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## 1. Introduction

- 1 Over the last ten years, various Latin American countries have developed alternative models to the classic conception of development rooted in a Western vision of social progress and of humans' relationship to the environment. Based on the world-view of the Amerindian peoples, the vision of development formulated and defended by Bolivia gives a central place to cultural identity and harmony between nature and human beings. It aims to break away from the economic model previously adopted by Bolivia, a model that has made the country highly dependent on the export of raw materials.
- 2 The emergence of a new vision of development based on the principles of *Vivir Bien* (Living Well) and *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) has led to the enactment of a law and the creation of an institution devoted to these principles. The latter lies at the heart of two important documents that define development priorities: the Agenda 2025 (Bolivia, 2013) and the Plan for Economic and Social Development 2016-20 (Bolivia, 2015).

- 3 This chapter is a study of the Biocultura programme (Programa Nacional Biocultura, PNB). The programme, which was launched in 2008, is a joint initiative by the Bolivian government and the SDC. It aims to translate the alternative vision of development into concrete practices by taking the rich culture and biodiversity of the Andes as the foundation for enduring economic and social development.
- 4 This chapter is based on fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2015, on the analysis of documents produced for the programme, and on discussions held in the SDC's Latin America and Caribbean Division.
- 5 The first part discusses the main elements of the alternative vision of development formulated and promoted by Bolivia. It shows that, far from being an unambiguous concept, *Vivir Bien* is subject to many varied interpretations. It also highlights tensions between this vision of development and the constraints of the Bolivian economy that depends heavily on the extraction of raw materials. The second section highlights the achievements of Biocultura. It focuses on the initiatives put forward to translate *Vivir Bien* into practice, and on the participatory approach used to encourage communities to determine their own priorities and, thereby, to reconcile the improvement of their living conditions with the protection of biodiversity. The last part presents the prospects of this programme, taking into account recent developments in the Bolivian context.

## 2. 'Living Well' and Economic and Social Development

- 6 The development model formulated and promoted by the Government of the Plurinational State of Bolivia is based on the notions of *Vivir Bien* and *Madre Tierra*. According to the Framework Law on *Madre Tierra* and Integral Development for *Vivir Bien* of 2012, '*Vivir Bien* [...] means living in complementarity, in harmony and balance with *Madre Tierra* and different societies, living in equity and solidarity while eliminating inequality and the mechanisms of domination. It means *Vivir Bien* amongst ourselves, *Vivir Bien* in our environment and *Vivir Bien* with ourselves' (Bolivia, 2012, Article 5, second paragraph, our transl.).
- 7 Based on the traditional world-view of Amerindian peoples, *Vivir Bien* proposes itself as an alternative to the Western linear concept of Living Better. In contrast with the anthropocentrism of Western philosophy that views nature as a set of exploitable resources, this model seeks balance and harmony between humans and nature. The latter is considered sacred and endowed with rights guaranteed by the Plurinational *Madre Tierra* Authority.
- 8 This vision of development breaks with the Bolivian economic model, dependent as it is on the export of raw materials, particularly oil and mining products. With the increase in the price of these commodities between 2005 and 2015 and the nationalisation policy pursued by the government during this period, the different strata of the Bolivian state benefited from a significant financial windfall. This windfall was largely redistributed through social programmes and funded an ambitious infrastructure programme. According to World Bank statistics, poverty affected 39 per cent of the population in 2013 against 63 per cent in 2002, and the rate of extreme poverty<sup>1</sup> fell from 37 per cent to 19 per cent over the same period. Beyond income indicators, the living conditions of the poorest and access to basic services have improved considerably with the Gini

coefficient of the country dropping from 60 to 49 (World Bank, 2015). These results may explain the support enjoyed by President Evo Morales since he took office in 2006.

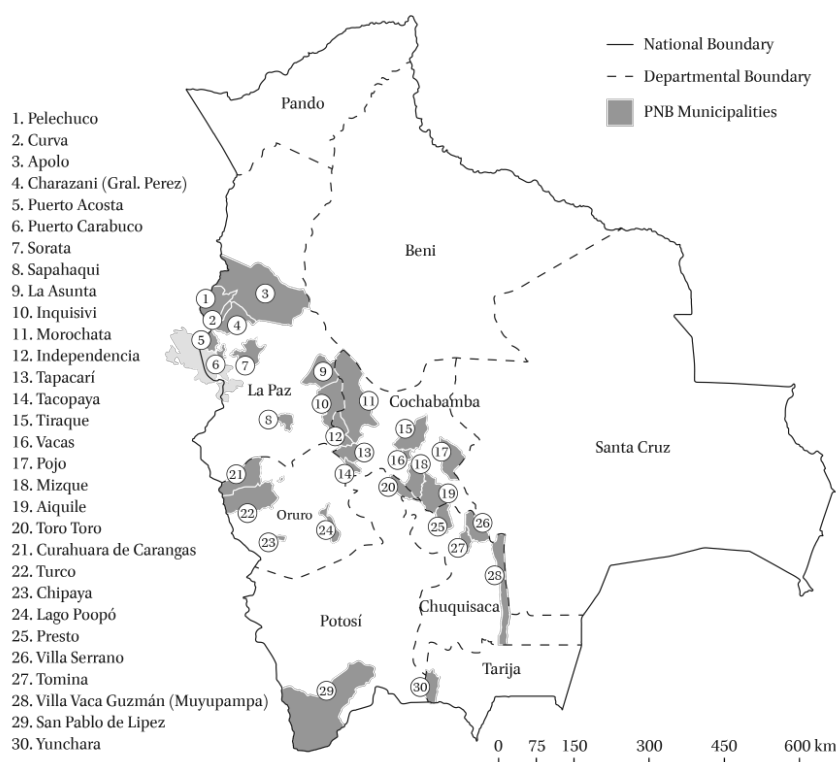
- 9 Tensions between this vision of harmonious development and the constraints of economic development based on the extraction of raw materials have become particularly apparent in two emblematic cases: the construction of the highway linking the departments of Cochabamba and Beni through the Indigenous Territory and Isiboro Sécure National Park (Territorio Indígena y Parque Nacional Isiboro Sécure: TIPNIS), and the more recent authorisation to make use of natural resources in protected areas and indigenous territories (Supreme Decree No. 2066, Bolivia, 2014). In both cases, the protests of concerned groups and conservationists did not deflect the government from its position, and there is every reason to believe that these facilities will indeed be built.
- 10 This apparent contradiction between economic development and *Vivir Bien* is partly due to the ambiguous nature of the concept of *Vivir Bien*. Hidalgo-Capitán and Cubillo-Guevara (Chapter 3, this volume) identify three main interpretations, each of which focuses on a specific aspect of the concept: an indigenous understanding based on identity, a socialist and statist conception based on equity and, finally, an environmental vision that emphasises sustainability. These three interpretations reflect competing ideological currents within the Latin American Left.
- 11 Each of these interpretations gives a different place to the imperative of extraction. The socialist and statist interpretation of *Vivir Bien* gives priority to improving living conditions and is, therefore, compatible with the extraction of raw materials. According to the Bolivian Vice-President, 'we cannot [...] be content with protecting the trees, while leaving our people in poverty—for there is nothing idyllic about the living conditions of indigenous peoples [...]. Some of our companions in the Altiplano live in stone houses; they have a five-hour walk to get to the nearest school; they sleep all day for lack of enough to eat. Please enlighten me: what knowledge economy can be built under these conditions? Should we emerge from "extractivism"? Yes, definitely. But not by returning to the Stone Age. The transition involves making use of our natural resources to create the conditions—cultural, political and material—which will allow the population to move on to a different economic model' (García Linera, 2016, our transl.).
- 12 The coexistence of these interpretations, even within the Movement Towards Socialism (Movimiento al Socialismo: MAS), currently in power, has not resulted in any thoroughgoing political and ideological debate. This lack of public debate can be linked to the characteristics of this particular political party, which—according to Do Alto and Stefanoni (2008)—acts as a simple political instrument whose structuring element is the trade union. Trade union leaders individually defend their respective positions and agendas with the support of their respective followers but do not engage in controversies themselves.

### 3. Biocultura: Implementing *Vivir Bien*

- 13 How far is it possible to reconcile the improvement of living conditions and the balance between human beings and nature? What role can actors of international cooperation play in the realisation of the concept of *Vivir Bien*? These are the questions that drive the Biocultura programme.

- 14 The programme relies on the assumption that sustainable economic and social development requires making the most of the richness of culture and biodiversity in the Andean region. It aims to encourage the development of alternatives to the current model of development of Bolivia. According to the programme's guidelines: '...changing—at least partially—the extractive and rentier model that has characterised our country in recent years and moving towards an alternative, sustainable and fair model of development [...] will be possible only if we implement innovative approaches to the management of Andean ecosystems, which will simultaneously make possible both the sustainable use and the conservation of biodiversity' (MMAYA/VMABCC and SDC, 2009, our transl.).
- 15 Conceptually, Biocultura aims to foster the complementarity between the Western approach embodied in the ideas of development, progress and growth, and an Amerindian vision based on the concepts of balance, respect and benevolence (Programa Nacional Biocultura, 2015a). This approach 'solves the contradictions that characterise modern societies. The first main complementarity is that of Western civilisation and indigenous civilisation. This contribution can help overcome the Manichean dualism of "either/or" that drains the creative energy of societies. We have advocated a logic that enables us to use "both...and" and thus create a "win-win" situation' (Programa Nacional Biocultura, 2015a, 18, our transl.).
- 16 Biocultura is a joint programme of the SDC and the Bolivian Ministry of Environment and Water. It is one of the public policies that were initiated in 2007 by the Bolivian government to strengthen the local management of biodiversity. In 2009, the new constitution and the National Development Plan incorporated strategies and policies for conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity related to the rights of indigenous peoples.
- 17 The Biocultura programme also benefits from the many experiments conducted by the SDC in Bolivia and the Andean region, especially in the field of biodiversity management by peasant and indigenous communities, including the BioAndes programme for the sustainable management of biodiversity in Bolivia, Ecuador and Peru; the regional programmes Probona and Ecobona for the management of native forest ecosystems through forestry, forest protection, rural development and access to markets; and the Proinpa programme for the use and conservation of biodiversity. For the SDC, Biocultura is an opportunity to strengthen the impact of such programmes by incorporating them within a government policy framework.
- 18 The Biocultura programme has local, regional, national and international dimensions. However, its resources are applied mainly at the local level, as it is regarded as the level at which the public policy of *Vivir Bien* finds its best expression (Programa Nacional Biocultura, 2015a). Between 2009 and 2014, the Biocultura programme was implemented in 35 municipalities (out of 339), all located in the Altiplano and in the transverse valleys (Figure 7.1), and characterised by a high level of biodiversity and endemic poverty. Despite significant investments made by the government to improve the road network, these regions remain highly isolated because transport development plans prioritise connecting large cities and strategic corridors, rather than these remote villages.

Figure 7.1 Municipalities of intervention, Biocultura programme (PNB).



Source: Author (prepared by the Unidad de Servicios y Fortalecimiento).

- 19 Over this period, the projects supported as part of Biocultura allowed over 11,000 families to increase their incomes by 17 per cent on average and to improve their diets (10 per cent more calories).<sup>2</sup> Efforts to preserve the ecosystems and biodiversity of the Andes focused on 9,873 hectares in four different ecoregions. In addition, the management of eight protected areas of national importance was enhanced.
- 20 At the local level, the projects incorporate four main components: local governance, productive development, ecosystem management and the management of cultural diversity. These components were identified through a participatory process at the time of the programme's launch.
- 21 With regard to local governance, the programme encourages participatory processes for developing strategic plans, so as to allow communities to set their own priorities. Funding (including municipalities' budgets) and external support are then allocated based on the strategic plan. In addition, Biocultura contributes to strengthening the capacity of local authorities and leaders in order to improve governance and the work of local organisations.
- 22 Moreover, Biocultura supports productive projects to raise household incomes and diversify the diet of the local population. These projects are intended to develop agricultural production and enable the creation of new sources of income. Some projects support the production of native and/or medicinal plants grown by local farmers, while others are aimed at the diffusion of organic farming techniques. In the municipality of Vacas, for example, Biocultura supported a project to prevent chemicals from degrading lagoon water quality; the lagoon being the main source of water supply for the population. Much of the production from this project is consumed

at home or traded on local markets. At Rajaypampa, support from Biocultura has enabled the creation of a communal company producing biscuits from locally grown wheat. Part of the production is sold to schools, which provide children breakfast. The rest is sold in markets outside the village—through short distribution channels—and, more rarely, in the departmental capital - which is more difficult to access given the remoteness of the village.

- 23 This component of the programme emphasises local products and their virtues. The development of the road network, although it focuses largely on routes linking major cities rather than on the secondary network, creates new trading opportunities for local production, but it also facilitates the entry of goods produced elsewhere to the local markets, thereby undermining local production. By emphasising the quality, freshness and price of local goods, Biocultura-supported projects have raised awareness among local authorities and the population about the quality of their products, the benefits in terms of diet, and for the local economy. As a result, there has been a major increase in the proportion of local products—honey, fortified flour, cereals, etc.—used in meals served in schools.
- 24 Activities to preserve the biodiversity and ecosystems of the Andes include not only the development of local standards but also the protection of resources, water management, reforestation, soil conservation, and the repopulation of native grasslands. In the Altiplano, for example, the water supply is the most important issue, being essential for the breeding of camelids, which is the main productive activity in the area. However, water supply is threatened by melting glaciers associated with climate change. In this context, Biocultura emphasises the maintenance of *bofedales*, wetlands used for grazing.
- 25 The main objective of the part of the programme dedicated to the management of cultural diversity is to enhance the value of knowledge, technology and cultural expression.. It highlights the knowledge possessed by communities about nature and about various productive activities, and brings these into dialogue with scientific knowledge. Some schools have also taken the initiative to integrate local knowledge into their curricula. Specific cultural aspects have been integrated into the teaching of different disciplines, including the use of medicinal plants and local architecture. Children are asked to carry out research on these topics by interviewing the local population. They gain a better understanding of local knowledge, and a genuine ability to bring out its value.
- 26 Projects aimed at strengthening the capacity of local actors are the result of a collaboration between communities, municipalities and NGOs. Municipalities are committed to providing their own funds and also to ensuring the sustainability of these projects. In turn, the local NGOs, which are selected through a competitive process, provide the technical knowledge necessary for the project.
- 27 In addition to its support to local projects, Biocultura works to strengthen institutions and *Vivir Bien* policies, the protection and conservation of biodiversity, and to promote issues related to climate change. Local experiences are systematised and made available to higher administrative levels. In this context, the programme has provided support to the departments of Cochabamba, Tarija, and Potosi. At the national level, Biocultura participated in the consultations about the development of Law No. 300, the Framework Law on *Madre Tierra* and Integral Development for *Vivir Bien*. Furthermore,

the programme has supported the creation of the Plurinational *Madre Tierra* Authority and the Plurinational Fund of *Madre Tierra*.

- 28 At the international level, Biocultura supported the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in developing the position of Bolivia—which incorporates the rights of *Madre Tierra* and the right to water and to *Vivir Bien*—in preparation for negotiations on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and climate change and in view of discussions within the G77 and China.

## 4. Conclusions and Prospects

- 29 Local projects supported by Biocultura show that it is possible to reconcile the protection of biodiversity and increased revenue. For Benecio Quispe, a former executive director of the Plurinational *Madre Tierra* Authority, 'Biocultura is perhaps the first serious attempt to search for a development model other than the one that the West has imposed on us. Comprehensive interventions have been carried out to show the world that an integral, sustainable development in harmony and balance with *Madre Tierra* is possible' (Programa Nacional Biocultura 2015b, our transl.).
- 30 Biocultura has entered its final phase (2015-19) and is now operating as a project. As in previous phases, it will devote most of its resources to local projects. However, it is now more aligned with national policy in the field of climate change, insofar as Andean regions are particularly affected by this phenomenon. Rainfall is indeed more and more variable, flood and drought episodes are now recurrent problems, and melting glaciers pose a threat to biodiversity, soil productivity and potentially the food security of the population.
- 31 In the coming years, the Plurinational *Madre Tierra* Authority will benefit from Swiss funds to build its capacity for the management of the Plurinational Fund of *Madre Tierra*. The latter aims to bring together national and international resources—in particular from the Green Climate Fund—that will be devoted to mitigating the effects of climate change. In addition, the Economic and Social Development Plan 2016-20 requires each municipality to set out a Regional Development Plan that incorporates social development, economic development and adaptation to climate change (Bolivia, 2015). In this context, the local projects supported by Biocultura stand out as examples, as does the participatory approach that gave birth to them.
- 32 The country's economic model is currently suffering due to the fall in raw material prices since 2015. It is therefore imperative that the government finds alternative sources of income that will allow it to pursue the redistributive policy that has enabled it to improve the living conditions of the poorest and to continue to benefit from widespread support from the population. Provided that the current situation does not cause an intensification of the extraction of raw materials, the government could therefore take this opportunity to diversify the country's productive base and implement an economic model that combines economic development, social progress, the protection of biodiversity and the promotion of local cultures. Furthermore, recent developments in oil prices are increasing tensions between the vision of development put forward by Bolivia, the constraints of its economic model; and between the different interpretations of *Vivir Bien*. In this context, the lack of public debate on the various options for dealing with these developments is regrettable.



- 33 In a referendum in February 2016, the Bolivian people opposed the constitutional reform that would have allowed President Evo Morales to stand for a fourth term in 2019. This could encourage the emergence of new political figures, including those from within the MAS, whose influence on arbitration and on the balance of power between the different interpretations of *Vivir Bien* would require further analysis.

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## NOTES

1. The World Bank defines “extreme poverty” as living on less than USD 1.90 per person per day (World Bank (2017), *Poverty*, <http://www.worldbank.org/en/topic/poverty/overview>, [accessed on 5 April 2017]).
  2. These results were established by the Development Research Centre of the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés through interviews with approximately 10 per cent of the programme’s participants, at the beginning and end of the relevant phase.
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## ABSTRACTS

In Bolivia, an alternative vision of development has emerged that relies on the concepts of *Madre Tierra* (Mother Earth) and *Vivir Bien* (Living Well), and promotes balance and harmony between humans and nature. It aims to break away from the economic model previously adopted by Bolivia, a model that has made the country highly dependent on the export of raw materials. This chapter analyses the Biocultura programme, a project launched in 2008 by the Government of the Plurinational State of Bolivia and the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC), which aims to translate this alternative vision of development into concrete practices. Stemming from a participatory approach, this initiative shows that it is possible to reconcile the conservation of biodiversity with raising incomes and the promotion of local knowledge. It also contributes to the creation and strengthening of institutions and policies in line with *Vivir Bien*. This chapter is based on documents and ideas developed by the Biocultura programme and the SDC, as well as on fieldwork carried out between 2013 and 2015.

## AUTHOR

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is responsible for the Bolivia programme and the themes of employment and income in the Latin America and Caribbean Division at the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation (SDC). She holds a PhD in Development Studies from the Graduate Institute of International and Development Studies (Geneva).