



Conversation with Luisa Fernanda Bacca Benavides

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about yourself, your background, and what brought you to the work you do?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: I am a Colombian lawyer, and I've been working in the field of human rights. More specifically, defending and supporting the rights of Indigenous peoples in Colombia and in the Amazon region in South America. At the beginning of my professional career, I was more involved in humanitarian field work. I was accompanying Indigenous peoples in some humanitarian issues such as internal displacement and territorial conflict because, as you know, this is a very complicated situation in Colombia. But then I moved to the field of environmental rights and territorial rights, and right now, I am part of the team of the Gaia Amazonas Foundation.

Gaia Amazonas is a Colombian organization that has more than 30 years of experience working in the field with Indigenous peoples from the Colombian Eastern Amazon. My interest has been focused on how to link the human rights agenda and the sustainable agenda with the aspirations of Indigenous peoples, taking fully into consideration their cultural aspirations and knowledge. We have identified that there is a gap between those agendas and the claims of Indigenous peoples from the territory.

Ashley Hopkinson: Why did you want your work to center Indigenous communities within this region?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Well, the Colombian Amazon is one of the most culturally diverse territories in our country. Here in our country, there are approximately 120 recognized Indigenous peoples, and 70 are in the Amazon. So, there is a really rich diversity, but this diversity is contrasted with the (lack of government support), and many pressures such as mining. I decided to work in this region because there, you can address the cultural diversity and also have the opportunity to see the many violations of Indigenous rights.

And life put me there. I had a feeling of being linked or connected to this specific territory, and then life opened the door for me to be part of this specific process. I found Gaia Amazonas, and I had the chance to work with them. I love it. I love the work that the organization is doing because they are here in Colombia.

Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned wanting to connect the human rights agenda with Indigenous communities in the area and help the environment. Can you tell me about that work?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Our work is based on the guarantee of self-determination of Indigenous people. And here, working together with the Indigenous people from the Amazon, we are claiming the implementation of one specific law, which is the Decree Law 632 that allows the creation of the first local Indigenous government. It is a kind of Indigenous municipality. These Indigenous local governments, through this law, will have three full powers: political powers, administrative powers, and fiscal powers. It is the first process here in my country. But we know that this is also a global example of Indigenous governance that really takes into consideration the self-determination of Indigenous peoples.

This is really important. First, because the Indigenous peoples want to govern their territory based on their traditional knowledge. Second, because their territory is approximately 30% of the Amazonian region here in Colombia, which is approximately 16 million hectares. This specific area connects or belongs to the largest and best-preserved tropical forest of the world, which is located in the northern area of the Amazon region. And they are doing an incredible job. All of their territories are fully conserved. The level of deforestation there is almost zero, and they have created a lot of tools for territorial management.

All of the work is nature-centered. They have created, as an example, the Plan de Vida, the Life Plan, and they follow an ecological calendar. So, for us, and me specifically, it is really important to guarantee Indigenous self-determination or Indigenous governance. It became really important in the current environmental crisis, as they are the ones who are protecting the forest, and they know how to do it. And they are working from a completely diverse paradigm. They are breaking with the colonial legacy that is still ongoing in our country and in our institutions.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you measure your progress toward your goals of Indigenous governance and ensure that Indigenous voices are included in these climate-related decisions?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: There are two ways of tracking the progress of our work. The first one is related to the policy or the fulfillment of policy. So, in the case of Decree Law 633, there are three

phases of implementation. The first one is related to political autonomy, the second one is related to territorial autonomy, and the third one is related to financial autonomy. So, we are in the middle of the process. As of right now, 15 Indigenous councils have been formally recognized by the national governments. We started with the second phase which is related to territorial delimitation, and we have to work together with the land agencies here in Colombia and with other institutions.

We track our progress through the level of implementation of the Decree Law. This is one example, but there is another one related to the work that Indigenous governments are already doing in their territories. So, this is a process of implementation, but they are creating these indicators. They are trying to create a very, very simple tool to measure the well-being of their communities, to understand how good people are living in their communities. They're developing some specific indicators or benchmarks.

These are related to, for example, access to food, access to education, and, culturally speaking, to the ceremonies. They are developing these indicators to check, through annual field work, how their work is impacting their communities. So these are two ways: the one related to policy and the second to the role of the governments in the territories.

Ashley Hopkinson: So this tool they're coming up with matches and works with their culture?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Exactly. For example, it is completely related to the ecological calendar, and in the ecological calendar, there are times for specific ceremonies or rituals. And for them, the idea of wellbeing is really different from our idea of wellbeing.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are the challenges you face in the work you do, and how are you managing those challenges?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Two challenges. The first one is that our culture is still really colonial. There is a lot of discrimination. Cultural diversity is not really a big agenda. Everyone is talking about gender or working on breaking these inequalities, but there is a small level of interest in the agenda or aspirations of Indigenous peoples. And when you are working together with the institutions, there are many administrative barriers, in which you can totally identify the contradictions between the rights and the implementation of a specific law. And then the other challenge is understanding when to leave the territory when you are an organization that is just accompanying a process for self-determination.

So if our purpose is to guarantee self-determination in the local government, at some point, you have to leave the process. You leave because otherwise, you're going to reproduce the same thing that you don't want to have. So, there is also a challenge, as an NGO, to know exactly when you are going to be

part of this process. I think it is really important to be open to listening to the necessities and demands of the Indigenous peoples. Nowadays, they are asking for more and more direct control of the budgets and everything. And that's perfect.

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it will take to demonstrate the value of this work and make it a bigger priority, particularly for policymakers, leaders, and people who are in a position of power?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: I would place it in the context of the environmental agenda because it is already known that Indigenous territories and the territories of local communities are the territories where the forests are best preserved. That is already recognized. Everyone knows it; the policymakers are aware of this fact. However, the point that is not completely recognized yet is that the forests are there because the people in the fields are doing a job. People have been in charge of managing those forests; it's not a spontaneous act. No, it happens because Indigenous peoples or local communities are doing work.

So, for me, the question is how to get more commitment from the decision-makers. How to create more visibility or advocacy tools in which you can clearly demonstrate that the conservation of the forest, the climate goals, and the biodiversity goals can be achieved only when you work together with Indigenous peoples and local communities, not only as they are beneficiaries of rights, but they are governing those territories. They know how to do it, and they are organized internally to do it. So, these are the links that we want to cement.

Ashley Hopkinson: So it's about recognizing that these communities have already been governing these territories and then putting in support?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Formally. When you acknowledge it, in terms of public policy, you also have to start working together in order to coordinate the agenda. That is why there is a lot of resistance. So, at some point, okay, you say they are doing it. But when you seriously take into consideration that they are governments, the public agenda should be more open to creating agreements between two types of governments with diverse interests and models of governance. One Western model, let's say, is based on more economic interests, and these other governments have developed a different system or approach. You can create a more innovative solution when you have this bridge, and you make those work together. There is no other way.

Ashley Hopkinson: So you need to be able to establish the political, territorial, and financial power through policy?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Exactly, exactly. And if you have it here in Colombia, you can scale up because that is what we want to do. We want to scale up this experience in the Amazonian region to protect this whole area, which is the largest and most preserved tropical forest in the world, by working together with Indigenous peoples and local communities. Because there is a landscape of actors that needs to be fully recognized.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some big lessons and teachable insights you've learned through your work?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: One very important lesson is that we do not bring solutions into the territories. We cannot go with this answer to a specific problem. The answer should be built among communities, in their own and from their own cultural values and aspirations. So, we are not the savers; we cannot save anyone. It's impossible. We can assist a company, we can support a specific process, but the ones that really know what to do and how to do it are communities in the field.

The second one is that these large-scale projects and global solutions really have to be more specialized in local small processes. Then, of course, we can take some lessons to share with others. But sometimes, these large-scale solutions (don't work because) the practical things are so difficult. So, I believe more in small changes than in these huge, global changes. We have to be more specific and committed to specific communities.

To me, it has also been really important and relevant to hear the ancestral stories from the Indigenous peoples, not only as narratives [but also as] knowledge. These very ancient ancestral stories can recreate the approaches and solutions to the problems that we are having today. And this could sound really strange, but there is a lot of power, a lot of potential wisdom, in them. They are like maps of knowledge, and communities can completely navigate in those maps and can recreate the situations and the new challenges that they are facing, navigating through those ancestral narratives— is incredibly powerful for me.

Ashley Hopkinson: Regarding the first lesson, what are some practical ways to make sure you're not coming in with all these solutions and that you're valuing the solutions that are already there in the Indigenous communities?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Gaia Foundation has developed two methodologies for working together with Indigenous peoples. The first one is social cartography. In social cartography, you have this tool in which you can collectively map the problems or negative situations in the community. By mapping these specific issues, you create a space for communication between the communities to identify

specific strategies to overcome those problems. This is a collective tool so that you can work in a specific cartography, and there you can be with all older and younger generations, all of the members of the communities. And they meet at the maloca...the ancestral, collective house.

Ashley Hopkinson: And everybody meets in the circle?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Everybody. At the end of the day, at night, there is always a space for talk. During the day, you can use this methodology, have your agenda, and go through a specific objective. But always, at the end of the day, there is this space for talk. No lights. There are no lights. And there is a space for reflecting on what happened in the day— for example, what they found through the social cartography—is it creates this environment for communication. And some solutions emerge.

So, this is one methodology, but there is also endogenous research. Endogenous research is the internal research that the youth do to identify the strategies that were implemented by the elders. The youth work as researchers in the communities in order to, for example, identify how to work in the chagra. (The chagra is the agricultural space.) How to take care of the rivers, the cows, how the ecological calendar works. So, the youth have this role as researchers, and they start to collect all of the information. And when they collect all the information, there is a space to have feedback from the elders. (They're) sharing, and then the elders say, "No, this is not working like that." (They give) a "no," or, "yes." And they systematize all of the information. And based on it, they also develop strategies for territorial management.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow, expand, and happen with the work that you're doing?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: First one, the thing that we want to see is the Colombian state really be intercultural. The Colombian constitution already recognizes that we are a diverse nation. However, the state is monocultural, and our dream is to really, really, really practically be an intercultural state. That could mean having the Indigenous local governments fully recognized, but also having them involved in the decisions related to the Amazon in a really coordinated mechanism and be in agreement with the national government, regionally and internationally, as the Amazon is critical for global goals.

And the second one is having a way to escalate the lessons learned, how to expand the recognition of these climate governance systems in the Amazon region in order to protect these specific areas. So for us, it means having these Indigenous and local communities fully recognized and managing their territories.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything else that you would like to share?

Luisa Fernanda Bacca: Maybe just to reflect one more time on the importance of self-determination, autonomy, and political autonomy as critical tools to overcome many of our issues. Not only related to political rights but also to environmental rights, as it is a link between those. There is a lot of resistance from the state and from the multilateral or intergovernmental organizations. And it doesn't necessarily mean that the Indigenous territories don't want to be part of a state because these processes of governance are based on a model of decentralization. But the state would continue to be sovereign.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Luisa.

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.*