



## **Conversation with Mariana Madureira**

**Ashley Hopkinson**

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**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you tell me a little bit about your background and the work you do now?**

**Mariana Madureira:** My name is Mariana Madureira. I'm Brazilian. I am 41 years old. I work and live in Brazil. I am a social entrepreneur. I have studied tourism for graduation and I have a PhD on psychosociology of communities, and I've been working on projects for 18 years. It's a social business called Raízes Sustainable Development, and we've done more than 80 projects, the majority of them with traditional communities and women. For the last year I haven't had a home, so I've been changing places in Brazil. I work in the entire country.

We are very focused on income generation. We see Brazil as a country with many opportunities, but these opportunities are not shared equally. On the opposite side, we see that we have a few people that concentrate wealth, and we have lots of marginalized people, especially people that we see as valuable for their culture. In Brazil we have 26 kinds of traditional communities.

We are not a country, we are a continent—it's so big. It's such a privilege to have so much diversity in a country, and that's what we work for. We work to give value to these people. We work with income generation, concentrated in the storytelling of these people and [their] products. So we work with tourism, handicraft, gastronomy—cultural products that bring together the history and culture of the people that cultivate them and tell about the land where they are cultivated.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think makes your work distinctive? Is it that you're working with cultural products? And how do you feel people are benefiting from your work?**

**Mariana Madureira:** We came for a long time on a path of globalization in which people were becoming the same. That's a very sad path, because you start leaving behind the things you learn, the things that make you who you are, the community sense. We are going into this neoliberal path in which individuals are more important than communities. People see that getting money is the most important, and that is this way you can get more money, so [they] go to university and work for big companies. This way of developing is still easy, but I think it was stronger in the '90s, the 2000s, that people were all going this way. We feel we are missing culture, and the communities are vanishing.

A lot of our work is about going to those places and helping them see themselves and that [what they are] doing is actually incredible. Community-based tourism can be a way of bringing in people who say, "Oh, that's amazing." So they see other people telling them that this is important, that this makes sense.

There's an entire movement now. We say here that the future is ancestral. There are a lot of people trying to reconnect with nature, because we were using nature as an object, something we could just use. Now we are trying so hard to reconnect and see that we are part of it, and we need to understand it. It's about regenerating our relationship with everything. The work we do in these groups is a lot about looking back and bringing back these things, and in a certain way connecting with our present, because those things need to make sense nowadays so that they can make income from them, so that they can live from their culture.

**Ashley Hopkinson:** I love when you say the future is ancestral, because we are having a lot more conversations now about: what is the ancestral wisdom around this idea? Or what did people do before? Sometimes it's fun to see some of the older things come back around.

**Mariana Madureira:** Exactly. And that's a lot of our work. We help them to see the value and to sell those things so that they can live in this capitalist world. They can make some money from the things that they know how to do, that they have always done.

**Ashley Hopkinson:** You talked about having 80 projects and doing this work over the course of several years. Is there anything you can describe for me, whether it's small or large, that felt like it shifted this conversation towards well-being or stepping outside of the status quo?

**Mariana Madureira:** Sure. We work sometimes with small groups that are already running a business, but many times we go to places and listen to people that need income for living, especially women. Because here in Brazil, especially in the inner parts of the country, not in the big capitals, we have lots of families in which women do not work. This is a problem because domestic violence in Brazil is so

huge. One of the reasons is because these women depend financially on their husbands. And in some groups we call women to take part in this project and we ask them what do they do now, what do they like to do, to see a path for entrepreneurship from [their] talent. And many times they tell us, "I don't know how to do anything."

You see that they don't feel worthy in the beginning. But once you start going further, you see that they usually cook wonderfully and they know how to make things with their hands. They have these manual [skills] that are very valuable. We had groups that started like this, and after a while they became a gastronomic group. For example, there's a group that now has an annual festival.

It's incredible when a year or two later they describe themselves as entrepreneurs, and they take care of their money, and they [say], "Oh, see this new product I made?" They feel creative and empowered. And I think that's the entire difference. We help them to see the value that they have, and it's important because they do it together.

The example that I am thinking about here is a group of 24 women. [They] support each other, and that's the important thing about making these projects. Someone from outside saying that you can—it makes a difference. After a while you've convinced yourself, and you build the tools you need to keep going.

But in the beginning, these groups we work with are usually financially vulnerable. They usually don't have graduation, but they know how to write and how to read. They are pretty vulnerable groups. I feel proud of the work we make because of this. Many times we go there and tell them things they already know, but they need someone to tell them in the beginning. It's a moment in which it's really important to give some support.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Can you say a little bit more about how that comes about? How do you decide how you're going to help a community? How do you come into the community? Do you knock on the door? Does someone invite you in? How does the process begin?**

**Mariana Madureira:** We have a very hard situation here in Brazil. Who is paying for the social work? Because these groups don't pay. At this stage we should be much further in private social investment, in companies putting money for environmental and social projects.

We talk about things like ESG. How are companies changing the world? How are people taking care of others? How do the big companies take care of the territory they are in? We talk about this all the time, but being here and dealing with these people, we see that there's a lot of greenwashing. They talk a lot and they do just a little bit.

So unfortunately, nowadays the main sources [of funding] come from mining, which is really bad for these territories, for the environment, for the communities. And they are obliged to invest in these projects because the government makes them invest a part of the money. I'm glad the government makes them invest because otherwise it's clear that they wouldn't. But it still doesn't [compensate for] what they do. It feels awkward that the money that we use for these communities usually comes from the big mining companies. It feels good that something can be done, but doesn't feel like enough.

To give you an example, we are working now with a group of quilombola, it's a Brazilian hinterland settlement—people who were originally from Africa. They were escaped slaves. We are working with one of those groups for community-based tourism. We are preparing a lot of experiences that we can do there. And the money is from a Canadian gold-mining company. They used to have a very nice waterfall in their territory, and the water is gone. It's such an impact on their way of life. Even their capacity to get tourists is now compromised by the way that the mining company is working there.

We are going really fast in technology, we have exponential growth, but our social-environmental mindset is growing step by step. I've been in social-environment projects for more than 20 years, and I feel we're developing too slow.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Are there other challenges that you're facing in the work, and how are you managing those and working through those challenges?**

**Mariana Madureira:** We have big challenges here. In the last two years, we are having a hard time with people that don't want to see the climate crisis, and then the need to change behavior. We need to be more aware of our impact on the climate especially. Recently here, in the south of the country, 200,000 families had to leave their houses because of too much rain, and we are still dealing with this.

And this is something we knew was going to happen. We have five cities in Brazil that will disappear in the next two years because of the ocean. And people live as if it was not happening. Inequalities are getting bigger instead of smaller. We have all the sustainable development objectives, but we are not going for them. We have here a group of researchers that follow up every year on these objectives, and we see that we are getting farther from them instead of closer to reaching them. This is difficult because people don't want to see. I think it's psychologically easy to explain. People don't want to see the pain, people don't want to change.

We need to be very, very resilient to keep going and doing our work [in the face] of that, although you know you don't have the background you need, you don't have that big percentage of people. We

would need the majority of people going in a better way to save our existence. People say, "Save the planet." The planet will continue; we [may] not.

I was telling you about mining. We are having big fights here with people wanting to start new mining. They say, "We have a project of taking out oil from Amazonia." I say, "Okay, we need to talk about clean energy. We're talking about preserving Amazonia. How are you [starting] a project that is completely [in the other direction]?"

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think it will take to demonstrate the value of this work, the value of sustainable development, the value of having more income-generating paths to entrepreneurship? What do you think it will take to help people better prioritize this area of well-being?**

**Mariana Madureira:** Unfortunately, we need government. I don't believe this neoliberal thing that each one of us has the power. We do, but it's limited. We know that governments have much more power. Companies have much more power. The last government in Brazil, we had this extreme right president who ended a lot of policies for communities. And in our work we had a very hard time because we see that when the state is not supporting, things get a lot more difficult.

So we need conscious people in charge. And it's so hard because if the majority of people aren't conscious of what's happening, they're going to vote for the wrong people. We have this great wave of lies on the internet, and in Brazil we are fighting it a lot right now. We are trying to avoid algorithms that give you all kinds of misleading information. People believe in things that make no sense. This is very dangerous for democracy, very dangerous for our future, not only for politics. We cannot think of this as simply someone that you don't like, a party that you don't support. No. It's what they do when they have the power. This power makes a complete difference in the lives of people here.

For many years we were off the hunger map—the map with the spots in the world where people are suffering from hunger. We came back six years ago, and we are trying to leave it again with public policies. We need to focus on that, on information, and on choosing good people for politics.

Corporations play a big role too. We are part of the B corporations movement, and it's a step. It's not enough, because we see that the smaller [corporations] are in the B movement, not the big ones yet. And a lot of big ones try to co-opt it as greenwashing. So you have a big company that buys a small B corp that is just one of lots of corporations. They have lots of companies, and they buy one B corp as a way to say they are more sustainable. But they don't incorporate the practice of the small [B corp] to the whole group.

In the end it's more greenwashing. So, big challenges, but we have a group of people who are really aware of these challenges.

**Ashley Hopkinson: With the community work you're doing, have you found that you've been able to bridge divides? Have you seen the work bring people together in a way that they wouldn't normally? You mentioned a program with 24 women, and probably everybody who came together in that community doesn't live or vote the same way. Do you feel that your work brings people together in these polarizing times?**

**Mariana Madureira:** It depends. It's been hard [in recent] years, but I feel that in many places we work, they have the community sense. It's a little bit like a family. For example, in my family I have people that are politically the opposite of my beliefs. It's family—you accept. When we have this community feeling, people have acceptance, so they deal with differences. When we are on social media, people don't have acceptance. They don't see the person.

For example, I have an uncle that believes in things that... But he's my uncle. So I love him anyway. I think knowing the person beyond these polarized movements is very important. And as we work in small communities, I think people can go beyond.

But I really think it's important that we advance the law [around algorithms]—that we forbid and avoid some kinds of information. Because people are becoming stupid. That's really sad to say, but they're believing conspiracy [theories]. And it's really hard to have conversations with people that keep receiving this information and keep telling themselves that they are right because of the things they're listening to. It's really important that we take care of them, because these people are especially vulnerable. They don't have a lot of scholarship. They don't have this critical sense to say, "This is weird, let's check." So they are vulnerable to this message, and they become very convinced, because it gets to their emotional side. It's complicated.

We've seen here, in the last government—we worked a lot with Indigenous people, and some of them really believed that the way to achieve income generation was making plantations, harvesting one thing in big areas. This capitalist agro form of thinking. It's really sad, because we are trying to do the opposite and to value the way you harvest things in the forest. Agro forest techniques are the future. The future is ancestral. This is the way we are going to preserve the forest and have organic food, and we are going to show the people who visit us how this can work and how this is harmonious.

**Ashley Hopkinson: You've been doing this work for a long time. What would you say is an insight or a teachable lesson that can be taken from your approach? What have you learned along the way that you think would be valuable to share with an audience?**

**Mariana Madureira:** From the many projects we've done, the ones that are still growing, that are becoming stronger, that achieved all the goals—first thing is that it takes time. So many times when we say, "I'm going there for three months and everything's going to change"—it's not true. It's work that needs to change people. Changing people is something that you do step by step, really slowly, and together.

What we learned from this project is that we need to listen a lot. We need to go in listening to them, and we need to adapt everything we have to their reality. It doesn't work if you arrive with all the knowledge you've got from the last project and try to implement the same thing. It's another territory, it's another culture, it's another people, it's another time. Everything changed. So we need to be really humble to listen and to understand what makes sense in that place. And it has a lot to do with understanding them. What's the role of each person in that group? Because many times if people don't feel they're seen and if they don't feel they are given a role, they start sabotaging the project, and you can start having problems. So it's really important to see what each one needs and help them to get this governance so that they can work together and grow together.

The main thing is this: it's people. It's people understanding each other and looking to the same goal. Which goal? Are we growing food? Are we making hand crafts? Are we selling for tourists? Are we going to sell it at the supermarket? That's less important. We are going to find solutions. We can map it and find the solutions. The most important thing is that people get together, they see each other, they value what they have, and they decide to work together. That's the difficult part. Once you've done that, the other things are problems you can solve step by step with different approaches.

**Ashley Hopkinson: I wanted to ask you about interdependency. Where have you seen links, and how has that caused you to collaborate with other groups maybe that you wouldn't have before, or reaching out to another partner? How has collaboration played a role in your work?**

**Mariana Madureira:** That's very important. We need to put collaboration in the middle of this project and to have partners, see clearly who the stakeholders are, what role they are playing there. Because many times these groups find it difficult because they don't have enough partners, they don't have support from the government, they don't have support from the company, they don't have a good relationship with another group that [supplies] the raw material they're going to work with.

We have this big net that they need to be very aware of, and to build strategies to bring all these groups together. This is very important to be sustainable. We work a lot with tourism groups, and we tell them all the time that if you have a small hostel, you are not competing with someone that has a hostel close to you. He's not your competitor, he's your partner, because you have a tourist destination to build together. And you are competing with another destination, (in another area). For example, I have a community-based ecotourism destination. The other community-based ecotourism destination is your competitor. So you need to get better, get stronger, get more attractive than that one, not your neighbors. That's something we work on a lot with the groups, recognizing that you cannot go alone, you have to go with everyone else that completes and supports the work you're doing.

**Ashley Hopkinson: What do you think is missing from the conversation when we talk about sustainability and well-being economics? Where are the gaps in the work?**

**Mariana Madureira:** We have lots of quality information, but it is not getting to everyone, and maybe it's not being translated for everyone. There are some obstacles. Maybe some people cannot understand [sources] that are more academic. But I see many people doing this work of translating them to an easier narrative. We also have this blockage of people that don't want to talk about it. We have the challenge of talking to the people who do not want to realize that we need to change, that we are part of nature, and that we need to respect it and create opportunities for disadvantaged people. In the end they do want this, if you ask them questions, for example, "Do you want nature to vanish? Do you want it to be hot?" And they say no. They want to have well-being. They just believe in the wrong tools and the wrong paths. We need to learn more about talking to those people, and we need to create more bridges. We need to get together to solve our problems. And we are growing apart every day.

**Ashley Hopkinson: How do you define well-being? What does well-being mean to you as it relates to the work that you do in the world?**

**Mariana Madureira:** That's a difficult question. The ones that seem simple are the most difficult. I think that nowadays, well-being means having the capacity to achieve the minimum and to value what is most important. I think it comes in this path, because we search for so many things, materials, we want recognition, and we are sick and the planet is sick. Well-being is looking back and saying, okay, we need cool water, we need air, we need friendships, we need quality time. We need to have clarity, what can I believe, what can I not? I think it's really simple. We need to get back to the basics and have basic quality things. I think that's well-being nowadays.

**Ashley Hopkinson: Thank you so much for your time. It was really great to talk to you.**



*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.*