



Conversation with Karina Víquez

Ashley Hopkinson

March 7, 2024

Ashley Hopkinson: Can you introduce yourself, share more about who you are and what you do?

Karina Víquez: Thank you for this space that I think is much needed to learn from different geographies and different challenges that we have worldwide. I am Costa Rican. I am an administrator by profession. But since 2017, I did a career change to dedicate myself to purpose-driven organizations. So during my MBA, I realized I did not want to go for a usual, regular MBA role. Since that year, I have been advising small enterprises, consulting on sustainable tourism, social impact projects, also participating in value chain strategies, gender strategies. Since 2021, I've been part of UCI, which is the University for International Cooperation ... I'm a program manager of a certificate program called regenerative entrepreneurship. It's continuing education. It's not a specialization, not a masters, but it's just an open course for anyone who is willing to go further, to explore more around well-known sustainability, but to go deeper and explore the areas of governance or politics, culture, society, and spirituality.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's amazing. That's a nice broad category. What role would you say regenerative economics and the work you're doing at the university plays in impacting the community?

Karina Víquez: What I think makes the difference with UCI and other universities is that we go to the field. We do not stay in the classrooms. So we have very strong project and extension areas where we are constantly listening, understanding, and working alongside communities... We believe regeneration is the solution, and with that we have been able to adapt or exchange knowledge with the different communities. So for example, what worked really well in 2020, during the pandemic, as Costa Rica was in what they called the zero season, where we had no tourism at all because the

frontiers closed because of COVID. We started a project called Costa Rica Regenerativa, a hub of different initiatives and projects in Guanacaste, the northern area, that is basically driven by tourism. There was hunger there, and this type of news is not widely shared. So we started doing community gardens to ensure food security for the communities and also working with young people in high schools. Aside from offering this education and training that is definitely necessary, we also combined it with developing projects. This versatile way of working has helped us to go further than any other program can offer. For example, the wellbeing (economics) concept here is not that strong. We have concepts and indicators based on the success metrics, regular metrics that usually are covered. But despite organizations such as the OECD, for example, that Costa Rica belongs to, and CEPAL...this wellbeing concept is more like a public policy that you barely get to identify on the ground. So it's a lot of nice words and a lot of documents. But a local government, for example, they do not dedicate any efforts or resources to that type of high-level-thinking.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's interesting. I was going to ask you as well about how you're able to take things from a more research and article driven setting to the community level but it seems this is at the heart of the work, to have the students go out and do a lot of listening. Can you share more about how you're able to make that connection for people that come into the program? How are you able to say, "We will do all of this deep thinking research, all of this work, but a big part of what we're doing is also these projects?"

Karina Víquez: Leading this program. It's a nice mix of impact learning combined with regenerative action. So besides having these great live sessions with guest speakers and mentors and sharing with other participants from around the world, we ask the participants. There are no evaluations, no exams, just generate an action. {We ask that you} start something during the 10 months, which is quite long for a continuing education program. We did it that way to design a better and more comprehensive curriculum of everything that includes regenerative development. So you get a true sense of what that is and not just a glimpse ... And it's not only regenerative entrepreneurship, but we also have biomimicry for social systems, regenerative development applied to tourism, the masters in environmental leadership, the protected areas specialization. So there are a lot of programs mainly in the development and environment faculty that we belong to, but you need to ask something from the participants, because we don't do anything just by accumulating knowledge. That's not what is going to make us survive or not. So we have seen amazing results there. Major career changes. For example, someone with a consulting service that integrated this regenerative approach and changed the whole portfolio of services that he or she offered and the type of projects or clients that they want to work with, the type of partnerships that they want to build...We also have this strong belief in what we are sharing and also generating the space for unlearning, which is very important. You have a space to be

vulnerable, to explore, because we do not expect that your idea will be a major success and go directly to an incubator or accelerator or startup but definitely a very deep thinking process. So I think that's a very important part of the equation.

Ashley Hopkinson: That is important. So you're teaching and you have all these great ideas that are bubbling to the surface. Is there any initiative or idea that came up that someone started to generate some action on that you thought, "If this person receives the right support, whether that is financial or they have enough people to help them, this is something that could really be replicated/scaled?"

Karina Víquez: At first, we offered this one-on-one mentoring sessions, and then we changed it to small group mentoring sessions because it's not unusual to have in the same virtual classroom, someone from Ghana, and someone from Mexico, and someone from Indonesia together. So to take in the most of this diversity and very rich conversations, we thought, "Okay, let's make them exchange their realities, their challenges or their resources and best practices with other classmates." Because one thing about education is that it's obsolete to have the one and only answer of the professor and the rest listening.

Also, considering that this type of program attracts people that are averaged 35 to 39 years old. These are people who have been through a lot of things... There are a lot of stars shining in their own paths. And so we needed to create these tools and spaces. So that's the reason we created the co-creation sessions and the small group mentoring. And having that sensitivity to identify, "Who am I working with? Who am I receiving in my program," so that they can first identify what their talents are, and then to put them at the service of life, because if not, it's just going to the same circle. Right? Something very important here is that the regular thing that is required from entrepreneurs is to scale. So you have this idea, scale it tomorrow, scale up one after another. What we should be scaling is consciousness and attitude, and learning how to partner with the ideal people around us, and also to have this competency-based education. That should be a scale.

... We should also be working context-based. Hitesh Mehta, he's from Kenya and also the U.S. He is an expert in ecolodges and I admire him a lot because of the meta-analysis that he develops before designing an ecolodge, for example. So what's the uniqueness of this place? So you can replicate some practices, but not copy, paste. It's not a recipe. It's not a step one, two, and three. So doing that context analysis or diagnosis or just feeling the place, then you're in a different spot. (Instead of) going to a community and telling them, "Hey, we have the solution for your local government. Let's work this way." That will not last a minute. Because as you leave and as you stop the help or the advisory services, because they don't feel identified, they don't feel part of the effort. So it's quite important to

see the context-based approach...We are part of, we're a system within a lot of living systems. So it's not easy, not at all. For this transition moment that we're living as a planet and society, it's quite necessary to find that uniqueness from each place or each group of people that you're approaching, and then you can think about what you can develop together.

Ashley Hopkinson: That's powerful. It's like you can generate something, but a part of generating something is having these great thinkers come together and share their ideas, real life experience and expertise from different parts of the world. Anything else you would like to add about that?

Karina Viquez : What I have learned from organic partnerships that have resulted from this program is that you just need to be in the classroom, to create the space, and then the connections and the relationships will be created naturally. We have a lot of tools. We have plenty of information. Start small, start with a workshop. Do not visualize the whole education proposal from day one. Just to start with something. So in a last cohort, a guy from Mexico co-designed a workshop for African young people about regenerative agriculture, but very carefully crafted, considering the language, and the narrative, and the complexity, and also analyzing where they were, the needs that they had. And they created this great workshop in three months, and they're still working together on different ideas. So also, I think we don't need more tax or we need to write this agreement and this contract so we can start working. Just start. We came up with an idea and we started helping and exchanging criteria, and that's it. So I think many formal processes can also be a barrier. Of course, then when you get to the funding and all the metrics that the regular return of investment that even impact investors require, that's a major barrier that you face. But we can start doing and planting seeds on a daily basis.

Ashley Hopkinson: How you were able to create this environment where small group mentoring can happen and people aren't resistant to sharing what they're doing and the challenges that they're facing. How have you been able to create that environment where people know that this is a part of the process of doing something regenerative?

Karina Viquez: The first step that we implemented is thinking like nature. This idea of competition that many times takes us nowhere. For us, as a global society and super interconnected society, what is needed to thrive is collective intelligence. And in collective intelligence, there's no space for, "I will not share my source.." For example, in these programs, we have curated materials and also translated a lot because everything is in English. So last year, we launched the first cohort in Spanish, which was a challenge, not because of the initiatives and purposeful projects being developed here, but because of all the documents, and the papers, and the theory is written in English. It's one day at a time, because you can get overwhelmed. This open-source movement that UCI is also part of, it's part of our identity.

Having so many different speakers has also been a great lesson in thinking about that. Because one student from the new cohort told me, "I felt very attracted to this program because you are a bridge between the global north and the global south." And I was like, "Whoa, I haven't thought about it that way."

She's definitely right, because if Europeans keep talking only between Europeans and doing great regenerative courses, of course, they have amazing courses, but where is the reality there? Because they have a lot of funds, and a lot of movements, and relationships, and subsidiaries, established there. But we have another reality. So to have genuine diversity in these processes is super important because you get out of your own bubble. And for one moment, you start thinking, of what I mentioned before, to put my services or my talents at the service of life.

So if I'm very good at doing Canva presentations or a newsletter, I can definitely help someone for whom developing a newsletter can be a total challenge. It's a small action. But then I can give you another example of local governments here in Costa Rica. Regeneration is not a new concept. It has been around for decades, I think. But we have never seen it as a powerful transformative path until now. So for example, we started having these conversations that usually we didn't have, for example, with a local government in Guanacaste. So we advise them on how to improve their tax process, and now they're committed to execute 30% of all the taxes that they get annually to regenerative projects. And that was just done during the pandemic with virtual meetings and a lot of limitations, but it's more important the attitude and the intention than a lot of people just chatting.

Ashley Hopkinson: What would you say is the most inspiring thing about the work you do? What is inspiring about being a regenerative practitioner or a teacher of regenerative work?

Karina Víquez: It's being part of the transformation of the being, of each person that comes here. Speakers, participants, mentors, allies. Because now, we have this huge amount of information. So being able to question, to think for ourselves, to work on this ability to think for ourselves, that is not easy because everything is just served. We do not dedicate the time to pause or to imagine things in a different way...If you give yourself that permission to explore, to question, to play, even that (is meaningful).

To give you an example, the dean from the faculty leading capacity-building projects for the protected areas teams here in Costa Rica, which is one of the pioneer protected areas management systems around the world since the '70s; they play. They have virtual courses with the gaming component. It has been amazing the way they process the information, they connect with the place, they start taking care and assuming their roles in a totally different way than they could do it in a regular course...All

these transformative paths that we have seen since 2019, that was the first edition of this program, because they are after a true purpose after this. So it could sound cliché, but it's a life-changing, eye-opening program. Because here in Costa Rica, also, as you mentioned before, we have a strong brand.

Ashley Hopkinson: Yes, is this the extension of Pura Vida, that is often associated with Costa Rica?

Karina Víquez: The thing is that, here, everything is green, everything is eco just because it's in Costa Rica, and it's not true. So it's not that pura vida, that type of communication. So there are a lot of places doing permaculture courses, which are great, but just having one course, and then doing nothing about it is not the impact that we want to generate. So to be an organization that is continuous in continued evolution and offering the type of unlearning that is required now, I think that's the main motivation. It's very relevant, the role that we have, because we cannot stop analyzing, questioning, and studying what is working in other parts of the globe. But it's definitely worth it because when you see the type of connections that are being created, the networks that are being strengthened by these types of initiatives it's definitely worth it.

Ashley Hopkinson : What valuable lessons have you learned along the way?

Karina Víquez: There are a lot of lessons here. It's not easy to select one. Many things can happen and you can get and achieve the goal, and maybe that was not the definition of success or wellbeing that you were expecting. But if you have the right tribe, if you get close to the people that are moving, heartfelt, with the same things or priorities or even have different ideas, but respect this connection, it's all that matters...And that the goal can change. We closed a lot of the community gardens that were open during the pandemic with the project. We have had failures, of course, but what matters at the end, the impact that we generated in those gardens that are currently open, that we even impacted women-led organizations and improved their mental health. That was not our goal, to improve mental health through community gardens, but that's what happened.

Ashley Hopkinson: For someone who's coming to this and they're going to read it and they don't know anything about the pillars of the regenerative process, how would you define it? What are the key elements of what makes something regenerative?

Karina Víquez: Sustainability is not enough now, because of the planetary limits that we have surpassed and they're out of control. So what can we do besides recycling, besides composting, which is good and has taken a lot of effort and time so that people can understand that? But regeneration goes further and includes the spiritual element that includes consciousness. It's not about religion, it's

about ethics. It's about what is my essence? What is my role here? What should I be doing? That's the spirituality.

Also, culture, to really root into our origins. If we still have the opportunity to get indigenous wisdom, that's a true diamond there, that we can get all that knowledge because they have done it in a more harmonious way than everyone for a long time. And the third party is governance. How do we lead? How do we govern ourselves? How do we govern our cities? Because that's an important thing that people think regeneration is happening on a farm in the middle of nowhere, in Guanacaste or in Africa or in Asia etc. ..But it is just thinking differently and giving the other species, (we are not the only species here), the value that they deserve, to have the voice of nature when we are making decisions.

Ashley Hopkinson: In the work that you do, how do you define wellbeing? What does wellbeing mean to you?

Karina Víquez: What comes to my mind now is that wellbeing is us, as humans, we are nature. So a healthy soil, a healthy planet permits or allows us to have a healthy life, and that's a never-ending process. Because if we fail in some of those parts of the soil or the water of the different elements that make us stand here, we cannot pretend to have a healthy life, at least not for our future. But we're currently seeing it way more than we expect to. So there's not much time. I mean, it can sound very apocalyptic sometimes, but it is. I mean, the clock is ticking, and we need to start focusing more on the health, the health of our soil, the health of our planet that can give us our own health as humans, as species.

Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you very much Karina. And I think urgency is okay when we're talking about how to live a better life and create a better life for people.

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.*