Public policies toward sustainable communities: the last chance

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Abstract

The capitalist economic model is unsustainable because far from producing an increase in the well-being of the population, it has intensified environmental and social problems. The 2008 Constitution of Ecuador includes some approaches when claiming the “buen vivir” or *sumak kawsay*, which grants rights to nature and considers a form of caring and sustainable economy. Some of the approaches of groups that demand social change are accepted, which would improve government management in the design, implementation, and assessment stages of public policies. Regarding the implementation stage, the scope is to analyze and present a proposal for public environmental, health, and education policies, which would allow us to overcome the crisis. Finally, it seeks to contribute to the discussion around post-development, that is, the viability of sustainable communities that allow supporting the theory of local development and specifically the “buen vivir” or *sumak kawsay* adopted by Ecuador.

Keywords: post development, local development, *sumak kawsay*, public policy.

1. Introduction

This paper seeks to draw the attention of policymakers about their great responsibility in establishing public policies that allow for reversing the environmental and social problems that we currently face. It is perhaps daring to point out that if we do not make right decisions now, there will be no one to work for because if we do not change consumption and production patterns soon, human beings could be extinct then. I want this scenario to be only rhetorical, but, the unsustainable situation makes an urgent change be required if we want to get out of the chaos that is coming.

On the one hand, when analyzing the environmental situation, the acceleration of climate change stands out, which under normal conditions takes thousands of years. However, due to the influence of the anthropic factor, it has reverted to a few decades. Scientists estimate that the average concentration of CO₂ in the atmosphere before 1850 was 274 ppm (Reece et al., 2011: 1256). Today it exceeds 400 ppm, which is correlated with the increase in temperature, because the accumulation of CO₂, as well as other gases, create what is called the "greenhouse effect" that traps part of the solar radiation that it hits the planet and does not allow it to be reflected into space. In this way, the average temperature of the planet in the period January to October 2018 was 0.98 +- 0.12 °C on the pre-industrial baseline (1850-1900), according to the World Meteorological Organization (2018).

This increase in temperature explains the loss of entropy of the meteorological system and the prevalence of natural disasters such as unusual storms, prolonged drought, loss of crops, rise in sea level, heat and acidification of the ocean, melting of glaciers, and extinction of species, and others. The devastation of the Antilles, Puerto Rico and flooding in much of the United States and the United Kingdom in the 2017 hurricane season are just a sample of natural disasters' intensification. In this way, strategies for adaptation and mitigation to climate change require a joint solution.

On the other hand, the capitalist model spread, far from reversing an injustice and social exclusion, has intensified them. It is known that one of the best indicators to measure income inequality is the Gini index. According to the United Nations, a coefficient higher than 0.40 is alarming. It indicates a reality of polarization between rich and poor,

being a breeding ground for antagonism between different social classes, which can lead to discontent or social unrest. World income inequality in 2004 reached unacceptable levels, with a Gini index of 0.63 (Lafuente et al., 2006). In addition to the class struggle, other social problems are added, such as the increase in femicides and violent deaths, the systematic destruction of the family as a social base, and the alienation of people by technology.

The capitalist model has also caused the loss of the scale of values due to the emergence of “materialism”, which is the search for material possessions, giving way to the anti-values of competition and individualism, unlike life in community, in where it seeks to maintain the common good, for which cooperation and social relations are valued. Unfortunately, today the human being lives enslaved to work, contributing to the economic growth of his country, measured in terms of Gross Domestic Product. However, embracing the words of Robert Kennedy (1968), who followed in his brother's footsteps, “GDP measures everything except what makes life worth living.”

Actually, we are going through an unprecedented civilizational crisis, the solution of which is social mobilization and citizen participation in the “public matter” to not leave important decisions for our life and for the balance of the planet in the hands of the political class. The emergence of the “Third Sector” is an example of this. So much so that in addition to the public and private sector, now recognizes organized civil society in decision-making processes regarding the formulation of public policies. The vision of the ecologist, feminist, and alter-world movements, which proclaim social change, must be taken into account due to its ideological basis, which aims to provide solutions to the problems indicated. In this way, in the development of this proposal, some of these groups’ approaches will be considered.

For this purpose, we will make an approach to the general guidelines in terms of public policies for the three stages of government management, such as design, implementation, and assessment. Regarding the implementation stage, the scope of this work will be limited to analyzing and proposing a reform in the public policies required for three sectors in which it is considered that they are the highest priority in terms of solving environmental and social problems, such as the environment, health, and education.

2. Results and Discussion

2.1 Design of public policies

One of the discussions of economic theory, which for practical purposes will have repercussions on the design of public policies, is the antagonism that exists between financial liberalization and centralized planning. On the one hand, in 1973, McKinnon and Shaw, developed the hypothesis that financial liberalization increases saving, improves the allocation of resources between investment projects and, therefore, increases economic growth (Fry, 1990: 162). On the other hand, the centralized planning approach was rather proposed by authors such as Marx and Engels. They criticized the capitalist system, considering work as a means of production, so that, in its conception, to avoid class struggle and the concentration of wealth, workers were required to regain property through institutionalized state organizations.

Although the Marxist postulates generated a social revolution at the beginning of the 20th century, generating a new economic model, “communism,” which was welcomed in the Soviet Union and China, and later in Cuba and countries in Southeast Asia, at the end of accounts, the result has been the same. That is, the accumulation of wealth in the hands of the State, which is another type of capitalism, because it pursues the same goals of economic growth although with new problems such as the increase in bureaucracy, the restriction of personal freedoms and the intensification of corruption.

To circumscribe the current situation of the Latin American reality in terms of the theoretical direction of public policies, it is necessary to approximate the economic model in which these policies are framed, which will help us establish proposals for improvement.

As Alberto Acosta, academic and former President of the National Constituent Assembly of Ecuador in 2008, points out that as a prelude to development, it is important to consider the idea of “progress” that arises after the discovery of America and the subsequent colonization process that followed. To lay the foundations of the global market, a scheme for exploiting natural resources from the colonies was forged based on the demands of raw materials from the imperial countries (Acosta, 2015).

This capitalist system is not consolidated until after World War II when creating the body that fulfills the functions of a supranational government (United Nations Organization) and multilateral financial organizations (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) is conceived. While these bodies would allow the reconstruction of war-affected European countries in the first instance, they would also continue to promote a development model based on industrial production and wage labor. These institutions also served to expand the sphere of influence of the great world powers (the United States and the Soviet Union), which competed in the implantation of their ideologies. For practical purposes, variation is based on the ownership of capital.

The apparent well-being of the decades of 50s and 60s, which brought economic growth, was overshadowed by the energy crisis of 1973, where the economic model was fed back thanks to the contribution of some economists, especially Amartya Sen, who introduced the concept of “capabilities” to the development discussion. In this way, through the United Nations Development Program, the use of Human Development Indices was disseminated. In addition to income, two new variables were included, access to education and long and healthy life. It tries to compare the management of countries in their search for “human development”.

However, this new approach to development could not solve the growing social inequity and environmental problems. Once again, the United Nations Organization contracted studies and international conferences were held to conceive the adjustment to the economic model that allows facing these new challenges. Such is the case that the concept of sustainable development arose, which in theory aims to satisfy human needs, without compromising access to future generations’ resources. Thus, and in 2015, world leaders meeting at the United Nations General Assembly agreed on a new agenda called “2030 Sustainable Development Goals.” The central purpose is the elimination of hunger and whose multiple objectives and goals promote to the balance of the economy, the environment, and society in general.

In this summary of the approaches to development, which have been implemented or implanted in the so-called “Third World Countries” or “Developing Countries” by the “Developed Countries,” it is evident that in crises systemic or the prevailing economic

model, there has not been a change of direction but rather the capitalist system has been strengthened, which has evolved towards a “neoliberalism,” which proclaims the liberalization of world trade under the pretext of the so-called “globalization.” In this sense, although the rhetoric speaks of the urgency of governments to dedicate greater social spending on health and education or the establishment of strategies to eliminate hunger and for the “adaptation and mitigation” of climate change. In practice, what continues to be done is to promote economic growth, based on orthodox thinking of the economy, in the sense that with greater investment and production, there will be greater sources of employment and redistribution of wealth. Nothing could be further from reality.

The situation is that the current economic model is unviable in a finite world, where human beings’ ecological footprint has exceeded the resilience of ecosystems. Added to this is the demand for raw materials to satisfy the population’s materialistic ego, which has determined that, if the whole world were consumed like a person from developed countries, 4 planets would be needed (Oliveres, 2015). That is why the countries of the South are questioning the current model and demanding social changes.

Ecuador’s case is interesting from an academic point of view, because, in the 2008 Constitution, the worldview of indigenous peoples called “buen vivir” or *sumak kawsay* was collected, so that they incorporated rights of nature and the territory was recognized as a multicultural state. In addition, it is intended to implement a social and solidarity economy based on the self-determination of the peoples, in order to place the human being over the capital.

The “sumak kawsay” is a new development model that is being embraced by other constitutions of the world for being innovative in considering nature as a subject of rights. Perhaps the most precise definition is the one presented by Greene (2018), which is cited below:

“Good living, based on the traditional indigenous worldview of the Andean and Amazonian peoples, can be understood as a process aimed at a participatory improvement of the quality of life, based not only on greater access to goods and services for the satisfaction of human needs, but also of the consolidation of social

cohesion, community values, and the active participation of individuals and communities in relevant decisions for the construction of their own destiny, on the basis of equity with respect to diversity. This process is part of a harmonious relationship with nature, which conceives human society as a constitutive element of a dynamic, evolving totality, the full realization of which cannot exceed the limits of the ecosystems that have originated it.” (Greene, 2018: 7)

In this context, a return to community life is observed. Indeed, *sumak kawsay* has been cataloged as a “post-development” trend that seeks to vindicate local development and participatory democracy as a basis for welcoming social demands. The experience with “participatory budgets” in Belho Horizonte (Brazil) and Villa El Salvador (Peru) is a success story in decentralized planning, from the bottom up. In this sense, communities and municipalities play an important role, since, through social representation mechanisms such as the Assembly, the needs are collected and then transferred to the Central Government, as input for the formulation of public policies and allocation of resources.

The optimal thing would be for the Government, in turn, to transfer national demands to international forums. However, for this, reform is required within the United Nations, so that it is a representative body of the countries in their search for the common welfare, and not a means to spread the agenda of world powers and developed countries.

Considering the progressive nature of rights, in the sense that they must advance over time, and taking into account that the State must guarantee their fulfillment, the fact that the design and planning of public policies must consider the new model is implicit. The budget constitute the main restriction, so that below are some approaches that should be considered in the design of public policies:

- a. The local development processes should be retaken, which promoted the elaboration of Development Plans at Parish Councils, Municipalities, Provinces, which were later consolidated in the National Development Plan.
- b. Throughout the local planning process, participatory democracy should be promoted to increase social capital, which gives rise to other types of capital, such as productive and environmental.

- c. Before establishing sectoral public policies, working groups should be established, including representatives of the public sector, the private sector, and organized civil society.
- d. Public policies should be prioritized according to the available budget. However, due to lack of budget, it should not be restricted to essential public policies, in which case it will require the channeling of resources from other sources of financing.
- e. Finally, it would be convenient that, throughout designing public policies, the general public and citizen observers are invited to make the prioritization of policies and budget allocation transparent and minimize the bias of political or economic interests.

2.2 Implementation of public policies

2.2.1 Environmental public policies

One of the main criticisms of the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda is that there is no obligation for countries to implement it. Furthermore, Serge Latouche (2009), one of the economists who promote degrowth, affirms that “sustainable development” is both an oxymoron and a pleonasm. It is the continuation of economic growth, with new rhetoric. Indeed, we cannot speak of sustainability when we are destroying the planet with our materialistic ego.

On the contrary, sustainability itself is rather associated with the idea of self-sustaining communities proposed by F. Schumacher, where there would be a dynamic balance. Their ecological footprint is minimized. Such communities would have sources of alternative energy to fossil fuels. Their production would be consumed internally. Their waste would be recycled and reintegrated as raw material for other products. The worldview of the inhabitants of the territory would be valued since their adaptation to the environment has allowed them to find local solutions to their environmental and social problems.

That ideal society may be a utopia, but we are beginning to see examples of it in German cities, Jewish kibbutz, or indigenous Kichwa communities in Ecuador.

Institutional investors are also adapting to this change, as is BlackRock, the world's largest investment fund, whose Director asked companies to play a more social role (Fink, 2018). In the Norwegian investment fund case, it has also announced that it is going to divest its shares from polluting companies or those that do not have a good environmental performance. These are encouraging examples in the transition to a low-carbon economy. Let us remember the proverb that says, “Small actions generate great results.”

The new paradigm of “responsible investment” to which institutional investors have adhered, has been complemented by the paradigm of “sustainable finance” that development banks have also incorporated. In both cases, it seeks to incorporate environmental, social, and corporate governance aspects in decision-making. One of the results of considering these approaches is the emergence of the “green bond” market, which allows funding banks, governments, or companies to allocate these resources to environmental projects’ execution. The exponential growth of the green bond market in the world, which goes from USD 500 million issued in 2008 to close to USD 250 billion in 2018, is a clear sign of moving along that line and contributing to climate change mitigation.

In Ecuador, banks are beginning to structure the issuance of green bonds to take advantage of this market’s potential. Green credit lines related to sustainable construction, cleaner production, and electric transport are conceived as viable alternatives for implementing sustainable communities. Thus, it is necessary to consider a legal framework of tax and environmental incentives for production. However, the green bond market regulation is still needed, which rather seeks to generate trust in the parties, as other countries in the region such as Colombia, Brazil, and Mexico have.

Finally, it is necessary to point out that not all public policies on environmental matters are the responsibility of the public and private sectors. It also depends on the general population, because consumers have a duty to demand safe products and an obligation to consume responsibly, to reduce pressure on ecosystems. For this, it is essential to work on environmental education, to generate environmental awareness, and thus join forces to construct a collective imagination in which nature is respected, on which our life depends.

After this analysis, the following are some public policies on environmental matters that must be implemented:

- a. Incorporate in the curriculum of schools and colleges, subjects related to environmental education, including practices and field trips, to make students aware of the importance of conserving nature.
- b. Create national regulations to regulate the issuance of green bonds to finance environmental projects by banks, government, public and private companies.
- c. Create a waste bag to promote the “circular economy”, in which tax and environmental incentives are considered for participating companies.
- d. Guarantee the conservation of water, soil, forests, and the life of the communities, within the National System of Protected Areas, in which “prior consultation” is guaranteed without directing, as a mechanism of self-determination, prior to the decision to deliver mining or oil concessions, in accordance with the Constitution.
- e. Declare Ecuador as a country free of transgenic crops to protect the integrity of the flora, fauna, and human beings, considering that the country is one of the most biodiverse in the world.

2.2.2 Public health policies

Health is one of the primary human rights and whose care should be one of its priorities. However, today medicine has become prostituted because it is no longer a social good but a business. It is enough to point out that a significant percentage of the State budget is allocated to health policies, mainly for purchasing medical equipment and medicines, that is, capital goods and specialized products from multinational companies that profit from people's lives.

If the approach were different, more resources would be allocated to disease prevention through education, health promotion and promotion of good nutrition actions. If the interest were different, there would be more nutritionists and psychologists and fewer doctors and psychiatrists. If the objective were another, knowledge for the cure of

diseases would be released by pharmaceutical laboratories, and formulas to sell medicines in developing countries would not be patented.

Unfortunately, the medical industry is not very interested in a healthy population because its financial results would be affected. In this way, corporate "lobbying" prevails to maintain the public health policies' status quo and set aside such important aspects as the regulation of processed foods, quality control of medicines and the promotion of another style of a lifetime. As a result, we are chronically absorbing poisons and mutagens, as reported by Iván Illich:

“Every 24 to 36 hours, 50% to 80% of adults in the United States and the United Kingdom take prescribed chemical medicine. Some take the wrong medicine; some take a contaminated or expired medicine; some take a plagiarized one; some take some that are dangerous or take them in dangerous combinations; some receive injections with inappropriately sterilized syringes. Some medicines are addictive, others mutagenic, although perhaps in synergy with food coloring and insecticides. In some patients, antibiotics alter the normal flora and induce a super-infection, allowing the more resistant organisms to proliferate and invade the host. Other medicines contribute to the feeding of other drug resistant strains of bacteria. Unnecessary surgery is a standard procedure.” (Illich, 1975: 23-24)

Another problem of the super-specialization of medicine is that, instead of using a systemic approach, a mechanistic approach is used, which is not the most appropriate to take care of the human being in an integral way. As a result, to treat a disease, several “specialists” are used to reach a diagnosis that does not attack the origin of the problem but helps to camouflage the picture, with specific prescriptions, the synergies of which may lead to errors or increase the probability of harm.

The most serious thing about medicine's institutionalization is that we are losing our natural capacity to respond to disease, integration with the environment, and community and family care. In this way, we are giving our life to another person, which is beyond all logic.

With this background, some public health policies are indicated below:

- a. Shift the focus to health promotion as opposed to the disease cure approach. For this, the strategy called "health in all policies" promoted by the Pan American Health Organization can be embraced, which consists of incorporating the health promotion approach in a transversal manner, in all public policies, by analyzing how a certain policy contributes to improving the quality of life in the population.
- b. The Ministry of Health must establish guidelines to guarantee that processed foods meet quality standards, mainly regarding the safety of artificial components, such as colorings, flavorings, preservatives, and trans fats from margarines, vegetables, and saturated fats of animal origin.
- c. Policies should be incorporated to disseminate the benefits of good nutrition, water consumption, the inclusion of fruits and vegetables in the diet, the reduction of sugars and fats, all this complemented with promoting physical activity and maintaining a healthy and productive body and thus reduce health spending.
- d. Promote scientific research in relation to the cure of diseases, epidemiology, the production of generic medicines, the synthesis of active principles of plants and natural medicine experimentation.

2.2.3 Public education policies

As we have mentioned previously, we are going through a systemic crisis because the current economic model has changed the scale of values, which forces people to compete in the pursuit of their interests, to the detriment of cooperation and the pursuit of good common.

Education, which is another fundamental right of the population, has a lot to do with the prevailing economic model. Let us only remember the social revolutions of the 20th century, which originated after the ideological indoctrination of the population: the writings of Marx, which influenced the leaders of the Bolshevik revolution; those of Mao Tse-tung, about the cultural revolution that allowed the creation of the People's Republic of China; or those of Adolf Hitler, the German ruler whose Nazi ideology originated one of the most significant wars in recent history. In the current context in

which the capitalist model predominates, education is also being hijacked by the powers that seek to produce disciplined human beings who do not question the structures of power. As it is, being an anarchist and rebellious is socially censored. On this, the following is mentioned:

“If in the current context, the purpose of education is to produce labor for production and consumption, then who is going to train citizens? Human capital reduces human capacities to the function of producing greater wealth in existing social conditions, which imply great inequalities. On the contrary, citizens have the duty to question these conditions when they produce injustice, discrimination, debasement, and put life on the planet at risk. In this sense, it is urgent to rescue the notion of education as a human right, in its formal, non-formal and informal dimensions, to open its gaze to the democratization of societies to form critical citizenships, capable of being linked to movements that demand a transformation of the social order, with a view to greater social and environmental justice, with the intention of understanding and discussing solutions to problems of planetary scale.” (Sansano, 2012: 1)

In contrast, education for development and education for global citizenship is conceived as a new way of educating to seek social transformation. Paulo Freire was one of the pioneers in this, whose work with low-income students in Brazil determined that it is necessary to form a critical awareness in people about social problems to get out of the forms of oppression. This is in accordance with the thinking of the Hindu philosopher Jidu Krishnamurti, for whom knowledge leads to freedom, as he stated at the conference given for the 40th anniversary of the creation of the United Nations (Krishnamurti, 1985). By accepting these approaches, it could be concluded that empowerment is the key to recovering democratic power. Social mobilization is the key to involving citizens in actions to denounce injustice and inequality situations.

Education for development, which seeks to reduce exclusion, and education for global citizenship, which seeks to recognize and respect different cultures, is essential if we want to increase mobilization to demand rights and seek social change towards a more just society inclusive and caring. Indeed, becoming aware of the reality we face and acquiring a clear ideology to get out of the crisis allows us to form human beings without ties. It is possible, in theory, to change the system from within.

On this, Gema Celorio points out:

“Education for development also helps the formation of a political subject, an informed, responsible, socially committed citizenry prepared to actively participate in the social and political transformation of another possible world.” (Celorio, 2018: 21)

Below are some public policies that would make it possible to incorporate education for development and education for global citizenship:

- a. Guarantee that international study scholarships are aimed exclusively at low-income students so that, at their own expense, return, integrate into their communities as change managers and active political subjects.
- b. Include in the curriculum of public colleges and universities subjects related to political training and advocacy on public policies, to train students with social awareness.
- c. Establish research centers that allow the advancement of science in all branches of knowledge, the results of which serve for the consolidation of other public policies.
- d. Promote entrepreneurship and social innovation so that students develop creativity and self-initiative, which allows generating solutions to social problems and developing new products and services.

2.3 Assessment of public policies

In 2018, Ecuador joined the international initiative “Alliance for Open Government,” which is important news for the country because it is expected to increase transparency and accountability, citizen participation, and governance. In other words, Open Government will allow to improve the management of public policies, and mainly, it is conceived as a tool for evaluating them to deliver information to constituents.

This initiative, which already has the support of 79 countries and 20 local governments, hopes to combat corruption and regain the population’s trust in public entities, to guarantee institutional framework and participatory democracy. In fact, the

technological tools that are going to be incorporated will make it possible to know in real-time what public money is invested in, which in turn will lead to a better allocation of resources and an improvement in the quality of public services.

Meanwhile, some considerations are outlined below that will make it possible to improve the public policy evaluation process:

- a. The “Government by Results” technological platform allows the Central Government to monitor the public institutions’ management. However, monitoring the indicators is reserved for the Presidency of the Republic and its attached Secretariats. In order to improve the evaluation and transparency of public policies, it is recommended to establish macro-management indicators of each public institution, so that it is available in real time for public access, which will contribute to the optimization of processes and optimization of the services, as the authorities are under public scrutiny.
- b. As part of the annual accountability of public institutions, the degree of compliance with public policies should be disclosed.
- c. The establishment of citizen oversight bodies should be promoted, to accompany the evaluation of sectoral public policies in the Ministries of the branch. Cases of bribery by businessmen to favor contracts with previous governments could have been avoided with this measure.
- d. According to the development model “sumak kawsay” or “good living” adopted by Ecuador, the process of evaluation of public policies should also be decentralized, that is, it should tend to evaluate from the bottom up, from the parishes, then the Municipalities, then the Provinces, prior to considering the evaluation on a national scale. This makes it possible to serve as an input for the definition of areas with the deficit in service coverage, poverty and exclusion maps, priority areas for conservation, and others, which provides feedback to the public policy design process.

3. Conclusions

The solution to environmental and social problems will not be possible only with the declaration of good intentions by governments. We must move from rhetoric to practice

since, when designing, implementing, and evaluating public policies, a consensus must be reached between social demands and what is technically feasible.

“Buen vivir” or *sumak kawsay* adopted by Ecuador, is a sample that it is possible to change the dominant imaginary to produce the social change. For this, it is essential to consider the rights of nature and the caring and sustainable economy, to enhance environmental, health and education policies.

Declarations of interest

There is no conflict of interest to declare.

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