Redefining the future through Indigenous concepts from the Amazon: What does "sustainable development" mean when seeking harmony for our Earth?

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Respectful sustainable development partnerships with Indigenous communities must begin with the acknowledgment that only Indigenous communities can lead their own development. The role of development programs funded or implemented by non-Indigenous organizations is one of attendant companion, not guide. Indigenous priorities should steer program goals, Indigenous traditional knowledge should guide program strategy, and Indigenous Peoples should have ownership over funding. This perspective sees sustainable development as a process rather than a goal, and one that steeps development in Indigenous understandings and cultural concepts.

Indigenous communities and organizations are key actors in the conservation and improvement of ecosystems and biodiversity efforts. They safeguard ancestral territories and are leaders in advancing balance and harmony between humanity and nature. Historically, many development programs have ignored, harmed, or come into conflict with Indigenous communities and their ways of preserving and enriching ecosystems. Some have approached programming as more of a dialogue between Indigenous and Western worldviews, to balance the needs and metrics of funding bodies with Indigenous priorities.

Taking this a step further, other programs have deliberately determined not to lead in social-environmental governance activities, but rather work to strengthen Indigenous organizations, enabling them to grow their own sustainable conservation efforts rather than working within Western frameworks. Rather than just a dialogue seeking understanding between different perspectives regarding development goals and approaches, such programs instead rethink development in its entirety as a process of supporting Indigenous communities to lead. Such an approach requires reframing development programs around the Indigenous conceptualization of the future and the relationship of Indigenous communities with their territories and situating organizational development within that understanding.

Acknowledging the importance of Indigenous communities' involvement in environmental conservation and the climate challenge, the *Strengthening the Capacity of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon* (SCIOA) project was designed to embed Indigenous Peoples' perspectives and skills throughout its programming, supporting social and environmental governance through organizational processes and sustainability. Relationships between

Indigenous communities, SCIOA, and partner NGOs, and the nature of related processes, have been key components of the program. This paper describes how the SCIOA program, NGOs, and Indigenous communities worked together to advance social-environmental governance of the Amazon, and how Indigenous Peoples' rights, concepts and leadership were guiding lights throughout.

Strengthening the Capacity of Indigenous Organizations in the Amazon (SCIOA) and Contextually-Embedded Capacity Development Approaches

There is quantified evidence that involving Indigenous communities in biodiversity conservation and supporting their presence in territories improves conservation efforts. According to Dos Santos et al. (2022)[1], between 1988 and 2021, deforestation rates outside Indigenous territories in the Brazilian Amazon were approximately eight times greater than within Indigenous reservations. Recognizing the fundamental role of Indigenous communities to conservation, the SCIOA project aims to strengthen Indigenous organizations, administratively and financially, so they can directly access resources to protect their and their ancestral territory's rights in a manner most appropriate to their traditions and priorities. SCIOA at its core supports the independence and leadership of Indigenous organizations to regain ownership and control over their ancestral territories and resources. This contributes in a small way to restorative justice: support to Indigenous Peoples must not only be instrumental, i.e. to mitigate climate change, it must also acknowledge and wherever possible work to rectify the discrimination and exploitation they have experienced and continue to experience.

SCIOA is a project implemented by Pact in together with eighteen Indigenous organizations in Colombia, Peru, Ecuador, Brazil, Suriname, and Guyana, and financed by the United States Agency for International Development (USAID). SCIOA started in March 2018. Throughout its implementation, SCIOA has built respectful partnerships at every programming stage to empower Indigenous communities and organizations, so that they analyze and strengthen their capacity towards self-determination, which includes their strengthened social-environmental governance. SCIOA aims to support the independence – financial, administrative, technical – and sustainability of Indigenous communities and their organizations so that they can determine and operationalize their own approaches to conservation. Part of this requires orienting international donors' administrative and financial procedures and resources within Indigenous traditional practices, as well as the other way around.

To fulfill this purpose, the project supported the adaptation of two capacity-building methodologies designed by Pact, the Integrated Technical and Organizational Capacity Assessment (ITOCA) and the Organizational Performance Index (OPI) to the Indigenous context, under the direction of partners (Indigenous Peoples' organizations and NGOs) and operationalized in a contextually-embedded manner by Indigenous organizations. These methodologies facilitate a self-assessment by the organizations to define their strengths and weaknesses and build an organizational strengthening plan (ISP), using goals and metrics defined by the communities and the organizations themselves. These approaches were selected because the methodology actively promotes the conceptions and perspectives of the self-assessors themselves. As a result, the goals and plans of the organizations were rooted in Indigenous conceptions of their territories and lives that, in the case of Amazon communities, are based on the *Buen Vivir* (Well Living) and *Vida Armónica* (Harmonious Life) philosophies.

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[1] Alex Mota dos Santos et al., "Influence of Deforestation inside and Outside Indigenous Lands in the Brazilian Amazon Biome," *Regional Environmental Change* 22, no. 2 (2022): 1–7.

***Buen Vivir* and *Vida Armónica*: Indigenous understandings of "sustainable development"**

There is tremendous diversity among Indigenous communities. In the Amazon, many Indigenous communities understand the cosmos as comprised of several layered interactions between nature and socio-political structures, economics, and religion. The future, i.e., development, is not understood in quantities or categories but around processes and relationships. Specifically, the concept of *Buen Vivir* (Well Living) and *Vida Armónica* (Harmonious Life) undergird expectations for the future, focused on caring for all lives, humans, and nature, on Earth.

The *Buen Vivir concept* "is based on '*the knowledge'*, which is a basic condition for the management of the ecological and spiritual local foundations of sustenance and autonomous resolution of needs." [2] It is a plural concept that is dynamic – in constant evolution – and tailored to community needs. The *Vida Armonica* connotes harmonious living between humanity and *Pachamama* (i.e., Mother Nature). Together they entail living harmoniously and sustainably. Moreover, Indigenous communities "configure their view of the *universo selva* [i.e. cosmos - jungle], where the different forms of life are conceived as beings analogous to people[3]" Consequently, nature is understood as the pillar of life, in a biocentric and holistic view of development.

In keeping with their philosophy, Indigenous Peoples build their Life Plans, which are documents written by communities that include political, economic, social, cultural, and environmental aspects. It is a collective "planning tool adopted by the Indigenous People in contrast to traditional [Western] developing plans"[4] where they define how to develop and operationalize the concept of *Buen Vivir* for themselves. These Plans are co-created by the community, collecting an integral view of their ecological, socio-politics, economics, and spiritual/religious structures, "expressing the way in which communities relate to their environment (…) guaranteeing the communal and representative will of different social groups (men, women, youth, children, elders, and others). The final document could vary for each community and includes, along with a written version, maps, drawings, and oral narratives "[5]. Moreover, the Life Plan accounts for self-defining sustainable development priorities rooted in the *Law of Origin*, understood as "the traditional science of Indigenous ancestral wisdom and knowledge for managing everything material and spiritual"[6]. In this way, the Life Plans promote the co-existence and balanced management of the Earth and the cosmos.

In these Life Plans, the future is not understood in linear quantities or categories, or as a sequential process where there are different stages. The word "development" is not even an

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[2] Eduardo Gudynas and Alberto Acosta, "La Renovación de La Crítica al Desarrollo y El Buen Vivir Como Alternativa," *Utopía y Praxis Latinoamericana* 16, no. 53 (2011): 71–83.

[3] Carlos Viteri Gualinga. "Visión indígena del desarrollo en la Amazonía", Polis [En línea], 3 | 2002: pag. 2. Original quote translated from Spanish by Adriana Bohorquez.

[4] Oscar Espinosa (2014). Los planes de vida y la política indígena en la Amazonía Peruana. Anthropologica, XXXII (32), 87-113.

[5] Asociación Interétnica para el Desarrollo de la Selva Peruana (AIDESEP), "Plan de Vida. Guía para la Planificación Colectiva", Ministerio de Cultura (2016). Retrieved from https://pdf.usaid.gov/pdf_docs/PA00M1B7.pdf. Original quote translated from Spanish by Adriana Bohorquez.

[6] Consejo Regional Indígena del Huila, "La Ley de Origen de los pueblos indígenas", Vientos de comunicación (2013). Original quote translated from Spanish by Adriana Bohorquez.

appropriate term, as it implies a progression as well as an end state, as exemplified in the traditional dichotomy of "developing" versus "developed" nations. Indeed, "development" should be understand rather as a relationship or a state of being: "Indigenous Peoples propose many epistemological frames that imply different ways to understand and act; in these new epistemic forms, the existence of circular times that can co-exist with a linear time of modernity is considered; the existence of a community-being, or if it is preferred, one non-modern being, is considered as an ontologically validated subject for the relationship between human beings and nature."[7] Plans express the way the community relates to their surroundings, considering the environment, their traditions, and customs. For this reason, the process of writing the Life Plans must guarantee the communal and representative will of different social groups (men, women, youth, children, the elderly, among others). And, the future is very much understood as a balanced and harmonious relationship within a larger communitarian being.

From this communitarian being, the relations between all communities, including men and women, children, youth, adults, and elders, become important in order to strengthen cross-generational relationships. These relationships guarantee sustainability via intergenerational transference of the knowledge[8] for the *Buen Vivir*. "The knowledge transmitted through generations to place individuals of a community in an equitable condition in terms of capacity, skill, identity, and worldview also establishes the essential values for the production processes and the autonomous resolution of needs, such as solidarity and reciprocity. One example of this is the *Minga* [i.e., collective actions]"[9]

How participating Indigenous organizations and communities have led the SCIOA project and utilized their concepts and approaches to advance more sustainable development

As the previous discussion showed, the complexity of the concept of *Buen Vivir* cannot be translated or interpreted directly as the Western concept of "wellbeing"[10] and nor does "development" sufficiently capture the entirety of the Indigenous perspective on what is appropriate care of sustainable ecosystems. As such, we cannot simply translate between cultures in dialogue. Rather, we need to steep our understanding of a sustainable future in Indigenous concepts and approaches. This requires supporting Indigenous leadership by enabling that leadership. Thus, the implementation of capacity development within a larger expectation of sustainable development is "not a simple multicultural exercise or juxtaposition of cultures, but rather an intercultural meeting, understanding the existence of a plane of equality between different cultures"[11].

Implementing the project in this frame of intercultural work enables communities to have equality and self-determined development. To do so, SCIOA undertook the following strategies together with Indigenous organizations: built alliances, conceptualized capacity in Indigenous terms, supported organizations to adapt and implement their own self assessments and organizational "life" plans, and transferred power and leadership over program funds to organizations to operationalize their plans through grants.

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[7] Pablo Dávalos, "Reflexiones Sobre El Sumak Kawsay (El Buen Vivir) y Las Teorías Del Desarrollo," *Boletín Icci* 103 (2008): 1–7.
[8] For example, the *Paju* for some Kichwa's peoples,
[9] Carlos Viteri Gualilnga, "Visión indígena del desarrollo en la Amazonía", Polis [En línea], 3 | 2002, 2.
[10] Gudynas and Acosta, 76
[11] Gudynas and Acosta, 81

Alliances. SCIOA built from the concept of *Minga*, which encapsulates a collective effort for the common good. It did so first by building alliances with local organizations, including foundations and NGOs, among others. Those organizations are called Capacity Development Organizations (CDOs) to reflect their responsibility and commitment in supporting the needs of Indigenous organizations. Pact forged strong alliances with strategic agreements with the CDOs, who in turn worked hand in hand with Indigenous People Organizations (IPOs) in the implementation of SCIOA. In this way, SCIOA is assured that its activities are aligned with the local context and Indigenous People's self-determined needs and mission.

The *Minga* represents how Indigenous organizations work among themselves in an exchange system that enables the knowledge of each ethnic group to be perpetuated. Just like the *Minga* is the collective work for the common good, the collective work is the core of respectful alliances in SCIOA. Thus, each actor – IPOs, CDOs, and Pact, based on a solidarity principle and exchange of knowledge – promote the strengthening of territorial governance of Indigenous Peoples.

Alliances support trust-building, mutual understanding and cooperation with and between Indigenous organizations. This is Pact's principle under its *do no harm* approach and is an organizational Guiding Star: wherever possible, Pact works through alliances with contextually embedded stakeholders and learns from them to carry out programs, conferring as much power over the program as possible.

Capacity as a "river." Only after alliances are formed and trust and cooperation are launched does SCIOA begin with capacity development activities. Capacity development is a continuous process, like a journey on an Amazonian River; endless. This metaphor was created by Indigenous organizations to represent the capacity development process of organizations in the "SCIOA river", where all members of the organization are necessary. The trip needs a purpose and preparation to define a road map (the stops) to recognize the barriers and threats. The river journey also connects with other paths and processes.

As an Indigenous leader in Surniame noted: "We used the example of a boat floating down the "SCIOA river". Participants drew a boat on the floor with everything they needed in it, such as an outboard motor, hammock, a little and a big paddle, a long stick, a machete, a bow, and an arrow. Then one by one they came forward and stood on the object they related to, explaining why they, just as the object, were important for the Tepu (Indigenous village in Suriname) and how they would support the team and the project".

Capacity self-assessments and organizational strengthening plans. The boats in this journey are the ITOCA and the OPI, Pact's capacity development tools that were selected because they could be customized to Indigenous organization needs and by the organizations themselves. Throughout the capacity development process, SCIOA uses these adapted and culturally relevant tools to help build Indigenous organizations' administrative and financial capacities. Hence, in the future, the Indigenous communities will effectively access and manage international financial resources while maintaining ownership of their development planning and priorities.

The ITOCA is a tool to measure internal organizational capacity. With the customized ITOCA, Indigenous organizations identify their strengths and weaknesses, which in turn provide information to help them design individual Institutional Strengthening Plans (ISPs) in line with their Life Plans. These ISPs are the navigation chart on the "SCIOA river" in order to advance in the process of organizational strengthening. During this process, linear modern time and circular

Indigenous time converge to work for the sustaining and autonomous resolution of Indigenous Peoples' Organization's needs. Likewise, the ITOCA tracks change (monitors and evaluates) within Indigenous organizations according to their own goals and priorities framed in their *Buen Vivir* philosophy.

For example, Galibi, an IP community in Suriname, has framed its ITOCA in a concept within *Buen Vivir*: *Know how to work.* Within this concept, responsibilities are conducted with joy and passion for doing so. In keeping with the priority to be joyful and passionate, the organization realized it needs young professionals who understand Indigenous traditions and Western regulations and that have the innovation and energy to contribute. Galibi recognized the need to expand to more youth through the ITOCA process because the ITOCA was able to embrace the concept of *Know how to work*. The other value important to Galibi within Well Living is K*now how to walk*, which means walking beside Mother Earth, the ancestress and the wind to protect the territory. This concept was operationalized by the organization in its ITOCA-supported plan to advocate to the government to implement the Free Prior and Inform Consent (FPIC) law, which helps to protect their territories in keeping with *Know how to walk*.

Where the ITOCA focuses on internal organizational processes, the OPI is a tool to help measure and assess changes over time in organizational performance and compares performance within and among organizations. It considers an organization's effectiveness, efficiency, relevance, sustainability, and resilience. The OPI helps organizations to understand the extent to which there are positive changes in the way they deliver services, relate to their stakeholders, and respond to changes in the external environment. Although the OPI can be understood as the most structured tool in a Western organizational development view, the assessment and supporting documentation, as mentioned, can be adapted to the conditions of the organizations and their context, tailoring to their perspective's concepts.

For example, IPOs such as Nonuya de Villazul Reservation in Colombia, use large gatherings with community participation called "assemblies" to engage its community in decision-making processes. Those meetings are not formally institutionalized in written procedures or rules within the reservation, but community members recognize the space as an opportunity to be heard and solve their worries. *Relevance,* one of the OPI's domains, is the ability of an organization to respond to the actual needs of its beneficiaries or stakeholders to ensure activities address actual needs. For Western standards, decisions must remain written in order to be followed. To ensure the OPI criteria were in keeping with Indigenous approaches, during the implementation of SCIOA, participating Indigenous organizations such as Nonuya write minutes with decisions made by the assemblies that impact the project (this approach has also been taken by other projects).

Empowerment through program financial ownership. Each of the organizations, in an exercise of learning by doing, for the first time directly executed projects with funding they controlled that enabled them to reach their self-defined sustainable development priorities. Thus, through grants, SCIOA approaches the regular organizational strengthening process with a holistic perspective that operationalizes how Indigenous communities perceive the world, their *Buen Vivir* philosophies, as an integral process where the earth, nature, men, women, and spirits are in harmony.

For this reason, depending on the country and the context of each organization, as well as the priorities of its ISPs, the projects financed by SCIOA and led by the communities were very diverse, reflecting the priorities and concepts of their areas. However, all of them have a common purpose: strengthening capacities to preserve and disseminate the concept of *Buen*

Vivir. For example, in Colombia, the Nonuya de Villazul reservation prioritized the formation of a board of directors and the definition of its statutes, which were consequently approved by the Colombian government. This achievement enabled them to access the resources that the national government allocates to Indigenous organizations. The Indigenous organization was empowered to use the small grant in whatever way it saw best fit its needs, which in this case, was receiving formal recognition.

Similarly, many of the organizations identified women and youth as important actors in their ISPs and used their grants to promote the role of women and youth inside their communities. Just as their territory is at the center of Indigenous decisions regarding the connection between the present, the past, and traditions, women and youth are at the center of social sustainability priorities of SCIOA's activities, as exemplified through the self-identified priorities of the organizations. In this way, continuing with the example of the Nonuya de Villazul Indigenous reservation, during the most critical time of the COVID-19 pandemic, the small grant activities supported the identification of medicinal plants by grandparents and young people from the reservation who worked hand in hand promoting the exchange of knowledge between them and creating a booklet to disseminate this information. As Álvaro Rodríguez, a traditional doctor from the Reservation, mentioned, "When the environment becomes ill, the balance and harmony between man and nature are broken."[12] These types of activities help to re-establish links with youth, who, for various reasons, are moving away from Indigenous cultural traditions.

The small grants also enabled IOs to support the role of women, who play various roles, from the familiar and traditional, communitarian role of caring, to the more political role of *cacicas* (leaders) of their communities. The project has promoted a more equitable dialogue between men and women in the IPOs and recognition inside Indigenous organizations about these roles and the importance of women in organizational sustainability. Specifically, after a SCIOA-sponsored activity about the importance of inclusion, women realized that they needed literally to speak the same language as the men to participate in decision-making. As noted by one participant from an Indigenous organization, "I feel that my voice is getting stronger and heard by others to the point that the community has prioritized an activity to encourage women's participation. We will learn our traditional language to be able to speak to our elders in the Assemblies." In this way, the more conservative IPOs have started to hear women's voices and sometimes empowered them in economic, political, and social roles.

In reality, women have for generations been at the center of critical systems that link humanity to nature. Consider the example of the *Chagra,* which is a traditional and ancestral Indigenous feeding system. With the inclusion of women in organizations and in decision-making spaces, IOs can better identify food sovereignty alternatives linked to ancestral practices for nature conservation. In the middle to long term, this promotes the understanding of the historic humanity-environment relationship related to feeding cycles, forestry, and fishing, which can improve the resilience of Indigenous People and guarantee their presence as guardians of the Amazon rainforest, key in the fight against climate change.

Another valuable example is *União das Mulheres Indígenas da Amazônia Brasileira* (UMIAB), an organization that represents 50,000 Indigenous individuals from 43 peoples and nine states in three different biomes in Brazil. With its small grant, the organization improved and expanded ways for women to connect and communicate so its members could collaborate with each other

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[12]Medicina Tradicional Noyuna, Pact Colombia, last modified December 2, 2020,
https://web.facebook.com/PactColombia/videos/medicina-tradicional-noyuna/2590279094597484/?_rdc=1&_rdr

during the pandemic. As a result of that it was able to hold its first virtual general assembly to elect new leaders. Approximately 70 women attended, representing more than 300 family members.

Telma TaurepangIs i, leader of UMIAB, said of Indigenous women: "Their objective [through SCIOA activities] is to continue being in the fight for the *Buen Vivir* of their communities and peoples, a fight for education and health."[13] As resilient as Mother Earth is, Indigenous communities are trying to adapt to challenging circumstances, in this case with the use of the technology, while also fighting to preserve their traditions. Sonia Guajajara, another Indigenous leader, emphasized how during the pandemic "[The Indigenous woman's] role became more evident than ever. As women, we make a political articulation and we take care of our families, our homes, and our crops. That shows how we innovate, and we rebrand ourselves with every challenge, but we still need the courage to face the *machismo* (sexism)"[14].

Empowerment through leadership. Finally, SCIOA facilitated Pause and Reflection workshops, which are common learning and adaptive management processes in large grants. The meetings were reconceptualized by SCIOA partners as "grandparents" (mayores, mayoras, curacas, sabedores) at the *malocas* (traditional buildings for family and communal use) advising and accompanying communities. In these meetings, SCIOA and all of its partners (IPOs, CDOs, USAID, and Pact) were called to share thoughts and be heard, exchange experiences, and collaboratively decide activities to improve the implementation of the project. This enabled recognizing the value of communities' perspectives and experiences in assessing and adapting activities and supporting sustainability. In this way, the project promoted exchange between different Indigenous Peoples, emphasizing dialogue as part of its traditional oral path of knowledge and the learning of writing as a method that can support the social and cultural sustainability of IPOs.

Another opportunity to exchange and adapt the course of the implementation as a team with IPOs was through a webinar series initiated by SCIOA, *The Amazon Proposes*,. In the webinar series, IPOs connect with each other and with different audiences and stakeholders to exchange their work for the environmental governance and the nature conservation.

The future of the conservation of the biodiversity of the Amazon Basin and what it represents for the balance of the world, including the sustainable development and the *Buen Vivir* of Indigenous communities, depends on the decisions that organizations such as Pact and its partners take today to support Indigenous organizations in their fight for the defense of the territory and its rights. Support to ensure development is aligned to the world and cosmos-vision of Indigenous Peoples is imperative.

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[14] Instituto Internacional de Educação do Brasil, "Primeira assembleia virtual das mulheres indígenas da Amazônia brasileira"

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