QUALIMETRY OF WELL-BEING

Toward a Qualimetric Understanding of Well-Being: Living Well and Living Better as Contrasting Paradigms

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ABSTRACT

This article offers a critical and constructive reading of the debate between Living Well (Suma Qamaña / Sumak Kawsay) and Living Better (the capitalist paradigm of progress). Using the notion of the qualimetrics of well-being, it explores the non-linear relationship between economic capital and holistic well-being, incorporating empirical evidence from the Happiness Index study conducted in Samaipata, Bolivia. The text argues that the apparent "failure" of Living Well as a public policy does not invalidate its civilizational potential, but rather reveals the limitations of attempting to impose a relational paradigm with linear, quantitative, and colonized tools. A graphic and conceptual representation is proposed to understand well-being as an emergent phenomenon, and practical recommendations are offered for articulating balance, transition, and complementarity.

Resumen (summary in Spanish)

El presente artículo propone una lectura crítica y propositiva del debate entre *Vivir Bien* (Suma Qamaña / Sumak Kawsay) y *Vivir Mejor* (paradigma capitalista del progreso). A partir de la noción de cualimetría del bienestar, se explora la relación no lineal entre capital económico y

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bienestar integral, incorporando evidencia empírica del estudio del Índice de Felicidad realizado en Samaipata (Bolivia). El texto sostiene que el aparente "fracaso" del Vivir Bien como política pública no invalida su potencia civilizatoria, sino que revela las limitaciones de intentar imponer un paradigma relacional con herramientas lineales, cuantitativas y colonizadas. Se propone una representación gráfica y conceptual que permite comprender el bienestar como fenómeno emergente, y se ofrecen recomendaciones prácticas para articular equilibrio, transición y complementariedad.

Key words: Living Well; Sweet Life; *Vivir Bien*; decolonization; Happiness Index; Bolivia

INTRODUCTION: LIVING WELL AND LIVING BETTER

Since the refoundation of the Plurinational State of Bolivia, Living Well (*Vivir Bien*) has been adopted as an ethical-political horizon aimed at transcending the Western model of development, founded upon unlimited economic growth, capital accumulation, and the commodification of life itself. In contrast, Living Better (*Vivir Mejor*) represents the continuation of the modern capitalist paradigm, in which well-being is primarily understood in terms of income, consumption, material comfort, and economic security.

With the recent shift in Bolivia's political cycle, a growing discourse has emerged claiming that Living Well has "failed." This assertion contains an element of truth: the principles of Living Well did not succeed in becoming visibly and sustainably embodied within everyday social practices or within the deeper structural foundations of society. Yet abandoning the concept altogether would amount, to borrow a Dutch proverb, to throwing out the child with the dirty water. Living Well is not merely a sectoral policy or a technical governmental program; rather, it constitutes a civilizational proposal that challenges the coloniality of thought, the reduction of value to capital, and the modern myth of infinite progress.

As David Choquehuanca (2010) has argued, Living Well does not mean "living better than others," but rather "living in complementarity, in balance, and in harmony with Mother Earth." In this sense, the concept does not promote competition or accumulation, but instead emphasizes sufficiency, relationality, reciprocity, and shared fullness of life.

The central difficulty, however, lies in the fact that Living Well has largely been evaluated through the same indicators used to measure Living Better. From this tension emerges the need for a new conceptual and methodological framework: the qualimetry of well-being.

2. CAPITAL, WELL-BEING, AND SEMANTIC CONFUSION

Within the capitalist paradigm, well-being is equated with comfort, security, and the capacity for consumption. Money appears as the independent and explanatory variable: the greater the capital, the greater the well-being. This deeply internalized logic shapes what Charles Eisenstein (2013) describes as the "story of separation," in which the individual seeks protection from fear and uncertainty through the accumulation of external goods.

From the perspective of Living Well (*Vivir Bien*), by contrast, well-being emerges from an inner state of sufficiency, gratitude, and belonging. This perspective does not deny the importance of satisfying basic needs, but it breaks with the linear relationship between money and happiness. Well-being cannot be purchased; it must be cultivated.

The two paradigms may be summarized as follows:

- *Living Better / Capitalism*: linear, quantitative, individualistic, competitive, masculine, and oriented toward control, accumulation, and security.
- *Living Well*: relational, emergent, qualitative, communal, complementary, feminine, and oriented toward balance, reciprocity, and life.

This difference is not primarily moral, but epistemological. As Javier Medina (2006) argues, Living Well belongs to the domain of the energetic and relational, whereas classical development belongs to the domain of mass, measurability, and technical rationality.

3. THE QUALIMETRY OF LIVING WELL

Qualimetry represents a conscious and necessarily imperfect attempt to quantify the qualitative without betraying its essence. Its purpose is not to reduce well-being to numbers, but rather to generate orientational frameworks that integrate measurement with meaning.

Important precedents already exist. The best known is the Gross National Happiness Index of Bhutan, which displaced Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as the central axis of public policy. In Bolivia, the study *High happiness low carbon link* (Powers, Mariaca, and Timmer, 2016) applied the Gross Happiness Index and the Happy Planet Index in Samaipata, revealing

significant results: high levels of subjective happiness combined with low environmental impact, despite low economic income.

This study empirically confirmed that:

1. High levels of well-being can be achieved with limited economic income.
2. Environmental impact constitutes a key component of integral well-being.
3. Social bonds, free time, relationship with nature, and sense of community carry greater weight than monetary income.

To understand these findings, it is essential to consider the three forms of poverty recognized in the Bolivian Constitution:

- Economic poverty**:** lack of material resources.
- Social poverty**:** lack of networks, community, and support.
- Spiritual poverty**:** disconnection from oneself, from nature, and from meaning.

Living Well addresses all three dimensions, whereas GDP registers only the first.

4. GRAPHICAL REPRESENTATION AND MATHEMATICAL FORMULATION OF THE CAPITAL–WELL-BEING RELATIONSHIP

With the objective of translating cosmological differences into a comparable analytical language, a symbolic graphical representation of the relationship between economic capital and perceived well-being is proposed. This exercise does not seek to empirically model social behavior nor to predict quantifiable outcomes, but rather to make explicit the implicit structures underlying different cultural conceptions of well-being.

4.1 Definition of Variables

The following abstract variables are defined:

- **X:** available economic capital, understood as an aggregate variable that includes income, assets, and capacity for consumption.
- **Y:** perceived well-being or integral satisfaction with life.

Both variables are considered dimensionless and normalized, and are used exclusively for comparative and conceptual purposes.

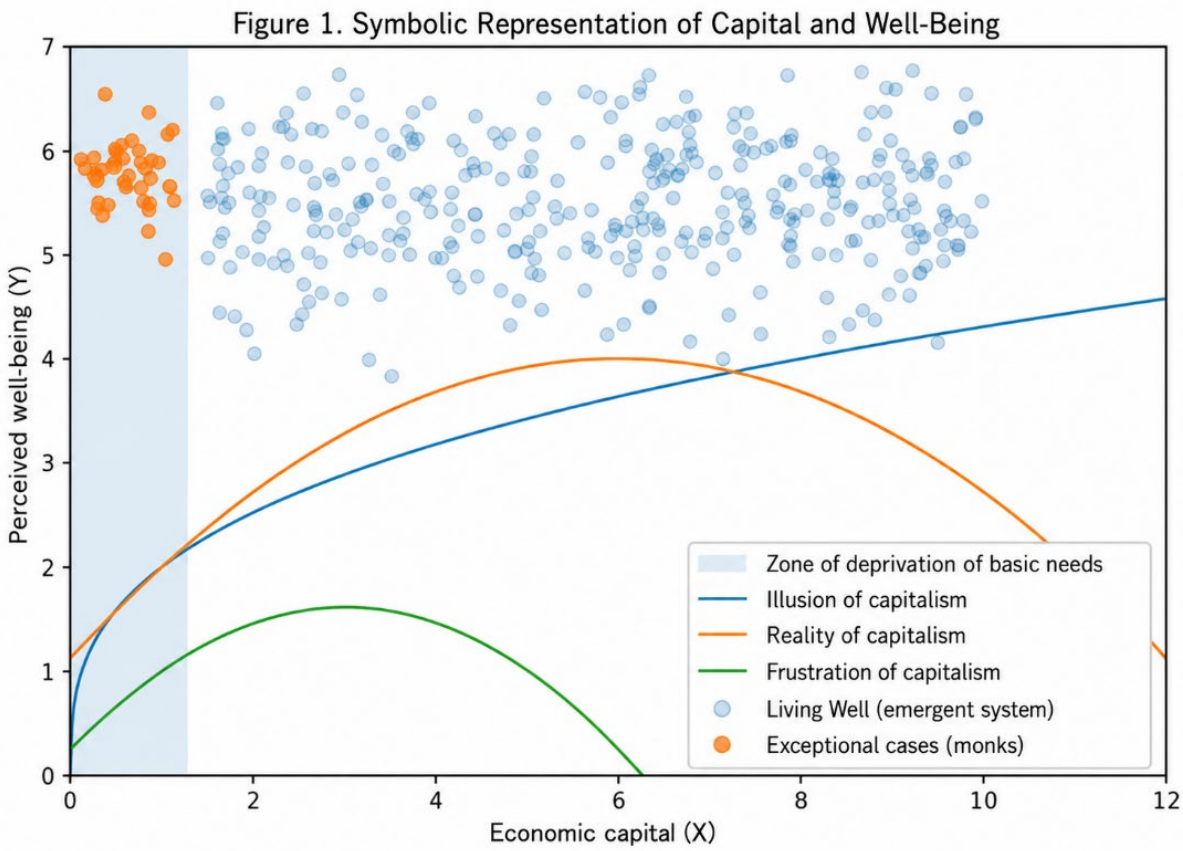

Figure 1. Symbolic representations of the relationship between economic capital (X) and perceived well-being (Y). Source: author's own elaboration. — The figure presents three curves associated with the paradigm of Living Better (*Vivir Mejor*): (1) the illusion of capitalism, in which well-being increases alongside capital; (2) the reality of capitalism, in which well-being reaches a maximum point and subsequently declines; and (3) the frustration of capitalism, characterized by low levels of well-being across the entire range of capital. The shaded band along the X-axis indicates the zone of deprivation of basic needs, within which well-being tends to remain low for the majority of the population. In contrast, Living Well (*Vivir Bien*) is represented as a cloud of well-being, indicating a weak and non-linear relationship between capital and well-being, characteristic of an emergent and multidimensional system. A separate sub-cloud located at low levels of capital and high levels of well-being represents exceptional cases (e.g., monks, ascetics, or highly cohesive communities), which do not constitute the statistical norm. The figure is conceptual and heuristic in nature.

4.2 Functions Associated with the Paradigm of Living Better

Within the paradigm of Living Better (*Vivir Mejor*), characteristic of the modern capitalist economy, well-being is conceived as a function dependent upon capital. From this worldview emerge three representative functional forms.

a) Illusion of Capitalism

$Y=a\sqrt[3]{x}$

This function expresses the dominant cultural expectation: the increase of capital leads to an increase in well-being, although with diminishing returns. It represents the symbolic promise of the system, widely disseminated through economic discourse and the imaginary of progress.

b) Reality of Capitalism

$0Y=aX^2+bX$ with $a<0$

This inverted parabola describes the empirical observation that, once a certain threshold of accumulation has been surpassed, the increase of capital becomes associated with a decline in well-being. Among the explanatory factors are chronic stress, indebtedness, pressure for performance, loss of free time, deterioration of social bonds, and the erosion of existential meaning.

c) Frustration of Capitalism

$Y=aX^2+bX$ with $a<0$ y b low

This variant represents the experience of broad social sectors that fail to gain access to significant levels of capital, the so-called “losers of capitalism.” In this case, the system promises well-being, but generates neither the economic means nor the expected subjective outcomes, thereby producing a low-performance curve throughout its entire domain.

These three functions share a common structural assumption: well-being is derivable from capital, whether in an increasing, decreasing, or frustrated manner.

4.3 Representation of Living Well as an Emergent System

In contrast, Living Well (*Vivir Bien*) does not presuppose a direct functional relationship between capital and well-being. Well-being is instead conceived as an emergent phenomenon, resulting from the interaction of multiple interdependent variables, among them:

- social relationships,
- balance between work time and leisure,
- physical and emotional health,
- connection with the natural environment,
- sense of belonging and existential coherence.

Graphically, this logic is not represented through a function of the form Y=f(X), but rather through a cloud of points:

- Well-being remains within a relatively stable range across highly diverse values of capital.
- There is no single directionality nor monotonic dependence.
- Capital operates as merely one variable within a multidimensional system.

From a mathematical perspective, this behavior more closely resembles a non-linear complex system than a classical deterministic function, and it is not reducible to simple closed equations.

4.4 Comparative Interpretation

The graphical comparison between the curves of Living Better (*Vivir Mejor*) and the cloud of Living Well (*Vivir Bien*) makes it possible to visualize a fundamental structural difference:

- In Living Better, well-being is a function of capital.
- In Living Well, well-being is emergent from the system.

This difference is not normative or ideological, but epistemological and methodological. The graphical representation thus functions as a heuristic tool that helps explain why approaches focused exclusively on economic growth may exhibit diminishing — or even negative — returns in terms of integral well-being.

4.5 Boundary Conditions of the Model: Basic Needs and Exceptional Cases

The model presented incorporates two relevant boundary conditions. First, the satisfaction of basic needs constitutes a minimum threshold for the emergence of well-being among the majority of the population. At extremely low levels of economic capital — associated with food

insecurity, lack of housing, or limited access to healthcare — well-being tends to be severely affected, independently of the cultural worldview adopted.

Second, exceptional cases can be observed in which high levels of well-being manifest even under conditions of virtually nonexistent capital. These cases, frequently associated with spiritual traditions (e.g., monks or ascetics), highly cohesive rural communities, or elderly individuals with strong material detachment, do not represent the statistical norm but rather structural exceptions. Their existence does not invalidate the general model; on the contrary, it confirms that well-being can, under very specific internal conditions, become almost completely decoupled from economic capital.

In analytical terms, the exception confirms the rule.

5. Living Well as Horizon, Not as Dogma

The political error did not lie in proposing Living Well (*Vivir Bien*), but rather in attempting to institutionalize it without first decolonizing subjectivity. Living Well does not function as a doctrine nor as a universal recipe; it functions as an orientational horizon.

Charles Eisenstein reminds us that the objective is not to destroy the existing system, but to allow the new to emerge through coherence and practice. In this sense, Living Well does not deny the use of money or technology, but rather reinscribes them within a logic centered on the care of life.

Concrete examples already exist demonstrating how both visions may coexist within the same socio-economic system. One such example is the existence of complementary currencies — also referred to as alternative or social currencies — as found in the town of Samaipata, Bolivia, as well as in dozens of other localities throughout Latin America. These systems allow conventional monetary exchange to coexist with relational and community-oriented forms of economic organization, thereby creating hybrid spaces between the logic of capital accumulation and the logic of reciprocity and collective well-being.

6. Recommendations for a Possible Balance

1. To assume Living Well (*Vivir Bien*) as a source of inspiration, rather than as an ideological imposition.

2. To guarantee the satisfaction of basic needs as a minimum condition for well-being.
3. To strengthen community, time, and nature as central axes of public policy.
4. To promote hybrid economies, such as local currencies, which function as a "third included" between market exchange and reciprocity, as proposed by Javier Medina.
5. To balance the masculine and the feminine (control and care, competition and cooperation), following a Jungian intuition applied to economics and politics.

7. Conclusion

Living Well (*Vivir Bien*) has not failed; rather, it has been misunderstood. It cannot be measured through linear standards nor imposed from above. It requires cultural maturation, practical coherence, and new tools for interpreting reality.

The qualimetry of well-being does not seek to capture happiness, but rather to open a space in which science and intuition may enter into dialogue. In a world traversed by climatic, social, and spiritual crisis, Living Well remains one of the most lucid and necessary proposals that the Global South has to offer the world.

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