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ABSTRACT

Agroecological social movements advocate for valuing agroecology beyond technical dimensions, incorporating physical, social, economic, philosophical, and experiential aspects. This article examines how the values of *Buen Vivir* (living well) and *comunalidad* (communalism) shape collective identities and social practices in five Mexican peasant and Indigenous communities engaged in agroecology. Through social representation theory, we show that these values strengthen collective identity, reinforce self-determination and shape how agroecology is practiced and interpreted. We propose an ontological framework that contextualizes agroecology in alignment with community needs and aspirations, while challenging external colonialist perspectives.

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Agroecology; social representation; ontological practices; collective actions; community; Mexico

1. Introduction

This article analyzes the values of living well that shape collective identities and social practices of five Mexican communities, each engaged in diverse territorial organizational processes that promote agroecology. The aim is to present an analytical framework that centers on the many ways collective identity is defined, and how that shapes the performance of agroecological physical systems.

In agrarian studies, especially those rooted in political economy, agroecology is considered a transformative practice capable of challenging and surpassing the structural inequalities of capitalist food systems. For Van der Ploeg (2021), Akram-Lodhi (2021), and McKay, Nehring, and Catacora-Vargas (2025), agroecology has emerged as a response to developing productive forces that support peasant autonomy and reshape the dependency of external agents and unequal distribution of value within the supply chain.

The impact of agroecology is addressed at different scales or systems, such as farming systems, agroecosystems, or food systems. Multiple authors (Altieri and Nicholls 2000; Bockstaller, Girardin, and van der Werf 1997; Sarandón and Flores 2014) and international organizations (FAO 2013, 2018; GTAE 2019; HLPE 2019; Petersen et al. 2017) have developed frameworks to assess whether a system is agroecological, evaluate its performance, guide practices and processes, and determine its stage in the agroecological transition.

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The High Level Panel of Experts (HLPE 2019) proposed 13 agroecological principles consistent with the Food and Agriculture Organization" (FAO 2018) *10 elements of Agroecology*. Furthermore, the FAO's *Tool for Agroecology Performance Evaluation* (TAPE) assesses the agroecological performance of biophysical systems (e.g. farms or territories) and their contribution to Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

These principles or elements of agroecology serve as reference points for guiding the direction of food systems toward socially and ecologically grounded practices that prioritize energy efficiency and local knowledge, thereby fostering autonomy from external inputs, labor, and expertise. However, some authors argue that a critical dimension of agroecology lies in its ontological, epistemological, and experiential orientation (Rosset et al. 2022). From this perspective, integrating traditional, Indigenous, and local forms of knowledge, alongside the use of participatory approaches involving researchers, farmers, and communities, is essential to build ecologically sound and democratized food systems (Brock et al. 2024; Méndez et al. 2015).

However, existing frameworks fail to consider the social structure and cultural context in which agroecology is re-signified and appropriated. For example, Darmaun et al. (2023) found that none of the assessment tools were sufficiently adaptable to local contexts. The tools do not incorporate the social dynamics among stakeholders engaged in agroecological transitions. In addition, they don't clearly define the concept of agroecology, consider the temporal dimensions of transition processes, or employ a participatory, bottom-up approach. Such evaluations involve deliberation on values, which can sometimes come at the expense of clarifying valuation criteria (who is assigning value, and to what).

Previous authors have emphasized the need to assess not only the physical functioning or practices of systems but also the social, economic, political, and cognitive dimensions, as well as understanding the ontological and experiential aspects of agroecology (González de Molina et al. 2021; Oteros-Rozas, Ravera, and García-Llorente 2019). Rosset and Martínez-Torres (2012) and Sevilla Guzmán (2011) highlight the social principles of agroecology, including social organization and reproduction. As agroecology gains prominence in global agrarian social movements (e.g. La Vía Campesina), these movements seek a deep scaling transformation in values and mindsets that require community agreement and collective thinking and action. Moreover, Ollivier et al. (2018) argue that agroecological transition frameworks need to be enriched by incorporating the ontologies of collective organizations, as these groups are pivotal in driving change and leading transition mechanisms. To achieve this, it is crucial to understand the needs and cultural perspectives of social systems, governance structures, and sociopolitical settings (Altieri and Toledo 2011; Oteros-Rozas, Ravera, and García-Llorente 2019; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012).

This study addresses that gap by grounding our analysis in Indigenous intellectual traditions, specifically the concepts of *comunalidad* (comunality) and *Buen Vivir* (living well), which provide a relational and place-based ontology for understanding agroecology. Developed within Indigenous and peasant contexts in Latin America, *comunalidad* is a social institution that sustains a way of life rooted in a distinct system of beliefs, mythology, cosmology, ontology, theory, epistemology, science, and practical knowledge (Esteva 2015; Martínez Luna, 2013). It encompasses a social fabric that allows these

communities to reproduce, reinvent, and self-determine their culture, traditions, and practices through communal life and work (Martinez-Cruz, Camacho-Villa, and Adelman 2023).

As a form of social reproduction and structure, communality has long served as a guiding principle in Mesoamerican and peasant life to achieve a collective construction of *buen vivir*. Concepts related to *Buen Vivir* are rooted in Indigenous worldviews and act as critiques of Western ontologies, offering alternative ways of being and knowing (Escobar 2014). Latin American expressions of these concepts, such as *'el buen vivir'* (living well), *'sumak kawsay'* (life in fullness) in Kichwa, *'yeknemilis'* (a good life) in Nahuatl, *'suma qamaña'* in Aymara, *'lekil kuxlejal'* in Mayan Tzeltal, and *'sesi irekani'* in Purépecha, encapsulate sociocultural practices and values of collective ways of living and being (Bueno, Moreno-Calles, and Merçon 2023; Macas 2010). These ways of living are central for the emergence of civilizational projects rooted in collective visions, discursive practices, and political positions that are connected to defending the territory, Mother Earth, common goods, ancestral ways of life, wisdom, and knowledge of peasant and Indigenous communities (Díaz 2007). Especially under colonial domination, the conception of *Buen Vivir* reflects an insider's perspective on an alternative reality co-created by Indigenous and peasant communities (Esteva 2015).

These communal logics of *Buen Vivir* and *comunalidad* are ontological¹ relational horizons that we understand as values of living well, structured by historical processes, and deeply rooted in local Indigenous and peasant heritage, and that nurture fraternal and organized communities that operate in synergy with ecological systems (Escobar 2014). Community-led social actions are based on values like reciprocity, social organization, Indigenous knowledge, and community policy. These dimensions materialize in their values, affections, and daily practices, reinforcing communal identity, autonomy, territorial belonging, and collective responsibility (Bueno, Moreno-Calles, and Merçon 2023; Macas 2010). Furthermore, epistemic and ontological relational horizons of community life shape social organization, learning processes, ethical frameworks, normative structures, and long-term collective strategies. Understanding relational ontologies requires examining daily activities shaped by knowledge, culture, belief systems, and reasoning processes (Escobar 2014).

This research conceptualizes the concepts of living well and communality not merely as cultural background but as analytical lenses to interpret agroecological physical systems. *Buen Vivir* and *comunalidad* align with agroecology by promoting autonomy over land and food systems, political participation of peasants and Indigenous peoples, community solidarity, and food sovereignty through agrobiodiversity and culturally appropriate, healthy diets that support human health (Roger et al. 2023; Suárez-Torres et al. 2017). They foreground relational categories like reciprocity, collective responsibility, and territorial belonging that are often absent or under-theorized in Western agroecology frameworks. This theoretical orientation enables us to analyze agroecology not only as a set of ecological practices that challenge capitalist food systems, but as a socio-ontological project that redefines relationships between people, territory, and the more-than-human world.

¹In this research we adopt the concept of ontology as the study of how collective communities exist and sustain themselves through relationships with multiple worlds (Escobar 2014). We use this concept to highlight Indigenous ontologies that prioritize relationality, place, and communal life, unlike Western approaches, which often focus on abstract, universal, and individual-centered perspectives.

With five empirical case studies of peasant and Indigenous communities, we analyze how these philosophical perspectives contribute to developing a community-driven agroecology. We present how peasant and Indigenous communities have massified agroecology through the construction of a social structure that transforms their territories and agri-food systems to promote autonomy and well-being. By focusing on the community as the central subject of study, our analysis unveils the complex identities that underpin agroecology and its role in constructing alternative ways that emerge from Indigenous intellectual traditions but speak directly to global debates on agroecology's deep scaling.

2. Methods

2.1. Selection of communities

The five communities discussed in this article were selected from a national survey that aimed to identify the diversity of agroecological grassroots initiatives in Mexico (Fernández González et al. 2023). These communities were chosen based on four specific criteria (Figure 1) to facilitate the analysis of their differences and similarities. First, the communities need to have a well-established identity defined by more than ten years of experience. Second, the communities were required to have an impact at a territorial scale.

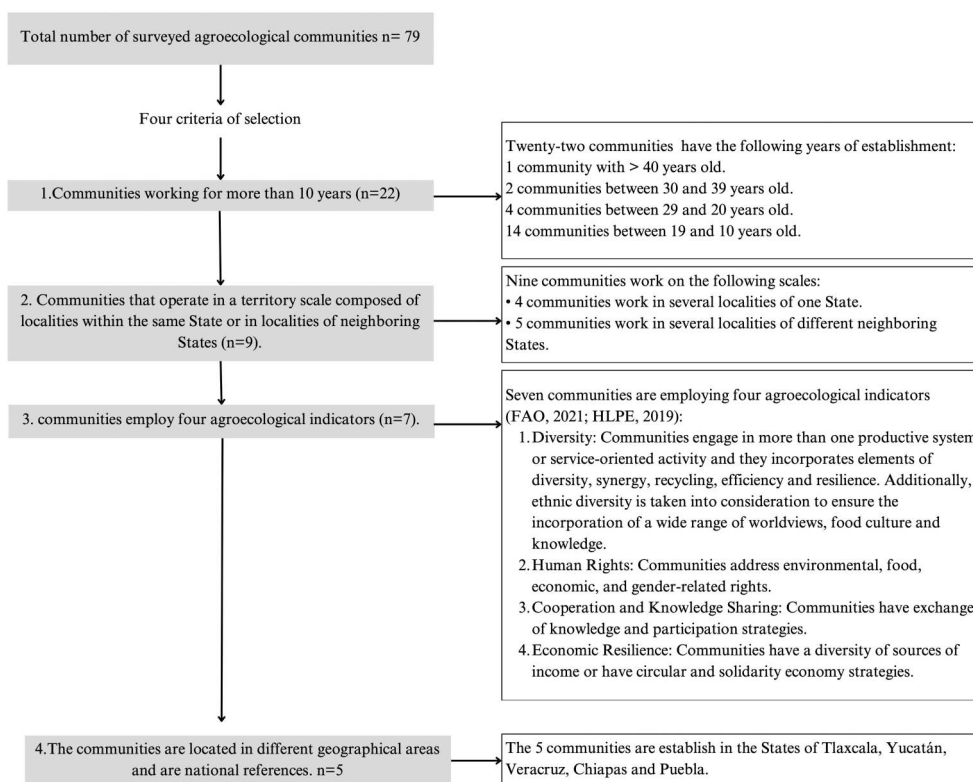


Figure 1. Criteria for selecting the five communities.

Third, they had to fulfill the agroecological elements of the FAO (2021) and principles of the HLPE (2019). Lastly, the fourth criterion selected communities in diverse geographical, cultural, and climatic regions.

2.1.1. Characteristics of selected communities

The five selected communities are:

- (1) *Julián Garcés Center for Social Economy* (CES) is a peasant organization dedicated to organizing economic, environmental, and food rights solutions. It was founded in 2005 with 120 members (79% women and 21% men).
- (2) *Alternative Tianguis of Puebla* (TAP) is a market composed of peasants and consumers that focuses on constructing a local food ecosystem founded on solidarity, healthfulness, safety, and sovereignty. It was founded in 2007 with 55 members (56% women and 44% men).
- (3) *San Francisco de Asís Agroecological Center* (CASFA) is a peasant organization that attempts to combat poverty and environmental degradation by fostering collaboration among peasants, Indigenous communities, and consumers. It was founded in 1991 and currently has 2038 members (20% women and 80% men).
- (4) *U Yits Ka'an Agricultural ecological School* (UYK) is a peasant school founded in 1996. It is committed to advancing food sovereignty and ecological consciousness to safeguard the collective environment. The school has 15 permanent members and more than 649 peasant students.
- (5) *Linking and Agroecological Development in Coffee* (VIDA) is a peasant organization that strives for holistic health, food sovereignty, and economic self-reliance. It was founded in 1990 and has 846 members (49.6% women and 50.4% men).

These communities are spread across five different states in Mexico (Figure 2), with climates ranging from temperate and semi-warm humid to arid, rainy tropical, and very warm humid climates (García de Miranda, 1981). TAP operates not only in the State of Puebla but also in four other states, with peasants from various climatic conditions coming to sell their products in the city of Puebla (Figure 2). These five communities primarily impact rural areas and small-scale peasants; however, TAP and CES also influence the periurban regions of Tlaxcala and Puebla. TAP, due to its market location, directly impacts the city. The community membership ranges from 55 to 2038 people, and each community includes members from at least one Indigenous group. For instance, most members of UYK and CASFA are Peninsular Mayan or Mam and Mocas, respectively. In contrast, TAP, CES, and VIDA have a minority of members belonging to Indigenous groups (e.g. Nahuatl). Furthermore, the gender composition varies across communities, with both women and men participating in different proportions.

The communities apply four agroecological indicators proposed by FAO (2021) and HLPE (2019) while engaging in a wide range of productive activities that differ due to their cultural, climatic, and geographical contexts. Additionally, they defend food, economic, women, or environmental rights and develop various strategies for knowledge sharing and economic resilience. Table 1 summarizes the activities undertaken by the communities to fulfill the agroecological indicators of diversity, human rights, cooperation and knowledge sharing, and economic resilience.

Table 1. Community activities that contribute to four agroecological indicators.

Agroecological indicators	Linking and Agroecological Development in Coffee (VIDA)	San Francisco de Asis Agroecological Center (CASFA)	U YITS KA'AN Ecological School	Julián Garcés Center for Social Economy (CES)	Alternative Tianguis of Puebla (TAP)
Diversity	Milpa*, homegardens and coffee agroforestry; livestock (e.g. beekeeping and chickens); embroidery, handicrafts, agrietourism, processed goods, production of cosmetics and traditional medicine.	Vegetables and milpa, agroforestry (cacao and coffee); livestock (e.g. beekeeping and sheep); fishery; wood timber; processed cacao and coffee; and agri-ecotourism.	Traditional homegardens and Mayan milpa; livestock (e.g. beekeeping and Mexican hairless pig); embroidery and production of cosmetics and traditional medicine.	Milpa, homegardens, wheat, and barley; livestock (e.g. beekeeping, sheep, chicken, and rabbit); processed goods.	Vegetables, fruits, coffee agroforestry, maize; livestock (e.g. beekeeping, cows, chicken, sheep); handicrafts and processed goods.
Human Rights	Defense of women, economic, social, environmental; sexual and reproductive rights.	Defense of food and economic rights.	Defense of Mayan, food and environmental rights.	Defense of food, economic, environmental and women rights.	Defense of food, economic, social and environmental rights.
Cooperation and knowledge sharing	Technical advice, peasant and popular education and an Agroecological Center of Peasant Knowledge.	Technical advice.	Peasant school, technical advice and peasant and popular education.	Agroecological peasant school technical advice, peasant and popular education, and CBS methodology.	Technical advice, popular education, and environmental education.
Economic resilience	Savings groups, cafeteria, local store, a cooperative to commercialize coffee and weekly peasant market.	38 cooperatives, one company to commercialize products and one rural tourism operator.	Weekly market in Mérida and monthly markets in Valladolid, Tixcacalcupul, Tekom or Mayapán and local store in Maní.	1 cooperative, tianguis** and local store in Ixtacuixtla.	Commercialization in physical and virtual tianguis in the city of Puebla.

Notes: Milpa* is a traditional Mexican agroecosystem that is a polyculture of maize and other wild and domesticated species. Tianguis** is a traditional Mexican open-air market that serves as a social space for recreation and the sale or exchange of goods.

and Indigenous collective rights in their agendas. Furthermore, CES, UYK, and CASFA emerged from Basic Ecclesial Communities (CEBS), which served as bastions for promoting liberation theology. The principles of liberation and Indian theologies not only inspired but also structured the objectives, strategies, and alliances of CASFA, CES, and UYK. Early support to finance the activities of CASFA, CES, and UYK came from Catholic NGOs. Building on these ideological foundations, each experience translated its guiding principles into concrete actions that are presented in the results.

2.2. Analyzing social representations of living well from community perspectives

In 2023 and 2024, two- to four-hour workshops and semi-structured interviews were conducted with the founding members or operational groups that organize or guide each community. The method follows a bottom-up approach aimed to capture the social representations of living well within each community.

A social representation consists of a network of elements (core, peripheral, and contextual) with a specific hierarchy that materializes the image and meaning of the represented object (Moscovici 1979). The central core of a social representation contains figurative or symbolic images, whether real or ideal, provided by the community. This core is timeless and serves as an anchor independent of its immediate context; any modification to the central core transforms the entire representation (Figure 3). Peripheral elements and

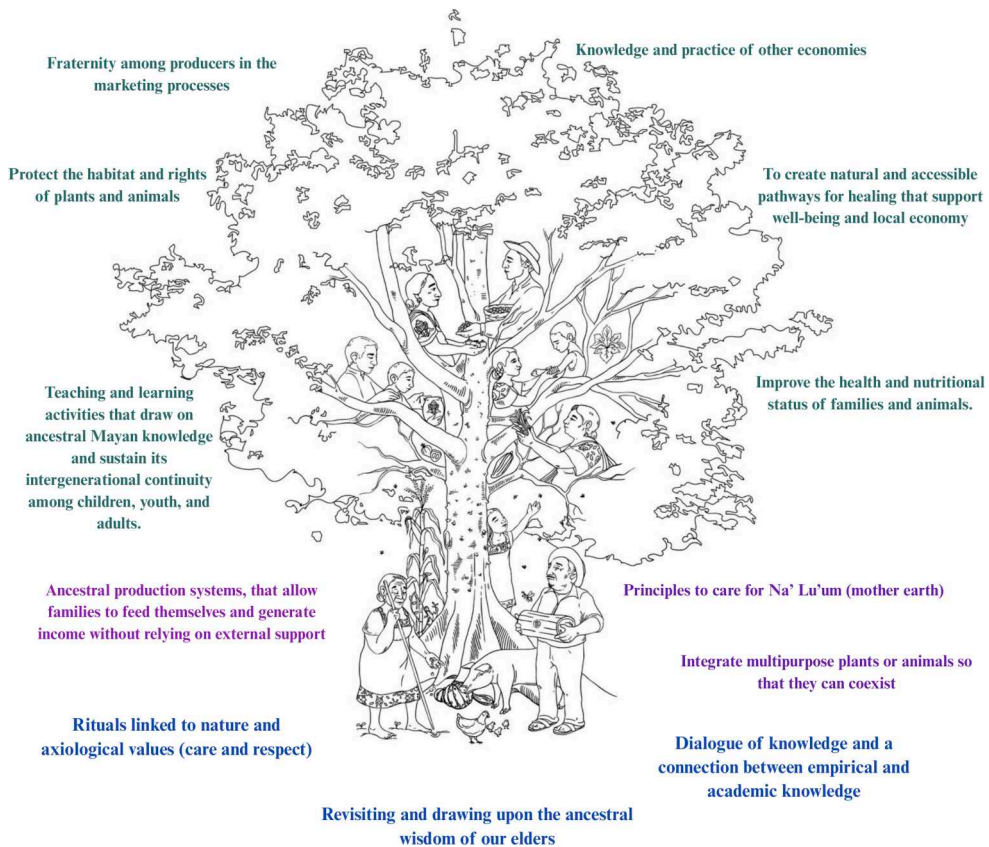


Figure 3. Illustrative example of the UYK ceiba tree of living well. The image shows examples of indicators placed in the roots, trunk, and leaves of the ceiba. It illustrates how core representations of living well (such as spiritual and Mayan heritage) influence peripheral and contextual representations related to production systems, principles of care for nature, healing practices, and alternative economies. Illustration by Aurora Pérez Domínguez.

contextual elements exhibit greater flexibility and can be integrated into the central core over time.

This theoretical framework was operationalized through a single, integrated methodological system implemented in three sequential and interrelated steps. Rather than applying predefined categories or evaluative frameworks, the workshops (Step 1 and 2) were designed to foster collective reflection on meanings, priorities, and hierarchies that structure community understandings and practices of living well. The outputs of this process (Step 3) are synthesized in Figures 3–6, which represent different analytical levels derived from the same participatory data.

2.2.1. Step 1 participatory identification of dimensions and indicators

The first step focused on identifying the content of the social representations of living well. Participants were invited to use their own words and categories to describe the everyday practices, values, activities, spaces, and rituals that shape their collective identity. These elements were discussed as central images of community life. Across communities, elements such as *tiangüis*, communal rituals, assemblies, and agroecosystems were frequently mentioned.

Participants then collectively organized these practices and values into dimensions that enable them to achieve their conception of living well. For each dimension, they co-defined indicators that describe the desired characteristics and purposes necessary to reach their goals. This process was grounded in collective reflection on dreams, motivations, challenges, concerns, contextual conditions, and current or envisioned strategies. The dimensions and indicators generated through this participatory process constitute the primary empirical material produced by the workshops and serve as the basis for the subsequent analytical steps.

2.2.2. Step 2 hierarchization of indicators through social representations

The second step focused on capturing the internal structure of the communities' social representations of living well. Participants collectively created an imaginary tree, with roots representing core elements, the trunk representing peripheral elements, and leaves representing contextual elements. *Core indicators* represent the fundamental essence of the community, acting as the roots that sustain its core principles and objectives. *Peripheral indicators* are strategic means to support and strengthen the core indicators. *Contextual indicators* represent the outcomes or aspirations the communities are pursuing or working toward, which may adapt depending on the specific context.

Indicators identified in Step 1 were collaboratively placed within the tree, and participants discussed the rationale behind each placement, including whether indicators were considered longstanding or emergent. This exercise was conducted with CES, VIDA, TAP, and UYK. Figure 3 presents a graphical example from the UYK workshop, illustrating the placement and interconnections of core, peripheral, and contextual indicators.

2.2.3. Step 3 interpretive synthesis of shared values of living well

The third step involved an interpretive, cross-community analysis of the dimensions, indicators, and hierarchizations generated in Steps 1 and 2. This analysis aimed to identify thematic convergences, shared meanings, and collective values shared by the five communities. Figures 4–6 present different analytical syntheses derived from this same data.

Figure 4 was constructed by organizing the dimensions and indicators identified during the workshops into ten thematic groupings that reflect the main issues considered relevant across communities. Although not all communities have the same dimensions, there is substantial thematic convergence. For example, VIDA does not define separate dimensions for *Care and defense of the territory*, *Exchange of wisdom and collaborative work*, or *Community feminism*; however, the objectives of these themes are embedded within the five dimensions through which VIDA fulfills its mission. Conversely, some communities define *Dignified life* or *Community feminism* as distinct dimensions, although their indicators overlap with those of other communities.

Figure 5 represents an interpretive analytical synthesis of the data generated through the workshops and the semi-structured interviews. Participants narratives, collective reflections, and co-developed indicators were analyzed to identify recurrent meanings, shared orientations, and converging ideas across the five communities. The figure functions as a conceptual representation of seven collective values of living well, rather than an indicator-based measurement system.

Figure 6 was constructed by classifying the indicators identified as core, peripheral, and contextual (Step 2) within the thematic groupings presented in Figure 4. This analytical step enabled a systematic comparison of social representations across communities using a shared thematic framework, while preserving community-defined meanings (Pujadas i Muñoz, Comas d'Argemir, and Roca i Girona 2010). Because CASFA did not participate in the hierarchization exercise conducted in Step 2, the theme of Dignified life was excluded from the social representation diagrams. Therefore, Figure 6 presents nine of the ten thematic groupings identified in Figure 4.

3. Results

3.1. Values of living well that shape alternative ways of living

Each community articulates a distinct set of dimensions that define its mission and objectives (Figure 4). These dimensions were analytically grouped into ten themes that share common indicators and address similar objectives or issues.

Although Figure 4 presents these themes as separate analytical categories, in practice they are interconnected. Community actions, strategies, and objectives rarely correspond to a single dimension or theme. Instead, they simultaneously engage multiple dimensions, reflecting the integrated and relational nature of community life. For example, actions oriented toward territorial defense often intersect with identity, organizational processes and knowledge sharing. Therefore, the thematic grouping should be understood as an analytical tool rather than as a representation of isolated domains.

Furthermore, we observed that these interconnections among dimensions are articulated and sustained through seven collective values of living well. All communities converged around the same seven values (Figure 5). These values operate as transversal elements that unite the diverse dimensions and themes identified in Figure 4. Despite the contextual differences between communities, they converge toward a shared construction of *Buen Vivir*, shaped by the dynamic interaction of these seven elements.

In the following section, we examine how the seven values interact with the thematic groupings, which in many cases reinforce one another. Rather than analyzing each theme






THEME	DIMENSIONS OF EACH CO COMMUNITY				
	 VIDA A.C. (5 dimensions)	 UYK (6 dimensions)	 TAP TIANGUIS (6 dimensions)	 CASFA (7 dimensions)	 CES (8 dimensions)
Agroecology	Agroecology	Food for a good living	Agroecological Practices	Agroecological production	Agroecological production
Economy and marketing	Solidarity economy	Fair and fraternal trade towards financial autonomy	Other economies	Marketing and value chains	Economic autonomy
Organization	Community organization		Community building Inclusion of people	Territorial and organizational governance	Political and care action
Care and defense of the territory		Care and defense of Na' Lu'um (mother earth)	Defense and incidence in the territory	Sustainable management and access to natural resources and land tenure	Right to a healthy environment
Exchange of wisdom and collaborative work		Exchange of wisdom from grandparents and collaborative work		Collaborative work, transmission and exchange of knowledge	Exchange of Knowledge Participation of new generations
Food sovereignty	Food sovereignty			Sovereignty and food security	Food and health sovereignty
Health	Health and spirituality	Health custodians			
Spirituality and cultural identity		Mayan spirituality and identity	Cultural anchor and recognition		
Dignified life				Dignified life	
Community feminism					Community feminism

Figure 4. Dimensions of five communities are grouped into ten themes. Columns display the dimensions defined by each community. Rows group dimensions into shared themes.

in isolation, we present an integrated explanation that captures the complexity, interdependence, and relational character of each dimension, as well as its connection to the values that sustain community life.

3.1.1. Communities conception of agroecology

The dimensions of agroecology, food sovereignty, and health (Figure 4) are closely related to values of *autonomy, identity, territory, and knowledge co-creation*. The five communities



Figure 5. Values of living well shared by the five communities.

conceive agroecology as a means to promote food and production that is in harmony with nature's cycles, avoids pesticides, conserves natural resources, and integrates native plants and animals. They aim to achieve autonomy and local identity by favoring family labor, maximizing local socio-environmental resources, and adapting to families' conditions, capacities, and experiences. Through agroecology and food sovereignty, it is possible to achieve food autonomy in their territory that complies with their identity and knowledge.

For example, the following two interview statements present how peasant and Indigenous knowledge are central to achieving food and health autonomy and preserving their identity.

In agroecosystems of coffee, native plants will not stop being consumed because they are very tasty, they are good for your health, and because it is tradition [...] But, those who do not know the plants do not appreciate it, but those who know it appreciate it and plant it. (Fernando, Mam peasant of CASFA)

Most people who think of coffee agroecosystems think of a monoculture or a polyculture. We link the agroecosystems with the food system because we know what all the plants contribute. This vision of looking at the coffee agroecosystem as a food system implies not only thinking about how to produce coffee or improve its quality but also how to preserve all the species that serve to eat or heal us, some of which are trees, herbs, bushes, mushrooms, and insects. (Gisela, president of VIDA)

Both statements exemplify how food sovereignty is bound with their identity as they safeguard agrobiodiversity and promote diversified agroecosystems because they provide food and medicine and reinforce their cultural identity ties. They strongly link food sovereignty and health, viewing food as medicine due to its nutraceutical and healing properties. Furthermore, the medicinal plants they obtain from healthy agroecosystems are perceived as a fundamental individual and collective right that should ensure autonomy to heal and access to their traditional means of healing. Therefore, to reproduce their culture, they aim to have food systems based on the consumption of native wild and cultivated plants and bioregional cuisine.

3.1.2. Economic and organizational structures that sustain communal work and life

The values of *autonomy, identity, organization and collective work, complementarity, knowledge co-production, and ethical values and attitudes* are present in the dimensions related to the themes of organization and economy and marketing. The five communities address financial, economic, and marketing needs of the community and the families involved. At the family level, the communities aim for economic and financial autonomy for housing, health, recreation, freedom, food sovereignty, and equity. Families are encouraged to invest in activities learned within the community or in their productive systems to achieve financial independence and leadership. All the communities promote the transformation and conservation of basic goods to share resources within their communities and families. Locally and regionally, they collectively sell their surplus in common commercial spaces such as stores, cafes, or markets owned by the communities.

They also practice local and eco-friendly economies based on social and solidarity principles. Values such as fraternity, trust, reciprocity, and solidarity are crucial when practicing eco-friendly economies or promoting short marketing circuits and local food systems. In the case of TAP, CES, and UYK, they organize local *tiangüis*,² bridging the gap between consumers and producers while creating a recreational space for the community and sharing peasant life and values. For example, the *tiangüis* of TAP serve as a community hub for building connections, procuring food, and creating a sense of community. Meanwhile, UYK commercialization fosters fraternity and mutual support among producers.

In the case of VIDA and CASFA they have organizational structures that allows them to have influence in the entire value chain to export or sell their products in national and international markets. They have established legal entities and socially responsible enterprises to commercialize the products of their members. They aim to create a territorial economic impact that benefits and dignifies peasant life, reduces migration, and enhances local livelihoods. By diversifying production systems, they generate multiple income streams through fair trade and value-added products, ensuring a dignified

²Tiangüis is a traditional Mexican open-air market that is a social space for recreation and to sell or exchange goods.

peasant life. For example, VIDA earns income from rural tourism, a cafeteria, coffee exports, and local sales. CASFA focuses on a local, efficient, simple, and eco-friendly agroindustry that transforms native cacao. The diversified income strategies also have the purpose of allowing peasants to have the right to rest or even have the capacity to retire.

The different organizational structures (e.g. for commercialization, to buy inputs, organize events) promote a set of values for collective work. The five communities value organized community actions and a collective identity that harmonizes, structures, and articulates organizational processes. To achieve this, they have various legal organizational figures, such as cooperatives, socially responsible companies, savings groups, and civil associations. The organizational process is articulated by a collective work bounded by ethical values and attitudes (e.g. reciprocity, trust, solidarity, fraternity). For example, the following two statements reinforce the idea that organizational structure and process are built upon social values and attitudes to benefit the collective well-being.

In this environment, we need to have solidarity [...] we can move forward by organizing ourselves well. We can obtain greater benefits if we all agree, because if we disagree, we will not get anywhere for the common good. Individual benefits are not the goal. (Rubiel, Mam peasant of CASFA)

The values and credibility of our producers are everything for the organization. It is important for us that producers believe in us and in what we are doing; otherwise, the value chain cannot be built. (José, board member of CASFA)

They have spaces to foster social cohesion, resolve conflicts, and promote political and educational reflection. These spaces facilitate knowledge exchange, community discussions, and decision-making for collective actions. These social spaces also provide enjoyment, celebration, reflection, coexistence, and nurturing affective relationships. For example, the following statement highlights the significance of *tianguis* as social spaces that serve as gathering points for diverse collectives across the city, whether in pursuit of alternative lifestyles or as platforms for addressing community issues.

The *tianguis* is a hub for collectives. For example, we give the collectives of missing persons a space to talk and make complaints. We also hold discussions on maternity with women's collectives. (Rocio, founding member of TAP)

Exchanging knowledge and collaboration among members and external actors is essential to all communities. The five communities ally with external actors – technicians, organizations, NGOs, networks, movements, and academics – to create supportive networks that share common goals and facilitate horizontal, decolonized exchanges of empirical and academic knowledge. For example, CASFA's technical manuals and plans are based on peasant and ancestral wisdom.

The peasant system has a lot of experience that they practice in the field; their experience is very logical. For example, the agroecology team implements those experiences in a work plan. (Iván, coordinator of Agroecology in CASFA)

The communities work together because they value their collective knowledge, shared identity, and collective actions to transform reality. The five communities mostly rely on popular education and participatory methodologies because they believe knowledge

should be replicable, practical, and accessible to everyone. For example, UYK, VIDA, and CES have peasant schools that focus on creating intergenerational spaces.

Indigenous communities like UYK and CASFA focus on ancestral knowledge and heritage alongside peasant knowledge. They prioritize rescuing, reproducing, and utilizing native seeds and ancestral production systems and technologies preserved by families. For example, UYK focuses on revisiting and reclaiming ancestral Mayan knowledge, drawing from the wisdom of elders and Mayan Codices. This activity aims to empower members by showcasing their work and transforming them into local change agents.

Furthermore, communities operate through committees, coordinating groups, and promoters, among other internal mechanisms that facilitate their operation and organization. Through assemblies and annual or weekly group meetings, they ensure the inclusion, participation, decision-making, and leadership of all community members (e.g. people with disabilities, women, the elderly, men, children, LGBTQTTIQA+, and Indigenous people). The communities reflect and act on how the different community members complement each other to establish horizontal, symmetrical, and harmonious relationships. These collective organizational systems are based on voluntary and multi-generational participation, where each member has a key role in the reproduction of community life. For example, VIDA values elders' guidance in the organizational process and has created a network of promoters that lead, support, facilitate, and connect community initiatives. Specifically, the role of women in the communities has become an essential dimension of the organizational process.

The five communities have developed their structures of communality, rooted in lived experiences of solidarity, reciprocity, and collective care. These structures are not abstract principles but embodied practices, sustained through organizational forms (e.g. cooperatives, savings groups), social spaces (e.g. assemblies), and ancestral knowledge that reinforces their cultural identity. Together, they foster a horizontal, decolonized, and collective vision of *buen vivir*, through which communities position themselves as agents capable of transforming their realities and dignifying peasant life.

3.1.3. Community feminism

The values of *autonomy*, *identity*, and *complementarity* shape the dimension of community feminism.³ Within this framework, communities aim to strengthen economic opportunities for women, upholding women's rights and creating public spaces for women's expression, fulfillment, and happiness. For example, CES and VIDA have cooperatives and savings groups to boost women's economic autonomy. These spaces provide women with safe recreational areas to reclaim public spaces and rebuild community trust. VIDA, CES, and UYK also promote income-generating activities – like embroidery, cosmetics, traditional medicine, and Melipona production – for women, connecting them to their culture and territory. These activities empower women by boosting their economic power, decision-making capabilities, and leadership skills as they actively participate in organizational processes. For example, savings groups and income-generating activities support family and productive projects within collective decision-making structures.

³Similar studies, such as those by Zuluaga Sánchez, Catacora-Vargas, and Siliprandi (2018), based on 12 case studies across Latin America, examine the relationship between agroecology and communitarian feminism. They highlight practices and reflections aimed at caring for life and ensuring food sovereignty, while critically addressing the exploitative, patriarchal, and colonialist relations imposed on both nature and women.

Specifically, the VIDA community focuses on women's rights to access healing spaces (care circles, as they call them) and networks of trust. It supports women in reclaiming or creating public spaces for collective joy and healing. As the following statement declares, women encounter the need to connect, which allows them to connect with nature through a collective space.

The care circles seek to strengthen women's rights and connect us spiritually with the earth from another perspective [...] The circles help to weave trust networks between women, who reflect that we are always connected to the earth [...] from the reproductive elements of care, food, and health. (Monica, coordination group VIDA)

3.1.4. Identity and spiritual relationship with nature

The connection with nature is a fundamental bond for the five communities. The values of *identity*, *autonomy*, *knowledge co-production*, and *territory* shape the relationship with nature, spirituality, and cultural identity. Communities like UYK and VIDA view health as a holistic concept that encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual well-being,⁴ emphasizing both individual and collective well-being. Physical health is seen as a fundamental individual and collective right that should ensure autonomy to heal and access to their traditional means of healing. They stress the importance of promoting, preserving, professionalizing, and documenting ancestral healing practices. For instance, UYK has promoted guardians to oversee community health. For UYK and VIDA, spirituality provides a connection to Earth from a unique perspective. For example, the following statement illustrates how Mayan peasants linked taking care of nature as part of their spiritual identity and the ritual they performed through knowledge provided by their ancestors.

Our parents and grandparents have taught us that the earth is alive, and we must always be grateful. The Sac-Ha and the request for rain [...] are offerings to thank the work because we cannot do it alone. We know that God is everything, but he has his collaborators who are like a family, and we imagine the same with nature, which is why we do the ceremonies. It is in accordance with the activities of the grandparents who tell us stories or tales that they have lived, or stories of nature. (Marcelo, Mayan peasant UYK)

For UYK, health and spirituality are central to their Mayan identity. Spirituality is deeply rooted in their cultural heritage and their needs. Mayan rituals are based on nature and axiological values, with nature seen as the epiphany of divine presence. Consequently, environmental degradation is viewed as a religious offense. Therefore, they advocate for protecting all living creatures and Mother Earth. However, TAP urban culture differs from the cultural identity needs. TAP values the diversity of identities coexisting within the community. It recognizes the different ways of perceiving and living life in the city and the remnants of traditional food consumption knowledge. To build a diverse community, TAP organizes activities to encourage knowledge sharing and cultural exchanges.

⁴From an ecotheological and communitarian perspective, Ceballos Loeza (2019) and Van der Hoff (1992) argue that Indigenous spirituality in two Indigenous communities of Mexico underpins struggles for resistance, dignity, and collective well-being, extending care beyond humans to encompass all living beings and territories. Spirituality is thus an essential dimension of well-being, embodied in rituals, teachings, and narratives that nurture social, environmental, and identity cohesion.

3.1.5. Care and defense of the territory

Despite their distinct cultural identities, the five communities converge in actions aimed at caring for nature and defending their territory.⁵ Our observations reveal that the values of *autonomy, identity, territory, organization, collaborative work, and knowledge co-production* are central to the care and defense of the territory. The five communities aim to establish a responsible and respectful relationship with nature by managing natural resources sustainably, conserving native flora and fauna, and ensuring a livable environment for all creatures. The communities promote soil and water conservation, eco-friendly housing, production and processing systems, and advocate for consumer support in maintaining agrobiodiversity. However, these communities differ in their approach to nature. CASFA aims to monetize environmental services by engaging in the carbon credit market, but UYK opposes this approach, arguing that commodifying nature conflicts with the Mayan worldview and spirituality. They believe Mother Earth should be cared for and protected as a sacred entity. They advocate for the rights of all living creatures and promote a fraternal relationship with them.

At the territorial scale, communities collaborate with various organizations to confront environmental, social, and political challenges threatening their identity, autonomy, and knowledge. These coalitions also defend collective and individual rights for all living beings. For instance, CES aims to stop the contamination of the Atoyac-Zahuapan basin and address women's trafficking. CASFA focuses on securing land tenure and natural resources for historically marginalized indigenous communities. TAP supports initiatives that address territorial needs, such as forest fires, feminist marches, and missing people. UYK advocates for Mayan rights against agrochemicals, megaprojects, and land dispossession.

In summary, the seven values constitute how the five communities create their conception of *Buen Vivir*,⁶ that are expressed through communality. These structures sustain a way of life that enables them to reproduce, reinvent, and self-determine their collective life and work. The communities seek *autonomy* in their territory through food, health, organizational structures, knowledge creation, and economic and financial strategies. This autonomy represents the community's self-determination over its territory, natural resources, organizational structures, and future. Therefore, the communality, as a social structure, is an expression of their autonomy that proposes alternative paths to the capitalist, patriarchal, and colonialist models of Western modernity. For example, the communities promote fraternal, supportive, and local marketing that challenges the capitalist logic of markets. Furthermore, VIDA and CES redefine the role of women in the family, the organization, the community, and their relationships with themselves and other women. In this sense, autonomy is a means to question the coloniality present in our relationships with nature, food, health, and people.

To achieve autonomy in a community, the value of *complementarity* interconnects all members. In the communities, efforts are being promoted to reflect and act on how women and men complement each other to establish horizontal, symmetrical, and

⁵Boege Schmidt (2008) links biocultural heritage to the care and defense of territory, emphasizing that safeguarding a territory goes beyond protecting natural resources. He argues that it requires integrating traditional knowledge, productive practices, symbolic systems, and domesticated biodiversity, thereby ensuring ecological, cultural, and social resilience in the face of environmental degradation and globalization.

⁶Other peasant and Indigenous organizations in Mexico, such as the Tosepan cooperative union, have documented in their Masewal Codex how their actions are rooted in their vision of *yeknemilis* (living well), which seeks to strengthen their autonomy, food sovereignty, self-determination, and identity (Boege Schmidt, Fernández, and Tosepan 2021).

harmonious relationships. Furthermore, elders guide the organizational process with experience, while young people energize and lead the production chains. In this context, the community is based on an ecology of knowledge, where everyone contributes with different practices and knowledge to benefit collective well-being.

The values of *identity* and *knowledge co-creation* are present in the strategies to build a collective way of life based on historical, Indigenous, and peasant roots. For example, organizational structures are deeply rooted in cultural traditions, ethical values, and ancestral knowledge, which shape their way of relating to nature, production, and social organization. Furthermore, spirituality reinforces identity by grounding it in ancestral traditions, ethical relationships with nature, and collective practices. Spirituality becomes a vital force in maintaining autonomy, cultural continuity, and territorial defense through rituals, healing practices, and shared cultural values.

The *values and attitudes* are rooted in community identity and directly influence the organizational framework. These values determine the agroecological approaches, economic models, and community organization, reinforcing food sovereignty and social solidarity. Ethical values like reciprocity, trust, and fraternity guide their organizational structures, marketing strategies, and political engagement. It is considered essential that their members be loving, reciprocal, supportive, and respectful of all living beings. In addition, they seek to strengthen values related to nature, which are an integral part of the Mesoamerican worldview.

The *organization* and *collaborative work* are values that allow us to understand how people organize the community's political, cultural, and economic aspects. These collective organizational systems are based on voluntary and multigenerational participation, where each member has a key role in the reproduction of community life. Furthermore, collective work is a pillar for communities because it is a reciprocal process that resolves collective needs, helps preserve cultural identity, and strengthens social cohesion.

3.2. Hierarchization of indicators through social representations

Our analysis reveals that certain indicators play a more central role than others in enabling the values of living well. We therefore categorized the indicators into three elements: core, peripheral, and contextual. [Figure 6](#) synthesizes nine themes ([Figure 4](#)) and their associated indicators according to this classification. Despite contextual differences, the four communities share four core dimensions.

- (1) *Care and defense of nature and territory.* This highlights the need to conserve and care for the environment, natural resources, and biodiversity. CES, TAP, and VIDA believe that fostering love, connection, and respectful relationships with Mother Earth is essential to sustain life. This theme supports indicators related to food sovereignty, health, and territorial protection. Although UYK does not have a specific indicator for this theme, care and respect for nature are fundamental aspects of Mayan identity and spirituality. Unlike other communities, UYK considers the conservation of natural resources and the environment as peripheral and contextual indicators, viewing them as a means to ensure their spiritual connection with nature.
- (2) *Food sovereignty.* This theme includes indicators that refer to food autonomy, family health, income, and transforming the local food system with regionally and culturally

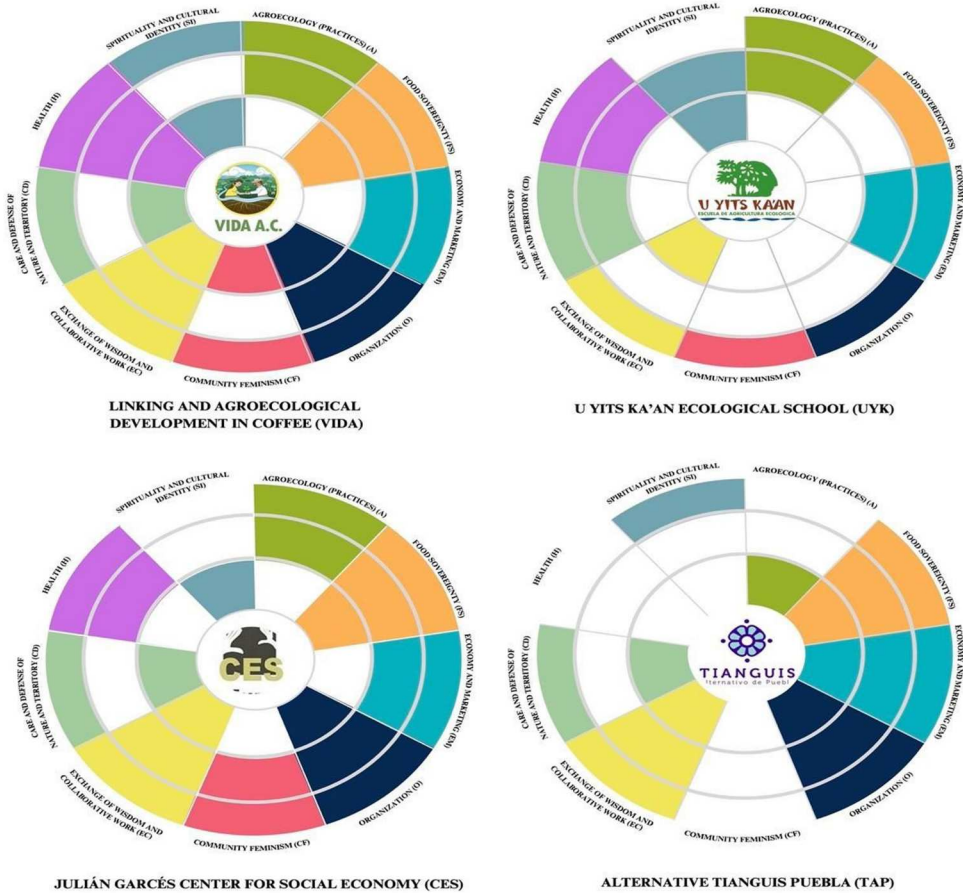


Figure 6. The hierarchy of indicators is organized into nine themes: core, peripheral, and contextual. Each color corresponds to a specific theme, while white indicates the absence of indicators in that theme. The inner circle symbolizes the core indicators, the middle circle signifies the peripheral indicators, and the outer circle represents the contextual indicators.

appropriate products. The core indicators of VIDA and CES include reciprocity with Mother Earth, safeguarding agrobiodiversity, diversified agroecosystems, and food with biocultural identity based on peasant knowledge. As contextual indicators, VIDA and CES seek to change consumption habits, promote bioregional cuisine, and support local food systems, reducing reliance on transnational and processed foods. However, this contrasts with the priorities of TAP, which ranks as a core indicator; having a weekly *tiangüis* enables producers to supply consumers with products for a diverse diet. However, TAP considers that contextual indicators are changing consumption habits and fostering knowledge exchange. For UYK, all indicators in this theme are considered contextual, emerging from the implementation of ancestral production systems and agroecological practices.

- (3) *Exchange of wisdom and collaborative work.* The theme includes peasant knowledge, ancestral knowledge, and collaborative knowledge construction. For CES and VIDA, a core indicator is to recognize peasant knowledge, which links them to their ancestral

knowledge and provides a means to heal their bodies and territories. Peripheral and contextual indicators for VIDA, CES, and UYK include spaces and educational methodologies that facilitate intergenerational knowledge exchange, reality changes, knowledge reproduction, and peasant life awareness. Communities differ in the hierarchy of knowledge construction with academics. VIDA and CES view collaboration with academics as peripheral and contextual indicators. At the same time, UYK, as a peasant school, centers its core pillars on ancestral knowledge and the dialogue of different knowledge, thereby strengthening its identity and fostering innovative solutions by integrating different knowledge systems. Meanwhile, TAP emphasizes knowledge exchange between producers and consumers as a core indicator but considers ancestral, productive, and ritual knowledge as contextual and peripheral indicators.

- (4) *Organizations*. This theme emphasizes values, attitudes, and strategies necessary for collective work. The four communities express the importance of fraternal, reciprocal, cooperative, supportive, happy, responsible, caring, and affectionate attitudes toward people and nature. Although UYK lacks a core indicator for this theme, spirituality is a core pillar sustaining the values of care and respect for all living creatures. For CES, TAP, and VIDA, a core indicator of participation, action, and collective decision-making is the presence of a community with a collective identity. VIDA and CES highlight the participation, leadership, and guidance of women, youth, children, and elders as core indicators. Peripheral indicators for all communities involve mechanisms or spaces that facilitate social cohesion, participation, decision-making, and collective functioning.

There are core themes that respond to each community's context and objectives of living well. For instance, TAP aims to build a local food system. Therefore, the core indicators focus on *Economy, Marketing, and Agroecology (Practices)*. These indicators include promoting agroecological products, fair pricing, bridging the gap between consumers and producers, and using a Participatory Guarantee System to ensure safe and healthy products. In contrast, VIDA, CES, and UYK consider *Economy and Marketing* indicators peripheral or contextual. For them, financial autonomy, economic alternatives for families, and promoting social economies are means to achieve their core values and address current food and economic issues. Similarly, implementing agroecological practices, such as maintaining diversified agroecosystems and using local native inputs, is considered contextual or peripheral. Agroecological practices depend on the core indicators of peasant and ancestral knowledge, serving as means to achieve the primary objectives like sovereignty, health, maintaining life, and establishing a respectful relationship with nature.

Their contextual origins deeply influence the hierarchy of indicators for health and community feminism. For example, the pioneering women involved in founding VIDA received political training and influenced the decision-making of organizational activities. Consequently, a central indicator for VIDA is the empowerment and advancement of women's rights. In contrast, CES and UYK consider these indicators as peripheral or contextual because the indicators respond to the prevailing social and economic conditions and the specific demands and needs of women. Furthermore, CES supports or delegates women's actions to its sister organization, Fray Julián Garcés, which focuses on women trafficking and rights.

Finally, the core values of living well are expressed differently according to the needs and cultural identity of each community. For UYK, Mayan spirituality, rituals, and identity form the foundation for many peripheral and contextual indicators and strategies. For CES and VIDA, a core value is to dignify, value, and build a collective identity as agroecological peasants, fostering an affectionate relationship with nature, cooperative and community values, and preserving ancestral knowledge. In contrast, TAP prioritizes community building without aiming for a single identity, recognizing that urban communities can comprise diverse identities and worldviews.

In summary, through collective actions, communities create social structures that address multiple themes and indicators simultaneously. The hierarchy of each indicator depends on the community's objectives, historical process, and context. The seven themes reflect their relational engagement with nature, territory, and all living creatures. Various indicators capture their pursuit of autonomy, the financing mechanisms that sustain collective initiatives, and the ways local knowledge and cultural practices are mobilized. Furthermore, variations in the hierarchy and interconnections among indicators demonstrate that each community defines its values of *Buen Vivir*, which are expressions of their communality. This finding has important implications for scaling agroecology, as efforts to expand agroecological systems often rely on standardized international assessment frameworks that tend to impose externally defined indicators and value systems, risking the oversight or misrepresentation of locally constructed meanings of living well.

4. Discussion

In the cases above, we analyzed Mexican communities that integrated their values of living well into collective actions to promote agroecology for over ten years. This study addresses the demand from social movements and peasant and Indigenous communities to explore diverse values that shape unique endogenous forms of *comunalidad*, which are social structures that uphold the objective of '*Buen Vivir*' (living well). Indigenous scholars have theorized on how community is the space for communality and how it shapes the way they see themselves and act, dependent on nature and the world (Maldonado Alvarado 2010; Martínez Luna, 2009).

This understanding of community clashes with the Western perspective. For example, Ostrom (1990) conceptualizes the communities as collectives that sustainably manage common resources through social capital, participatory networks, collective action, and locally defined governance systems. However, Ostrom's model tends to overlook the deeper values, knowledge systems, and cultural practices that shape collective action in many non-Western contexts. Similarly, agrarian studies grounded in political economy tend to treat nature as an external object from society, valued primarily for its productive use (Gudynas, 2017). Therefore, the results of this study aimed to understand the cultural roots, ways of life, and territorial relationships that shape the communities and foster a deep scaling of agroecology as these elements influence agroecosystems, food systems, and their components, resources, and governance structures.

The five communities in this study emerge in a context where twentieth-century policies overlooked local economies, traditional food systems, agroecosystems, Indigenous

livelihoods, and nature conservation. These communities present an alternative where collective dreams, hopes, knowledge, and ideas shape a plausible future. For De Sousa Santos (2006), these experiences represent a sociology of emergences that create a diverse array of alternative realities beyond a linear ontological and epistemological vision.

Our study identifies that communities within a territory are bound by shared dreams, uncertainties, necessities, and their social and cultural context (e.g. rural revolts in LATAM, liberation theology, and peasant organizations), leading to unique ontological practices. Despite their differences, these communities need autonomy to care for and defend nature and their territory, achieve food sovereignty, exchange wisdom, and work collectively. This requires self-determination and a redefinition of their identity as individuals and collectives. Similar needs have been noted in other agroecological communities (Bezner Kerr 2013; Bezner Kerr et al. 2022; Giraldo 2025; Rosset and Martínez-Torres 2012). For example, Brazil's National Agroecological Coalition (ANA) focuses on decolonizing the objectification and commodification of land and food. They argue that agroecology must go beyond physical aspects and prioritize repairing socio-ecological relationships through cooperatives and collectives, ensuring mechanisms for self-determination, equity, and justice (Wittman and James 2022).

Scholars and institutional agencies have concentrated their agroecological perspective on a systems approach that encompasses all actions and consequences related to food and agriculture (M. M. Bell and Bellon 2018). FAO (2013; 2018), GTAE (2019), HLPE (2019), Petersen et al. (2017), and Wezel et al. (2020) use a systems approach to provide guidelines on how agroecology should develop to transform food systems and achieve the SDGs. While this approach addresses needs like food, health, and income, human needs extend beyond physical necessities to existential desires of *being*, *having*, *doing*, and *interacting* (Max Neef 1991). The systems approach promoted by FAO (2018) and HLPE (2019) focuses on people's needs to *have* and *do*, aiming for resilient, recyclable, synergetic, diversified, and efficient systems to ensure healthy food, economic diversification, and climate resilience. Our results indicate that agroecological communities express needs beyond the elements of agroecology. Examples of community needs include:

People need *to be* physically, emotionally, and spiritually healthy, activists, agents of change, autonomous, part of a community, peasants, Mayans, and loving, reciprocal, happy, affectionate, and respectful.

People need *to have* food sovereignty, financial autonomy, adequate housing, eco-friendly and diversified agroecosystems, cultural identity, traditional knowledge, and human rights (food, environmental, economic, and women).

People need *to do* care for habitats and the rights of all living creatures, promote and rescue ancestral medicine, practice alternative economies, and foster collaborative, supportive, and reciprocal frameworks.

People need *to interact* to create community spaces for voicing opinions, celebrating, reflecting, coexisting, and finding personal fulfillment and happiness. They also need to connect with consumers, producers, and other actors through horizontal and decolonized dialogue.

Other studies show that agroecological communities have intangible needs to build a rich social structure that transforms physical systems. For example, Brazil's Landless Rural

Workers Movement uses agroecology to establish a relationship with nature. It sees the community as a core space to achieve autonomy and impact the social and political system (Ilieva and Hernandez 2018). In Ecuador, peasants adopted agroecological practices because they aligned with their Indigenous identity (Deaconu, Mercille, and Batal 2019). Consumers, an essential part of some communities, fulfill their need for food that brings them pleasure and joy (Bezner Kerr et al. 2022).

Beyond material and cognitive needs, fulfilling relational needs is also crucial (Bezner Kerr et al. 2022). S. Bell and Morse (2008) warned that a systems approach may overamplify or fail to measure all interactions and human experiences. Our results show that communities seek diverse relationships with human, non-human, and material entities. For example, UYK promotes fraternal commercialization between peasants and equal rights for all living creatures. For VIDA and CES, relationships with academia must be horizontal, with academics being viewed as companions in a common cause. Bezner Kerr et al. (2022) noted that this fosters a sense of belonging, trust, mutuality, identity, and place in agroecological communities. Furthermore, relational needs among producers, consumers, and academics foster reciprocity and commitment to agroecology (Dumont et al. 2016).

Agroecological principles with a systems approach define and provide guidelines for achieving an ideal system. However, they do not address ontological questions, such as why a community is agroecological?, or what their conception of *Buen Vivir* is? What type of relations do people establish with others (human, non-human, material) or what are social structures (e.g. communality) that sustain their collective action? What core values and needs do people pursue in agroecology? Understanding agroecological communities' ontological and epistemological context is crucial; otherwise, agroecologists may inadvertently advocate for a productivist and technocratic approach indistinguishable from other eco-friendly agricultural alternatives (e.g. regenerative agriculture, organic agriculture, climate-smart agriculture) (M. M. Bell and Bellon 2018). There is an ontological and epistemological dispute over what is agroecological (Giraldo and Rosset 2018; Van der Ploeg 2010), which directly impacts current agroecological transition frameworks (Ollivier et al. 2018). Imposing specific philosophical perspectives or frameworks risks transforming agroecology into a colonialist approach if it fails to serve the collective's ontological and epistemological perspectives.

For example, evaluation tools for agroecological indicators may obscure diverse ontological practices and undervalue community objectives or values of living well. The TAPE methodology, which uses spider web and context analysis to quantify agroecology based on SDG goals (FAO 2021), may overlook the historical context and the social structures that sustain the communities' priorities and understanding of wellbeing. These structures often influence the emergence of communities, mission, methodologies, finances, alliances, operational strategies, and what they prioritize as core, contextual, or peripheral indicators.

Our results show that each community tailored its dimensions based on necessities, knowledge, objectives, dreams, and historical context. Therefore, we foresee that a spider web analysis assigns equal weight to all dimensions, focusing solely on whether the SDG objectives are met, without considering that different dimensions and indicators might be represented and achieved in various ways. For instance, TAP prioritizes the indicators of economy and marketing because the market is a vital space for social

reproduction. However, for UYK, VIDA, and CES, the market is a contextual or peripheral indicator. Furthermore, the themes of spirituality, food sovereignty, and health are so intertwined that evaluating them separately weakens their significance. We are not arguing that the tools and principles proposed with a systems approach are not helpful, but rather that we need to be aware of the ontological structures they entail to avoid colonialist postures of agroecology that impose external categories.

Our analysis demonstrates that communities are unique social structures capable of envisioning and creating alternative realities, deeply scaling social values, norms, and relationships. Communities exhibit diverse material, epistemological, and ontological perspectives to transform their territories, agri-food systems, and social structures and build autonomy and self-determination. They seek well-being through various means, with agroecology being a key framework for achieving '*el buen vivir*' and upholding individual and collective human rights. However, current frameworks for assessing agroecological transition often lack local conditions and do not address end-users' needs (Darmaun et al. 2023). Therefore, a community-focused approach can help legitimize frameworks that are aligned with the community's goals and social structures.

Studying agroecology at a community level presents challenges when aiming to quantify or compare different ontological practices. However, our community analysis allowed us to understand similarities and differences, priorities, and strategies across environmental, social, cultural, economic, health, nutrition, and governance dimensions in diverse contexts and scales. Finally, we concur with the idea of CASFA: '*Together, we can achieve greater things.*'

5. Conclusion

Our study highlights the profound complexity and richness of the values of living well within five Mexican agroecological communities. These communities challenge conventional modernization paradigms and prioritize autonomy, food sovereignty, and the defense of cultural and ecological heritage. They have empowered women by placing them at the forefront and allowing them to transcend traditional roles. They emphasize the necessity of communality as a social structure that upholds their objective of *Buen Vivir*. While the systems approach promoted by institutional agencies is valuable, it fails to address community needs and values fully. Our findings underline the importance of acknowledging and integrating the diverse ontological perspectives that shape agroecological practices, thereby preventing the imposition of external, potentially colonialist frameworks that could undermine local objectives. Ultimately, these communities demonstrate the transformative potential of the community to be resilient and achieve well-being for all living creatures.

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