



Conversation with Alexandra Goossens-Ishii

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Could you please introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about yourself and what has brought you to the work that you do today?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: Thank you very much. I am Alex. I am based in Geneva. I am a program coordinator for a faith-based organization, Soka Gakkai International (SGI). It's a Buddhist grassroots network. The office for UN Affairs of SGI is following a lot of the work that's happening at the UN and we're working to create bridges and contribute to policymaking based on our values. My area of focus has been mostly on the environment, following UN processes relating to environment, biodiversity, and climate.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is distinctive and unique about what you do in the way that it brings together Buddhist principles, and environmentalism?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: I don't know if it's unique, but we are very intentional in engaging as SGI and we see it as reflecting everything that's happening outside. For instance, we're trying to advocate for peace, human rights, local community voices, Indigenous people's voices, and faith voices.

Sometimes people work in extractive ways, pushing ways, reproducing power dynamics. The way we engage creates a pattern that truly embodies respect, dialogue, and a true will to learn from each other. It is a dynamic of self-reflecting and transforming from within and a path to creating peace, better relationships, and community. The uniqueness of it is the community that we reach out to, it's about collaboration, seeking to bridge and doing things with others. We're not alone in that approach.

At various levels, people are seeking to create bridges between groups that would not talk to each other naturally and that's the way we bring back what's happening in the UN outside of the UN. We have a lot of educational tools, and awareness-raising tools. We have done dialogues. When we create

an opportunity for a workshop or community gathering or symposium or something at the UN, it's always in that bridge-building spirit.

I have realized within the UN, there are values of peace, solidarity, fighting for basically a better environment, better world, and there are still many power dynamics. Like any organization, we have work to do. We're intentional about embodying respect for others, but also for ourselves.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the work that you've been doing, what has been an insight, learning or takeaway from working to include faith voices and holding a human rights focus towards environmentalism?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: One thing that I've learned and that I've appreciated, in the work of the Faithful Biodiversity Coalition is that for the sake of the environment, there can be something beautiful about faiths coming together and being even more intentional in reconnecting with faith, the inner aspects of our life and creating spaces where people feel welcome, resourced, enriched, and nourished so that everybody can continue in the advocacy work that we will have to do.

Going back inside, reconnecting to our respective faith, but with that active action, and from that basis engaging in the world; this has been a constant learning from my end. It's been a great journey not to put the solutions always outside and not to be for too long disappointed if something is not the result we wanted it to be at the advocacy international level. To go back to this process that has no hand off forever, something new can be created.

From inner transformation to outside, this has been a great privilege of working for a faith-based organization because I've also worked in universities and sometimes I would dissociate myself. There would be two people. There is me as a faith person and then there is me in academia. After that, working for a faith-based organization, was like, "This is the way I want to continue." I want not to cut the inside from the outside.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you give me an example of a project or an initiative that you have worked on through SGI and what has been your evidence that this project or program is working?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: There are different things. SGI has had several stories, very much based also on storytelling. It has shared many stories of people's empowerment and how that has transformed their communities. In SGI, we call it Human Revolution or inner transformation processes and how that has shaped people's change and their relationship to their community. For instance, there is one young man in France who I used to do Buddhist activities with, not in the context of work.

He was fed up with seeing so much trash in the streets of the city where he lived. He was angry, and then he went back to his faith. In our faith, we chant, so he chanted, and reflected, and then, so that he didn't feel powerless and angry, he decided to take action. He didn't know what to do, he just started by picking up the trash he saw in the streets and it was bringing him some joy. Then he realized maybe other people would like to do that. He started to research, and connected with the Zero Waste Association in France.

He set up the first antenna of the Zero Waste Association in his city. Step by step, more people joined because now there was a contact point. After a year, they ended up organizing a Zero Waste Festival, collecting four or five tons of waste. They created a community. I've seen the impact of a single person's change.

We've been engaging in our work through dialogues. Recently, we have been engaged in a multi-actor dialogue process with other organizations, mostly non-faith-based. We tried to understand better what climate and biodiversity action would look like when they are people-centered and when they are human rights-centered. We gathered various actors, Indigenous peoples, local communities, women, youth, and state parties, because it was in the context of the Convention on Biological Diversity.

We also gathered various actors that we brought through different workshops a few weeks ago, just before the COP16 on Biodiversity in Colombia. An in-person multi-actor dialogue where these different groups could really speak to each other, but from the heart. What was so heartwarming was the feedback from participants who said, "We've done a lot of workshops, but this was so different."

I think that's where we are intentionally trying to enable people to speak as themselves, and reconnect with their function, and be able to embody that in finding a pathway to advance together. This type of project bridges and brings people together from various perspectives to create more solidarity. This then impacted UN negotiations, the realm of my work, which has been interesting.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges that come up with doing work through a faith lens? How do you actively work to overcome the challenges that come to the surface?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: That's a good question. One of the challenges is that sometimes you're not taken seriously because you're not taken as an expert. Also sometimes, you are not an expert. For instance, in the climate convention, there are specific fields of finance, just transition, all these fields. It's true that many of the faith representatives come from a strong will to engage. Many faith organizations also bring voices from communities, which is so important.

You are considered like a faith voice, but it stays general. It's like in the realm of ethics, and that's great, but doesn't bring money to the table or the Global South and Global North together. At a press conference organized by faith groups, in the Climate COP, there is less attendance than at the big environmental NGOs' press conferences.

Sometimes you can feel that it's remaining a little bit on the side. However, my vision is not for faith groups to become a prominent voice. For those engaged in the UN space, we have to keep breaking our barriers, keep learning from others, and engaging wholeheartedly in the policies for those who want to engage. The way to overcome that is to find the conversations that are not happening and find a way to make these happen.

Some of my friends from other faith groups are focused on governance, cooperation, and convening discussions with people who have active roles at various levels within the UN to keep things moving. I find that interesting. Other groups will have more behind the doors action and create safe spaces between Global North and Global South countries who will fight in the negotiations room. In a safe space where it's not going to be public they create the conditions of a dialogue.

With SGI we're trying to focus on youth. Our delegates attending the COP will be youth. We're enabling them to join advocacy spaces in a way where they are embodying their faith and representing a faith-based organization, for different opportunities to create dialogues that would not happen.

For the Faith for Biodiversity Coalition that we are co-supporting with Gopal Patel, we support faith groups by sharing everything from a policy perspective. To make policy debriefs and daily policy updates during the COP. To create that bridge and learn from each other.

Ashley Hopkinson: What is the role of partnerships and collaborations in your work and are there any strategies that you use to cultivate and maintain partnerships?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: The role it plays is major because for SGI, for instance, the way we see things moving forward is through solidarity and collaboration. I think the interfaith movement is super important. Then as I said before, know the partnerships across. We work with a lot of other civil society groups, but we also discuss with member states when there are projects. The Faith for Biodiversity Coalition has been wonderful in terms of these partnerships.

Everybody tries to bring different strengths so that we can support capacity building of more faith groups engaging in all the various UN spaces. I'm here speaking only from the environmental perspective, but SGI works from disarmament to gender equality, human rights education, and youth

empowerment. In that way, partnerships are super important; they are key. At the UN level maybe one partnership we don't have in the field of environment is with the private sector.

We are realizing that in the UN environment space, there are a lot of the original constituency groups, women, and youth environmental NGOs, but then the business is completely separate. I think there are some discussions about changing that dynamic. I was talking about the multi-actor dialogue process we are having, with some of the actors we couldn't engage yet and we are still brainstorming for the next year.

It will be to engage with national, sub-national and local actors, meaning mostly cities and sub-national and the private sector. Donors, the private sector, and businesses and financing to some extent. I find it super interesting to question the type of collaborations and partnership we have and see which groups are not speaking yet or how we could bring some new conversations in and what could that trigger.

Maintaining those relationships brings us back to embodying what we are. I'm becoming friends with these people. There are people that I truly cherish and treasure. It becomes natural to continue the partnership, I don't know if I've been fortunate or not. I think it comes from the intention to nurture the relationship and to get to know the person in front of me, to treat that person as a person.

A lot of times friendships are being created and then we are just one person so there is only so much you can do. Sometimes, part of the work will go in another direction. We just reassess, "Okay, can we engage on that? Do we have capacity?"

Ashley Hopkinson: To go back to the policy aspect of it, what can leaders and decision-makers do to advance faith in action and environmentalism and unity with faith perspectives?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: One thing is from the negotiations policy level area, from the climate space to the biodiversity space to the UNEP space. I know that when we talk about human rights at the policy level it is not something that comes easy because it comes with accountability. States don't like it. I would even say that sometimes human beings don't even like accountability, frankly speaking.

What would be a great step forward at the policy level is to stop seeing and fearing accountability, transparency, and human rights, but to see that centering on people increasingly is a win-win. A human rights-based approach would benefit everyone. It would enable many narratives to be embodied from Indigenous people to faith-based ones.

Policy leaders will enter the role of their function. So many are faith-based, but their faith will be completely on the side. They will just enter into what they must achieve from their office. They cut their freedom, creativity, and faith to contribute to something better because of fear of being cut by a boss or being cut by a budget. It's understandable. Courage is needed to embody what you think is right because those who can do that, have transformative action. It leaves a trace for the betterment of many.

Ashley Hopkinson: How would you define collective wellbeing? What does wellbeing mean to you within the scope of your work in environmentalism through faith?

Alexandra Goossens-Ishii: I would say that each person is engaged in an inner transformation that will then contribute to the wellbeing of others. Sometimes you have to stand up with courage to say something. For me, collective wellbeing also means the courage to speak up, and the courage to give up privilege to hold space for others. This usually comes from an internal state where you're not feeling unfulfilled or craving something because when you are unfulfilled or craving something, it will reproduce in a relationship.

For me, collective wellbeing comes from the dynamic process of the mirror of others and society, neighbors, and local community to your emotions. You take that, work on yourself, and bring it back out. It's like a constant back and forth, and you work on yourself to become happier by transforming and healing the parts that are making you feel unfulfilled. From that standpoint, you continue to engage. It is a dynamic process in which you co-create constantly with the feedback loop of others who say to you, "Wait, you are speaking out of a place of privilege, no?" And you're like, "Oh, really? Am I?"

You reflect, move, and decide, "Okay, yes, I am. I have to not speak at this time and hold the space. I have to invite someone else to speak and not speak for that person." You don't sacrifice yourself either, you advance for your own life's respect and go to the deeper values of what will enrich your life and make you fulfilled, not craving external things. I would define it as a dynamic back-and-forth process where you care for yourself, but also change for the sake of others.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you Alex.

Ashley Hopkinson is an award-winning journalist, newsroom entrepreneur and leader dedicated to excellent storytelling and mission-driven media. She currently manages the Solutions Insights Lab, an initiative of the Solutions Journalism Network. She is based in New Orleans, Louisiana.

** This conversation has been edited and condensed.*