Interview with Juliana Strobel and Paula Ellinger (Fundación Avina)

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Hello, can you tell me a little bit about what Avina does and your relationship with climate work? I'm interested in what makes your approach distinctive.

Paula Ellinger: Fundación Avina is a Latin American foundation that's working across the Global South. We have been for 30 years now in Latin America, and in the past five, exploring collaborations across the global South with partners in Africa and Southeast Asia around sustainable development, care for the planet, and dignity for human lives.

What characterizes our work is orchestration of collaborative processes. We work in climate action innovation for democracy and regenerative economy. What brings together our work in these three pillars and with partners from all sectors across Latin America, and increasingly in other parts of the Global South, is our interest in identifying where there are collaboration gaps for agendas of sustainability in the South. We work together with our partners to overcome these collaboration gaps towards systemic change. This means we work through what we call collaborative processes.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you say you're a foundation, are you a funder?

Paula Ellinger: We are a re-granter organization that works very closely with our partners. We do re-granting, but we also use other resources to support our partners, like collaborative intelligence. We bring together intelligence to understand the context and where opportunities for changes are, convening spaces, articulation of partners across the spectrum, not only up in one agenda in different sectors but also across agendas.

We are not only a climate organization. We have a large history of work in climate, but also in circular economy, in migration, labor innovation, and access to water. We have a very broad portfolio that we work on, and we bring synergies between these portfolios.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: I want to go back to the systems change aspect, could you go in-depth on one example of what you've done with collaborative processes?

Paula Ellinger: One example is the work that we did in Chile when there was social unrest around a project for a hydroelectric power plant in the Patagonia region, which led to a mobilization across the country against the plan to make a hydroelectric power plant in the region of Aysén.

Driven by this unrest, we identified that there was a need, together with partners. When I say we, it's not only Avina, but it's us in this orchestration role with partners across the spectrum. We identified that it was not only about the hydroelectric power plant but also about the future of energy in Chile and how energy security would be ensured for the country together with parameters of sustainability.

Based on this process, we brought together partners across what was called energy scenarios in Chile, where different parties with very different and opposing views on what the vision for the future of Chile should be in energy built their scenarios based on similar parameters—what they thought the demand for energy would be in the future, the size of the population, and so on. They were able to build scenarios and discuss the future of energy in Chile based on these scenarios.

This then informed the current energy vision of Chile and the transition that the country has gone through. That's one example that I think is very emblematic of what we call collaborative processes. Now, I know that you are more focused on land tenure or the Amazon, and we're discussing mostly about forests here. As I told you, we have been in the region for 30 years. Avina is an organization that is very much alive. What do I mean by that? We adapt to the context, and we change our approaches as we understand how social change takes place.

That means that, when Avina started 30 years back, we started by supporting social leaders. They were called the Avina leaders. There are many people in different sectors and in different agendas that nowadays are in the region were back then Avina leaders. Then we were also a supporting network. After some years we started supporting networks and organizations, and many of them were in the area of georeferencing and monitoring of land use mostly in the Amazon, but also in the Chaco region.

In the second phase of our work, Avina used grantmaking, and much of the grantmaking was with the Skoll Foundation, to mobilize funds with partners to organizations in Pan-Amazon. Not only in the Brazilian Amazon, which is often the focus, but the Pan-Amazon and the Chaco region, to strengthen their abilities to monitor deforestation. Many of the organizations that nowadays are leading organizations in this area have been supported as a seed grant by Avina.

As we mature our understanding of how social change takes place, that's when we consolidate. What I'm explaining to you is our collaborative processes at the center of our work. We understood it's not only about having strong organizations doing their work, but it's about making sure that their work is filling in the gaps. For example, information about land use to be used to make decisions for forest conservation.

In that sense, another example that I can give to you that's more recent, together with Skoll, we have been at the initial days of the support of MapBiomas. We supported the first workshop that MapBiomas did that [brought together] different organizations—many of them were partners of Avina—in a workshop to discuss how maps cover land use and how change can be unified in Brazil with a historic perspective, periodic publication, and so on.

We made this support, then MapBiomas arose and started to develop in Brazil and started to develop very well, strengthening an existing network. That Avina could make this initial support was great. After that, MapBiomas strengthened in Brazil, there was not a specific role for Avina at that moment because there were no collaboration gaps. They were doing amazing work.

Last year we came back to the partnership in their move to scale the impact of MapBiomas across the Global South to monitor all of the world's tropical forests, or at least 70% of the world's tropical forests and reduce deforestation to 0 in 2030. What is the role of Avena now in this partnership? We're supporting them in the countries where the network is already building maps, but they are not as strong as they are in Brazil. [We help] identify who potential partners, [assess] the governance, [and figure out] what are the connections that can be made with different stakeholders in the country so that maps have as much impact as they have in Brazil. That's the role that we play now in MapBiomas. I think that this gives an example of what I mean by a collaboration gap and how we support them.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: When you're doing systems-level change, and you've explained about the sub granting and also about the partnerships you have, who else are you working with? I'm curious where the Indigenous communities come into play.

Paula Ellinger: It's part of our principles of operation at Avina that we work with diverse stakeholders. That's part of our starting point. In any conversation, we make sure who the stakeholders are that should be part of these conversations and how we reach them. We work with governments. We work with companies. We work with local organizations. We work with banks, across the spectrum. That being said, we understand that, to promote collaborative processes, there are different power imbalances. It's not as easy as just putting a community organization at the same table

to discuss with a company. There's a need for an actor that helps navigate the power imbalances that take place when these conversations happen.

I think one very good example that we have in that sense is our work on the circular economy. I know I'm moving to another agenda here, but circular economy applies to the urban context. We've worked for decades with waste pickers in several capitals around Latin America. We run a platform where waste pickers fit together with companies in the same space. The main platform we operate with circular economies is exactly generating this context. Of course, when we operate the actions of these platforms, we always engage with governments because it's true policy-making that then these cooperatives of waste pickers can be strengthened, and local policies for waste management are defined. I'll leave to Juliana to talk about the Indigenous people.

Juliana Strobel: Thanks, Paula, for all the explanation. Everything we do around the programs that we have that are inside biomes, like the Amazon or the Gran Chaco region, we always incorporate the Indigenous people's vision because Avina's mission is to contribute to the care for the planet and for human dignity. When we say that in our mission, we are also saying that our main target group are the most vulnerable people.

That's why normally our point of view to work with, for example, waste recycling is the point of view of the waste pickers. When we work in those biomes in the protection of the forest, we are working, not only with Indigenous peoples, but with all the people that live sustainably from the forest and normally don't have the space and the opportunity to bring their point of view to the decision-making processes.

We have a project right now on Marajó Island in Brazil. This is the biggest fluvial-maritime island in the world. This project is being funded by the Green Climate Fund (GCF), it's an adaptation project. The solution here that we are proposing to the GCF is the agroforestry system that historically has been implemented by the local populations. The local populations are not only smallholders but also [a community] protected by the ILO 169 for the same reason as the Indigenous people. When we work with them, when we integrate them into our work,. For example, for this project, although it's a project that wants to give them a benefit of scaling their ancestral practices around agroforestry, they don't call it this way, but they do know how to live and to adapt to a climate that is changing.

The idea of this project is to scale their practices. We do it in a very close way not only with their leadership but also with the communities. In this kind of initiative, as in others that we have in Avina, we also promote a governance system that allows them to take part more closely to the project because, normally, the initiatives come from outside, stay there for three, five years, and then leave. Then the local communities that are beneficiaries of that don't really incorporate, and then every success is sometimes lost. The idea here is that we have this local committee for the project where we have this

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: There are a lot of organizations that are working to save the environment and do policy change. When you're working at the policy level, some of those repercussions or some of the effects of that never really actually reach the community level. When you're working on the community level, sometimes it's really hard to get to the policy change level. There seems to be a really big gap specifically for climate, and I just wanted to see how you guys were tackling that challenge with your work.

Paula Ellinger: It's interesting because we like to see ourselves working across the levels of governance, and it's challenging. It's not always as easy as it seems. I think there are a few aspects that support us. On one hand, we do a lot of work translating what global and national decisions mean for the local level and bringing in perspectives, concrete needs, demands, and solutions from the local level to national and global levels. I think that's one approach that we take.

Then there are a few mechanisms at the level of architecture of society that help this connection between levels, be it participatory processes. For example, NDCs [nationally determined contributions] are revised or developed, where the local communities or local actors can participate. Or even local municipal policies—usually local governments play a key role in this interface between communities. How do we get from community to coherence at local level policy like municipal policies and then national policies and then to the global space as well.

I think there's these different ideas and approaches that we have tried in that sense. Even engaging with policy makers to, for example, revise some of the proposals that we were seeing arising from local communities, which also help them get closer to the local level, so a variety of approaches that we use but often this component of translating and identifying what are the mechanisms that trickle down best.

One of the important aspects that we have as part of our agenda is the importance of localization. How do we ensure that policies and funds recognize how crucial it is to reach the local level when we talk about climate? Not all responses will fit the same everywhere. That's why local approaches are important.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: There are many competing interests, like, economic development, environmental impact, and there are many different Indigenous

communities with different needs. I'm curious how you perceive competing interests and what some of your advice or suggestions would be.

Paula Ellinger: The approach that we try to take is always identifying all aspects in a conversation as legitimate in the sense of the need to understand what their interests are, to be able to find the best approach and more sustainable approaches in the long run. Avina works very much in fostering empathy between positions to be able to identify common solutions and common approaches.

I think the example that I gave you of energy scenarios is one. Rather than saying let's take sides, let's identify the interests, principles, and hypotheses, and create spaces of trust where conversations can take place—and possibly a common understanding and solution can be found. I know it's very generic, what I told you, but that's our approach.

It's important to have supporting activism and, in some cases, litigation as approaches to a bigger process of change, our overall view is that we will only be able to find solutions that are sustainable in the long run if we can understand the different interests and find how they can live together.

Juliana Strobel: Yes, we try to see all the interests and see those connections. Because of this imbalance of power, our work tends to be giving more space to those who are not at the table. The interest behind that is that all the interests are seen, but we do focus more in Indigenous people populations or those vulnerable populations.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are the biggest challenges with the work you're doing?

Juliana Strobel: If we focus on climate action right now, I believe the acknowledgement of the importance of this issue throughout all the actors is very important, not only the local populations who are really feeling that in their skin, but also local municipalities. Because of political polarization right now in Brazil, climate has turned into an ideology, not an effect. This hinders our effectiveness of our work, because we do need local administrations and state administrations to work together with us. This is one of the main difficulties, I believe.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some mistakes that you guys have made? What's some advice that you would have for people trying to do some of the work that you're doing?

Juliana Strobel: I believe it's not being afraid to have a dialogue with different people, with people who think differently than you do. We are here in the middle orchestrating everything, so we tend to talk to everyone. But we feel like Indigenous people are afraid of talking to companies. For example, we know what the agribusiness is doing in Brazil,

but there is an agribusiness who is interested in doing it right. Indigenous people should not have the fear of having a transparent dialogue with them. The other way is the same. The companies, the industries, and also some governments are afraid to talk to these local people because, of course, these local people are fighting for their lives, and they have a very strong way of saying that, which the industry is not used to.

When you start these dialogues and when you are really transparent about what you see, [you might] have something common to look for. For example, a part of the agribusiness in Brazil already knows the importance of the conservation of the forest. They already know the importance of local, Indigenous people in protecting this forest. It is time to get these people together and have this plain conversation. We can keep in mind that everyone wants the conservation of the Amazon forest, but the industry, the private sector have a different way of working than the Indigenous people or the local communities. But they do want the same thing. If this conversation starts, I believe we can get somewhere. For me, this is the main issue that we need to have, these dialogues going on around a common goal.

Avina is talking to both sides and we look for opportunities. It takes time. It's not from one day to another, but it takes some time. As we are talking with both sides, we try to convene and have these meeting opportunities in safe spaces where this dialogue starts to happen. For example, right now there is the Industry National Confederation in Brazil. It's made of several state and federal industries. The states from the Amazon now are interested in promoting bioeconomy. They're interested in promoting the economic activities in the Amazon that do not disturb or do not imply deforestation. These people are already willing to make things different, but they have some difficulties in talking to, for example, Indigenous people. On the other hand, we know Indigenous people or local community representatives that want to open to this dialogue.

Txai Suruí is an Indigenous girl that was in COP 28 talking about the importance of the forest and so on. Her mother told me directly that she was tired of fighting against the industries, the farmers, because she didn't find any result after years and years of fighting. Now she told me she is willing to be at, for example, mining congresses where there's a whole lot of people from the mining industry there so that she can say her point of view and listen to their point of view.

She says, "I'm at a point right now where my people think I'm against them because, traditionally, in the past, they didn't talk to the mining industries," for example. She's beginning this dialogue, and we try to promote this kind of opportunity of connection in Avina's work. It's a long-run process. For example, in the case of the urban waste pickers, we are in a moment right now where they already sit on the same table. When we talk about climate action in Brazil and forest protection, they are still not sitting together. They are starting to have this conversation, but we do see that maybe in two,

three, five years' time, there will be a table where all of them will be really talking about what is going on.

Avina brings people together for these conversations but our goal is for them to come together on their own in the future. We really believe that this dialogue is key because, otherwise, in the end, the economic decision is made mostly by people other than Indigenous people. They are like hostages of the economic system, so we need to understand who in the economic system is willing to work together and spread the word among their peers about what is possible to do once this convergence of objectives is made.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What are some mistakes Avina has made that, looking back, there's something you could have done differently? Or if somebody is trying to replicate what you're doing, what are some things that you learned?

Juliana Strobel: I would say, taking too long to engage the right people on board, because sometimes we think we need to have a strategy going in without listening too much to others or listening just to a few of them. This made our path begin wrong. In the middle of the way, we understood and said, "Let's engage more people here. Otherwise, we will have just one view of the solution, and the solution could be broader if the right people were engaged from the beginning." This is something that happened with the Marajó Resiliente project.

Marajó Resiliente is a project where we are implementing 800 hectares of agroforestry systems, considering the local practices. I will say here *Indigenous*, but in Brazil, [here I am referring to] *Quilombolas*. Conexsus and Belterra are helping us with the implementation of the agroforestry systems. Conexsus is helping us with access to the market and credit. There's another local organization, Instituto Internacional de Educação do Brasil (IEB), who is helping us with local governance, which is how to engage local municipalities to really think about their public policies to strengthen adaptation practices within the municipalities.

Our goal is that the local population is better adapted to climate change after the project has ended because agroforestry is a good way of maintaining people in the land, and also the productivity of its products is also best when it's in a diversified way.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Can you explain what you were saying about the Quilombolas, and then the Indigenous groups and then how you use the word local groups?

Juliana Strobel: Brazil has a lot of Indigenous people who are the original people, the originaries from the country. Quilombolas originated 250 years ago from African people [who were forcefully brought] to Brazil as slaves. Somehow, some of them fled to the

forest away from the slavery. There, they could reorganize themselves as not a local population, but with their traditional knowledge from their ancestors, and so they live sustainably from the forest, almost like the indigenous people, and they've maintained themselves until today.

We consider them the local population because they are also the people who live in the forest right now. We also consider riverines and other family smallholders who live in the Amazon local populations because they are the people, of course there are some exceptions, but who are right now living sustainably from the forest. They are different groups within a bigger group that is the "local communities".

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Where do you hope to be in five years' time and what do you need to get there?

Juliana Strobel: In five-years time, we want to see the local people from the Pan-Amazon strengthened. Since we are a global South organization with a lot of experience in Latin America, we do know the differences there are in the social issues that we have in each one of these countries. Historically, Brazil has had access to more financing and interests from funders from everywhere in the world, but the other countries from the Pan-Amazon, we see that they still need support to be at the same level as in Brazil, even the Indigenous people organizations. It's very clear to us that for Avina, the most important thing right now is how we make peer-to-peer exchanges and collaborations among Brazil and the others.

We would like to strengthen the whole Pan-Amazon region. For that to happen, we need the world to recognize this importance because it's so connected. The forest doesn't acknowledge political limits. It's one big forest that is all interconnected. Mostly, in the frontiers, there are some Indigenous people that don't acknowledge this frontier because they are one people. We would like more support to these exchanges and to these strengthening of the non-Brazilian Pan-Amazon region.

For Brazil, we see a lot of organizing going on. Of course, this project in the Green Climate Fund is located in Brazil. This is because it's where we saw the best conditions to have a GCF project. We don't see this project as one initiative or one project, but how it connects to the whole, how it can inspire other Pan-Amazon countries and Indigenous people and local communities that want to do the same and to adapt themselves to a changing climate.

Because of this, we work a lot. We want to promote the localization of funds, recognizing there are roles for each—there are several organizations between the GCF and the local community. We understand there are some organizations in between that need to be there sometimes, but we need to discuss it. We need to discuss how much of these funds really gets to the local level.

In the case of the Marajó Resiliente project, we worked a lot to make these funds get to the local level. Fundación Avina is an accredited organization for the GCF, and we had to struggle to make the money flow to the local populations because of the high standards that we need to comply with the GCF in order to be able to receive this fund.

In this issue, we had to be very creative in how we could pay the beneficiaries for the results. How could we engage more local organizations, understanding that they don't have the same accountability standard as required by the GCF. We needed to engage, for example, Belterra and Conexsus, who are already more strengthened. For GCF, it doesn't need to be really local, but for us, the local organizations are the ones who are really there. We are trying to discuss this.

We are engaging in several opportunities where, for example, the World Bank or—it was USAID—or the bilateral cooperation with the Netherlands, where we talked about understanding how much of the barriers to localization are within our own organizations. It was really interesting.

For example, the UK government, FCDO (Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office), I was in a meeting with this commercial director there who said she would talk to her team to see what barriers they could forget and which barriers they need because they can't because they cannot accept too much risk. It's only the beginning of this conversation. There are other organizations too. IIED (International Institute for Environment and Development) are really orchestrating this, and Avina is part of this orchestration. We need to have this discussion.

Avina is really interested in the localization of funds. In the next five years, if we manage to have a common understanding among not only the local population who already know, but really the funders. Philanthropy is normally more open to that, but I believe that philanthropy can also have some conversations about these kinds of funds–adaptation funds, Green Climate Fund, and the bilateral cooperation, which is at risk right now.

We can promote this conversation so that everyone understands. Especially regarding adaptation. Where the solutions are local, the money needs to flow to the local level. It's not like you can just implement the infrastructure for a solar panel [and be done]. No, you need to have people engaged. It is more difficult because you need to deal with a variety of people who don't understand the problem at the same level as the experts do. At the same time, they don't have the education, and they will not have the level of the education in the next 30 years that these people do.

Historically, Avina has invested a lot in capacity building for local populations. Yes, there has been a strengthening, but it's very slow. The burden of adapting and the burden of making the money flow should not be in the local populations. It should be in the upper

Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Thank you for your insights!

Juliana Strobel: Thank you.

Ambika Samarthya-Howard Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solution Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.

* This interview has been edited and condensed.