

Sumak Kawsay

Indigenous Wisdom to Save the Planet

An edited excerpt from a 2010 talk by Luis Macas

Sumak Kawsay originates at the center of community life, is the essence of the community life system and is explained in the exercise and daily practice of our communities. It is the vital part of our civilizational matrix, which is still in force, despite the violent interruption of colonialism and the aggression of the capitalist model. Sumak Kawsay's true meaning, comes from Quechua. Sumak, means fullness, greatness, the just, completely, the superior. Kawsay is life in permanent, dynamic and changing realization. It is the interaction of the totality of existence in movement. Life understood from the integral is the essence of all vital being. It is the permanent construction of all life processes in which it manifests itself: harmony, balance, internal and external to the entire human and natural community.

When translating the two concepts of Quechua into Spanish, we appreciate that the meaning of Sumak Kawsay is not exact. It cannot be translated as Good Living, because when translating this into the original language it means Alli Kawsay, which relates to what is good, to what is desirable, to conformity. Therefore, Alli Kawsay does not keep the same meaning as the Sumak Kawsay. They do not correspond, either semantically nor as a thought. The Sumak Kawsay when translating as Good Living, diminishes its true meaning.

Sumak Kawsay is more than Good Living. It is life in fullness, or life in splendor. It expresses the supreme life in the community system.



So, the resistance and validity of the Sumak Kawsay is a proposal to overcome the disastrous current system and build the community system. We believe that it cannot embed, or incorporate into the present development model, nor can it be an appendix to this system. It will be necessary to fundamentally transform the old existing State structures and institutions and build a new one — but made with our hands, with the hands of the people. It is not a proposal for indigenous people, but for all humanity. We consider it to be a construction of a life option for everyone.

Luis Macas is one of the founders and is the past President of the Confederation of Indigenous Nationalities of Ecuador (CONAIE). He led the growth of the indigenous movement into the most powerful political force in Ecuador, ousting two presidents and writing Sumak Kawsay and the Rights of Nature into the Ecuadorian Constitution.



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