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Posted Date: 9 December 2025

doi: 10.20944/preprints202512.0616.v1

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Essay

The Spiritual Architecture of Post-GDP Societies: Ubuntu, Christian Theology, Buen Vivir, and Indigenous Cosmologies

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Abstract

Gross Domestic Product (GDP) has dominated national development policy for decades, yet it largely neglects relational, spiritual, ecological, and ethical dimensions of collective well-being. As global crises—from climate change to social fragmentation—expose the limits of growth-driven paradigms, alternative frameworks emphasizing relationality, ecological ethics, and spiritual worldviews are increasingly urgent. This paper proposes a spiritual-postgrowth architecture integrating four epistemological traditions: Ubuntu philosophy, Christian theological ethics, Indigenous cosmologies, and the Andean paradigm of Buen Vivir. Drawing on contemporary scholarship, the paper critiques GDP, explores how spiritual and relational values redefine well-being, and outlines policy implications for governance, ecological stewardship, and leadership. The framework advances a postgrowth theory emphasizing relationality, stewardship, and ecological regeneration.

Keywords: post-GDP; spirituality; ubuntu; christian theology; buen vivir; indigenous knowledge; relational governance; ecological ethics; postgrowth development; stewardship

Introduction

GDP has long been the dominant metric for assessing national progress, yet its limitations are increasingly recognized. Stiglitz, Sen, and Fitoussi (2018; 2020) demonstrate that GDP measures production while neglecting social relations, ecological integrity, and spiritual well-being. Rising ecological degradation, widening inequalities, and moral crises expose the inadequacy of growth-centered models.

In response, scholars have explored relational, ecological, and spiritually grounded frameworks. Ubuntu philosophy emphasizes collective flourishing and moral interdependence; Christian theological ethics centers on stewardship, care for creation, and justice; Indigenous cosmologies foreground reciprocity, regeneration, and intergenerational responsibility; and Buen Vivir (Sumak Kawsay) conceptualizes well-being as harmony among humans, communities, and the Earth (Washington, Piccolo, Kopnina & Simpson, 2024 ; Cloutier, Ehlenz & Afinowich, 2019).

This paper proposes a spiritual architecture for post-GDP societies, arguing that development must be grounded in ethical, relational, and ecological values rather than in narrow economic indicators. The following sections examine GDP's limitations, explore contributions from each spiritual-ethical framework, and outline implications for governance and policy.

1. Why GDP Ignores the Spiritual Dimensions of Life

GDP emerged in the 1930s–1940s as a tool to track industrial output and fiscal capacity, not as a universal measure of societal progress. Its adoption as the dominant metric reflected Cold War geopolitics and growth-centered development paradigms (Stiglitz et al., 2020). GDP embodies a materialist worldview prioritizing production and consumption over moral, spiritual, and ecological concerns.

Spiritual activities—prayer, meditation, communal worship, rituals, and indigenous practices—are largely invisible to GDP, despite their centrality to identity formation, moral development, and social cohesion. Paradoxically, GDP counts destructive activities as “positive growth,” such as deforestation, pollution cleanup, or medical treatment for stress-related illnesses (Raworth, 2017; Escobar, 2020).

These limitations necessitate alternative metrics emphasizing ecological integrity, relational cohesion, cultural continuity, spiritual vitality, and moral well-being. Frameworks such as the UN’s Harmony with Nature initiative (2023), Buen Vivir, and African relational philosophies challenge societies to embed ethics, cosmology, and community into development. Moving beyond GDP thus requires a civilizational shift toward reciprocity, stewardship, and relational governance (Moleka, 2025a-j, 2026).

2. Ubuntu as a Framework for Relational Value

Ubuntu—“Umuntu ngumuntu ngabantu,” or “a person is a person through other persons”—offers a sophisticated critique of Western individualism and market-centered development (Ramose, 2002; Metz, 2017). It situates human existence within networks of mutual responsibility, moral accountability, and communal reciprocity.

Ubuntu transforms development thinking in three ways:

1. Relational well-being: Flourishing is measured by social trust, empathy, and collective resilience rather than income or consumption.
2. Participatory governance: Decision-making emerges from dialogue, consensus, and moral accountability (Mbigi, 2020).
3. Ethical leadership: Leaders are evaluated by their capacity to foster harmony, protect the vulnerable, and uphold dignity (Tutu, 1999; Mandela, 2006).

Ubuntu-informed practices, including community health programs and restorative justice initiatives, demonstrate that relational ethics can guide sustainable and socially cohesive development. This framework aligns with postgrowth theory, emphasizing dignity, reciprocity, and interdependence (Metz, 2017; Moleka, 2025k).

3. Christian Theology of Stewardship and Non-Domination

Christian theology offers an ethical and cosmological foundation for postgrowth development, emphasizing stewardship and non-domination. Humans are custodians of creation, accountable to God for the flourishing of all life (Hodge, 2022). Genesis narratives frame this as a dual mandate of responsible use and protective care, contrasting sharply with GDP-driven extractivism.

Contemporary ecological theology, including Pope Francis’ *Laudato Si’* (2015) and *Laudate Deum* (2023), situates ecological degradation as a moral and spiritual failure. The Christian ethic of non-domination emphasizes humility, service, and solidarity with marginalized communities (Wright, 2020). Liberation theology further foregrounds the preferential option for the poor, reframing economic and environmental policy as questions of justice and moral discernment (Cone, 2018; Katongole, 2017).

Faith-based initiatives worldwide operationalize these principles through agroecology, conservation, and governance programs, demonstrating theology’s practical relevance to sustainable and relational development. Christian stewardship complements postgrowth frameworks by embedding moral, ecological, and spiritual accountability in governance.

4. Indigenous Cosmologies and the Ethics of Regeneration

Indigenous cosmologies provide enduring, sophisticated frameworks for understanding the world in relational, ecological, and spiritual terms. Across regions—from the Andes to Amazonia, from Māori territories in Aotearoa to North American First Nations and the Sámi of Northern

Europe—the Earth is conceived as a living, sentient, and relational entity. Human well-being is inseparable from the vitality and resilience of ecosystems (Kimmerer, 2013; 2022). These knowledge systems emphasize that humans are participants in a broader web of life rather than masters of nature, and development is measured not in material accumulation but in the quality of relationships within ecological, social, and spiritual networks.

Key contributions of Indigenous cosmologies to postgrowth development include:

- **Regeneration over extraction:** Indigenous practices actively restore ecosystems. Controlled burns in North America and Australia, rotational agriculture in Amazonian communities, and sacred rituals in Andean societies exemplify practices designed to maintain biodiversity and ecological balance. These practices are guided by ecological observation, historical knowledge, and spiritual ethics, ensuring that human activities enhance rather than degrade ecological health (Moleka, 2025). Such practices provide models for postgrowth societies that seek to restore ecosystems and maintain planetary boundaries.
- **Intergenerational responsibility:** Indigenous cosmologies often operate on temporal scales far beyond typical planning horizons. The Haudenosaunee principle of considering the impact of decisions on the next seven generations illustrates this ethos (Kimmerer, 2013; Moleka, 2026). By integrating long-term thinking into governance and social organization, Indigenous frameworks embed sustainability, resilience, and cultural continuity into everyday decision-making—a stark contrast to the short-termism of GDP-centered development.
- **Rights of nature:** Many Indigenous epistemologies attribute agency and moral significance to rivers, forests, mountains, and other non-human entities. Legal innovations, such as the recognition of the Whanganui River in New Zealand and the Pachamama in Ecuador as rights-bearing entities, operationalize these ethical insights in modern governance (Boyd, 2017; O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018). These legal frameworks challenge anthropocentric models, positioning development within ethical, ecological, and intergenerational accountability frameworks.

Indigenous cosmologies thus offer both conceptual critique and actionable guidance. They teach that relationality, reciprocity, and humility are central to development, offering pathways for ecological restoration, social cohesion, and long-term sustainability. Postgrowth societies can operationalize these lessons through policies, governance systems, and community practices that place ecological and social relationships at the center of decision-making.

5. Buen Vivir and the Sacredness of the Earth

Buen Vivir—Sumak Kawsay in Quechua and Suma Qamaña in Aymara—is a paradigmatic alternative to Western growth-centered development models. Rooted in Andean Indigenous cosmologies, it emphasizes harmony between humans, communities, and the Earth (Gudynas, 2011; Walsh, 2010; Escobar, 2020). Well-being is defined relationally and spiritually, encompassing ecological integrity, cultural cohesion, and collective fulfillment rather than individual consumption or GDP growth.

Key elements of Buen Vivir include:

- **Sacredness of the Earth:** Pachamama is considered a living, spiritual entity whose well-being is inseparable from human welfare (Altmann, 2022). Development activities that harm the environment are morally and ethically impermissible, reframing ecological preservation as a spiritual obligation. This worldview situates environmental care within ethical and cosmological frameworks, encouraging societies to consider the spiritual and material consequences of their actions.
- **Rights of nature:** Ecuador's 2008 and Bolivia's 2009 constitutions formally recognize ecosystems as rights-bearing entities, capable of legal action and protection. These innovations operationalize Indigenous cosmologies within national governance and provide a mechanism

for holding governments and corporations accountable for ecological harm (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018).

- **Participatory governance:** Buen Vivir emphasizes inclusive, community-based decision-making. Indigenous knowledge, local expertise, and communal deliberation shape governance processes, promoting social cohesion and ensuring that policies reflect ecological and cultural realities rather than abstract economic targets.
- **New metrics of well-being:** Beyond material production, indicators of well-being include ecological health, cultural vitality, food sovereignty, spiritual fulfillment, and social reciprocity (Baysal & Sutton, 2024). These metrics operationalize a postgrowth vision, demonstrating that development can be measured by the quality of life rather than by aggregate economic output.

Buen Vivir shows that postgrowth paradigms are not merely theoretical but can be institutionalized in constitutions, legal frameworks, and national policies. By embedding relational, spiritual, and ecological values into state governance, societies can transcend GDP as the primary measure of progress while maintaining Indigenous principles of harmony and reciprocity.

6. Toward a Spiritual-Postgrowth Theory of Development

Integrating Ubuntu, Christian stewardship, Indigenous cosmologies, Buen Vivir, and relational postgrowth frameworks generates a multidimensional approach to post-GDP societies. This spiritual-postgrowth paradigm situates ethical, relational, and ecological responsibility at the center of development, emphasizing holistic flourishing over material accumulation.

Core principles include:

- **Relational metrics over economic indicators:** Development evaluation prioritizes social cohesion, collective resilience, ethical reciprocity, and spiritual well-being (Moleka, 2025a-c). Policies are assessed by their ability to foster trust, solidarity, and interdependence, rather than solely by financial returns.
- **Stewardship governance over extractive strategies:** Leadership and governance are guided by care for human communities and ecological systems (Tauro & Rozzi, 2025). Resource allocation and policy decisions prioritize sustainability, equity, and long-term planetary health.
- **Regenerative ecological models:** Resource management emphasizes ecosystem restoration, biodiversity conservation, and climate resilience. Human activity is designed to repair and maintain ecological systems, embedding the ethic of “do no harm” at the heart of development planning (Oyefusi, Enegbuma & Brown, 2026).
- **Communal flourishing over individual accumulation:** Well-being is conceived collectively, rooted in relationships, spiritual connectedness, and community values (Cloutier, Ehlenz & Afinowich, 2019). Individual prosperity is meaningful only when it aligns with collective welfare and ecological integrity.

By synthesizing these principles, this framework offers a comprehensive postgrowth theory that integrates moral, spiritual, ecological, and relational dimensions of development, providing guidance for societies seeking to transition beyond GDP-centric models.

7. Policy and Governance Implications

Operationalizing a spiritual-postgrowth paradigm requires systemic and structural transformations:

- **Redefining indicators of well-being:** National and subnational frameworks should integrate relational, ecological, cultural, and spiritual metrics to complement or replace GDP (Stiglitz et al., 2020). Examples include measures of ecosystem health, community cohesion, cultural vitality, and spiritual fulfillment.
- **Stewardship-based governance:** Legal and institutional frameworks must embed ecological limits, intergenerational accountability, and rights of nature. Laws that recognize ecosystems as

rights-bearing entities can institutionalize ethical and ecological responsibility (O'Donnell & Talbot-Jones, 2018).

- **Education for relational and ecological literacy:** Curricula should cultivate ethical reasoning, environmental literacy, and social responsibility, drawing on Indigenous knowledge, Ubuntu philosophy, and stewardship ethics (Kimmerer, 2022). Education becomes a tool for shaping citizens who value ecological integrity and relational well-being.
- **Ethical and service-oriented leadership:** Leadership frameworks must prioritize collective care, humility, and accountability. Leaders are evaluated by their capacity to nurture community resilience, protect the vulnerable, and maintain ecological balance (Mandela, 2006).

By embedding these strategies, governance systems can operationalize spiritual and relational principles, creating societies that value holistic well-being over narrow material accumulation and align development with ethical, ecological, and spiritual imperatives.

Conclusion

This paper presents a spiritual architecture for post-GDP societies, integrating Ubuntu, Christian theology, Indigenous cosmologies, Buen Vivir, and relational postgrowth frameworks. Together, these approaches position development as ethical, relational, and regenerative, centering dignity, reciprocity, and ecological stewardship.

Postgrowth paradigms provide pathways for addressing ecological crises, social fragmentation, and moral fatigue. By redefining progress in terms of relationships with people, ecosystems, and the sacred, societies can cultivate sustainable, just, and meaningful futures. Future research should explore empirical applications, localized relational well-being indicators, and comparative governance models operationalizing ethical, spiritual, and ecological dimensions of development.

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