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## **Sustainability from an intercultural perspective: dialogue with the ancestral peoples of Abya Yala\*\***

***La sostenibilidad en clave intercultural: diálogo con los pueblos ancestrales de Abya Yala***

***A sustentabilidade sob uma perspectiva intercultural: diálogo com os povos ancestrais de Abya Yala***

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**ABSTRACT** Unsustainability seems to be the way in which humanity is heading. In the face of this global perspective, Sustainability is a concept and a practice that has several confronting interpretations: scientists focus on the ecological limits imposed by the biosphere; the promoters of the sustainable development current try to make economic growth compatible with environmental conservation; and the anti-systemic perspectives seek alternatives that put life at the center instead of economic growth. Amid this scenario, the worldview, practices, struggles and resistances of native peoples, expressed in their daily relationship with nature in community life or in active struggles against extractivism, show us that sustainability, more than a theory or civilizational discourse, is their way of life, supported by their culture and community. This article arises from a qualitative research that, through the testimonies of 12 leaders of 10 native peoples of Abya Yala located in 7 countries, reconstructs their vision of the territory, their ways of life in community, the external threats, the repertoires and strategies to face these threats and, above all, the lessons that these ancestral peoples can give us about the sustainability of life in all its forms.

*Keywords:* sustainability; sustainable development; ancestral peoples; Abya Yala.

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**RESUMEN**

La insostenibilidad parece ser el norte al cual se aboca la humanidad. Frente a esta perspectiva global, la Sostenibilidad es un concepto y una práctica que posee diversas interpretaciones confrontadas: los científicos se concentran en los límites ecológicos impuestos por la biósfera; los promotores de la corriente del desarrollo sostenible intentan compatibilizar el crecimiento económico con la conservación ambiental y, las perspectivas antisistémicas buscan alternativas que pongan la vida al centro en lugar del crecimiento económico. En medio de este escenario, la cosmovisión, prácticas, luchas y resistencias de los pueblos originarios, expresadas en la cotidianidad de su relación con la naturaleza, en la vida comunitaria o en las luchas activas contra los extractivismos, nos demuestran que la sostenibilidad, más que una teoría o discurso civilizatorio, es su forma de vida, soportada en su cultura y comunidad. El presente artículo surge de una investigación de tipo cualitativo que, a través de los testimonios de 12 líderes y lideresas de 10 pueblos originarios del Abya Yala, ubicados en 7 países, reconstruye su visión sobre el territorio, las formas de vida en comunidad, las amenazas externas, los repertorios y estrategias para enfrentar dichas amenazas y, sobre todo, las enseñanzas que los pueblos originarios pueden darnos para la sostenibilidad de la vida en todas sus formas.

*Palabras clave:* sostenibilidad; desarrollo sostenible; pueblos ancestrales; Abya Yala.

**RESUMO**

A insustentabilidade parece ser o norte ao qual a humanidade se dirige. Diante dessa perspectiva global, a Sustentabilidade é um conceito e uma prática que possuem diversas interpretações confrontadas: os cientistas se concentram nos limites ecológicos impostos pela biosfera; os promotores da corrente do desenvolvimento sustentável tentam compatibilizar o crescimento econômico com a conservação ambiental e, as perspectivas antissistêmicas buscam alternativas que coloquem a vida no centro, em vez do crescimento econômico. Em meio a esse cenário, a cosmovisão, práticas, lutas e resistências dos povos originários, expressas na cotidianidade de sua relação com a natureza, na vida comunitária ou nas lutas ativas contra os extrativismos, nos demonstram que a sustentabilidade, mais do que uma teoria ou discurso civilizatório, é sua forma de vida, sustentada em sua cultura e comunidade. O presente artigo surge de uma pesquisa de caráter qualitativo que, por meio dos testemunhos de 12 líderes e lideranças de 10 povos originários do Abya Yala, localizados em 7 países, reconstrói sua visão sobre o território, as formas de vida em comunidade, as ameaças externas, os repertórios e estratégias para enfrentar essas ameaças e, sobretudo, as lições que os povos originários podem nos oferecer para a sustentabilidade da vida em todas as suas formas.

*Palavras-chave:* sustentabilidade; desenvolvimento sustentável; povos ancestrais; Abya Yala.

**1. Introduction**

The planet as a global ecosystem is going through a systemic crisis as never before in the Anthropocene era, a crisis that, according to science, is fundamentally caused by the hegemonic production and consumption model; its most significant and at the same time decisive expression in the continuity of life is the environmental crisis. In this context, the notion of sustainability has gained relevance in

academia as well as in the sciences, in debates on development, in social movements and in governmental spheres at the political level, generating a dispute in the assignment of content.

In the present work we present a different approach to the notion of sustainability, that is, from an epistemology different from the conventional one, which usually addresses it based on ecosystemic limits. Sustainability is conceived here as ways of life, culture, philosophy and praxis exer-

TABLE 1 - Summary of interviewees' profiles

<b>Name</b>	<b>Original people</b>	<b>Country</b>	<b>Year of Interview</b>
Rosalía Matene	Mujeño-Ignaciano	Bolivia	2024
Edwin Miró	Mosetén	Bolivia	2024
Arturo Camiao	Mapuche	Chile	2024
Mirian Cisneros	Sarayaku	Ecuador	2024
Olmedo Morocho	Kiwcha-Kañari	Ecuador	2024
Luz Guamán	Kiwcha-Kañari	Ecuador	2024
Thelma Cabrera	Mam	Guatemala	2024
Mauro Vay	Maya-Kiché	Guatemala	2024
Tania Cruz	Otomí	México	2024
Kinyapiler Johnson	Kuna	Panamá	2024
Jorge Stanley	Kuna	Panamá	2024
Tania Vera	Ava Guaraní	Paraguay	2024

SOURCE: prepared by the authors

cised by the original peoples of Abya Yala. For this approach, we take a brief tour of some of the most relevant approaches to sustainability from science, sustainable development, social movements and the perspective of women. With this overview, we contrast and expose the perspective of the original peoples of Abya Yala.

The research carried out aimed to “Analyze sustainability from an intercultural perspective, based on a dialogue with the ancestral peoples of Abya Yala”, to achieve this, the selected methodology was qualitative because it sought to understand the deep perceptions and meanings that people attribute to their vital experience and the phenomena that are part of their socio-cultural, political, economic

and natural context. During the months of July to September 2024, semi-structured interviews were conducted with 12 male and female leaders from 10 ancestral peoples of Abya Yala located in seven countries: Mexico, Guatemala, Panama, Ecuador, Bolivia, Paraguay and Chile, according to the summary of the profile of the interviewees in table 1.

Due to geographical distance, 90% of the interviews were virtual. In accordance with ethical criteria, the interviewees were aware of the objectives of the research and the final destination of the information provided through their testimonies and gave their consent for their dissemination. The interviews were transcribed textually<sup>1</sup> and then analyzed based on categories and variables cons-

<sup>1</sup> We appreciate the contribution of José Perea and María José Jarama in the transcription work of the interviews.

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tructed for the research. Through the interviews, it was learned that the common points about the relationship of these peoples with nature are focused on an ecocentric worldview, where the living and non-living constitute a totality that embraces culture and way of life. It stands out, however, that throughout the continent, developmentalism and capital united with the power of the State, harass the territories of indigenous peoples with the aim of exploiting and commercializing common goods; but they also highlight the strategies of resistance and re-existence that they exercise to guarantee their continuity.

## ***2. To understand sustainability***

The challenge of putting a concept like “sustainability” – originated in a specific cultural environment, such as the capitalist system and its framework of values – in dialogue with the perspectives of ancestral peoples, places us in a field crossed by political, economic and cultural contradictions. In the peoples of Abya Yala, this notion is intertwined with concepts such as territory, culture, identity, worldview, subsistence and community; while, in Western modernity, it is mainly linked to sustainable development, risks, needs, economic growth and the market.

The dialogue held with original peoples from Mexico to Paraguay shows that, for these cultures, the concept of sustainability has no translation in their languages, simply because this category does not exist in their rationality of life, since, in their worldview, the human being and nature are not separate entities, but rather indissoluble parts of the same unit:

We understand territory as a sacred, cultural, spiritual and vital space for the subsistence of indigenous peoples. The best way to value our territory is by respecting and taking care of everything that exists on it... We consider the territory as a living being because on earth we value the sacred places, the spiritual places, the rivers, the trees, the plants, that all have life. That is, it is a subject that we recognize in the indigenous world through “ayahuascas”, through plants one can communicate (Mirian Cisneros, Sarayaku, Ecuador, 2024).

What they clearly perceive is the harassment of their territories, extractivism, contamination, dispossession and the impacts on the continuity of their culture. Sustainability would have with this worldview an ecocentric perspective, a systemic view related to the way of life:

Our languages are already being lost, everything that is the education system. Education is instilled to domesticate us and to say that the one who studies is the superior and the one who doesn't study knows nothing. Within this I can also tell you about religions, that spirituality, true spirituality was lost and that now there are many religions where they instill conformism in us; because if we raise our heads to identify the damage they have done to us, well, they instill fear, persecution, criminalization and then they tell us that that is a sin (Thelma Cabrera, Mam, Guatemala, 2024).

On the contrary, in the modern vision of sustainability – both in the academic field and in territorial management – the idea is subsumed by two emerging notions: the first, by the environmental crisis generated by the exceeding of planetary limits and the loss of the capacity of the biosphere to sustain life and, the second, closely linked to the previous

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one, by the exhaustion of resources to satisfy human needs and maintain economic growth. Here an anthropocentric and urgent position is evidenced in the face of a threatening collapse. Thus:

A thoughtful response to these environmental concerns is not to stop economic growth or to maintain previous patterns of growth, but to design new models of sustainable development. There is no option between economic growth and environmental protection. Growth is not an option. It is an imperative. (Pronk & Haq, 1992, p. 10).

Within the framework of this version from modernity, sustainability presents strong bifurcations due to the unprecedented deepening of environmental crises expressed clearly in the events resulting from climate change. The stress that this situation has generated in the economic system leads to a countless number of reactions ranging from trivialization to strategies of denial or minimization of realities, to the point that it can be affirmed that this concept entails an intense dispute over meanings.

### ***3. The notion of sustainability in dispute***

Sustainability is today a common term due to its elasticity and ability to adapt to different positions, for this reason, it has become a “word buzz” or a fashionable word, one of those that serves to impress but does not serve to explain (Ecomunicar, 2012). The term has been appropriated by the “establishment” to convince citizens about the need for a “green economy” where, ultimately, the responsibility is placed on individuals for certain healthy

and environmentally correct behaviors, diverting the gaze from the structural determinants that generate the unsustainability of the planetary ecosystem, such as the dominant patterns of production, market and consumption. Thus, sustainability has become a functional and manipulable term to clean up all the irrationalities of an economic system based on unlimited growth.

The dispute over the meaning of the term is more complex than what green marketing pretends to show, since the denunciations about the commercialization of nature, extractivism, greenhouse gas emissions, maldevelopment, hyperdevelopment, the historical extortion of the north to the south and other global disparities, are still present in the international debate on the environmental crisis, which is already perceptible to humanity due to the effects of global warming and its expression in climate change. In the semantic dispute over the notion of sustainability, those who will not decline on the political potential of the concept are in science, in social movements, in ecofeminism and fundamentally in the original peoples. Each one, from their spaces, advocates for demonstrating and influencing the need for urgent civilizational transformations, since the term “constitutes possibly the main pretext or argument to make a radical questioning of the dominant development style, the hegemonic values, the current worldview or paradigm, and Western Civilization” (Elizalde, 2003, p. 51).

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#### 4. *The warnings of science*

Several voices around the world and from different sciences warn about the threats that hang over ecosystems and their capacity to host life, threats generated by human activities that, in the existential desire to subject nature and common goods to extractive and productive processes, are exceeding certain biophysical limits and violating the functionality of the biosphere to generate the conditions for survival.

According to *Ecologistas en Acción* (2007, p. 3), “We are experiencing the largest wave of extinctions after the disappearance of the dinosaurs. Every hour, three species disappear. Every day, more than 150 species are lost. Every year, between 18,000 and 55,000 species become extinct”.

The Amazon, which contains more than 30% of the world’s biodiversity, has lost 54.2 million hectares in the last twenty years. due to deforestation equivalent to 10% of its forests (Zanón, 2023), which implies that if this planetary lung “exceeds the tipping point, it will change to a new state that will be more like a savanna, and then it will release a large amount of carbon, damage the geological cycle and have significant detrimental effects on warming” (Rockström, 2024, p. 3), since forest systems absorb 25% of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions from the burning of fossil fuels (Rockström, 2024).

Rockström, director of the Potsdam Institute (Germany) and recipient of the Virchow 2024 award, and a group of scientists who are around the Stockholm Resilience Centre, work intensely on planetary limits and the health of the global ecosystem and have established nine thresholds as existential boundaries to ensure that life on this

planet endures. Among these thresholds are: fresh water, the ozone layer, biodiversity, chemical emissions (CO<sub>2</sub>), ocean acidification, land use changes, nitrogen and phosphorus flows to the atmosphere and oceans and, of course, global warming. Each of these thresholds has tipping points, that is, points that, when exceeded, will cause states incompatible with life.

Here, it is essential to understand the systemic dynamics of the biosphere and the planetary ecosystem, for example, global warming is produced by the over-emission of greenhouse gases into the atmosphere, fundamentally CO<sub>2</sub>, which, in conditions of ecosystem health, should be captured by the oceans, forests and soils that function as natural sinks. However, deforestation, land use change and ocean acidification produced by the chemical combination of CO<sub>2</sub> with water, have deconfigured their absorption capacity. The amount of polluting elements and the breaking of the thresholds in the sinks leave the biosphere literally naked in the face of the toxicity generated by human activities. That is to say,

The current rate of use of all kinds of essential resources is unsustainable, from energy to fishing grounds, forests, fresh water reserves and the cultivable soil itself. A rate far superior to that of its regeneration, when they are renewable, or to that of its substitution by others that are. (Vilches, 2016, p. 2).

Exceeding 1.5 degrees of global average temperature, in turn, will affect the melting of the polar ice caps and the collapse of all tropical coral reef systems that sustain life for hundreds of millions of people around the world. Although a growing trend has been observed, these last two years have

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been the most severe in terms of extreme climatic events, droughts, floods and high temperatures that have bordered 50 degrees (Rockström, 2024) and, according to those who make up the scientific community, this is just the beginning. The drastic changes in the climate regime are already perceived by their effects such as the burning of forest areas, since, according to Amnesty International (2024), from August to October 2024, only in the Amazon, around 11 million hectares burned. What is not yet clearly perceived is the incidence of these phenomena on food and the provision of fresh water, two elements that are already causing havoc in vulnerable populations throughout the planet.

### ***5. From development to sustainable development***

The “Homo sapiens of the capitalocene” have destroyed their own habitat in multiple ways, putting the continuity of their species at risk in direct contradiction with the original content of sustainability, that is, the ability to maintain existence without interruption or degeneration. In effect:

In the process of life, every living organism develops in interaction with its environment, and this interaction that is properly the life of that living organism, allows it to make itself by modifying or transforming its environment, to make its existence possible. When a living being, as an individual, fails in this purpose, it dies. When a set of living beings, as a species, fails in this purpose, they become extinct. (Elizalde, 2003, p. 57).

For many authors, the existential transgression of homo sapiens towards life arises with the advent

of the capitalist mode of production and industrialism, a phase that is also marked as the beginning of the Anthropocene, where humanity assumes the leading role in planetary transformations, breaking, once and for all, the human-nature unity. This transgression will generate a utilitarian valuation of nature and, therefore, its unlimited extraction; a logic that will support the advent of the theories of developments, created in the north and assumed in the south (Gudynas & Carpio, 2024).

For this reason, since the seventies several criticisms have been raised against the development model due to its environmental inconsistency. One of the most widespread criticisms was the questioning by the Club of Rome, for whose members the patterns of production and consumption are unsustainable in a finite global ecosystem such as planet earth, nothing can grow infinitely in a finite environment was the central thesis that positioned its report “The Limits to Growth” in 1972 (Meadows, 1972).

In contrast and, with the purpose of denying this thesis, in 1987 the United Nations Organization (UN) constituted a commission to analyze the environmental problem and design strategies to promote lasting development, a task that fell to Gro Harlem Brundtland who presented the report “Our Common Future” which, in summary, postulates the incorporation of environmental management into development policies, also considering social, political, cultural and gender elements. The Report maintains that the expansion of poverty and demographic growth are constitutive of the environmental crisis (Brundtland, 1987) and does not shy away from pointing out the responsibility of the global north and the system’s production and consumption patterns. Its entire discursive framework revolves

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around warning that environmental deterioration and the depletion of non-renewable resources, due to the rate of exploitation that production demands, will become a barrier to growth, which is why it calls on the nations of the world to think about a “common future” where ecology and economy are harmonized. Unlike the Club of Rome, which emphasizes the unsustainability of unlimited growth, Brundtland (1987) proposes the opposite when relating population growth and poverty:

On the contrary, we see the possibility of a new era of economic growth that must be based on policies that sustain and expand the resource base of the environment; and we believe that such growth is absolutely essential to alleviate the great poverty that continues to worsen in a good part of the developing world. (Brundtland, 1987, p. 16).

Furthermore, this report considers that economic growth must be sustained from progress:

not only in a few places and for a few years, but now on the entire planet and even into the distant future. In this way, “lasting development” becomes not only a goal of “developing” nations, but also of industrial nations. (Brundtland, 1987, p. 18).

Faced with this proposal, Gudynas & Carpio point out that:

As can be seen, this Commission takes the economy-ecological opposition that was being discussed at that time, reformulates it by considering that there are limits that can be modified, reverses that confrontation and concludes that sustainability is a new way of ensuring economic growth. That is, that sustainable development would only be ensured if economic

growth persists... Environmental impacts or the need for the preservation of biodiversity are not rejected, but the Commission reverses the issue, indicating that environmental deterioration would have economic consequences that would make growth impossible, and, at the same time, this is presented as essential to ensure development, and with it, achieve both poverty reduction and conservation itself. (Gudynas & Carpio, 2024, p. 27).

Finally, it is necessary to observe the postulate of sustainable development in relation to intergenerational responsibility to guarantee the satisfaction of needs for today and tomorrow. The Brundtland report (1987) points out that the world at that time was going through a great structural crisis whose expressions are in the environment, in energy and in development, which means, ultimately, failures of development and environmental management:

In the development aspect, in absolute figures, there are more hungry people in the world than ever before, and their number continues to increase. As well as the number of those who cannot read or write, the number of those who lack clean water or safe and adequate housing and the number of those who suffer from a shortage of firewood to cook and protect themselves from the cold. (Brundtland, 1987, p. 17).

Today, almost four decades after these statements and the Rio+20 Earth Summit, the picture of inequalities in the world is catastrophic:

For most people around the world, the start of this decade has been tremendously difficult. At the time of writing this report, 4.8 billion people are poorer today than in 2019. For the poorest people (generally women, racialized people and groups excluded from society), daily life has become even more difficult.

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Global inequality, that is, the gap between the Global North and South, has grown for the first time in 25 years. (Oxfam Internacional, 2024, p. 9).

This reality drowns the hopes placed in sustainable development because one has to ask how many people of those billions in poverty levels represent the new generations who were promised not to compromise their possibilities to satisfy their needs as the central concept stated in the foundational report (Brundtland, 1987).

This tendential scenario of growing poverty and inequalities shows us that development, in any of its forms: maldevelopment for the south or hyperdevelopment for the north, is, ultimately, what explains the systemic crisis. Nor have the promises of sustainable development been materialized, precisely because they are within this paradigm imbued with that same developmentalist irrationality.

## ***6. Social movements against unsustainability***

The “consensus for unsustainability” established by global economic and political power, which envelops governments and transnationals in the logic of capital, has protected this position from the very moment that voices have been raised both from science and from social movements against polluting industries; mining, forestry and maritime extractivism; intensification and artificialization of a toxic and expansive agriculture and livestock model. These power groups have synergistically developed a set of strategies such as denial, “watch green” media campaigns to green the economy, corruption plots in governmental spheres and

persecution and death of defenders of territories in the so-called “third world” when it comes to extractivism.

Despite this offensive, social movements have clearly told the world that the accumulation and developmentalist logics of the consensus for unsustainability are the essence of a civilizational crisis, whose erosive axis is the capitalist system. These movements are on the front line for the defense of the sustainability of human and non-human habitats, since it is clear that exponential growth has broken ecosystemic balances causing metabolic fractures to the point that the ecological footprint of humanity today is more than 1.7 times the planetary biocapacity (WWF, 2021), so much so that, of the nine thresholds defined by scientists as basic conditions for life, seven have been exceeded according to the Stockholm Resilience Centre (2024).

The resistance struggles raised by social movements around the five continents have achieved, in several cases, positive results by stopping extractivist or high-impact projects against the environment and territory, such as, for example, the great march in 2011 of the indigenous peoples against the mega highway in the Isiboro Sécure Indigenous Territory and National Park – TIPNIS – in Bolivia that forced Evo Morales to suspend it. A fact of the most significant worldwide is the Yasuní case, in the Ecuadorian Amazon. “Leaving oil underground” was the central proposal of the “Yasunidos” movement who, in alliance with other social movements and, fundamentally, with Amazonian indigenous peoples such as the Woaranis, fought for: the protection of uncontacted peoples, the preservation of Woaranis territories, the conservation of biodiversity, the non-contamination of water, air and soil, the suppression of thousands of millions of tons in CO<sub>2</sub>

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emissions (either due to oil extraction, permanent flare ignition, transfer, processing and consumption of its derivatives in destination places) and, in general, for the care of the ecosystem. In essence, what was put in dispute was the change from the primary export extractivist model to another based on sustainability.

Another fact of international resonance and “southern patent” is the consecration of the rights of nature in the Ecuadorian Constitution of 2008, which became the sustenance of social movements for discussion in several countries, as well as the argument for the protection of rivers, lagoons, animals and ecosystems in various parts of the world. Although, in general, the struggles of groups that defend the environment and territories are still specific, localized and dispersed, they are projected as the basis for a global, articulated, integral and anti-system collective action, since coordinated events are increasingly emerging from spaces of globally organized civil society under the thesis that it is possible to change the logics of the consensus of unsustainability for a consensus of sustainability, recognizing in this task the leading role of the original peoples, due to the strength of their cultures, philosophy, knowledge and their practices as guardians of biodiversity and ecosystems in general.

### ***7. Women’s contributions to the debate***

From various schools of thought, women have contributed to the debate on development and sustainability. One of the most powerful proposals comes from Ecofeminism, a current that, based on the dialogue between the principles of ecology and feminism, confronts the notion of development for

being based on two systems of exploitation of nature and the human species, with special emphasis on women: Capitalism and Patriarchy. The idea of sustainability created from the concept of sustainable development is also subject to criticism because, from a feminist perspective, it has a pretension of universality and reproduces the logic of masculine rationality in relation to the understanding of nature, but fundamentally, because it has excluded in the construction of said notion of sustainability, the voice of communities and in particular of grassroots women, who are the ones who have borne the brunt of extractivism in their territories and in their bodies (Carpio & Falconí, 2024).

According to Herrero (2015), people are entities and bodies dependent on nature and interdependent among humans to be able to survive, therefore, a large part of the continuity of life is in the hands of women, who carry out two thirds of care in the world due to the sexual division of labor, which generates an overexploitation of female work that, in addition, is invisible. Consequently and, keeping in mind that human life is vulnerable and precarious, “that basic human condition must be solved in common, in interdependence” (Orozco, 2019, p. 37), that is, the creation of the necessary conditions for a dignified life, the work of caring for and reproducing life is and must be a shared responsibility as a society.

However, the problem of the Capitalocene lies in the fact that putting life and care at the center is incompatible, according to the author, with Capitalism that permanently develops through the capital-life conflict. The challenge is, then, to move towards the construction of a system that sustains life, which requires, to begin with, questioning the very notion of what we understand by life, a notion

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that has been co-opted by a hegemonic capitalist and heteropatriarchal vision that has placed the market and accumulation at the center as the meaning of life. That is to say, following Orozco (2019), a life that is worth living is one that puts “the sustainability of life” at the center, rebels against the logic of the capitalist market, breaks with the human-nature division, recovers collective responsibilities in relation to care and recognizes the contribution of domestic and care work not only to production, but, above all, to the generation of human well-being.

### ***8. Sustainability from the original peoples of Abya Yala***

For the original peoples of Abya Yala, sustainability is not in the speeches of their organizations, nor is it in the concern of communities or families. For these cultures, sustainability would be implicit within their philosophy of life around the earth and territories in a direct relationship with their ways of life and their ancestral culture. The indissoluble unity of these factors is the active nucleus of their resistance struggles, since the tensions in which they operate, dispossession and acculturation, result from the permanent harassment of the market society to deconfigure the basis of their socio-cultural reproduction to assimilate them into its circuits.

This other way of understanding sustainability implies preserving life as a harmonious totality of nature that includes everything living and non-living, like the Pachamama in an Andean key:

The territory itself, as a people, not only for the Guaraní who live in Paraguay but for all peoples, is a fundamental good, inherent to us indigenous peoples.

Because if we lose our territory, we lose everything, we are left empty (Tania Vera, Ava Guaraní, Paraguay, 2024).

### ***9. Land and territories: material sustenance and spiritual worldview***

For indigenous peoples, territory is not only the physical space where human populations settle and carry out various economic activities; the territory, from their worldview, has an integral value, that is, it articulates the social, environmental, cultural, spiritual, economic and political. It is a means of sustenance, but also, the point of connection with ancestors and of dialogue with forests and mountains, with waterfalls and with the earth itself, all of which shapes the culture, the vision of the world and the cohesion of a people:

for us there are two things, land and territory. The land for us is the place where our house is, where our plot is, where we live and, the territory, on the other hand, is what encompasses the aspect where all the elements of nature are, made up of rivers, mountains, plants, animals, the earth itself... the earth is considered by our elders, by our ancestors, as the main thing, without the earth man does not exist (Olmedo Morocho, Kiwcha kañari, Ecuador, 2024).

The philosophy of life of the original peoples shares common foundations throughout the continent, which expresses that the human-nature relationship is consubstantial to their existence, that in that connection lies their cultural continuity as specific communities and that, furthermore, on that premise a holistic and systemic worldview has

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been built in reciprocal interrelation. As Thelma explained:

for us [the earth] is our mother because we live from it, because the plants from which we feed ourselves are born from it. We eat from it and it is like a mother who breastfeeds her children, shelters them, takes care of them and, therefore, her children must take care of her. This is how we compare mother earth and her rights with our human life (Thelma Cabrera, Mam, Guatemala, 2024).

This conception is reaffirmed with the testimony of Tania: "for us the territory is our home, there is our food, our spirituality, our identity, there we are... if we lose our territory, we lose everything, we are left empty" (Tania Vera, Ava Guaraní, Paraguay, 2024). Among all these expressions and, from different contexts, there are several common aspects about the conception of the territory. When speaking of territory, reference is made to a living being, a sacred, cultural, spiritual and sustenance space, that is, for the original indigenous peoples it includes the community of living beings, where the human being is only a part of this community, where everything is important for the balance and harmony of life. From there another rationality to protect and conserve it arises, for this reason, the Sarayakus of the Ecuadorian Amazon speak of "territories of life" to refer to their habitat and their practices of sustainability.

## ***10. Culture and ancestral knowledge as foundations for sustainability***

The different peoples of the current Abya Yala are heirs of a millenary past in which they have developed their cultures in correspondence with their ecological context, however, from the diversity that emerges from there, there are transversal cultural elements such as the ecocentric conception of nature. This relationship has become the determining factor to preserve their habitat against the intense advance of developmentalism and extractivist practices that undermine every space where there are resources to exploit and commercialize them, be it oil, mining, wood, biodiversity, intensive agriculture, livestock or tourism.

Hence, the territorial sustainability of the original peoples is a crucial issue in the current context, given that their territories are fundamental not only for their physical and cultural survival, but also for the preservation of ecosystems and global biodiversity. In effect, indigenous peoples have historically been the guardians of vast territories that include forests, jungles, mountains, rivers and other vital ecosystems for the planet's biodiversity, thus:

You can't do whatever you want, untechnically for example, exploit it [the land] however you want. Our elders told us that, to start a work on the land, do any crop, whatever it is, you first ask mother nature for permission through a special rite. Well, of course now these things are being lost, but culturally the earth is always linked with man [sic], that's why we hold festivities, for example, in honor of Taita Inti (Olmedo Morocho, Kiwcha kañari, Ecuador, 2024).

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The other determining factor for the sustainability of indigenous territories and that is a constitutive part of the culture, is ancestral knowledge. In Peru alone, according to the National Institute for the Defense of Competition and the Protection of Intellectual Property (Indecopi) of that country, more than eight thousand diverse traditional knowledge have been registered (Casique, 2024). This ancestral knowledge is not limited to a specific area, it covers various areas of life from agriculture, medicine, architecture, crafts, biodiversity or care of ecosystems that guide communities in their sustainable practices to guarantee the conservation of biodiversity and the mitigation of climate change. As Luz Guamán points out:

In the territory there is also ancestral knowledge and wisdom that has been transmitted from generation to generation and that are fundamental to guarantee territorial sustainability. For us, the territory is a sacred place, more than a geographical space, it is the place where the wisdom of our ancestors is found, the relationship of respect and harmony of all beings that are in the Pachamama, since this provides us with the means to live, the common goods such as land, water, air, forests, plants, etc., from here we get our food, our medicine. In this space of territory we keep our culture alive (Luz Guamán, *Kiwcha kañari*, Ecuador, 2024).

The expansion of the capitalist system as a model of life supposes the globalization of its values, such as individualism, competition, success, wealth and consumerism that penetrate community life, fragmenting and eroding their own culture, fundamentally in young people who constitute the most vulnerable group due to their exposure to Western-type education, mass media, social networks,

the labor market, migrations and the absorbing and hallucinating – for them – urban lifestyle, thus:

Youth are the most sensitive to acculturation... having your own identity makes you unique, but that has to come complementary with ancestral wisdom. Recognizing who we are also implies knowing what nature is, respect and harmony with nature, knowing what you can heal yourself with, what you can shoot with, hunt, fish, collect, but people are no longer valuing that (Edwin Miró, *Mosetén*, Bolivia, 2024).

This perception is reiterated among Mexican and Guatemalan Mayas, among the Kuna of Panama, in the indigenous population of the Andean and Amazonian area, among the Mapuches of Chile, as well as in the Paraguayan ethnic groups, as we can see in the following testimonies: "currently, due to various changes, because there is no longer much forest and those things, we can no longer maintain that way of life because globalization suddenly absorbed us" (Tania Vera, *Ava Guaraní*, Paraguay, 2024).

as soon as we lost respect for asking a tree for permission to cut it, for asking the earth for permission to give us food, we also lost something of our being man [sic]. And what we have lost of our being man [sic] is also caused by this system and it is violent with nature, just as it is with women (Tania Cruz, *Otomí*, Mexico, 2024).

These findings express visions, imaginaries and philosophies that ancestral peoples have dragged from time immemorial despite the fact that, as the Kuna women of Panama say, "the colony penetrates to disappear our own identity... and the

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colonization processes have not ceased to this day”<sup>2</sup> (Stanley, 2025), for this reason, they consider that the fight for the defense of the territory is a factor in strengthening culture and identity, since these struggles are an empowerment and amplification of culture<sup>3</sup>.

From non-indigenous perspectives, the bio-centric worldview present in the human-nature relationship of ancestral peoples is superficially assumed as an elemental and primary relationship within the framework of daily life for survival. Thus, in the words of the British anthropologist Tim Ingold:

For those indigenous people there is not even the concept of nature. The idea of Nature only comes when it is opposed to Humanity. So for indigenous people it is about the world they live in: the earth, the countryside or whatever, but not Nature... for them there is no nature, there is world (Ingold, 2024, p. 9).

Although this author has made significant contributions to integrate anthropology into a transdisciplinary perspective, especially with the ecological sciences, that Eurocentric bias remains by assuming that the original peoples live a world with no other meaning than the immediacy of daily life, without understanding that the unity he intuitively is based on a strong philosophy of life, as in the Andean peoples where the Pachamama and the Sumak Kawsay articulate the validity of that “in-habitants” he calls for.

Facing this perspective, Arturo Escobar reminds us that peoples “are historical subjects of particular cultures, economies and ecologies; particular producers of knowledge; individuals and collectives committed to the game of living in and with landscapes in a specific way” (Escobar, 2010, p. 23), therefore, it is not feasible to analyze other cultures from the paradigm of modernity, since there is a risk of committing “epistemicide”, contributing to the coloniality of being and knowing in the words of Anibal Quijano (2000).

### *11. The Women of Abya Yala*

The communities and peoples of Abya Yala have been fundamental for the preservation of key ecosystems for the planet, as well as for the conservation of natural and cultural diversity. Within these peoples, women have a leading role, since, in congruence with the reflections raised by Eco-feminism, the sexual division of labor has placed women as those responsible for the care of life in all its forms.

Conscious of this, women and men whose testimonies weave this article recognize some particularities in relation to the role of women in the processes of life sustainability, beginning with the fact that women are the guardians of the seeds, that is, women are the ones who select the best seeds for each harvest, store them, care for them, plant them and cultivate them. The seeds represent the relationship with the earth, the continuity of agra-

<sup>2</sup> Presentation by Tayra Stanley at the X CLACSO Latin American and Caribbean Social Sciences Conference, held in Bogotá from June 9 to 12, 2025.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

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rian practice, food security and the maintenance of ancestral culture. With the internal and external migration of men in search of work, women alone assume various tasks such as cultivating the plot. In this regard, women feel that the deep degradation of nature and climate change affect them with special intensity, because they manage the garden or the chacra that guarantees the self-sufficiency of the family and whose cultivation is seen as an extension of the care role.

Above all, the role of women in the historical and permanent struggle against extractivism is recognized, and it is criticized that their presence has been made invisible or minimized. On the contrary, they are perceived as more radical and unyielding in the struggle. Thus, according to the interviewees, "women have a firmer position when it comes to defending something, they have to fight, they do it head-on, they are not afraid, because they are not only fighting for the territory, they are fighting for their children who are coming behind" (Rosalía Matene, Mujeño-Ignaciano, Bolivia, 2024), to which a dignified and ethical position is added in the dispute against extractivism, in the sense that "one always seeks to negotiate a personal or family benefit, but women do not. Women defend the territory more and are more like: no, it cannot be negotiated, this belongs to the family, it must be conserved" (Tania Vera, Ava Guaraní, Paraguay, 2024), an affirmation that is ratified with the feeling of Rosalía Matene: "I have noticed and I have lived it, that women do not pact or negotiate human rights or territorial rights" (Rosalía Matene, Mujeño-Ignaciano, Bolivia, 2024).

## ***12. Threats to the Original Peoples of Abya Yala***

The most latent problem and the main threat to ancestral territories is related to the extractivisms that are present in all peoples. Extractivisms are economic practices that consist of the intensive exploitation of the natural resources of a territory without taking into account the environmental, social and cultural impact they can cause. In this sense, the dialogues with members of original peoples evidenced the presence and intensity of extractivism and its consequences against territorial sustainability. Thus, in Bolivia, a country that has historically suffered the consequences of mining, what is strongly evidenced are the devastating effects of mining in the northern region of La Paz, where eight indigenous communities are located that live on the Beni, Cotacajes, Tuichi and Kikiberey rivers. There, the Central of Indigenous Peoples of Northern La Paz conducted a study on the effect of mercury on the peoples, whose report highlighted the significant consequences of high mercury contamination on nature and the health of people. The same thing happens in the Lecos indigenous communities, that is: "the Lecos always tell us the experience that the territory has already been destroyed by mining and there are places where you can't even cultivate" (Edwin Miró, Mosestén, Bolivia, 2024). Mining is, therefore, one of the main dangers to the continuity of life for the Bolivian Amazonian peoples.

For their part, the Kuna indigenous people of Panama state that transnational mining companies from countries in the global north are also one of the greatest threats to their territory, even more so when through their co-optation strategies they have achie-

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ved the adhesion of some people from the communities themselves. This case is not exclusive to the Kuna people, mining companies work strategically in all the territories they break into in order to weaken collective ties, divide communities by offering projects or jobs to their leaders, developmentalist projects whose background is not the community or territorial interests (Carpio, 2023). According to Tania Cruz, we are living in an era of neo-extractivism because, currently, traditional extractivisms promoted by transnational companies sheltered by national or local governments have opened the door to organized crime. Indeed, in Mexico, "water is one of the most important resources and one of the least available... and organized crime has recently been seizing water sources, no longer allowing access to them" (Tania Cruz, Otomí, Mexico, 2024). This diversification of actors and repertoires against peoples and territories attacks community networks, that is, the deep ties of communities with nature and among people, because a united, organized and conscious people does not allow the entry or destruction of their territories.

Mining and the accompanying contamination of water sources, the private concession of water sources to large companies, as well as forest exploitation, are the main threats to the Mapuche people. This is aggravated by the observation that it is not possible for communities alone to stop the devastation of the territories: "that has no shortcut, no one can say anything at all to them despite there being a Constitution, there are political authorities... there is no constitution or law that can regulate them" (Arturo Camiao, Mapuche, Chile, 2024). In Ecuador, the advance of the agricultural frontier is visible and, in the Andean highlands, the livestock frontier, since, with the consolidation of the capita-

list production logic in large areas of agriculture, the grasslands and páramos become grazing areas, which destroys the fresh water sources in the highlands. In Guatemala, for its part, the contamination of the territory by transnational companies through the implementation of monocultures such as African palm, rubber, banana, sugar cane and the practice of livestock farming is a concern. Monoculture for export, in addition to exhausting the land, damages it through the use of chemicals and insecticides that spread throughout the environment, because "they damage our mother earth and all the peoples, all the nations that cohabit, because in our territories we are cornered in villages, hamlets and, around them are the farms with aerial fumigation of these insecticides" (Thelma Cabrera, Mam, Guatemala, 2024).

Similarly, in Paraguay, the struggle for the possession and titling of ancestral territories is seen as one of the most pressing threats. Several communities have made agreements with businessmen to lease the territories for five or ten years, a period during which they are deforested and devastated for a rent that does not compensate for the environmental and health damage, while a few leaders benefit from the agreements. On several occasions, businessmen have demanded possession and eviction from the land, justifying their use and production, a phenomenon that, according to Tania Vera of the Ava Guaraní people of Paraguay, increased significantly during the Covid-19 pandemic, when ranchers and soybean producers took advantage of the crisis and illicitly obtained property titles, evicting the communities. In this same vein, Ecuador is facing unprecedented situations of intrusion into the territories of the Amazon by organizations that settle in order to occupy and control said territories, taking

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advantage of the growing ignorance and needs of the population. Thus:

there are international organizations that are entering the territories... there is an NGO called Kailasa that buys plots of land, we do not know the objectives of these people who are already inside the indigenous territories, they buy community lands and want to privatize them. Two hours from Sarayaku territory there is a community called Molino, its president without having knowledge signs an agreement [with Kailasa] for one thousand years and it is notarized (Mirian Cisneros, Sarayaku, Ecuador, 2024).

In turn, in Mexico, there is an advance in the land grabbing by large companies – such as the pharmaceutical company Bayern – because, since the reform of article 27 of the Constitution, communal and ejidal lands can be sold with the consent of the State. In the case of Bolivia, the Multiethnic Indigenous Territory (TIM) – an area of the Amazon inhabited by five indigenous peoples: the Mojeños Ignacianos, Mojeños Trinitarios, Yuracaré, Movima and Chimán – is unevenly confronted with loggers and ranchers and since 2020 has been supporting a lawsuit process by ranchers allied with political actors, which seeks to annul the ownership of these indigenous peoples over the territory. All this problem, according to the leader Mirian Cisneros of the Sarayaku people, is related to the lack of recognition of the collective rights of the indigenous peoples of Abya Yala. At the same time, the defense of the territory has put the integrity and the very life of community leaders at risk. Only during the year 2024, 77 indigenous leaders have been killed, with Brazil, Colombia and Peru being the countries with the highest number of cases.

In summary, indigenous peoples must increasingly face extractivism, mining, oil exploitation, deforestation, the advance of the agricultural frontier, the destruction of forests and the Amazon jungle, the contamination of water sources, waste without adequate treatment, the dispossession of territories, the deconstruction of the sense of community, the advance of organized crime, among many others. The territories where the ancestral peoples live have become the natural reserves of humanity, that is why they are so coveted, since they are one of the last planetary remnants that preserve the conditions for the continuity of life.

### *13. Resistance for re-existence*

In the face of extractivist policies and actions, as well as threats to the sustainability of life in the territories, communities have shown their enormous capacity for struggle, resistance and resilience. A common strategy, shared by several peoples of Abya Yala, is the search for legal recognition and autonomy of the territory inhabited by the different groups, peoples and nationalities. Thus, in Bolivia, the TIM has undertaken a struggle since 2016 for the legalization of the areas that make up this multiethnic indigenous territory. The Kuna people of Panama achieved this goal with the Law for the creation of the Kuna Yala Comarca and the recognition by the State of the General Congresses and the indigenous Local Congresses as the highest authorities of the territory.

In accordance with the above, a second strategy deployed is the application of constitutional tools for the defense of territories. This is the case of the “popular action”, a mechanism presented

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by the Central of Indigenous Peoples of Northern Bolivia to protect the peoples of Ceja, Chimán, Mositén and Tacana from mining, in order to review mining concessions and permits for being illegal, with which they managed to stop mining activity in the area. Similarly, various peoples and nationalities have made use of ILO Convention 169 which seeks to protect indigenous assets and territories, urging States not to intervene in said territories without prior and informed consent. An exemplary case in this regard is that of the Kuna people who declared the territory of Kuna Yala free of mining and who have managed to get the Panamanian State to respect this decision and the customary regulations of the comarcas.

Another mechanism used is the deepening of control over the territory, that is, communities have organized and activated systems of patrols and communication among themselves in the face of possible threats, thus "one of the strategies is to be alert within the territory... for any entry that is like a threat, hunters, fishermen, businessmen who want to go and get wood, or other people who may go to do some research work" (Rosalía Matene, Mujeño-Ignaciano, Bolivia, 2024). Similar actions of control of the territories are part of the practices of the Quichua-Kañari peoples of Ecuador. From various perspectives, the reaffirmation and continuity of the peoples' own ways of life, such as the Sumak Kawsay in the Andean highlands or the Kawsak Sacha (Living Forest) of the Sarayaku people of the Ecuadorian Amazon, are one of the main resistance mechanisms, expressed in the conservation of nature, the preservation of the principles of collective life and the exercise of ancestral production practices. According to their representatives:

we have concrete defense strategies in the community minkas... In this way we are trying to strengthen those life systems and defend our territories because if we don't do that now, later we will depend totally on the capitalist system and that will even end us as original cultures (Luz Guamán, Kiwcha-kañari, Ecuador, 2024).

Organization is constituted, from this perspective, as the center of the work, the main strategy and the germ from which new strategies are designed. Therefore, by strengthening organization and articulation between communities both within countries and throughout Abya Yala, they have fought for the recognition of the rights of indigenous peoples, the right to protest, the rights of "mother earth" and for funds to develop their activities. In this sense, in Guatemala, work has been done since the signing of the Peace Accords to consolidate a Popular and Plurinational Constituent Assembly, as well as on the proposal of 14 thematic axes promoted by the Peasant Development Committee CODECA since 2013, with the aim of constituting a plurinational State. For its part, the Kuna people have been pioneers in the search for relationships with the indigenous peoples of the continent. Indeed, through the organization of the Kuna Youth Movement, in 1972 relations were initiated with indigenous peoples from countries as varied as Colombia and Canada, forming the International Council of Indian Treaties (CITI), under the understanding that the struggle was continental and that there were other interlocutors beyond the national States.

In parallel, another strategy deployed in all territories has been information, training and the promotion of awareness among the peoples regarding the advance of extractivism, the devastating effects of development or maldevelopment and

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the role of States, companies and transnationals. Organization and awareness are the pillars for the struggle: "when there is organization and there is training, people endure, they know why they are doing it, they know that if they fight they are seeking the well-being of their children and the new generations. That is done when there is a community" (Mauro Vay, Maya-Kiché, Guatemala, 2024). In this line of training, several communities and peoples have decided to break away from traditional Western education and create their own schools with an intercultural perspective because:

education, that is, school, is a colonial device that has wanted to erase us for centuries and that has wanted to see us as objects of study and not as subjects of knowledge, and the internal colonialism that exists within these spaces is tenacious, the violence that many of our children live... I think that is why it is important to build our own educational processes (Tania Cruz, Otomí, Mexico, 2024).

The peoples, worldviews and ways of life remain valid despite the annihilating force of colonization due, among other things, to the resistance capacity of their people, which, according to Don Arturo Camiao, Apu of the Mapuche people, should be considered as "a heroic resistance... [since] over time, resistance has allowed us to still have spaces of territory, although minimal, but we have a place to develop life independently" (Arturo Camiao, Mapuche, Chile, 2024). Resistance, now converted into multiple proposals for a good or dignified life, will allow us to think about continuity because, in her words, "we have been existing for more than five hundred years, so, I hope that this ancestral wisdom continues to sustain us" (Tania Cruz, Otomí, Mexico, 2024).

In summary, the original peoples of Abya Yala currently demand their ethnocultural continuity, their recognition and the practice of plurinationality within the framework of national States, therefore, their main strategies focus on the respect for rights, appealing to the fact that the territory, in addition to all the cultural connotations, is where collective rights are exercised. Finally, indigenous peoples have proposed not only for their communities but proposals for life, for a good life or a dignified life for the entire population of the nations they inhabit, from an intercultural perspective, thus: "if we, the indigenous peoples, have always taken care of our mother earth, others can also do it" (María Cristina Pizarro, Wounaan-Noman, Colombia, 2024).

## 14. Conclusions

1. Sustainability is an old concept with malleable content; scientists in the natural sciences (physics, biology, chemistry, ecology) use it as a red alert to explain the limits that the biosphere places on human beings. For developers, located under the paradigm of sustainable development, it is the concept that covers economic growth and guarantees the perpetuity of the system. Here, while science warns, those who belong to the second group moderate extractivist practices and seek solutions in technology, recycling or green washing with speeches, international summits or national environmental policies that never prosper.

2. For ecofeminism and for those seeking alternatives such as the care economy, the focal point is the sustainability of life. This objective implies a series of questions to the social, economic and political system itself and to the development mo-

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dels that are based on the exploitation of labor and extractivism. Sustainability is therefore a forceful concept to face the civilizational crisis that humanity is going through in an integral way.

3. The post-developmental currents share this anti-system position, for whom the unlimited economic growth that capital demands is an irrational and unsustainable obsession due to the thresholds that the global ecosystem imposes on the economy. Post-development calls for good living, degrowth, care and other alternative options to both maldevelopment and hyperdevelopment.

4. In these disputes, the notion of sustainability takes on a political dimension on a global scale. The social movements with an ecological base join their voices to confront extractivism and development; in every world summit on environmental issues, mobilizations take place to demand urgent transformations from politics towards nature and life.

5. For the original peoples, sustainability is their way of life, and culture is its support. For them, there is no fragmentation between people and nature; what exists is a concrete totality: the territory where they coexist with the elements of nature, with spirits, ancestors and with the community. The problem lies in external threats that covet the goods present there, in addition to the penetration of narco-economies that have gained relevance even with the benevolence of national governments.

6. It is not possible to talk about sustainability in the territories without deep transformations, starting with a reconciliation with the Pachamama and nature, for all the disasters we cause and to be able to resume the meaning of life. In this regard, from the original peoples it is proposed to strengthen the Sumak Kawsay as a local proposal and a bet for planetary change.

7. The notion of sustainability navigates in an anthropocentric plot based on sustainable development and science that is locating the limits that should not be exceeded. On the other side we can find biocentric positions when the sustainability of life is postulated as the ultimate goal. And finally, the experience of indigenous peoples with their culture, philosophy and practices of production and consumption raises an ecocentric logic, that is, nature as a whole that deserves respect, care and reciprocity.

8. From these positions we can conclude that there are two perspectives on sustainability, the first from limits, that is, when alterations to the biosphere and ecosystems have already occurred; and the second from care, that is, with ways of life linked to natural cycles and the logic of ecosystems. This difference is necessary to evaluate the route that is promoted from politics and power, from activisms and anti-system struggles.

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