Conversation with Sarah Queblatin
Ashley Hopkinson
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Ashley Hopkinson: Can introduce yourself and tell me a little bit about yourself. What led you to Green Releaf and the work that you're doing now?

Sarah Queblatin: My name is Sara Queblatin, I'm from the Philippines. Actually, it's very interesting you're asking me about Green Releaf now because we just closed it. But I could speak about our legacy and where we're going and what is emerging from it, and what are our learnings as well. It has to do with wellbeing. The Philippines is one of the most climate-vulnerable places. It's number one in the global disaster risk index in the world in the latest one from 2023. It's by default that we need to design our solutions that go beyond disaster risk reduction because we need to think ahead. We have to think systematically in a holistic way.

My reflection after responding to a humanitarian recovery effort in 2011 was that most of the way we have been responding is fragmented. When we respond to a broken system with a broken solution, it's fragmented, it repeats the brokenness and the antidote to brokenness is wholeness. I was drawn to what is the whole system's response to a broken system.

That invited a deeper understanding to the problem. It's because we don't see things as a whole, we see it as a part of a whole. The whole humanitarian system is designed according to clusters e.g. food. How about if food is connected to waste and their food becomes waste that transforms into energy and economy and livelihoods in a more circular design.

Green Releaf was actually inspired by a regenerative aid approach because we always try to ask, "How can we design a response that does not repeat the same costs? For example, it started as rethinking relief. In 2009, there was a huge typhoon that flooded most of Metro Manila, locally named Ondoy, and there were so many packages for the relief goods that I wondered wasn't our plastic a big part of why we got flooded in the first place? It was 2009 and it was such an early time I think to ask about it

because, of course it was important to pack goods. It’s not saying that we wouldn't use it, but rather what could be an alternative to it or how can we create a system to transition out of it? Personally, how can I not contribute to the same thing that caused the problem? Later, I learned about permaculture, eco-village design, and regenerative design.

Back then, I was so burned out working in peace and conflict and the peace building process in the Philippines. I was moved by using the arts as a way to bridge divides and dialogues as a means of healing with the community. I also explored art therapy, but also contributed to ritual and healing and ceremony with our Indigenous elders, our peacekeepers.

While I was working with peace consultations — interfaith dialogues and peace building — I discovered the power of creating and making sacred the arts and ceremony to help us remember deeper values, deeper relationship with each other, deeper relationship with our ancestors, with the lands and how the way we address change without these deeper intangibles of our inner wisdom, our local knowledge, our rituals and practices, they won't be as sustainable if we were just coming from our solutions from the head.

For example, in the peace process, their agreements were made between the government and the rebel groups in a very formal way, a rational way. You present the terms on paper and all this deliberation, but in our ancestral knowing… peacekeeping was done in a circle and people listened to each other. Then, there was ceremony and there was ritual. When the peace talks resumed in my country, I was asking, “Could we do a ceremony that would bridge this divide and make it a sacred resumption of the peace?”

Coming from that experience, from the typhoon, where most of the solutions were disconnected and fragmented, my curiosity was how can we come from a holistic way, a deeper way, a conscious way of responding? We recently closed Green Releaf because of burnout from fundraising cycles. There's so many crises happening, emergencies taking place that we cannot be in all of these places and we have to build up our resources, bring ourselves down to the ground. We'd rather share the collaboration with more people, but reach as many and be more anticipatory than responsive, but also set up the response ahead that is more regenerative.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share one thing that you have found through doing this work that you think illustrates an alternative way of responding? You mentioned doing circular work, like the peace talks and ceremonies. Does anything else come to mind?

Sarah Queblatin: The permaculture movement was an inspiration for me. I was attracted to permaculture as a nature, designing based on nature, designing based on nature's principles. My mentor, Rosemary Morrow, I eventually reached out to her. I found out that she was working with permaculture, with refugees around the world. We were trying to model something like that and to learn from her about permaculture in the disaster front.

Our setting is different. It's different when you're in place with an Indigenous community. It doesn't have to be the space that is impacted by a war zone or an entire village evacuating to a camp to resettlement. For me, that was kind of one of the main inspirations. Permaculture is a way to reconnect your home as a source of energy or food. Your garden is a source of energy in terms of food or in terms of ways that this turns into or your wastewater turned into something that can be useful more so that it's flowing circularly.

Back then, the circular economy wasn't clear. I've been working with Indigenous wisdom keepers and spiritual leaders, I was working in the interfaith dialogue and peace building. It was really this fascination with the cosmo-vision and the worldviews that are circular and there's no separation between the self, nature and the creator or a source. That, for me, was really a bigger whole system paradigm. It was the entire paradigm shift that I had to go deeper or higher with that brought me to this rethinking the way we respond.

Ashley Hopkinson: Did you find within the Philippines that there was an openness to people doing things a new way? Did you face any sort of challenges in trying to get people to open up to this idea of a paradigm shift in the years that you've been doing this work?

Sarah Queblatin: For the first three years we were prototyping Green Releaf. When you're working in the aftermath, when the system is broken, disasters just came through. It was hard to show something new like permaculture. Well, permaculture is actually an Indigenous way of growing food or connecting with nature. We just forgot it because we were using chemical farming and made that a standard. If you try to introduce something natural and organic but they have just recently lost everything and are recovering, it's not easy because there's still a need to recover the old way. Not everyone is ready to embrace something new. So that was hard for us.

We learned that for that experience, we will only work with early adopters because we would invest so much of our energy. There are three things I discovered, three archetypes with early adopters: the visionary, the rebel, and the curious, so in a community we worked with after the typhoon, we had a visioning, a group of women, and most of them said, "In this number of years, I would like our roofs fixe and our children to graduate from university." There were around two to three who wanted a

market for the community, who wanted to restore the forest. We thought, “Okay, these are the people who are a bit ready and see something that is not there.”

We also saw that the rebels are those who are wanting to prove and change something in the place so they're ready to show something else as possible. The third one is the curious, who would just show up even if they don't understand, but they keep on showing up.

There was a man who kept on showing up in the natural building course we did, and he would just show up. He was not the most active person but he would be helping out all the time, and he ended up learning the skills and actually contracted in a city to transfer his knowledge and learning. I think that's one learning from our experience. Then, the other one was vulnerabilities were higher, so the risks are higher, then we have to scale deeper.

We also saw that we should work with early innovators who are already doing the work, that are actually not necessarily in disaster recovery areas, but in places that are where there's already this emergence of innovators and to help catalyze their collaboration and scale, scaling up influencing policy, but scaling wide by replicating solutions building deeper relationships.

They were like the midwives of a new system and that the critical mass involved needed these incubations. We also ran an ecosystem restoration lab where we brought in people who are working with food systems, forests and mangrove or seaweed production, and they would interact and interface and collaborate together.

Some of the things that we learned in the process because you can't introduce it to a politician who has a different agenda, but you would rather invest your energy in those who are already willing to do it than engage with those who are not interested. Work in catalyzing those who are already engaged. Also, a lot of our education system or development system is kind of westernized, and there are standards that create a loss of identity and culture. You lose the intuition and imagination to believe in something that you can create.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the insights or takeaways that you've had from your work, ideally something that you think someone else can learn from?

Sarah Queblatin: If you're in your own country trying to do this work it’s different. But if they're not from the place, definitely to engage with local partners and leadership to collaborate with them. Now, especially with the crisis, there's a lot of complexity and it's very hard, but also very simple in some way, because the antidote to complexity is simplicity. So remembering what is true, what is more valuable and what is coming from intuition, inner knowing and local knowing.

The complexity of the world that we have now invites a lot of the kind of leadership that is really emergent and able to adapt. You’re agile and you’re able to maneuver. It’s a trap in some way, because it doesn't mean that you're able to do it perfectly. So it can really be a time of deep grief and failure as well because we're trying to innovate and there's so many complexities, you can feel like you're not going anywhere. That is also a part of the process.

So I think for innovators, solutions work is changing this and it’s about being attuned to your inner compass, because with your compass, you can go anywhere. And even if you get lost, you can remember— oh this is my purpose, this is the collective purpose of the place, the people and what we agreed to with the community.

The illusion that you can do everything is also really dangerous. We didn't say we embarked on something with the goal of doing it on our own. We actually wanted to collaborate with everyone and we tried to create the spaces for that. But the system is designed for one organization to champion over the other, because of funding and you have to raise capital and build resources. But collaboration allows more for the resources to be shared or that risks are also shared. For me, it has invited this capacity to let go. That’s the kind of leadership that is needed now.

The last few years, and going through the grief of closing my nonprofit, we really struggled when the nonprofit donor didn't meet our funds properly. It’s a little bit of white privilege, blindspots that were really frustrating, but it made us rethink things. Going through the grief of — we built something beautiful and now we can't sustain it, it's going to kill us. That is also part of it.

I had to reframe climate vulnerability. As a climate vulnerable nation, we're always thinking of ourselves as victims and always this climate justice from the lens of poor us, you did something to us. It’s okay too, because it's important to name the truth.

It's a strength to be able to allow ourselves to be met with other people's vulnerability. I'm sharing that in comparison to climate ambition. Because climate ambition is sometimes tone-deaf in terms of vulnerability.

For climate ambition, there's so many targets. Every COP, there's always a new target. But we are not allowing ourselves to say, "Hey, I don't think we're able to meet this,” or “Hey, this is overwhelming,” or "Hey, I'm already dying inside."

I'm afraid. Today I found out that 95% of our corals are dead, or at least in parts of our country, it is 85-95%. That's huge for a country with seafood and marine life, a big part of our food is from the ocean. So I think there's this need for us to acknowledge all of this.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support what would you rebuild? What would you recreate from the ground up or want to see advanced?

Sarah Queblatin: Good question. I'm in this place of trying to figure that out and learn from the past. I think for people who are working in this field, definitely there's something in the system that needs to be addressed. If you notice, a lot of our work is dependent on funding. So all of us have to always apply for funding or chase awards and there's a chance you don't get it. I feel like that's wrong on many levels. I think the system should be that — all of our work should be funded and supported. It's not selective or about who qualifies. And that we don't need it because the system already provides for it. But that's the most ideal.

Since we are trying to offer wellbeing in the places that are, at least in my work, vulnerable, it's just a way of creating renewal, resourcing back. So things that I'm passionate about now are creating learning centers that are spaces for remembering and healing.

Because in places where we work with traditional communities, who've lost their seeds or lost their heritage crops, because they grew GMO corn, which led them to be devastated after typhoons or because the trees and their heritage crops are gone and they're displaced, we need these centers. If the learning site we created there, also holds their local knowing and knowledge, that's a space of inspiration for the place and the people. Then, I think that could catalyze a deeper way of healing and wholeness.

Innovations don't get so much funding. So we had to juggle so many projects to get funded and then patch together various funding. And that means a project would have two to three funders. And that way we have to report to three funders. So it's one project and that means we have to work three times more and that's also very stressful. Funders or policymakers, that would ensure wellbeing is important.

It's also ensuring the wellbeing of those bringing the wellbeing out there, because if we're all burning out, then who would be the first responders? Who would be the people bridging the gap if the government doesn't make it? Who gets to remind the corporate sector, that you're damaging a river and all these things.

We're also the ones who are targets. My country is one of the most dangerous places on earth to be an environmental defender. So if the ones that are even defending the forest and their rivers and are the ones vulnerable, then who will continue doing that?

Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think leaders and decision makers can do to advance this work?

Sarah Queblatin: One thing that I really learned from working with governments is that they are in a way stuck in their own system that doesn't allow change to happen. Even people who want to innovate the government system, they're caught back to dirty politics. And I think then it is also a capacity to listen deeper also to themselves. I think most of them are not able to reflect deeper on their role, because it's a very powerful position to be a government leader and they forget that.

For example, we had a dialogue with the government leaders and government agencies with Indigenous peoples we work with, and we invited the Indigenous peoples to share their plans to the government. And the government was invited to practice deep listening and witnessing. But even just with those first minutes of practice, they started saying, this is what you should do. They're not able to listen. They're not able to comprehend the reality of people on the ground, even if it's already a workshop that is enabling that. But my theory is it’s because they themselves are not able to listen to themselves.

Ashley Hopkinson: What does wellbeing mean to you? How would you define that based on your experience and based on where you live and just your own journey?

Sarah Queblatin: I would say whole being, because I am just in the spirit of fullness. But how do I define it? It's very hard. There's a difference.

A really good friend of mine who passed away, his name is Orland, said there's a difference between balance and harmony. Balance is when you're trying to make it equal -- left, right; dark, light… something like that. But harmony is when the parts don't need to be equal together, yet there's still wholeness. For this moment, this is what's needed. I would say that wellbeing is where there is capacity to adapt and evolve and to be able to regenerate, because that's wholeness.

Compared to being a survivor where you're just living day to day or trying to just reduce the risk all the time. But a thriver has a system in place that no matter what happens, they can come back, they can recover easily, they have the system in place to address whatever is to come. And I think that's knowing and embodying that you can recover.

You have the inner resources and outer resources to navigate yourself back to wholeness. And I think it's how it looks like an economy. I say sovereignty, maybe you have the seeds in your seed bank or you have an early warning system or you have, for example, relief.

We launched a mutual aid mapping platform, because in disasters it's actually the people in the community who respond first. It's the church, it's the youth, it's the women who breastfeed and share

their milk, and the bikers who weave in between disasters. So humanitarians, large humanitarians, they only come in later.

We are trying to create a system where they are lifted up and they're in the platform, so that people can support them and that they will be the long-term people to continue the work, because humanitarian aid leaves after and then that leaves dependence in the place. We are only in beta, but our goal was also to connect everyone ahead of the disaster, because that way they already know each other ahead and that there's a relationship that's built.

Wellbeing in terms of something beyond resilience. We try to be careful, we use the word resilience in our part of the world, because it's been romanticized a lot. All Filipinos are so resilient. And here we've covered so many typhoons and disasters and volcanic eruptions and earthquakes and wars. So we're really careful with that word.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share your perspective on the importance of partnerships and collaborations? You mentioned every COP, there's a new target. How do you move out of that target cycle? Because it also feels like that's a part of the crisis cycle where it feels like you're never quite there, because you're always in response mode.

Sarah Queblatin: We find ourselves as enablers and weavers creating bridges and collaboration. The space is for deeper listening dialogue. For example, one of our ecosystem restoration labs, it's called Pamumuno lab. Pamumuno is one of our terms for leadership.

We're also seeing that just by bringing people together, they start collaborating on their own. And that for me is even more powerful without us trying to facilitate it. Of course, we kind of wonder, could we monitor and track this to show our donors? But you don't have to measure everything, but just to see it's already being done and that should be enough.

It's also nice to see that self-organization is one of the ways to see that you have impact. We helped incubate a group of leaders working for ecosystem restoration. We were still trying to nurture that leadership of these grassroots organizations and their collaboration with the government and society.

Even now as we're closing, we're still trying to nurture that, because now we're seeing that the city government is recognizing them as a partner, that they're now replicating something. So now we're trying to connect them, even if we don't have the funding or the programmatic capacity now. But we're seeing that just by helping plant seeds, helping to bridge, they're starting to organize themselves and have more impact than ever. One founder said, "thanks to your organization, you helped us kind

of come together." I always thought that, without the funding, we didn't do enough. And sometimes, it's actually the organic processes that happen after that (engagement) that actually has more impact.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share your favorite story of impact from the work that you've done?

Sarah Queblatin: We created a space that actually allowed for that deeper listening. Another is, the aha moments when, for example, we work with an evaluation of a 10-year Highland agriculture program, the government's, and we use some tools like Theory U and then systems thinking and then embodied practice, where they actually said there was a traditional evaluation method. But when we use arts and sculpture, social sculptures, feelings and reflections, then a deeper understanding of the problem comes out. There was this endless sharing. And they saw the system, the parts of the system that they never saw before or never connected the dots.

This is a 10-year program of IFAD, International Fund for Agriculture and Development and the governments of that region. And because the shift from a very cognitive assessment of survey, talk about the problem, it was too much on the mind. But when connecting them to the hearts and effectiveness of the creative process, there was a lot of reflection and feedback that showed the good things about the program, the challenges, and then the potential, and what could move forward.

I'm an artist, so I work with arts and culture, and sometimes it's hard for me to find the combination. We designed a disaster risk reduction planning through arts and culture because it was hard to do planning from the head in a very logical framework and planning, at least for me, and it didn't apply to Indigenous elders.

They're old people, they're storytellers. They're wiser than I am. Why would I tell them not to do it? So what we did was to facilitate visioning and arts, helping them envision what they want their community to become. It wasn't even about your vision for a disaster risk-free community, but it was a whole vision first.

So we drew a mandala of this vision, and then because we had to make a plan, we used symbols of a tree. The parts of the tree that showed the roots became, what are the existing resources we have from our place already? The trunk became, what is the scale? Then the fruits became the outcomes. The flowers were the outputs that resulted in the outcomes. So by the time we removed the parts, it was a tree, but also it became a log frame. So that log frame was instrumental for them to come up with a plan.

Then we found out later on that they were able to use that plan with a Christian aid organization that came in to further the disaster risk reduction plan. That was my personal 'aha moment,' the moment

when people start seeing the power of something that they're not used to. And the arts, for me it is about creating a means for a deeper understanding of the solution. Maybe I'm biased there, but I've seen it and witnessed it working well.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you, Sarah.

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.*