



Vida Verde

Reverse Modernization as a New Vector of Inclusive Growth

REPORT SUMMARY



CENTERO
Research Association

ANALYTICAL REPORT • MOSCOW • 2020

Vida Verde:

Reverse Modernization as a New Vector of Inclusive Growth

REPORT SUMMARY

Russian experts from the Center for Crisis Society Studies, the Institute of Latin American Studies of the Russian Academy of Sciences and the Institute of World Economy and International Relations of the Russian Academy of Sciences, together with researchers from the University of Belgrade (Serbia), analyzed the strengths and drawbacks of alternative models of socio-ecological development. Then, based on that analysis, they addressed the issue of the potential 'third path' of social, economic, political, cultural and environmental development – one that does not prioritize economic growth and progress in the conventional sense.

The modern world is going through a difficult period. The fact that normal life essentially stopped for four entire months all across the planet, as well as our subjective experiences of the lockdowns introduced to halt the pandemic, have, in some ways, forced us to reflect about the environment and reassess the way humans coexist with the systems of nature. Confronted with new political and ethical dilemmas brought forth by the pandemic, humanity now stands at a crossroads, presented with a new

perspective on the world's economic and climate crises. It was this impulse for self-reflection that inspired us to write this report.

However, it would be wrong to think that the world before the pandemic was perfectly sustainable and resilient in terms of its economic structure and existing social systems. It was the coronavirus pandemic that once again demonstrated how the imperfections of our world can take humanity to the brink of disaster: uncontrolled waves of migration caused by globalization; indigenous peoples losing their lands to major agricultural companies and the mining industry; rampant soil and water pollution; unethical manufacturing that contaminates the environment; workers losing their jobs as imported products flood the markets, etc.

Ironically, the COVID-19 crisis has also given us a major platform for public debate with a focus on the search for alternatives: we are looking for ways of organizing society after the pandemic and leaving the crisis behind; exploring what kind of governance and what types of public

policy countries should pursue in order to recover. In other words, we are talking about the future of human civilization that found itself on the verge of systemic collapse.

Therefore, the ongoing global crisis may pave the way for a more democratic paradigm of social organization – one associated with notions of care, solidarity and cooperation – and a different public policy aimed at creating a ‘new ecosocial and economic contract’, where issues of social justice and environmental protection would be closely linked together. The idea is not to just reduce emissions, create ‘green’ infrastructure or ‘green’ jobs, but also find solutions that focus on responsible environmental management, respect for human rights, and ensure maximum equality of access to essential goods such as water, energy and renewable energy sources.

The current growth-based economy is incapable of balancing prosperity with sustainability; reverse modernization is only possible through establishing a new social and ecological framework that will meet people’s needs while respecting the planet’s ecological boundaries in balance with ethical principles. However, it is very difficult to escape the ‘progress trap’, as the departure from the conventional mode of development would generate a number of problems: economic, political, geopolitical, ideological, and epistemological.

Lack of political will and the failure of governments (both conservative

and progressive) to break with the growth model that is based on large-scale exploitation of natural resources hinder the development of a meaningful alternative. Moreover, until public perception (especially at the level of the elites) changes, abandoning the notion that development is only possible through extraction, production and export of resources, the status quo will not change, regardless of ideologies or political regimes involved. For the most part, the concept of development in our world revolves around the idea of economic growth based on massive foreign investment and the use of natural resources to boost individual economies. This type of growth has a strong environmental impact and takes a high social toll, contributing to the systematic violation of human rights.

The authors of this report seek to show potential alternative ways of organizing socio-ecological development, as well as answer the following questions: Are any such alternatives possible in principle? How willing is the post-Covid world to accept these alternatives? What are the strengths of alternative models, and what are their limitations?

A new equitable and balanced model of global development in the medium term seems very likely and promising, and this paper is an attempt to reflect on the very possibility of choosing alternative development paths (as a way to generate inclusive growth in the post-Covid era), and to stimulate further public discussion on the subject.

The first chapter of the report, prepared by T. Rusakova, contains an overview of socio-ecological schools, current trends in socio-ecological development, as well as the rationale behind the emergence of the concept of reverse modernization as one of the alternatives to further socio-ecological, economic and political development. The chapter by D. Nadić is devoted to the issue of the common good and the institutionalization of environmental movements. In the third chapter, A. Shinkarenko talks about common good as a post-colonial alternative to development in Latin America. The fourth chapter by E. Glushenkova addresses Russia's current environmental agenda.

There is a reason why the experts limited their analysis of the environmentalist agenda to Western Europe, Latin America, and Russia. Our goal is to show two pictures of the world, two development alternatives that can be considered as potential ways forward for Russia. At one end is the more structured European 'green movement', where the environmental agenda is neatly integrated into the Western fabric

of political life, and where even non-systemic environmental movements – while they may not establish their own political parties – over time acquire specific characteristics that grant them the title of 'environmental corporations'. At the other end is the Latin American development scenario, which is based on grassroots autonomous communities (mostly comprised of indigenous peoples) and is often seen as a fringe mode of development. In our opinion, the latter assessment is not quite correct, since one of its main characteristics is the harmonious coexistence of indigenous peoples and the natural environment, and the fact that these communities practice moral and ethical norms related to the interaction between man and nature – in other words, they have a strong natural ecoculture. Therefore, the environmental expertise of indigenous groups can provide valuable information about adaptation strategies, community-style monitoring, and the dynamics of environmental ethical values. The Latin American experience can, in theory, be applied by Russian indigenous peoples and by grassroots network organizations in general.

KEY HIGHLIGHTS

1. The environmental factor has invariably been present in socio-political discussions, studies, as well as social, political, and economic research since the latter half of the 20th century, and its role has only grown over time, which ultimately invites the notion of a distinctive 'environmentalist ideology'.

2. In some cases, environmentalism openly opposes hegemonic economic models, supporting alternative equity-focused development models. It is crucial to distinguish between more radical and less radical but balanced alternative models of socio-ecological development, without slipping into biocentrism. The concept of Vida Verde, or reverse modernization, involves finding a new balance between the economy, culture and politics as a way to address major socio-environmental problems. This concept can be used to develop suitable policies and guidelines for a new society, adapted to the modern period. Under this model, GDP growth ceases to be the key indicator of national success, and society is primarily focused on reasonable self-restraint and preservation of ecological balance.

3. However, the Vida Verde model that we propose also has limitations: the conflict between the economy and the environment cannot be resolved solely through calls for 'eco-efficiency', 'ecological modernization',

or a 'greener' economy. It is necessary to design and implement a strategy that will eventually lead to a post-extractivist economy. This does not mean, however, that extraction of mineral resources is to be abandoned immediately. The success of this strategy depends entirely on the extent of public support it would receive.

4. An important step toward a greener society is to protect the environment at the constitutional level. Discussions about introducing a development model that differs from the rent extraction model present a challenge to the established paradigm of the 'human-environment' binary, since the non-conventional model is based on indigenous values and cosmology, which are almost impossible to replicate in the majority of the population.

5. The impossibility of changing (in the foreseeable future) the existing economic system at the global and national levels does not mean that the idea of change has to be abandoned. This change can be achieved by building communities that develop in parallel with the global economic system, thus proving that an alternative exists and that it is sustainable.

6. Russia is at a crossroads, searching for an ideology of its own, and the concept of Vida Verde could well become part of it. However,

the formation of a socio-ecological ideology requires a clear and coherent political plan of action in order to move beyond the two-dimensional framework which sees ideology in an exclusively reductionist light, relying on dichotomies such as 'left-right' or 'democracy-totalitarianism'. We believe that introducing the concept of 'production-antiproduction' into the political field will contribute to a better-defined environmentalist ideology, which can be promoted as an alternative to the conventional capitalist categories.

7. The ecological agenda in general (especially the part that concerns climate change) is often imposed 'from above', at the level of the international community. However, it would be wrong to say that elements of Vida Verde cannot resonate with the population of Russia (excluding some of the city residents who already practice responsible consumption and minimalism). In Russia, this model can gain genuine traction through environmental conflicts, which have become a permanent item on Russia's agenda,

as they reflect public dissatisfaction with the policies of the current authorities and signify a demand for equity.

8. At the moment, Russia is still far from either the 'institutional' European green model or the Latin American grassroots alternative. Our country is characterized by excessive centralization, which makes it extremely hard to engage in activity 'from the bottom up'. What Russia needs is decentralization, combined with a gradual transfer of power to local communities, as this is the only way to manage all the information required for decision-making.

9. If displays of solidarity, social and ecological equity, equality, and cooperation (currently isolated and spontaneous), both by individuals and institutions, do not result in new models of behavior, then social inertia is likely to roll everything back to the starting point: the vicious circle of extractivism will continue to reproduce itself, exacerbating economic, political, social and environmental crises.

CENTERO Research Association is an independent non-governmental
research center specializing in public policy analysis.

✉ centero@centero.ru

☎ +7 (495) 664-52-07