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**Implementing Real Sustainability -  
The Meaning of Sufficiency for a New Development Approach**

Jorge Guerra González  
January 2013

**[Zur Verwirklichung von Nachhaltigkeit - Die Bedeutung von  
Suffizienz für einen neuen Entwicklungsansatz]**

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Leuphana Schriftenreihe Nachhaltigkeit & Recht  
Leuphana Paper Series in Sustainability & Law

Nr. 2 / No. 2

[http://www.leuphana.de/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/publikationen/  
schriftenreihe-nachhaltigkeit-recht.html](http://www.leuphana.de/professuren/energie-und-umweltrecht/publikationen/schriftenreihe-nachhaltigkeit-recht.html)

ISSN 2195-3317



## Implementing Real Sustainability - The Meaning of Sufficiency for a New Development Approach

Jorge Guerra González\*  
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### Abstract:

[In theory we pursue a sustainable development, but in reality we do not. An economy based on continuous growth, which evidently is not sustainable, is however the priority model almost everywhere. If we really aim at implementing sustainability, then we must radically change our economic model. Sufficiency - which calls for individuals mainly from so-called "developed countries" not to consume more than is really needed - may offer a useful alternative. We can still find some - last - examples of indigenous peoples living in a sufficient manner, all of them nowadays in those "developing countries". We could learn at least from them that it is possible to live differently, i.e., in harmony with ourselves and our environment. This would pave the way for their - and for our all - protection, as well as the manner in which we understand at present development politics]

**Key words:** [Sustainability, Sustainable development, Developing politics, Sufficiency, Indigenous peoples, Native peoples, Economic growth]

### Zusammenfassung:

[Theoretisch verfolgen wir eine nachhaltige Entwicklung, in Wahrheit tun wir es nicht. Das fast überall priorisierte Wirtschaftsmodell basiert auf ständigem Wachstum, was sicherlich nicht nachhaltig ist. Wenn wir wirklich beabsichtigen, Nachhaltigkeit zu implementieren, müssen wir unser Wirtschaftsmodell radikal ändern. Suffizienz - was für Individuen hauptsächlich aus so genannten entwickelten Länder bedeutet, nicht mehr als notwendig zu konsumieren - könnte eine nützliche Alternative sein. Wir können noch - letzte - Beispiele von indigenen Völkern finden, alle in so genannten Entwicklungsländern, die suffizient leben. Wie könnten von ihnen lernen, dass es möglich wäre, in Harmonie mit uns und mit unserer Umwelt zu leben. Dies würde den Weg zu ihrem - und zu unserem allen - Schutz ändern, so wie die Art, wie wir Entwicklungspolitik aktuell verstehen]

**Schlüsselwörter:** [Nachhaltigkeit, Nachhaltige Entwicklung, Entwicklungsländer, Suffizienz, Naturvölker, Indigene Völker, Wirtschaftswachstum]

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## I. Introduction

Human beings exploit as consumers the Earth's resources in order to satisfy their needs. The problem is that more and more consumers demand more and more resources, and that resources are finite. As a result they dissipate, become exhausted, or are simply spoilt. A gradual collapse is unavoidable if the consumption-exploitation engine continues this way. In fact, collapse is already announcing its presence: natural resources are progressively rare, hence they are expensive and are often fiercely fought for; our environment (climate, water, land, air) is worsening with every day; sustainability guidelines, which should guarantee the durability of our resources, are mostly observed only if they serve the interests of mainstream politics or the economy – which often pursue much more short-term goals.

The problem is as well that such politics and economic concerns, the ones that clearly count in the international arena, rest precisely on growth and consumption. So it would be a gigantic task to modify its foundation, even if knowledge of causes and negative effects of this basic model were already commonplace. In fact, knowledge of the consequences of our actions, in case we continue to use such a model, is a necessary condition for reversing the situation, but not a sufficient one. It would be additionally required to consider and change influence factors like the inertia of the present economic and political structures, the ability of political actors to perform in coordination in the long term at several action levels, the resistance of those privileged through this system - and maybe to assume (hopefully only in part) the limitation of humanity to set and pursue priorities and to assume responsibilities beyond a certain point (in space and time). As a matter of proof we can observe the poor results obtained at the World Climate Summits in Copenhagen (2009), Cancun (2010), Durban (2011) or, with the benefit of twenty years' hindsight, at the so-called "Earth Summit" in Rio (1992). There, we can take for granted that the general knowledge of climate change, resource scarcity, etc. - and of their causes and consequences - unfortunately only played a minimal role compared to the influence of many contrary factors<sup>1</sup>.

Even the way in which we understand and promote development politics - politics which should follow almost by definition other priorities (such as sustainability in the sense of inter- and intragenerational justice) - has become in reality a way to export a "mainstream model" to the world, the one that paradoxically has caused the present pre-collapse situation, thus multiplying its negative effects and limiting its solution scope.

In any case, it is urgent to find and follow a path able to bind both Economy and Politics with real sustainability. We must either do so voluntarily or we will have to do it compulsorily.

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<sup>1</sup> See, e.g., Dehmer 2012; Endres 2011; Drieschner 2010.

This paper proposes a radical (meaning here “thorough, from its roots”) view change through goal substitution of our general economic and political actions, focusing then on ways to implement it.

The advocated goal concerns every human being: to achieve his or her fulfillment. The remarkable thing is that achieving this goal would assure global sustainability. Then the way to this achievement would lead almost necessarily to sufficiency, i.e., moderation in consumption. This is, admittedly, not a particularly original approach, for, as probably anyone could figure out, this would make it possible to live sustainably in harmony with the environment without missing any essential aspect of human life. Another remarkable thing: this approach would work easily, at least in theory, since anyone could start at any time, without any preconditions.

Nevertheless, this way would certainly be very complicated to implement, as it diametrically contradicts the way and foundation of our economy and politics.

In order to implement sufficiency, the focus of this paper turns to indigenous peoples in so-called “developing countries” to search for appropriate models. This approach would bring other positive effects. It would lead to another conception and consideration of development politics as an inspiration to learn from, and as a way to expand sustainable solutions in a multidirectional way, all of them being regarded as equally valuable, those people and their way of life finally gaining respect - and protection. This should as a counter effect assure our protection for generations to come.

Therefore, the next section describes mainstream politics and economics in order to understand them and analyze their transformational potential. Section 3 offers the foundation of the possible way out, sufficiency, and a new orientation of and from development politics regarding its implementation. Section 4 shows some examples of ways of life that are still practiced by indigenous peoples, examples that today are only to be found in “developing countries”.

## **II. Growth/Development - Limited Resources - Sustainability**

*Growth* is a peculiar concept nowadays, as it alone justifies economic-political measures without the need for any further foundation<sup>2</sup>: if those measures are meant to promote or to promise growth, they are good in and of themselves. The same could be said about *development*, as at the end of the day it is often identified with economic growth<sup>3</sup>.

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<sup>2</sup> See v.Weizsäcker et al. 2009, 356ff.

<sup>3</sup> Sachs 2000, 9.

The world economy relies basically on growth. Such a statement would not deserve any additional comments if growth did not encourage resource consumption - or vice versa - and if resources were not finite<sup>4</sup>. However, they are certainly not infinite, so we have to face an uncomfortable inconvenience. The model the dominant world economy relies on - employment, public and private investments, pensions, health security, insurance, social assistance, etc. - is flawed and requires urgent updating, or better, deep transforming, as it nears an abrupt ending<sup>5</sup>.

Perhaps an economic model based on growth seemed right as its limits were still not perceived or were not that close, for it could be identified with wealth and welfare. Resources seemed inexhaustible, as there were not so many consumers and their needs were much more modest than they are now. At present though, subsequently to the reaching of its confines through its worldwide expansion - or rather as the precondition of such a model - the perception of its effects is different and clearer. We are continuously confronted by limits to natural resources and by the boundaries of growth at the same time. Increasingly, we face bottlenecks as resources are exhausted or damaged<sup>6</sup>. Some of them sound perhaps old-fashioned: diminishing oil reserves, abusive fishing, ozone layer depletion, acid rain. Others are more present in public consciousness: climate change, food crises, radioactive remains, etc. Finally others are more or less unknown: lithium exploitation in Bolivia, coltan wars in Congo, Mapuche land expropriation in Chile. New bottlenecks will doubtlessly continue to arise<sup>7</sup>. As a consequence of the mainstream economic model based on resource consumption and growth we are compromising all aspects that are concerned with a truly sustainable development: economic, social, environmental, and also inter- and intragenerational justice. So if we are serious about sustainability, it is necessary to find alternative models or solutions.

### **III. Sustainable Strategies - Sufficiency - Reconsidering Developing Politics**

#### **A Strategies Towards Sustainability: Efficiency, Consistency/Substitution**

In order to ensure sustainability and resource protection, we could count on strategies concerning *efficiency* (doing things *better*). These strategies aim to save resources by optimizing the relationship between input and output in goods production: less input for the same output, or more output for the same input<sup>8</sup>. These strategies would reduce resource consumption - provided that demand remained stable.

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<sup>4</sup> E.g., Jackson 2011, 23ff.

<sup>5</sup> See Müller/Weiger 2010.

<sup>6</sup> BUND/EED 2009, 41ff.; Sachs 2000, 11ff.

<sup>7</sup> E.g., through NF<sub>3</sub> (Nitrogen trifluorid), a gas with 17200 times more powerful greenhouse effects than CO<sub>2</sub> (Forster/Ramaswamy 2006, 212) that has not been included in the Kyoto-Protocol list. It is released by solar cell production. So when we are solving a problem by substituting fossil through renewable energy sources, we meet this next stumbling block.

<sup>8</sup> See, e.g., BUND/EED 2009, 335ff.

We could also rely on *consistency* strategies (doing thing *differently*) that are based on the ideal of (more) sustainable resource use - neutral if possible with regard to global sustainability - e.g., by a positive re-integration of the required resources in the environment or in the production process<sup>9</sup>. Or we could rely on those strategies that have the objective of replacing non-sustainable with sustainable resource utilization, called *substitution* strategies if considered by themselves<sup>10</sup>.

The most relevant advantage of these strategy sets is that they do not break with the growth scheme above. They simply try to integrate the questions of sustainability and resource scarcity into it. Paradoxically, this is their greatest disadvantage, too. Without questioning the growth-based economic model, it is not possible that they really bring us any closer to sustainability. Even if we rely on human know-how and technique, succeeding at compensating for the negative effects of resource consumption, either with efficiency or with consistency/substitution approaches, we realize that resource exploitation increases much faster nowadays; i.e., that the improvements achieved cannot keep in step with the worldwide consumption growth. This means that resource scarcity or damage will still be an issue even if we just rely on these strategies. But the real scenario is even worse if we take into account "rebound effects"<sup>11</sup>. These effects appear when the resource protection or saving achieved due to efficiency (and even, indirectly, also due to consistency/substitution<sup>12</sup>) strategies vanish just after a while owing to a rise in demand, which eliminates that resource saving - and sometimes even surpasses it, thus worsening the original situation<sup>13</sup>. Finally, concerning consistency/substitution it is obvious that there is no such thing as "neutral" resource consumption<sup>14</sup>.

So the mainstream economic and political systems are after all undermining their own foundation and therefore necessarily idealistic, as anyone would admit that eternal growth, or infinite resources, is logically impossible. Collapse will progress more or less slowly, whether we like it or not, if we insist still on basing our way of life on it. And the strategies outlined above, which are still deeply rooted in it, cannot change, but only at most delay this fate<sup>15</sup>.

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<sup>9</sup> The idea of *waste* would make no sense; non-renewable, non-resource neutral good production would be incompatible with this approach (see, e.g., McDonough/Baumgart 2002, 68ff and their "cradle-to-cradle" principle).

<sup>10</sup> Cf. BUND/EED 2009, 306ff.

<sup>11</sup> v.Weizsäcker et al. 2009, 289ff.; Radermacher 2008, 33ff.; Hofstetter/Madjar/Ozawa 2006, 105-15.

<sup>12</sup> This point becomes more obvious when demand - in this case, for "renewables" - significantly rises, which bring many negative side effects in other areas - see the conflict over energy and food (see SI 2010). Note that solar energy needs solar panels and wind energy needs wind mills, two products whose production also requires resources.

<sup>13</sup> The grounds for this notion is probably that these strategies produce no change at a deeper, motivation level in consumers but rather only superficial ones rooted in the price-performance relationship (see below).

<sup>14</sup> As for example showed in fn 7. See Stengel 2011, 131ff.

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Paech 2012, 71ff.

## **B Strategies Towards Sustainability: Sufficiency**

### **1. *Two alternative attitudes***

The strategies above are not adequate to succeed in the objective of a durable present and future for human beings. The future they promise is unknown but different and in the sense of sustainability steadily worse than the present we enjoy. In this regard we can take two alternative attitudes:

a) We can be realistic, or perhaps just pessimistic, and recognize that human beings as a collective entity have very seldom acted as one to preserve anything just for the sake of future generations - especially in the leading countries for economic growth. Only at an individual level - apart from some especially generous persons - can we find some unselfish examples of individuals acting contrary to their immediate political interests - setting aside that inheritance, indeed an act for the sake of future generations, cannot be said to be altruistic, as it refers mostly to goods kept for close family (mostly known) heirs.

The reason for this might be that those who are not yet perceivable human beings, and even more those who are to come, are not categories we can really consider and then take care of<sup>16</sup>.

The good news is that human individuals are creatures of habit. We learn to get used to what we have. So we can trust that future generations will manage with the resources they receive; they cannot miss what they never had. We did the same, and we could not either. Our generation has learnt to survive in this manner.

The bad news is logical. We are only ethically responsible for the future. From a legal standpoint, there would be no case for assuming responsibility for damages in the very long term. No one would be to blame, and it would be very complicated to face concrete complaints or accusations from future generations or in the name of human beings to come, provided that we do still not take steps to improve (e.g., we are still wasteful). Such a case would be legally very questionable, as there would be no easy way to represent future generations or their interests today. Besides, resource collapse or denigration may be fast, but these results would be multi-causal and will happen mostly slow enough so that no present politician, country or generation could be made responsible. And in any case, no future politician, country or generation will be able to argue that it is impossible to live in the conditions they inherited. They will manage and will not look backwards.

b) Otherwise, we can adhere to our present ethical values, even beyond any legal requirements, and look for strategies that really guarantee sustainable development<sup>17</sup>.

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<sup>16</sup> See, e.g., Liedtke, Max 2011, 37ff.

<sup>17</sup> Cf. Braun 2010.





I think the only strategies that first break with the present predominant economic-political system and second offer realistic alternatives without destroying our resource assets are those based on *sufficiency* (i.e. *less*, moderation in needs and in the ways to satisfy them)<sup>18</sup>. These strategies are more realistic than the current scheme based on continuous growth, whose foundation and goals are definitely idealistic, whereas just the realization of the former would be extremely difficult but not impossible - as well as their foundation or goal<sup>19</sup>.

Sufficiency has an incomparable advantage over other strategies: it can be directly implemented by anyone at any time<sup>20</sup>. It would probably start as a bottom-up process. If a significant number of consumers dared to try this strategy, both Politics and Economy would have no other choice but to consider them.

The advantage of this individual approach concerning sufficiency can also be a disadvantage. Successful individual efforts in one state or world region would have a minor effect if these efforts did not simultaneously obtain broad international support<sup>21</sup>. If economic growth continues to be the model that rules both Politics and Economy, those countries that followed sufficiency strategies would weaken themselves in the political arena, as their economies would become progressively feeble. The consequence would be that they would have less and less international influence if the others did not go this way as well; we would then run out of sustainable models.

## **2. Towards Sufficiency Implementation**

As stated above, sufficiency is a tricky question. If you wanted to implement it directly, you would then transform it into a question of voluntary or involuntary renouncement - and sufficiency has to come from an inner freedom: you just do not need more<sup>22</sup>. Otherwise, as a kind of "rebound effect", you will obtain consumption moderation only as long as the external (e.g. financial crisis) or internal (e.g. bad conscience) pressures affect the individuals' decisions of renouncing material goods. Afterwards, you will have the same

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<sup>18</sup> Not too much of anything: Linz 2002.

<sup>19</sup> It is true that a growing population of moderate consumers could compensate for those strategies as well, as a huge number of them could make it unavoidable to reach the boundary of resource scarcity and exhaustion or drain anyway after a while - certainly, depending on the definition of *moderate*. The most important thing, however, is to change the foundation of current Politics and Economy, as this shift would offer a real chance for sustainability for this generation and for future generations.

<sup>20</sup> Cf. Kaufmann-Hayoz et al. 2001, 37-8.

<sup>21</sup> It is different with regards to resource conservation in the case that international consensus fails, as states that decide individually to preserve their resources will not necessarily harm themselves by keeping their resources in case other states do not follow them. Those resources will still be there, just in case. They might even become compensations - against guarantees - for their preservation (UNDP 2010).

<sup>22</sup> Cf. Stengel 2011, 340ff.



consumption level as before - or perhaps even more, at least for a short while, to compensate for the renouncing time<sup>23</sup>.

In any case, the first question concerning the adequateness of sufficiency would be easy: *Whether* people can live acceptably with moderate needs or by moderately providing for their needs. The answer would probably be affirmative<sup>24</sup>. We can assume that living a fulfilled, happy life is the direct or indirect goal of any human action<sup>25</sup>. And we can accept that happiness does not directly depend on material goods - or that it could even be incompatible with them<sup>26</sup>. So the pursuit of our own fulfillment should have real sustainability as a result.

We can go into more detail. We can observe from the logic behind growth that our generation has had more than enough goods to cover needs (and probably more than needs, too); in fact, it has had more goods than any previous generation. However, it would be difficult to conclude that our generation lives happier than older generations just for this reason<sup>27</sup>. So we could indeed state that happiness and consumption are not directly correlated<sup>28</sup>. It would mean on the contrary that a growth-based system has in principle little influence over the attainment of happiness – or it might even be counterproductive. *De facto*, we can observe in countries with different Gross Domestic Indexes (GDI) that their "happiness" index - provided that this index really measures what it is supposed to, which is not obvious at all - does not correlate with their GDI, at least not in a consistently significant manner<sup>29</sup>. Even if there is some relationship between wealth and happiness, at any rate, up to a \$10,000/year limit, the exceptions are overwhelming (Costa Rica has one of the

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<sup>23</sup> This is the essential difference between *abstinence* (lat. *abstinere*, *abs* away, *tinere* hold, to abstain, to refrain) and *sufficiency* (lat. *sufficientia*, *sufficere*: *sub* down; *facere* make, to suffice, to be adequate) approaches. Even if their goals are similar, namely less resource consumption, their methods are different. In abstinence approaches there is a heteronomous - maybe autonomous - element of obligation (to consume less) that is absent in sufficiency approaches. This difference is important, as moderation will last only as long as the obligation. In other words, voluntariness guarantees the stability and success of sufficiency.

<sup>24</sup> See Paech 2012, 113ff.

<sup>25</sup> Which can be regarded as nothing less than a fundamental right: Virginia Declaration of Rights 1776: I "*That all men are by nature equally free and independent, and have certain inherent rights, ..., namely, the enjoyment of life and liberty, with the means of acquiring and possessing property, and pursuing and obtaining happiness and safety*". Declaration of Independence 4<sup>th</sup> July 1776: "*We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness*". Cf. the Preamble American Declaration of the Rights and Duties of Man, 1948.

<sup>26</sup> See Beckmann 2010; NEF 2009, 45; Heuser 2007, 3.

<sup>27</sup> See Jackson/Marks 1999, 421ff. Probably anyone can individually arrive at the same conclusion. In so-called "developed" countries people must have had less in the past (certainly in peace times without any kind of emergencies or disasters) than they have today, given the continuously growing economy. And this does not mean that they lived (twice, thrice, x times) less fulfilling lives. Some would even say that the contrary would actually be true.

<sup>28</sup> See Jackson/Marks 1999, 436ff.

<sup>29</sup> See Jackson 2011, 53ff.; v. Weizsäcker et al. 2009, 362ff.



highest life satisfaction rates worldwide)<sup>30</sup>. Finally, external observations of GDI-weak countries - which I can share - often also conclude that their people seem to be as happy as (or even happier than) people in the so-called “developed” world, even though they have much less in terms of material means<sup>31</sup>.

The decisive questions are nevertheless, *why* should, or *what* makes people consume moderately, perhaps, to live frugally - i.e., to reject the present model that promotes not wanting to have enough, but rather more and more of everything - and *how* to implement it. Answers can be very complex: many areas of knowledge must be considered and combined in order to obtain plausible results. It is well worth finding those answers, as the success of replacing the growth-based present economic scheme could depend on them. Politics would be challenged to look forwards and from an international perspective, rather than being oriented towards immediate needs; economics, now reluctant to change the model it is at present based on, would have to question its foundations and conceive post-growth scenarios; law would be responsible for presenting supportive, repressive, and sanctioning instruments in order to achieve those political and economic goals; psychology and sociology, which have the competence to understand and explain motivations behind human actions, should explain and ground the shift from life quantity to life quality; religion and ethics should offer credible or plausible alternatives to materialism as well as cement values and principles that are valid for future generations; etc.

However, the answers could be very simple if we followed the arguments above. As has been mentioned, everyone wants to live a truly fulfilling life. They will look for their own answers and instruments to achieve this. Doing this, they will live sustainably. This simplicity could mean a paramount advantage: there would be no need to know, to understand, to convince or to adhere to abstract ethical values that would be very difficult to determine or perhaps to perceive or justify. Individuals need just to be "egoist" and look for effective ways of obtaining happiness, and hence they will be in solid harmony with global sustainability, even for future generations<sup>32</sup>. In any case, as an advantage over all other methods for achieving sufficiency, no new technology or especially clever method needs to be found or discovered for its attainment.

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<sup>30</sup> NEF 2009, 21ff.; cf. [http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap\\_nat/findingreports/RankReport2009-2d.htm](http://worlddatabaseofhappiness.eur.nl/hap_nat/findingreports/RankReport2009-2d.htm) - 31.08.2012; Heuser 2007, 2. According to the Happy Planet Index (HPI), the first three countries (by combining the targets' life expectancies, life satisfaction survey responses and ecological footprints) are at present Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic and Jamaica (NEF 2009, 27-8).

<sup>31</sup> See below. Cf. Everett 2009.

<sup>32</sup> This may sound like Adam Smith's invisible hand and resource allocation in society. The outcome of the proposal shown in this paper should hopefully work better inter- and intragenerationally.



## **IV. Sufficiency and Development Politics: Paradigms to Learn From in Developing Countries**

### **A Sufficiency and the Consequences for Developing Politics**

In the context shown development politics should be seen under a very different light. In two senses:

- The reflections above would challenge its foundation, particularly if mainstream economic development underlies it, as is usually the case. This development concept compromises and undermines the environmental and social conditions of our generation and of the next generations. Therefore, a new goal, compatible with true sustainability, must be the goal of development politics. This approach would certainly bring a fundamental change to the way such politics would be carried out in the future.

- It may not be clear which development concept is preferable or which methods should be used to implement it. It is certain, however, that unidirectional, uniformising approaches would not be adequate any more. The idea that (sustainable?) development should come from those who know, are "developed", or are somehow superior, to those who "must" or "should want" to know, or are somehow inferior, i.e., "developing" countries, would be highly questionable. Not least because there would be no reason to export a flawed model. Indeed, if "development" equals sustainable development, there could be many good ways to achieve it. So the knowledge of real sustainability could already exist in those so-called "developing" countries. The input to a new development approach would be necessarily multidirectional, as many of those "developing" countries have something to contribute and to say regarding time-tested sustainable models.

The result would be a radically transformed view. The difference between developed or developing countries would become redundant, as all countries would belong to both categories. Hence the search for real sustainability would imply equality and respect. All viewpoints and ways of pursuing that goal would then be considered at the same level. They all could potentially provide valuable paradigms to learn from. Developing politics would provide a good chance for the communication and implementation of such obligatorily sufficient, sustainable strategies, as they are the only ones that benefit simultaneously both individuals and their environment. Both points bring us to the next section.

### **B Native or Indigenous Peoples: an Approach to Learn From?**

Strategies based on sufficiency are both realistic and yet far from reality at the same time. On the one hand, sufficient ways of living would provide a sustainable solution, but on the other hand, their implementation would be rather idealistic, as the dominant economy and politics would be extremely difficult to displace.

The realistic side of such strategies could, however, come to outweigh the negative side, since these strategies correspond to the living experience of some peoples in so-called developing countries. They show that it



is possible to exist in harmony, synergy or symbiosis with the environment, taking just what is needed, thus guaranteeing its sustainability. It could be beneficial for human beings to see this and how these models work, to know that there are other ways of living to learn from, so as to best decide which model could be adopted or just how to adapt our (in theory) more developed solutions to make them truly sustainable ones. Three examples, among many hundreds, will be considered in this section. There is no special reason for this choice. Apart from the fact that their conditions and approaches are different from each other, they all have something in common: the cultures they represent have developed a higher respect for their environment and for their integration into it; are aware of the validity and sustainability of their world views; and they are willing to keep them. Something else: their singularity is menaced, as they subsist amidst a much more influential mainstream-economy world that threatens both their living spaces and their ways of life.

Previous to their presentation, it is important to remark the following:

- This section aims to briefly expose the reality of different ethnicities and their cultures in a different manner from anthropology or ethnology. I mention this simply in order to qualify these fields as valid counterparts.
- It does not pursue to protect those people as a curiosity, as this attitude would contradict any respectful approach to them and cement a new dependence on their "protectors", which would not allow them to be seen as unequal; and would finally mean disorientation and isolation for them, as the world around them would be still irresistibly and unsustainably changing, their communities being shielded from any outside influence in the process.
- It is necessary to present these examples in the most genuine version possible, perhaps partially anachronistic, in order for the contrast to mainstream approaches to be more evident. At the same time, it is necessary to try to avoid naive or romantic interpretations or approaches.
- Cultures can very rarely be hermetic, as they communicate and influence one another. Perhaps the best chance for indigenous people and their cultures would be to participate in the building of both Politics and Economy without giving up their own roots, which would logically cause complex tension on both sides. As the indigenous peoples are the weaker side, the cost of this exchange could be to lose for them - and for all of us - most of their originality.
- With our ignorance or their disappearance (or assimilation), these and other similar cultures would miss the chance to leave their footprint on the way people live in the future. If they fade away, the practical models those cultures represent as chances to reverse the collapse of our current idealistic consumption model will vanish with them.



- The paradox is that indigenous peoples are among those that suffer most of the consequences caused by deeply unsustainable mainstream politics without having contributed - in general at all - to their arising.
- The following examples are not meant as a desire to undo development or western civilization. They should be just the expression that other ways of living, which are far from materialism and economic growth, are possible, and that they deserve respect in and of themselves, not just as a source to mutually learn from.
- Finally: you can doubt whether or not the following people voluntarily chose their way of living - probably not, so in a way we could disagree as to whether or not they live according to our approach to sufficiency, i.d., self-fulfillment. Perhaps they would be ready to exchange their way of life for ours, if given the chance. Such questions would require an independent analysis. These examples just aim to show that sustainability and a balanced life are possible. Not more, but not less than that.

### **1. The Machiguenga**

The Machiguenga (or matsigenka) are an ethnic group of around 9,000 individuals who live in the upper rain forest of Southeastern Peru, mostly in the Urubamba and the Madre de Dios river drainage area, including the Manú<sup>33</sup>. Traditionally, they preferred isolation from western influence, so they started to settle in increasingly inhospitable places. They spread out into smaller groups, although complete isolation is nowadays no longer possible. Some facts are to be highlighted that are fundamentally a part of a culture that is orally transmitted from one generation to the next<sup>34</sup>: their respect for the environment in which they live, their integration into their environment (also spiritually through the *ayahuasca* shaman ceremonies); their deep appreciation of biological diversity; and their immense knowledge of botanic and plant effects - which is, by the way, far beyond utilitarian motivations<sup>35</sup>. The Machiguenga are animist and explain through myths and philosophical speculation the origins of the life around them<sup>36</sup>.

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<sup>33</sup> See [http://www.peruecologico.com.pe/etnias\\_machiguenga.htm](http://www.peruecologico.com.pe/etnias_machiguenga.htm) - 31.08.2012. This reached relative international prominence through Vargas Llosas *The Storyteller* (2001).

<sup>34</sup> Shepard/Chiccón 2001, 166ff.

<sup>35</sup> Shepard 1997: "*Native peoples [sic] have a great deal to teach us, not only on the spiritual level but also about practical issues about the environment in which they live. Native peoples [sic] have great knowledge about medicines, wild and domesticated food plants, dyes, insect repellents, resins, perfumes and other practical uses of plants. Not only do native peoples have tremendous knowledge about individual plant species, they also know the plant communities, habitats and local forest types better than scientists. In a three-month survey of Machiguenga knowledge of the forest, I was able to document some 45 different kinds of forest recognized by the Machiguenga in the immediate area of their village. Scientists working in the Manu are currently able to distinguish just ten or twelve types of forest. (...) I hope that native people, typically looked upon as backwards and uncivilized, can be seen instead as sophisticated naturalists in their own right (...)*".

<sup>36</sup> Shepard 1997.



## 2. The Mapuche

The Mapuche (from *mapu*, “earth”, and *che*, “people”) ethnicity is now found only in central and southern Chile and in south-west Argentina. They resisted the Inca and the Spanish empires, but then started to yield and decline with and after the independence wars in the 19th century. Policies of assimilation both in Argentina and Chile afterwards have had a very negative effect on their linguistic and cultural identity and integrity. The Mapuche represent an important part (4-10%) of the Chilean population - although less than 0,5% of the Argentinian population<sup>37</sup>. They have developed a deep and profound knowledge of their natural and spatial environment and believe in the cohesion and mutual influence of everything. *Gvnechen* (*Ngenechén* or *Ngünechén*) is their highest deity. All visible or invisible matter has *energy* (*Newen*) and thus movement and life. Nothing is static or isolated. Human beings do not have hegemonic power over the cosmos or over the forces that are present in the world, as they are just a part of it and of its balance<sup>38</sup>.

## 3. The Bijagós

The Bijagós (also known as the “Bissagos” or “Bidyogo”) are a native ethnicity of about 20.000 people who live in the Bissagos Islands<sup>39</sup>. In their matriarchal and matrilineal culture, women choose their husbands and play a guiding role as priests in their communities<sup>40</sup>. The Bijagós have managed to preserve their independence despite long periods of slavery and colonial oppression. Their religion is animist and land-oriented. It prohibits access to certain sacred places for ceremonies and rites of initiation. This prohibition has been decisive to the conservation of flora, fauna and natural resources in the islands (since 1996 the archipelago has been a UNESCO Biosphere Reserve). Now fisheries, offshore oil drilling, shipbreaking, and drug smuggling are menaces, not only because they produce pollution and create social problems, but also because they threaten the longstanding environmental balance vital to the almost autarchic Bijagós population<sup>41</sup>. The protection of this balance and of the Bijagós population is nonetheless not assured due to the fact that Guinea-Bissau is one of the five poorest countries in the world.

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<sup>37</sup> The existing statistics are however contradictory and vary significantly from each other depending on their sources (Bussani 2003; <http://www.ine.cl/cd2002/sintesis censal.pdf> - 31.08.2012).

<sup>38</sup> Millamán 2008, 67-70. This is the sense of the central Mapuche yearly rite of nature balance renewal on the 23<sup>th</sup> June (Bussani 2003).

<sup>39</sup> This archipelago is located in front of the semitropical Guinea-Bissau coast (West-Africa). It comprises 88 islands, only 23 of which are inhabited. Corbin/Tindall 2007.

<sup>40</sup> Corbin/Tindall 2007; Bernatzik 1933.

<sup>41</sup> Henriques/Campredon.



## V. Conclusion and Outlook

From the point of view of logic it is sometimes difficult to understand why there is a divergence between how things are and how they should be if all agree on the goals and on the ways to achieve them, and if these are feasible. We would all concede that human beings pursue, consciously or at least unconsciously, a happy, a fulfilled life according to the circumstances they are given. They will do their best in order to succeed in that goal. No method that really brings to fruition this goal (i.e., one that does not fail to satisfy any essential need) would burden those individuals or their own environment. Its attainment would also guarantee sustainability for generations to come. So then why the enormous discrepancy mentioned?

It would be complex to speculate and delve into all the possible explanations. Such explanations would all only give partial answers as to how reality is as it is now, or how it became this way. This cannot be the aim of this paper, which is instead to draw attention to some inconsistencies, to inquire as to their possible explanations and then to propose some solutions.

This paper presumes that mainstream economics, and thus the politics based on it, is unsound. First, their foundation - continuous growth or consumption - is flawed, as it exhausts or damages the existing resources, thus impeding sustainability, hence having a negative impact on the ways this generation and future generations will satisfy their needs. And second, their nature steers human beings away from their own essence by promoting values like materialism and individualism. As a result, there is no logical reason to support these politics or this economy. It should be replaced, as complicated as its removal may be, because this would benefit all of us lastingly and absolutely, i.e., beyond any temporal or local point of view.

If the premises above are convincing, the good news is that replacement is actually within our reach. Any one of us can start to live sustainably without any prior knowledge, or can fashion a sustainable way of life that will be more fulfilling for him- or herself. Or, *vice versa*, anyone can look for his or her own balance of fulfillment (happiness is preferred), and then he or she will be living in a sustainable way, i.e., acting for and assuming responsibility just for ourselves will benefit not only any one of us, but also our next of kin, as our needs and the manner in which we satisfy them will then be sufficient, moderate and, therefore, sustainable.

The consequence of this view change is of capital importance and immediate for development politics: the idea behind *development* is to be questioned - why should other people *develop* or become *developed* if it does not make sense to insist on the mainstream growth-economy and politics. Another development concept would be required, the input of which will have to come from different sources. The answer cannot be unidirectional anymore, but rather multidirectional, according to different models, towards a global real





sustainable development – including according to models coming from some native peoples and their cultures in former “developing” countries. With this approach, development politics would be sustainably hindered from spreading unsustainable models and flawed values, but would instead spread only truly fair and durable ones. These values would be respectful to every human being and hence simultaneously to all those who will inherit the earth from us.

In this paper, some real models were shortly described with two purposes. The first one was to show that it is possible to live differently and sustainably, as the examples of some aboriginal cultures highlight - most all of them in so-called “developing” countries. The second was to encourage people to react quickly, for our own sake, and also in order that those models do not belong to the past before they have a chance to be realised and so remain an open lesson in this regard.

On the other hand, we can consider realistically (and perhaps sarcastically) that no one will be to blame if Politics or Economy remain like this; that humans are creatures of habit that get used to what they receive; or that their temporal and spatial perspective is limited, so it is extremely complicated for them to assume responsibility beyond the confines of their immediate existence - indeed, resources will diminish and peoples living in peace with their environment will adapt or disappear, and the knowledge on this will not be enough to stop this development. However there is hope. There is one horizon or perspective people will respect: their own lives. Each one of us will not really feel better or fulfilled if the dominant values are materialism and individualism. It is not possible, then, to see the logical point of approaches relying on them: what are they good for, or for whom? So: just try to be happy, in balance with yourself and your (also social) environment and you will achieve sustainable development in the process.

This paper is not to be understood as a rejection of any progress or development or as technique-resistant *per se*. Its purpose is to offer alternatives to an evolution that goes step by step to its own end. Integration of different views and mutual respect could be ways to achieve it. If the goal is to stop such negative evolution, and this means to question progress or development, or the ideologies behind them, this inquiry should however be made.



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**Nr. 1** (Januar 2013)

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