



THE CONNECTION BETWEEN DEMOCRACY AND SUSTAINABILITY

INTERVIEW WITH CLAUDIA GIMENA ROA AVENDAÑO FUNDAEXPRESIÓN, COLOMBIA

Video on YouTube: youtube.com/watch?v=MMNqZYkPcaY&t=1s

Transcript English

Interview and Translation: Birte Dohlen

My name is Claudia Gimena Roa Avendaño. I am from a city called Bucaramanga in the northern part of Colombia, our country. My background is diverse because I studied languages and literature as well as other subjects.

I am working with a process that is called “Colectivo de Reservas Campesinas y Comunitarias de Santander” and “Fundaeexpresión”. In this process, we work to protect the forest near our city. We are protecting 33 reserves. And, we do other sort of work for women’s rights, water rights, literature, and art processes.

Before we go deeper into the topic of this interview, which is the relationship between democracy and sustainability: can you share with us which importance you see in this topic?

I see a lot of importance on this issue. It is very important. However, I think we have to study or we have to reflect about what democracy is and what sustainability is. Because from my point of view, democracy is not just that you go to vote, but it is: fulfilling all our needs with our people, and with our world. Therefore, it is not just that democracy is what the media or even the governments or institutions want to show us. It is broader. It is a broader issue.

Most people have an idea when they hear the terms democracy or sustainability. We would like to talk with you about the connection of both terms. Where do you see the links, how do democracy and sustainability relate to each other?

I would like to say that according to different cultures, democracy is one thing, and democracy is another thing. For example in our country, we have the Wayúu communities, where decisions are made mostly by women. I mean it is a matriarchy. However, the world has developed through patriarchy. If we see the issue in different cultures, the term democracy will be understood differently. For example, I had the opportunity one day to share with the “Emberá Katío Group”. We were organizing a tour to go to different parts of our country and to describe their situation. When they came to decide whether it was important to go to the tour or not, the eldest person, or the group of elders had to decide that. We had to convince one person, because everybody was convinced but one person. Instead of voting, like five people vote for yes and one people vote for no, it is not like that. We have to convince the person who decide to vote “no”. It is not as it is in the western world, that we say, “ten people vote yes and one people vote no, so let’s go ahead with the decision”. In this case, it was

very important for the decision to convince that person to do what the group wanted to do, so this is another type of democracy.

Where do you see that this has to do with sustainability when there is much more like a participatory process in democratically systems where you are living?

Okay, look, I would say that there are many types of democracy, and even in a same country. We have for example our constitution in Colombia, the 1991 constitution. It is very important for the rights of communities to decide for whether they want a big project in their communities or not. This was part of our constitution in the year 1991 and it has been very important. However, at the moment, there have been many oppositions to that constitution. In Bolivia and Ecuador, the constitutions integrated "El Buen Vivir" as part of our life, as a philosophy of life. A philosophy that says that it is not just important to have money or to build big houses, big schools, but it is important how you feel yourself and how you protect your environment, your rivers, the fauna, the flora, how children are educated in a different type of education, how you fulfill with happiness your life. We pretend that democracy is only one, that you go to vote or that the United Nations decides for us, what is supposed to do for our world and that the big countries, the leaders, are the ones who are going to decide. But we say, "No", there are other types of decisions we are taking that are different. Consensus, protecting our forests, protecting our rivers, saying no to megaprojects. Saying we want another type of sustainability, that doesn't has to do with money, that doesn't has to do with the World Bank. That doesn't has to do with decisions taken by white male in the northern part of our world, taken by countries like Germany or the United States, or that favor the consumption in the north and then we are the ones who have to protect the environment here. That the life in the northern part, in Europe, in North America. It is a different life, because consumption is there for anything. Energy, a lot of energy is spent in those countries. Here, people are having a different type of life in a different type of world. But within communities also democracy is not as perfect as people think, because as I said before, girls are different from boys. In our communities in rural areas, women and girls don't have the same rights as men and boys. Women and girls have to cook for men, have to clean their rooms, have to look after men, and have to look after children. There is another issue that has to do with sustainability. Food sovereignty is important for a community, for a country. If you are not hungry, you live better. But if you are hungry, how can you talk about democracy? If you are starving, how can you talk about democracy? Is there democracy in a country where twenty-five million people go one day without food? I don't think so.

You were already naming a few contradictory aspects that you see between democracy and sustainability. Can you say where you see the interplay to sustainability or is there any contradiction between these two concepts?

If we talk about democracy, and sustainability, it is action and theory. One thing is the action, what is really happening in any country, in any society, in any community, in any group, even in a house, even in your own household when you share, when you are more democratic, because democracy is rights and duties, you know. The right that I am, like the African say, "I am because you are", like "Ubuntu". I think democracy has to do with philosophy of life. Democracy has to do with culture, democracy has to do with environment, democracy has to do with happiness. If we live in maybe not so luxurious places but we are a little bit

happier, that we are able to afford what we do, our activities and we don't leave so much garbage, so we could talk about sustainability and democracy.

I would like to ask you to define in your own words what democracy means to you.

Democracy has to do with freedom; freedom to express yourself, but that expression has to respect others peoples freedom as well. I mean if you are free to express yourself but you don't let other people express themselves, it is not democracy. Democracy has to do with culture, it has to do with how I feel identified with many of the traditions that we have, that we have developed. When we speak about democratic world, it has to be a world that is pluriverse, which has different types of expressions, not just one expression.

As you are familiar with the view of indigenous and non-indigenous people in Colombia and you even know the European perspective, because you have close relations to Great Britain, do you see differences in how the connection between democracy and sustainability is perceived?

Yes, I would say that of course in some cities, especially in the big cities, some people do not understand what a rainforest is, for example. So when I am talking about sustainability and democracy, however I think what is common to northern and southern people is that we want to live well, we want to fulfill our needs. But the needs of some people are larger or are bigger than the needs of other people. The needs of some people are more spiritual, more content with having a very beautiful landscape, with being able to eat, to share with the families, to preserve traditions. For some other people it is not the same, for some other people it is like only: let us go to vote for this senator or this parliament.

In Great Britain or in Europe or other part of the world like industrialized countries you see that there is a lot of individualism, which is maybe a fundamental idea of democracies, that everybody or that some people want to have more than others. And I think this is especially true where you have a lot of media influencing you, like a lot of commercials that you see and you are exposed to a lot of consumerism, especially in western and in the northern countries. Do you also see such trends in countries like Colombia?

Yes, but I would like to say that I also see there are many groups that are flourishing, groups in the UK and other countries, of young people that want a different world, you know? Also you see individualistic behavior because the theory of Adam Smith and the theory of capitalism were born there, were born in Europe. And the idea, that one society is developed and another society is underdeveloped, was born from the philosophy or the belief that people were superior - that Europeans were superior to Asians or Africans. And the North Americans developed a theory. But within these countries, you find very, very good people, very interesting people, that have fought for the rights, not just for them, but also for the rights of other people in the world.

You were just mentioning that you know, that there are many groups in the world that are fighting for a better living for all, or engaging in this process. Can you tell us about your personal environment? Do you have some examples where people are organizing or where there are forms of participation or engagement?

Yes, I know a group that is called “Comité de Pro-Defensa de Páramo de Santurbán”, which is a group that is in our city, that is defending the cloud forest. I also know el “Dejen el petróleo en el suelo” (“Leave the oil and coal in the ground”) from “Acción Ecológica Ecuador” and the U’wa-people from Colombia. They say the oil is the blood of the planet, so we must not exploit oil. People have developed their own way to resist, resisting against one type of development that is not our development. It is an industrial development. But we talk about another type of civilization, a civilization that cares more about protecting mother earth, protecting our environment, protecting our children, protecting our women, protecting our food, our health. I think this is another type of democracy.

You were talking about examples of people successfully engaging in activism against exploiting resources and so on, why are they doing this?

Because when you see that your house, your territory is all what you have, because if you do not have a territory, you do not have anything. Now we also talk about women’s territory, our bodies as our territories, and our land as our territory. If we are not able to cultivate and harvest, if we are not able to have a clean water, if we are not able to fish, if we are not able to do many activities like even walking without contamination, without pollution, what is it for us? I mean it is very little what is left for us.

And are these actions successful or are there threats that are putting these actions under pressure?

Yes, as you can see, Latin America has the largest or the highest amount in the world of people who have been killed by defending the environment. Because in Latin America, indigenous groups, women’s groups, children’s groups, youth groups, and in Colombia even more, but Guatemala, Honduras, in Chile, in Argentina, people in México, people are fighting and struggling against all these big, big projects that will finish with beautiful cultures, with our territories. So of course, there are threats. What are the threats? Missing people, tortured people, people who have been murdered, exile. And even in the Amazon rainforest there are some groups of people who have been exiled since in the first white person appeared, because they were chased and it was the only way to survive. But within communities people have their own ways to decide and we have been able to stop many projects. Even Berta Cáceres, the emblematic case of Berta, who has been our one women who fought against the big dam that cut off the rivers and the life, the natural life of the rivers.

When you are talking about these cases of people being threatened, or their life being threatened, do you see any solution that democratic systems could offer to this? Because this happens also in democracies, right? What must happen for this people to be less under threat?

It is the right to nature. To survive as well as nature. So for instance, there have been some legally processes to respect a river, to respect a mountain, for indigenous communities they are sacred. Under the law that has been applied especially here in Colombia as well, is the right of a river to be free, not to be cut off by big projects. The right of a mountain to exist. This is a type of democracy that we also are speaking about, the right not just about human beings and democracy to feel free. And especially some important territories that have been declared special sites for cultural purposes as well, because their ancestors, the spiritual site of their ancestors are there. And legally there have been some actions as well regarding that.

This is another type of democracy that we would like to speak about. Democracy that speaks about the right of Pachamama, the right of nature to exist, and to express themselves as well.

So, what is your vision for our common future?

I am sometimes very optimistic, and sometimes very pessimistic. I am very optimistic when I go to places that are still very well preserved, where people are expressing themselves, who have some cultural identity, protect the forest, protect the river, protect the sea, protect fish, different types of ways of survival. But sometimes I look at the floodings, the fires, the pollution, the way children are dying from starvation. I look at the way how refugees are crossing the borders, and they don't let them cross the borders, when many people need to go outside of the country because of political persecution, or even because of economic persecution, or even because they want to just visit another country, because why not?

What would you like to share with somebody who is listening to this interview and who is starting to think about the topic of sustainability and democracy? Do you have any advices or some wishes that you would tell us about?

Yes, I have. In one opportunity, I went to Germany and one person from Germany said that he wanted to come to Latin America to do some work to support Latin American groups. But I say, you can do anything in your own neighborhood. Sometimes you think that you can only help by going abroad or doing some type of activity abroad. But no, even in your own neighborhood: compost, organizing activities with people, local markets, protecting the many species, thinking about different issues and also to develop another sense of democracy than only going to the polls, go and put your vote. That is one type of democracy, only one. But there are one hundred thousand types of democracies.

*Ok, then, for the end I have two sentences which I would ask you to complete. You can also think about it shortly and then tell something. So, the first one would be:
My wish for a democratic and sustainable world is ...*

My wish for a democratic and sustainable world will be respect, freedom, and happiness.

*Then the second one would be:
Become active for democracy and sustainability yourself because ...*

Because you can be part of a world that is more fair, more beautiful and better understanding.

Is there anything else that you would like to add?

It depends where you are, on the part of the planet you are. Some people say: this country is democratic and this country is not democratic. But they speak about countries, they don't speak about the concept that communities and people, collective people, have to decide their own future locally, at the local or regional level, or at a country level and a world level. If we could, people say: let us go to vote for a better planet, I don't think it is about going to vote, it is about action and theory, it is about taking the stand at this moment on time.