



Conversation with Ana Rosa de Lima

Ashley Hopkinson

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Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself and tell me a little about what brought you to the work you do now?

Ana Rosa de Lima: My name is Ana. I coordinate a network, engaging Indigenous and local communities across Latin America. As a person with Indigenous heritage, discovering it and meeting my mother's family in the Amazon area, I think this is what actually moved me (to the work). When I started, I didn't know that. I actually discovered it through the process. (Eventually), I moved to Germany and I could see a big willingness to support Indigenous communities, but a complete lack of knowledge about how to do that.

So I bridged these two worlds, and then I started doing an impact network. It started with a WhatsApp group, then crowdfunding in 2019. We started with a few people. Now it's 200 to 250 people. There's also a smaller group in Spanish and a larger group in Portuguese. We are probably starting an English chapter soon.

I'm moved by seeing the potential of bringing people together, and making these connections, and to let the people flourish themselves as it comes together and (they) support each other.

Ashley Hopkinson: When you started the group that grew into a network, what were you trying to shift? What was the problem you were setting out to solve through this network?

Ana Rosa de Lima: The problem starts in the region I grew up in — a region called the Arc of Deforestation. As the name might give away, it's the part of the Amazon that's been destroyed strongly in the last decades. Not only that, but I also saw the human rights abuses that were related to this destruction.

The first step is to reflect on the loss of biodiversity, the fact that it is directly related to human rights abuses. You cannot miss it if you're there with people literally being killed on the ground. That's the problem I try to solve.

It's a big process and nobody's able to do that alone. I don't want to say I'm the only one solving that because I need more people to help me get there. Simply (I want to) make clear that when biodiversity is being lost, there are a bunch of human rights that are being attacked with it.

Ashley Hopkinson: How have you been able to foster and maintain the relationships that are a part of this network? Can you talk about the strategies that you have used to cultivate and maintain the partnerships and in a way that's beneficial to your work and the mission?

Ana Rosa de Lima: In the beginning it was literally friends of mine, so direct partnership. They're people I went to school with. The network has now grown. It grew strongly with friends of friends as well. We saw that the best process was to always (connect with) people that you trust, and so then, I trust you, and then you bring people that you trust, and then they bring people so it literally grows organically, beautifully, and strongly. It's very beautiful to see how this grows. The WhatsApp group is our core. We have daily messages.

This week, one of the guys that's taking care of stingless bees, that's our little animal guardian, had problems, and then he posted in the group. The others said, "Oh yes, this happened to me as well. We did this and this." It's very beautiful to see how this knowledge is built together.

We do have people from academia but most of the recent exchanges are within the communities. To have both of these worlds talking to each other and not in a hierarchical manner, but actually in a very horizontal manner (is key). Also, academia doesn't know as much about stingless bees. Indigenous people have much more knowledge and much more experience on that, than academia. It's beautiful to see that we are able to work with topics and that we don't have a hierarchical perspective, but rather a very much horizontal perspective. This is the first step.

We have online meetings every Friday. These meetings started with a presentation of people. Everybody loves presenting their community and it evolved. In a couple of moments, there were very intimate presentations where people talked about themselves. We never say, oh, you have to do it like (this)—we simply let it be— always leave it open.

We are working with Indigenous people, the multi-generational traumas come up. The majority of people are Indigenous and that's a crucial point for us as well... They are extremely happy to see a

space where they are the majority and they can feel relaxed and feel comfortable to share. That's very rare and that's what I'm most proud of.

So to finish, we have weekly meetings to listen to the communities. Our organization is a network to empower Indigenous and local communities to continue doing their regenerative work. We give them the space they need to foster their agriculture, their beekeeping, their forest protection and their storytelling. We want them to be proud of what they've done and of their cultures. Simply meeting another Indigenous person from another region that is interested in their work is already very inspiring.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you describe the network for me? Talk to me a little bit about the bees, about the philosophy? It seems like your network is combining territory, stewardship and engagement. Can you share more about what you think is distinctive about the work?

Ana Rosa de Lima: Definitely how holistic we are — the holistic perspective. Trust, I do think this is a big differential for us—the trust building with the community work and the kind of training (we provide). The trainers we work with, they're either themselves Indigenous or they have a long experience working with Indigenous communities or are at least open.

The few times that we brought in someone (who is working with Indigenous communities for the first time) we try to always have someone who has a longer relationship with the community so that you're not there for the first time within the Indigenous community alone and you feel like ‘I don't know what to do.’ We have a respectful mindset.

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you share more about the stingless bees and the territory stewardship aspect of the work that you're doing with the communities?

Ana Rosa de Lima: The stingless bees, we are inspired by them; they're Indigenous wisdom. They have been there for a long time. They are pollinating the plants. That's exactly what we want to do. We want to do something that is important for the society and for communities to grow. At the same time, the community is doing this for themselves, to protect the future and it's important for the environment. Indigenous people do that very well. So we see this as the guiding principle of everything we do at Meli. We want to do stuff that has a positive impact on the community and on the environment. That's what guides us.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's beautiful. So let's talk about the network. How do you measure progress and know that you're on track toward the mission and also what the group wants to accomplish?

Ana Rosa de Lima: I don't think there are two different things here. On one side, I do take a look at the network and on how the network is doing. Literally, I see that every day there's some pictures of bees or of plants on the WhatsApp group. (They tell us). They're like, it's working. I'm quite happy with it. I don't have so much regard for quantitative measurements. I do more qualitative network-based measurements.

(For example), we had more than 10 Indigenous peoples on our Friday call. It's very clear that we have an audience and that people want to exchange with each other. We also do projects with communities. A month ago, I was in Brazil and we did two workshops. One with the Krahô people and one with the Aikewara people. We literally had hundreds of people in total to learn about agroforestry. Then we did work in an area of agroforestry. That's very tangible. There are also two programs that are related to the network as well. One is the pollinators fellowship. That's basically how we train a group. This year we completed the pilot phase.

Ashley Hopkinson: The groups that you're training, are these are Indigenous communities too?

Ana Rosa de Lima: At least 80%. They learn agroforestry, beekeeping, storytelling, and project management. During this program, we also have some measurements that we do. You can check on who is attending the classes. Then with the storytelling, they do a booklet by the end of the program. With the agroforestry, they want to establish an agroforestry area in their territory. Same with beekeeping, they want to have the beehives there. For all of the (programs) it's about an outcome. The last one is about themselves. We also support them to develop a project. Basically, it is regranting and supporting the communities to do the work with them.

(For example) we did a program, Pollination Regeneration — basically we asked the community, please send us a project, we want to regrant you. As we did that, we saw, there's some base knowledge that is missing in almost all communities. We did that, and then we came back and said, actually, we need to do this step. We need to go one step back to do this structural (work) for this to be possible. That's the story.

Ashley Hopkinson: What lessons do you think others could learn from this approach? What is something that you've learned along the way?

Ana Rosa de Lima: This holistic perspective. You're always in a learning mindset and able to get the feedback on the activity you last did so you can create (something new) and get better. To be able to say, this was good but not great, and I can work a bit better to make it a little bit better and to always be open to challenge yourself and make new propositions.

The importance of simply being open with the communities. In an exchange—you need to put yourself there for the community to put themselves there as well. You need to be curious. You need to be open. You need to show yourself.

Ashley Hopkinson: What are some of the challenges that you face in the work and how are you actively working to overcome those challenges?

Ana Rosa de Lima: A challenge is to be able (to bring) these two groups of people together. It's not only about the language, it's that they don't understand each other. It's very challenging for me to remember to be patient enough.

When I'm talking with people who do not have a clue about what Indigenous agroforestry is, I need to remind myself to be patient too—I do think this is key. I'm in Germany. I was just invited to be in a little Sunday space, and I was talking with some Germans and they had no clue about what I was doing. It was very difficult to connect.

I had some images and videos but it's still very hard for them—this bridge (to the Indigenous communities) and for that I'm educating myself about what can be better for them to be closer? Videos help. But this is a big challenge. This also goes for donors, because once the donors understand what you're doing, it's easier for them to support you.

Ashley Hopkinson: What can leaders and community members do to move conversations forward around stewardship?

Ana Rosa de Lima: It's exactly what I'm trying to learn, to be honest. How to do that. We are doing more and more work bringing the Indigenous communities to share their knowledge because we see there are many Indigenous leaders who are ready to share Indigenous wisdom. I need to find an open space on the other side as well. What I ask is for people to be open and willing to listen, to understand that this is very, very important wisdom and to actually value what they're receiving. It doesn't mean that you don't question, of course, the idea is to build together. It's about being open to reflect and challenge your worldview as well.

To understand that you're not always right and to be open to listen. I can share my worldview and we can build something, and I can learn from your worldview. We are not challenging. I'm not saying my worldview is better than yours. I'm actually open to hear your worldview and maybe reflect, this is interesting, maybe this is a view that I haven't seen before. To bring people from such different contexts to conversation to the same table is a challenge. It's a challenge.

Ashley Hopkinson: How do you define collective wellbeing? What words come to mind for you?

Ana Rosa de Lima: It is a tough one. I do think collective wellbeing is to build a place where people feel safe to share and not afraid of judgment. At the same time, it's not because I'm not afraid of your judgment that I'm not going to respect you. This is also a big thing that we need to be respectful towards each other. I do know the boundaries of respect that I need, but at the same time, I'm open to having a safe space for us to talk and to build on that.

Ashley Hopkinson: Given the right support, what would you like to see grow and expand?

Ana Rosa de Lima: For one, engaging in the community. I'm very excited that one of the directors of Meli, she's from Mexico. She's Nahua herself, as are many people in Mexico. She's bringing Mexican communities into our work and I'm very excited about that. We are planning our first activity; we are going to Peru. Seeing this network literally growing to other countries: Peru, Colombia, and Mexico, the main countries right now, it's very moving.

I'm from the Omagua Indigenous people and we are originally from Peru. We went to the Solimões River or Amazon River. It's very moving for me to go there because that's where my people originally came from. And Mexico, I was so moved when I was there. So it's not only to grow in these countries but to be guided by the best people that could ever guide me in these countries.

Ashley Hopkinson: Is there anything I didn't ask you about the Meli Network that you want to share?

Ana Rosa de Lima: One topic that I consider adding is our growth. A few months ago, a guy from Tanzania reached out to us saying: 'Do you have a Meli Africa? If you don't, I want to build one.' Basically, he has been following our work and literally shares contacts of people in Africa. There were some in Kenya and some in Tanzania that work with stingless bees and wanted to start a network. We are trying to grow a Spanish-speaking network and with the learnings, we can grow an English-speaking network as the next step. A big part of the growth is that it grows organically, so people see the importance of each other's work.

Regarding the growth, something that I really need is other people on the other side (globally) to find our work interesting and to pay attention to it, and to support it somehow. We need funding to do the work. If we want to regrant a community, we need to send them money, and this money needs to come from somewhere. We are trying to do more work with the material. We need to have more art, more Indigenous stories coming to Europe. We need to do more and more of this exchange for them to get to know each other's work more and more.

Right now, our first work was engaging with Indigenous communities and having their trust, leading the work and understanding how we can spread their values in the larger network, (since) everybody is not located in the Global South.

There are a bunch of other stories across the world of people needing support. That's a core thing to understand as well, that people here also need support. People (in Germany), they screwed up their land. They need Indigenous values to save their land. This wisdom exchange, in this regard, needs to happen. Not in a superficial manner but in a strong, deep manner to be able to learn. So it's not just you see an Indigenous painting as beautiful. Yes, it's beautiful. It's a great start of conversation, but let's understand a bit more about why it's beautiful and how this connects to the environment and to the care of the land...to understand why this cultural background has respect towards nature that's around them.

Ashley Hopkinson: I understand. This goes back to earlier when you said you don't just need people sitting in the room listening. You need people who are open to listening so that exchange can happen and you can learn the meaning behind all of these things.

Ana Rosa de Lima: Exactly. That's basically it. To grow the network in the sense that we exchange on both sides.

Ashley Hopkinson: It sounds like you have a great foundation because you started with community, and the community feels connected and centered, and grounded.

Ana Rosa de Lima: Thank you very much.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you Ana.

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.*