer an interesting panoply of activities that can be usefully compared and contrasted with the approaches and concerns offered by authors of other chapters in this handbook.

### **Forging the community subject**

Strengthening communities involves the emergence of a 'collective subject', a group of people recognised by the members with the moral authority to lead the society in its activities and its struggles to maintain its identity. This new actor has the responsibility to generate a social dynamic to create the possibilities for the social appropriation of nature (to conserve and protect their territories). In doing so the group must transcend the notion of individuality, creating a political dynamic generated by building consensus (Barkin and Sánchez 2020).

Community dynamics offer important contributions to advance in the process of building new socio-metabolic configurations to assure environmental balance, improve the quality of collective life, and reinforce the capacity for self-governance and the advance of demands for autonomy (Barkin and Fuente 2021). Socio-metabolic configurations define the way in which societies interact with the planet (Fischer-Kowalski and Huttler 1999; Burkett and Foster 2006). The communities we describe in this chapter are particularly concerned about their impacts on their territories and, therefore, go to great lengths to attempt to reduce their demands on their ecosystems – by trying to develop a balance between what they appropriate from nature and their disposition of residuals from production and consumption activities. Among such socio-metabolic configurations, we have identified three of utmost importance.

First, in the variety of cosmologies of the different peoples, there is implicit the commonality of their various social organisations in contrast to the social contract of the individual that dominates the main cultures of the North Atlantic world. A clear explanation of this is the contrast between the representative form of governance and the participatory process of consensual decision-making common in the communities.

Second, the possibility for the communities of workers, peasants, indigenous and afrodescendants to generate significant surpluses through the participation of all their members in the different

tasks identified by the assemblies and their leaders, and the commitment to use them for projects based on collective decision-making. These surpluses are frequently of a material (non-monetary) nature, involving improvements in infrastructure or contributions to communal celebrations that directly impact in the quality of collective life or the continuity of cultural traditions. One particularly notable institutionalised method is the assumption in most groups that everyone is expected to contribute their labour (without remuneration) to community projects and maintenance, called *tequio*, *faena* or *minga* in different Latin American cultures. Of course, in most communities, leadership roles are often honorific.

Third, the practical and analytical visibility of the perspective of women in the communities, whose struggles open new windows on their collective practices, as part of the community subject, and their contributions to sustaining life while maintaining the continuity of the territories. On the basis of their own narratives, they have become protagonists in the defence of lands and territories, active participants in the exercise of autonomy, the consolidation of their productive base, the management of the territory and the consolidation of alliances with other communities.

The (neo) Zapatista movement was born in the jungles and highlands of southern Mexico during the last quarter of the 20th century; it is an example of this struggle. From its very beginning, their leaders focused on the importance of overcoming patriarchy as part of a struggle for autonomy and self-sufficiency. They identified the centrality of constructing an alternative as integral to their efforts to reverse the destructive impacts of colonial society on nature as well as their own well-being. Importantly, they were cognisant of shaping a new organisation in which matriarchy did not involve a new domination of women over men but rather a different conception of life itself, based on the intricate relationships of all dimensions of social life with the non-human beings in their surroundings as well as with their territories. As one close observer of the movement put it: ‘This is why, for all cultures, it can be said that “in the beginning, there was the mother”, in the last instance, Mother Earth’ (von Werlhof 2021, p. 39).

The ‘communitarian subject’ has become an active player in implementing community efforts to gain recognition as legitimate participants in the political processes in many countries, principally in the Global South. After years of exclusion, discrimination and outright persecution, they are successfully prosecuting their demands for recognition of their rights (as previously spelt out) as collective members on the national scene, although not without some reluctance on the part of governmental bodies in some countries.

### **Some material correlates of indigenous perspectives**

Communal organisation, care of territory, growing assertion of autonomy and strategies for the balanced development of society as part of nature are some of the results of the cosmovisions that indigenous communities have cherished and enriched over the centuries. These characteristics, however, also are producing lifestyles that contrast strongly with dominant forms of social interaction and behaviour in the societies that evolved in the Global North and are aggressively disseminated across the globe.

As already suggested, a sensitive approach to understand these differences refers to the concept of sufficiency. In many of the communities we are describing the challenge they pose for themselves is not how to increase consumption but rather how to assure the welfare of all of their members while also assuming responsibility for the care of their territory. This obligation is not simply one of attending to their material needs for, in many societies, the underlying beliefs also encompass an obligation to tend to all elements in the natural world – be they other living creatures (flora and fauna) or physical and geological features. This extended concern is not simply a

rhetorical acknowledgement of the significance of the ‘outside world’ but rather its intricate and intimate integration into the very essence of the collective beings, the societies, that are forging new worlds.<sup>5</sup>

A productive approach to focusing on the concept of sufficiency is the decision-making process that assures the ability of many communities to provide for their basic needs and improve their quality of life while also reinforcing the significance of their cultural heritage. A significant dynamic in community life is the assembly, during which participants play a decisive role in formulating policies and allocating resources based on consensus rather than majority voting; often a time-consuming part of governance; it has proven essential in developing strategies for confronting basic challenges to assure social inclusion and planning.

This is particularly evident in their attention to the education of the young, in relations with governmental organisations, and in negotiations with groups attempting to obtain access to their natural endowments or to their people, as consumers or workers. Many communities are assuming responsibility for the first years of schooling, concerned about the implications of using materials developed for a national (or international) curriculum, and the loss of fluency in local languages. It is significant, however, that these same groups frequently encourage their young to prepare themselves for careers in advanced specialities that could be of importance for meeting the various challenges facing the communities. With the growing recognition of the important contributions that these groups can make to national integration, there are new initiatives by some national governments to support systems of indigenous education and promote biocultural organisations specifically designed to take advantage of this dynamic to reduce inherited spatial and political barriers.

Perhaps the greatest source of conflict between indigenous communities and the nation-states in which they are located is related to the exploitation of their natural bounty. In general, many communities are systematically opposed to overtures by outside interests to install mining operations or renewable energy projects (eolic or solar) for cultural as well as environmental reasons; the disruption of the local patterns of social organisation and production of basic needs is often more significant than the destruction of the natural balance that these proposals promise. It is particularly striking that the conflicts are often notably more acrimonious when they involve proposals that might contribute to reducing global environmental damages but without any notable contribution to mitigation of these problems locally!

In general, however, the principal contrast that these communities offer in comparison with the dominant consumption and production patterns of the global economy is in the concept of ‘enough’ and the nature of the political and economic systems in control. Most indigenous groups organise themselves to assure an adequate diet based on traditional ingredients that are produced locally or available through trade with their partner organisations; these networks of exchange have long been an essential part of their means for acquiring parts of their diet or other products.<sup>6</sup> Martínez Luna’s (2023) characterisation of the interaction among communities involves much more than the exchange of goods, for it also encompasses spiritual and cultural facets of life that contribute to the consolidation of collaborative efforts that transform their individual acts of resistance into collective strategies for building the new societies that they are consciously attempting to consolidate.

### **The contrast with degrowth**

Indigenous perspectives on organising their societies and their relationship to nature are firmly grounded in their cosmovisions. Theirs is a complex set of beliefs and organising principles that

guide them to a dynamic relationship with the countries in which they live but also to a way of life dramatically different from that of those societies. To begin with, there is the matter of the way in which production itself is organised: although the degrowth literature addresses the problem of 'overproduction', it generally does not sufficiently address the question of who would organise production and the installations for its realisation. This elides one of the key origins of the need for growth: the never-ending drive for accumulation by the owners of the enterprises inherent in private ownership, as well as the need for production to assure their viability. This growth is essential for maintaining the economic health of the global market system, assuring not only the flow of necessities but also the superficial excesses of the system along with the employment so necessary to guarantee the ability of the population to survive. Engagement with indigenous peoples, with their experiences and activities, would reinforce degrowth's focus on such fundamental questions.

In contrast, many of the communities we are describing are strengthening their traditional process for the organisation of production, even when their individual members assume responsibility for implementation. The collective organisation of the process and the local events for exchanges among community members is complemented by the regular organisation of encounters with other communities and the promotion of systematic mechanisms for trade with those that are not in the immediate vicinity. A central characteristic of this process is the commitment that nobody in the community be left out or deprived of the basic set of goods needed for an adequate quality of life within the community.

Just as important, however, is the concern with the care of the territory and the attention to the spiritual and cultural activities that are an integral part of community cohesion. These facets of indigenous organisation are central to the shared experience. It is evident in the individual responsibilities to participate in collective activities, such as the maintenance of basic infrastructures and the care for community institutions and buildings, called *tequio* in many parts of Mexico. This is firmly engrained in collective chores as is the responsibility to participate in community assemblies, considered to be the maximum organ for decision-making and assuring the accountability of the leadership. These processes, including partaking in the ceremonial activities, also play an important part in assuring the gradual equalisation of wealth among members, since those who are prospering more than others are expected to share their good fortunes by providing important parts of the costs for these celebrations.

In sum, many indigenous and rural community societies in Latin America are actively involved in shaping a world in which there is a balance between their own demands and their impacts on the regions in which they live. The integral interrelationship between society and nature is not a strait-jacket they impose on themselves but rather an expression of the symbiotic interaction reflecting the unity that derives from their cosmovisions, a result that is an essential part of building the many new worlds that will enable them to continue confronting the challenges posed by the globalised societies in which they are located.

### Notes

- 1 This term was coined by Immanuel Wallerstein (1974), who collaborated with a large group of social scientists to create a school of 'world systems' scholars, much of whose work has been published in the *Journal of World Systems Research*. Following years of debate, the group recognised the significance of the persistence of these resistance movements among indigenous and rural peoples around the world, offering their analysis of the significance of 'anti-systemic movements' (Arrighi et al. 1989).
- 2 This is a point central to the recounting of the 'peoples without history' by Eric Wolf (1982).

- 3 Spiritual degrowth work left undeveloped includes work by French-Algerian Pierre Rabhi who, in 2002, unsuccessfully attempted to stand as a French presidential candidate in order to promote degrowth more widely (Marsden 2002) and Fabrice Flipo – who are among those that Schneider et al. (2010, p. 512) identify with a ‘fourth source’ of degrowth within discussions of “‘the meaning of life” and movements around it emphasising spirituality, non-violence, art or voluntary simplicity’.
- 4 The expression “good life” or “buen vivir” in Spanish, emerged as a translation of the Andean phrase “Sumak Kawsay” (in Quechua), a corpus of the millenary beliefs and traditions that refers to the cosmovisions of indigenous peoples living on the western slopes of the mountainous range in South America. It became widely known after being incorporated into the Constitutions of Ecuador and Bolivia at the beginning of the present century (Esteva et al. 2013; Lang and Mokrani 2013; Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara 2014).
- 5 This unity of society and nature was a controversial assertion in Western scholarship when proposed by French anthropologist Descola (2013). Indigenous communities around the world had long been vociferous and eloquent in asserting their intimate interrelationships with the planet and all of its component parts. The subsequent proliferation of literature advancing this perspective is testimony to the changing balance of sensibilities in this matter – see, for example, Danowski and Viveiros de Castro (2017), de la Cadena and Blaser (2018), and Esteva (2019) for poignant examples.
- 6 Cossens (2019) makes a strong case for the importance of trade among pre-conquest peoples in Mesoamerica dating back at least 3,800 years. These exchanges not only involved valuable ornaments but also goods that were important for daily life. The regional and international alliances that communities are participating in today are probably far more varied, as evidenced by the experiences of the members of the Territories of Life consortium.

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