



## **Conversation with Alison Guzman**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, tell me a little bit about your background?**

**Alison Guzman:** Hi, Ashley. Nice to meet you. I'm really excited that we're talking. I am based in southern Chile and since 2013, I have been co-designing economic alternatives with Mapuche communities on the coast of the Araucania Region, the Lake Budi territory, which is a wetland forest area that the communities are wanting to restore. I did my studies in DC, my Masters in the area, but focused heavily on Indigenous issues and Indigenous rights. At the time, there was the UN passing the Declaration of the Rights of Indigenous Peoples that I was following in New York. So that completely gave me the insight to focus on Indigenous-led solutions for our planet.

Maybe 10 years later I happened to come across a small nonprofit based in Oregon that was founded by students at the business school there. They wanted to create a different model of development, because as we know, international development sometimes has a very cookie cutter approach to solutions and therefore, at times creates more harm than positive impacts, depending on the methodology that they use, how they're exercising the fund, etc.

So these students wanted to create an alternative, and that's where the nonprofit Maple Micro-developments emerged. So the concept of micro comes from small, community led (efforts that emphasize) that communities should see themselves and everyone else should see communities with assets and strengths as opposed to lack or (a sense that) they're lacking or don't have enough of something. So that's where I started to link myself to the organization. And today, I find myself as co-director of the Maple Office in Southern Chile.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Our economic system is very GDP driven so the idea that someone can create an economic alternative or a model that exists and functions outside of that can feel very revolutionary. How have you been able to do that kind of work? What has helped you in creating**

**that shift and what is the connection between creating alternative economic models and also the Indigenous community itself? How have you been able to move that work along in a society that is very much operating in these cookie cutter ways economically?**

**Alison Guzman:** That's an awesome question and thank you. We're getting right into it. So first and foremost, a very key beginning is being invited by a territory, a land-based community, in this case, an Indigenous community, which holds a heritage and knowledge that spans for thousands of years. That's the first protocol. I'm starting there because in many cases there are initiatives (that are) kind of imposed. I don't want to get into that. I think the relevant thing to begin with is this invitation. So with that invitation, our team, my partner and I... Ignacio, we do this together jointly with the communities. He's from Chile. So the reference goes through establishing a clear protocol of what it means to work with Indigenous communities, us not being Indigenous. So the invitation was the first step, and from there, creating an instance where our team expanded to incorporate two other members from the community themselves, who were appointed by the traditional leaders at the time.

So that helped us form a situation of mutual learning where our team contributed in providing Western tools that could be used towards strengthening community visions. And their team contributed to providing insights into protocols and decision making mechanisms that were already established ...that helped us create what we call the Mutual Support Group in their language (which) actually means to lean on each other.

So before we began implementing everything, the focus was actually research. We did six to eight months of research that ended up becoming a year, but it was to understand the current monetary assets and non-monetary assets and what it means to save in the context that we were working.

People assume they (Indigenous communities) are not saving, but that's only because you're thinking in monetary assets. When we go into non-monetary assets, people do save, and were saving and still do, in seeds, in farm animals: chickens and lambs and pigs and cows (and) also in skills and crafts and developing capacity in that sense.

What was happening when we did this research is that we realized that these non-monetary assets were quickly vulnerable when a case of liquidation of that asset happens. So as an example, if a family would need to have an urgent matter to attend to in the city, just to give you a quick insight, those chickens were actually valued in a monetary asset lower than what the chickens value to the community and family was. So the chicken may have cost \$12 for the ticket to go to the city, but in that sense, the chicken itself was actually much more valuable than the \$12. So things like that we quickly

picked up. Also, the Mapuche communities have been practicing their own type of economy for thousands of years and are still practicing.

So we were able to also garner some of those insights. So for example, the gift exchange economy was active, this concept of language, where someone would say, provide land and someone else will provide work. This was very often the case for individuals who were elderly and who weren't able to work in the fields. They can offer skills and capacities to work in the field. (These are) things that are active and have been going on for longer than Western economic models.

So by incorporating all of these elements that were focused on strengthening community assets and focusing on the non-monetary assets, we were able to create this...support group, which extends at the level of the community, which is about maybe 50 families. And within that, the idea is that people can save together in monetary assets... So these timeframes are in an ecological timeframe because of seasons. That's another part of the research we found. People had different levels of monetary and non-monetary assets by seasons. So after summer when they had harvested and they had created all these economic or income generating activities, there would be more savings than say, in the winter. So things like that were a part of designing this model.

So what was established was a group or a network that saved together. Together they decided where to invest their savings. Then from there individuals can access community savings for their initiatives, for their activities that were decided through community assembly. So it was all transparent, and was all guided by the traditional authorities. And people could also save seeds, in work and in other ways as well. Let's say I didn't have any monetary assets to save, but I did want to start a tree nursery. What I would need to do is seek a partner who wanted to say, buy plants from me.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Let's go deeper into that example. Let's say, I don't have money in the monetary sense, but I have these non-monetary assets in the living room. These seven plants. What do I do with these plants? How do I then make it something more?**

**Alison Guzman:** So we come together with other members into this assembly. You come, you don't have to bring your plants, but some people did bring what they had to showcase. So you can come to the assembly and you say, "Hey, so I want to be able to save together with everyone and hopefully everyone can support my tree nursery initiative. So is anyone here in this assembly.. able to exchange with me monetary for plants?" And then I say, "Oh, guess what? I also want plants in my living room and I would love to support your tree nursery project. So let's do this exchange." And so we come to an agreement, a monetary agreement in front of everyone, so the value is placed there. But instead of me directly giving you the monetary component, I give it to the group. And so the group now has that

investment and you immediately are able to access (that investment), I'll just say \$50 for emergency funds. So anybody can access those for emergency funds. For example, say you had a plant that hasn't grown yet, and I say, "Well, then I can take the plant later in the year." And so that happened a lot actually because of the cycles of agriculture. And at the same time, I can also not only exchange with you the plant, but I can also put my own money. So what I did was that I did a partnership with you and the benefit was getting plants and you were able to access the investment, but I also want to access investment. So I put my own \$50. And so the group pool increases, and the idea is that the pool doesn't stay stuck... The idea is that it moves around.

So that's why really soon after the harvest cycle, people are able to access their initiatives. And so that's when you say in another assembly meeting, "Hey, so as you may remember, I want to do this tree nursery. What do you guys think?" And everybody says, "Yeah, that's a great idea. We need a tree nursery. This community, we're so happy that Ashley is starting it. So let's invest in Ashley's tree nursery." And you say, "Well, I need \$120." And so the group says, "Okay, great." So then we know whose savings are going into that. Then from there you're able to access those savings of those community assemblies. So within an agriculture cycle, that means that there is an agreement to understand how that's going to go back to the group.

**Ashley Hopkinson: One thing that I really want to go back to because I think it's important is when you were describing the process, you said it started with an invitation. And then there were two appointed leaders coming in from the Indigenous community that were chosen by the community form of government. And then you guys came together and there was mutual learning and Western tools then met Indigenous wisdom.**

**And I wonder if you can speak a little bit to that collaborative effort, because what we traditionally see is Western knowledge comes in and says, this is the knowledge. Or there's an alternative where there's a shift happening now where it's like, well, Indigenous wisdom is wisdom, so then we just need that wisdom to come to us.**

**What can you say about the value of the methodology around leaning on each other? What have you learned? Maybe what's an insight or a takeaway from that process of those two things needing to come together and the value of having those two things work together?**

**Alison Guzman:** That's a great question...so the first thing that we had to do was research together. It was composed with someone who understood the methodology of research. So that was a key component, and I'll get to that in a bit. The second part was understanding current, at the time I should say, frameworks of micro financing. Microfinance from the informal sector. So microfinance has

a range of tools, and some of it can be extractive towards communities and put their social pressure on women, on the elderly. And that's much more apparent in the formal microfinance sector. However, in the informal microfinance sector, there are certain tools and approaches that are used traditionally in various parts around the world, including the Americas and in Africa, in the Middle East. So there are informal approaches to managing monetary assets.

We learned these concepts together, and this is from the Western perspective. We provided these kinds of tools so that the community members can also access these ways of managing monetary assets...then we started doing the research. So the research required going to the families and speaking to them, which also involved speaking to them in their native language, researching using methodologies that involved elderly people who perhaps weren't literate, etc. So all of these components also involved our support or I should say mutual learning. So for example, one key criteria for this model in doing the research was to make sure that it was inclusive. And what I mean (by) inclusive is exactly what I just mentioned, people who were not literate, people who did not have cash, readily available cash... (It was) a challenge for us to design this model that involved some of these elements.

In that mutual learning, the community also provided guidance on what were the more liquidable assets. The pigs, what kind of seeds were exchangeable, who had land, who didn't etc. These kinds of things were very important to designing the model. And I say model because that's the closest word, even though it's like a network. .Until today it's an informal gathering but there is a management team that continues to coordinate the assembly meetings and work towards managing the assets. Both monetary and non-monetary, keeping track.

That said, they are now in the process of understanding how to generate incentives ....basically to harness monetary assets from outside so that the youth can stay in the community. And that's one of the biggest challenges going on right now because a lot of youth, they're leaving. They need an income generating activity because the reality is that there are bills to pay. ...We're working together on how to generate an income generating stream that supports wetland and forest restoration.. (and) a specific nut oil that has high properties.

**Ashley Hopkinson: You mentioned that you had to do a lot of research. You lived there and you interviewed people across languages making sure people understand what's happening and there is inclusion and mutual learning. What else do you think has helped this to continue to work? Was it that it was participatory? Was it that it was flexible?**

**Alison Guzman:** So there's different levels of knowledge everywhere, and we're always so cornered into thinking that knowledge is only one stream, direct, sometimes even boxed (in). And that's how we absorb knowledge. But in reality, this experience has taught me that knowledge is also absorbed through experiences and conversations. And even walking in a forest, you're absorbing knowledge. I don't know how to explain that. And as you know, the Mapuche community has been revitalizing their culture. So this community in particular, and the communities that we work with are in the process of strengthening their more traditional concepts of knowledge and culture. I want to say knowledge, because culture is knowledge. What I mean by that is, for example, not only language revitalization, but also medicinal revitalization. What does that mean in the Mapuche context? What does it mean in the restoration context? The custodian revitalization ...and building reciprocal relationships with their environment, is the closest word, but they have their own word for it because it's not only life that we see, but it's also life that we don't see.

I think Indigenous is a word that comes from a colonized perspective, so I like to try and reframe it in different ways, as filled with knowledge for thousands of years. So that's why I wanted to strengthen that aspect. Sometimes the West conceives of Indigenous as an old museum, classical museum, meaning that their knowledge is stagnant and their culture is stagnant. I quickly learned that that is not the case. This particular culture, and I can only speak on the communities that I work with because I can't say that for all Indigenous cultures, but I have a feeling that it's the same case for all Indigenous cultures, especially with my involvement with cultural survival I'm learning a lot about that too.

So the Mapuche community's knowledge is constantly evolving and it's very dynamic. So what does that mean in practice? It means that being Indigenous today requires a twofold responsibility in a way, if I just put it in black and white terms. One is that they have to be excellent leaders in their own community, that they need to speak their language, that they need to be decision makers, that they need to be active in meetings, etc. At the same time, they need to also be the bridge to the Western society. And those two responsibilities are huge. That is more than what the average youth inherits today.

So by being the bridge to the Western society, they need to understand what tools are relevant that strengthen them and be able to interact with their society around them. And what tools aren't because there are tools that are very extractive. And so those kinds of tools that Westerners use, I should say, depletes energy. So there's this whole concept of the use of tools within a living, dynamic culture. What I'm trying to say is the answer to your question is the ability to see paradigms in various levels of ways of being. And I think that that is something that I've learned and continue to learn because...to work within that perspective is very intense.

Now in practice it means dialogue and conversation. That to me has been key for understanding how to keep moving forward. And it's easier said than done. Today leaders are bombarded with all kinds of responsibilities, not compensated by the government, by anybody, but they have all these burdens. I don't know if that's the right word but responsibilities that are not compensated. So how can we build strength? It's through interlacing perspectives, energies, conversations. And that is why it's important to keep meeting, to keep meeting, to keep meeting and to keep meeting. And that was difficult during the pandemic.

Actually the pandemic had created a certain hump in that specific cultural protocol and decision making process. So it's starting to slowly come back again the last couple of years. But I think in practice that's what it means. And then we can get into the things about decisions, all the management and all that stuff. But meeting is very important— community dialogue.

**Ashley Hopkinson: So the reason I ask that question is because I think when people are reading about these efforts; it's like, how exactly does that work? So the conversations have to keep happening, the dialogues have to keep happening, it's something that helps it to continue to move forward.**

**Alison Guzman:** This was a very diverse group, as I mentioned earlier, I don't consider myself Indigenous. I do have Indigenous heritage and I am in the process of learning and understanding that for my own personal life. But in my day-to-day work with the communities, we consider ourselves as allies and supporters.

One of the biggest contributions that allies and supporters can (make) with these concepts of Western tools is capacity building. And I know that that's so unglamorous, it's so anticlimactic. Capacity building, we hear it all the time. But I think capacity building from the perspective of mutual learning, so I build capacity, they build capacity is so relevant to be able to harness these tools.

In practice, what does that mean? It means project management, it means (being) goal oriented. So we're not going to be using that in the paradigm of the Western influence of "development" but it has been useful for creating strategic frameworks to be able to achieve goals.

That's also important because you have to remember that these societies have been, Chile (atleast), was in a dictatorship, they lost their land, there was genocide, all kinds of traumatic experiences that have passed through generations. And so this need to not only decolonize one's mind but also to heal from this trauma is very relevant to consider. So when we began, for example, there was a difficulty in thinking past the day to day or the year. When there was a need to talk of a 10-year perspective, a

20-year perspective, that was harder to think about in my humble experience... Thank you for the space to express myself, but that has been a priority in the work that we do as allies and supporters.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What would you like to see grow and expand within these models that you're working on in terms of Indigenous finance models? You spoke a little bit about inclusion of youth and wanting not just to strengthen knowledge, but wanting to build out different resources and different streams. Can you elaborate on that and share anything else that you would like to see continue to expand based on what you've already done?**

**Alison Guzman:** Yes. Thank you for that. So I didn't mention yet, I'm also a member of the Community Economies Institute. Their whole framework is to understand from a perspective of not seeing capitalism as one big thing (but) to address the issues of capitalism in its fragments. And that way it disempowers capitalism. Because we tend to just say anti-capitalism, anti-capitalism. We don't know who's responsible for the whole capitalist movement, so might as well start to analyze the fragments. And how community economies are also fragmented and how do we strengthen those.

In that process, I'm part of the Community Economies Research Network for Latin America, and we've been having these conversations from Latin America's perspective. And from that emerged this concept of what we call creative tension... Rather than completely turning our cheek to something that is oppressive and unjust. That is needed as well, I'm not saying that it's not needed. But (also) putting into practice what does that mean? ...We keep coming to the same wall, which is access to income. So how (can we engage in) conversation that involves dialogue and full analysis of what that means in perspective? We can talk about this more as a society because I feel like there is this constant scapegoating of anti-capitalism, anti-capitalism when in reality we need to analyze it further.

So for example, monetary assets that are generated within a community land-based context should be strengthened by extracting from monetary assets of the global capitalist, the global world. Especially if the origins are clean and just and come from "clean" clients. So meaning that the movement of assets needs to further be analyzed because otherwise we get into this corner of saying, we don't need money, we don't want money... Having alternative currencies is also something that we have been toying and playing around with in conversation, not being put in practice, but in conversation. But there are bills to pay, youth are accessing technology and the internet (and) until we have our own internet in our own communities, —it's all one big corporate monopoly. So as a society, how can we delve into further analysis?

I'm not an economist, but I've been put in this situation where I need to learn what is an ethical harnessing of monetary assets within a community context. Because otherwise it's quickly pushed



into a taboo situation. So what I'm saying is, let's talk about money and where it comes from, its origin. Let's not be scared of it. Let's figure this out together.

**Ashley Hopkinson: In an earlier interview I spoke to someone who reflected on the tension around governance. That there can be blanket statements around not creating anything that may require government support. What I'm hearing from you is a similar tension point around this idea of capitalism and one blanket perspective on how to approach capitalism and the challenge of conversations about access to income.**

**This reminds me of the Ameridian community in Guyana, South America and how cassava is used by the community but also produced in several products outside of the community. It makes me think of what's happening on Indigenous land that these communities have their own industries and that industry then serves people who are outside of it as well. Have you found a way through this challenge with the community you serve?**

**Alison Guzman:** I'm so glad you used the word industry because that is kind of like a vision that the communities have with this oil that I mentioned earlier. The nut oil, the Chilean nut oil, which is like a hazelnut. They call it hazelnut, but it might not be a hazelnut, I don't know. It's what's normally called the Chilean hazelnut oil, which is not the same as hazelnut from Nutella. It's a different hazelnut. But the process to convert it into an edible product is long. So in general, people have been just ignoring it. However, one of the opportunities that we're seeing is, let's gather it again, and this time we'll use machines to help us add value to the product and value the oil. Because in the past, oil was not able to be extracted because there was no machine to do that but now we do have it.

And it turns out that this property has high UV ray protection, so it's used for the skin. I have one now here with me from the community. And I use it on my lips. I use it on my hair. It's something that we're kind of exploring and adding value to this product or this oil. This nut that was normally just fed to the pigs or whatnot. So the question is maybe the clients (for this product) are allies and supporters. We don't have to see growth. We don't have to see it from a perspective of let's sell it to Walmart. No. Let's figure out these networks where our clients and supporters have a regular income or somehow they're stable...And they have a paradigm of being able to see the world from the wellbeing perspective and create balance.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What has been your big insight from this work? What's something that you've learned along the way that you think might be valuable to share for someone who might be wanting to do this maybe in another area?**

**Alison Guzman:** That's a hard question. I don't have the answer right away. I do think that that's why the role of philanthropy could have a place, because when I started this with my partner, it was on a \$5,000 crowdfunding campaign. I left my life in the U.S., packed my bags, my whole life in two bags and jumped on a plane kind of thing. Basically, I jumped off a cliff and my wings were still kind of short. They're still growing. I'm not saying that I am full-fledged or anything. But in the way I found people who believed in us and our work and our mission, that is how I began to appreciate the philanthropic network. So for example, The Bay and Paul Foundations based in New York, they've been with us since the beginning.

First Peoples Worldwide, who actually are no longer providing grants, but they directly funded the community teams that I was telling you about through their Keepers of the Earth Fund, which Culture Survival is hosting now. And other groups that have been focusing on Indigenous led initiatives. We're also being supported by the Packard Foundation directly to our sister organization called the Mapuche Environmental Association. So things like that have been key in understanding the role and influence that all allies and supporters can have in believing in our mission.

The key ingredient is the flexibility and autonomy that Indigenous communities have to be able to implement these resources. And that is very relevant because time is different. As I mentioned to you, there's certain healing processes that they're going through, which means that there are certain vulnerabilities that they are more exposed to than someone in the average, say, privileged society. So those kinds of things need to be taken into consideration. And not to mention the authentic capacity building required to generate a foundation of skills and knowledge and capacities to be able to take this on towards the next generation.

**Ashley Hopkinson: If you can go back to the mission of the organization for me briefly. What have you found keeps you in the work? Is there something from the mission that you're seeing actualized and happening that you share as an example?**

**Alison Guzman:** I like to see my work as building. I like to see what I'm doing as being part of a network of garden pods. So gardens. So every garden is different in their own setting. And I like to see what we're doing as part of that. And so all these pods are generating all over the world is how I see it. So in this work I see us co-designing this garden.

Over the years there has been a need to captivate youth. We have been able to build ways for youth to stay in the communities because in Chile, land for the Mapuche communities is not readily available.

Traditionally each child had access to the land and the lands were basically the commons. So everyone accessed water and agriculture and foods differently and openly. And in time, because of the whole Chilean state way of organizing, they took away land from the communities and by each generation they have much less land. So a family, for example, is basically in the backyard of their parents who are in the backyard of the grandparents... (The state) they owe land back, basically.

So (we) created what we're calling, this organization that I was telling you about, the Budi, to (encourage youth) to stay in their communities, they're becoming observers of their land and what we call monitors. They have their own name. So they are starting to observe the species that are in their land, the frogs, the birds...etc.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What is it you're seeing that is giving you the encouragement to continue along with Maple?**

**Alison Guzman:** There are layers for different reasons (but) sticking to my original commitment when I was learning about Indigenous issues back in the day for the UN situation... That still is a part of this commitment to healing the land. I'm always going back to land and earth... As I mentioned, knowledge is observed and absorbed differently within an Indigenous context. And I've had the experience and the honor to participate in some of these more intimate cultural gatherings and spiritual activities where I have seen for myself the power of harnessing knowledge in benefit of community visions.

The reason I mention youth a lot is because I arrived here in my mid-twenties and now I'm in my late thirties, and I've seen kids grow. I don't have kids myself, but I have seen kids grow and go through being a middle schooler and then having to board outside their communities because there's no high school in their territory. And then going through the pressures of universities and then going through the pressure of figuring out what it means to be a leader, etc. And I've seen my peers and colleagues in the communities also go through issues, positive stuff and negative things.

So all of that to me is experience and knowledge that I've absorbed and can be referenced and transformed into love. I know love is so mushy and things like that, but I do think that love in action is relevant. It is a powerful source and a powerful force. And not only love for the communities...because my mom comes from Paraguay, she comes from Campesino families. So just this commitment to understanding my role of why am I here alive on this time in this earth kind of thing. The quality of life of one is also important because you can't sacrifice your well being for others, you have to take care of yourself too. So I do think that seeing my family is very important. I'm going to Paraguay to see my parents and to see my family there in a couple of weeks. So things like that give me energy...

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you. I really appreciate you taking time to talk to me about the work that you're doing.**

*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.*