Weaving Wisdom: From Ubuntu to Kapwa

Developing a Deep Design Approach to Conscious Food Systems at the Edges | Global

Authors: Sarah Queblatin, Thao Ngo, Margarita Zethelius, Abumbi Prudence, Sonita Mbah, Damaris Mufur, Konkankoh Joshua | Better World Cameroon, Living Story Landscapes, Alianzas para la abundancia, Global Ecovillage Network, Gaia Education

"From Ubuntu to Kapwa" is a transformative initiative rooted in local communities across Africa, Asia-Pacific, and Latin America. This project seeks to revolutionize regenerative food systems by weaving together cultural values, worldviews, and traditional wisdom from diverse regions.

It is a South-South collaboration that captures the essence of collective wisdom and presents a novel framework for whole systems change.

BACKGROUND

The project was inspired by the aspirations of three teams already connected through the Global Ecovillage Network and Gaia Education. They envisioned a deep design approach to food systems that integrates the cultural values and traditional wisdom of communities. The initiative draws from the African philosophy of "Ubuntu" and the Filipino concept of "Kapwa," both of which emphasize interconnectedness and shared identity.

The goal was to create a framework that reflects these worldviews, offering a fresh perspective on resilience, shaped by the shared experiences of colonization, climate change, and conflict in regions like Cameroon, Colombia, and the Philippines.

IMPLEMENTATION AND CONSCIOUSNESS APPROACH

The project "From Ubuntu to Kapwa" commenced with the objective of highlighting the cultural and worldview dimensions of the Ecovillage Design Mandala. This framework, developed by the Global Ecovillage Network and Gaia Education, includes social, economic, and ecological aspects of design but had yet to fully integrate indigenous and local wisdom. The initiative, which ran from January to June 2024, aimed to localize the Mandala's approach by incorporating insights from indigenous communities. The project documented three case studies focusing on conscious food systems, demonstrating how traditional practices can enhance ecovillage designs and policies related to climate adaptation and economic development.

The project followed this learning journey, inspired by indigenous research methods:

- **Listening**: through a mindfulness practice of attunement - connecting to the wisdom of our body and spirit; listen to the story of the interconnectedness we carry within ourselves
- **Honoring**: paying tributes to all the partners, stakeholders, members, donors and supporters of the project
- **Dreaming & Offering:**
  - Rituals from each country (Cameroon, Colombia, Philippines)
  - Altar-making: seeking guidance for the question “how does incorporating a conscious food system in the courses/trainings that you design or facilitate look like to me?”
  - Expressing the guidance message through artwork or writing
  - Sharing highlights in the big group
- **Learning**: sharing the deep design patterns that the project have woven together from different activities of the project
- **Celebrating**: honouring the process and the fruits that it bore with gratitude, songs and celebration
- **Embodying**: the whole design process as the manifestation of this deep-design pathway

This figure shows the types of activities enacted in this intervention.

Each activity is infused with traditional wisdom, and together they demonstrate conscious approaches to designing food systems in a deeper way.

Each activity was done independently across each country then woven together through pattern weaving sessions as a means of identifying common practices.

Cameroon

The Achu Festival - a ritual for connection to nature, hosted at the Palace of the King of the Bafut Kingdom, February 2024. This ritual involves sharing Achu - one of the main indigenous meals - to give thanks to the land and bless the good harvest, while bringing the community together. It also passes ancestral wisdom and connection to the food down to younger generations.

The Mandeleh Festival - a ritual to connect with the ancestors through dance, sharing food, and chanting at the Palace of the King of the Bafut Kingdom. This identity ritual for the Bafut Kingdom empowers the community and blesses them with good health and fertility.

Colombia

Andean-Amazon Experimental Station La Realidad - a pedagogical project for the regeneration of the human bond with the earth through agriculture, native gastronomy and arts. The project explores Syntropic Agriculture and Shagralidad (ancestral techniques) for producing food and regenerating land; and El Cocinadero is a project which investigates indigenous food and native culinary arts.

Music and Dance are used as reflection and exploration practices used as reflection and exploration practices of the beneficial role of humans in the planet earth system, weaving cultural bridges and connecting with tradition.

“La Fiesta del Platano” - The Plantain Festival - this Festival is a space to share ancestral knowledge from different regions of Colombia where the banana/plantain is a common thread. This festival and its roots come from the core of emancipation, the identification of a plant as an articulator, a living expression of the ancestral knowledge on service to conservation and care.

The Philippines

Kapwa Story Circles: Engaging Indigenous and Local Wisdom in Designing Regenerative Food Systems in Cebu City - The Kapwa Story Circles are a series of activities for 20-30 organizations working on ecosystem regeneration in Cebu City. This lab weaves the process of Theory U (a change management approach for awareness-based systems change) with “Pamumuno” (a leadership approach patterned from indigenous Filipino systems, which invites actors to embody leadership for landscape regeneration by taking inspiration from trees). These circles came after one year of sensemaking with stakeholders; the circles are the presencing stage: a practice of letting go and letting come, which resonates with Pakikipagkapwa: a practice of relating without separating, a state of unity and deep relationship with all, in the spirit of Kapwa. These circles engaged indigenous and local wisdom through storytelling and ritual, as an opportunity to deepen the stakeholders’ worldview on their role and relationship with people and place.

Bringing consciousness approach to virtual space - *Opening Ceremony & Blessing Ritual for “From Ubuntu to Kapwa” -* ***On 12th January 2024,*** a launching ceremony with blessing ritual for the project “From Ubuntu to Kapwa” was held virtually with the presence of wisdom keepers from the three project sites of “From Ubuntu to Kapwa” and participants around the world. After a short introduction by the project coordinator Sonita Mbah, a blessing ritual was held in which wisdom keepers shared prayers and teachings in reply to the core inquiry of the project: *“How might we consciously design resilient and regenerative food systems from a deeper approach?”.*

More detailed case studies per country can be found in this document.

RESULTS AND IMPACT

The project had a profound impact both at the individual and community levels. In Cameroon, cultural identity was strengthened through indigenous education and ritual practices, fostering a sense of belonging and resilience. The King of Bafut’s public endorsement of conscious food systems highlighted the expanding awareness and support for these practices. In Colombia, participants reconnected with ancestral knowledge and developed new skills for conflict resolution, all while deepening their relationship with the land. In the Philippines, the integration of indigenous wisdom into regenerative food systems fostered values like respect, cooperation, adaptability, and resilience among participants.

Virtual events further connected people worldwide, generating excitement about the shared wisdom and cultural similarities among different regions.

Overall, the project engaged over 450 people through virtual and in-person activities across the three countries. Participants included local wisdom keepers, community members, educators, and others passionate about ecosystem restoration and sustainable food systems.

LEARNINGS

The project presented several challenges and valuable lessons. One significant challenge was the difficulty of conveying the spirit of cultural rituals and prayers in a virtual space. Despite technical issues like sound quality and internet connectivity, the team found that authentic and carefully conducted virtual rituals could still have a powerful impact. Another challenge was the need for translation support to share local wisdom across languages, which added complexity but also enriched the experience. Coordinating activities across different time zones required flexibility and effective use of asynchronous communication.

Looking ahead, there are significant opportunities for scaling up the initiative. The project team has compiled a living guidance document that captures the methodologies and insights gained, making it a valuable resource for future trainings on Ecovillage and Regenerative Settlements Development. The lessons learned from integrating indigenous wisdom into food systems can inspire similar efforts worldwide, promoting resilience and regeneration in diverse cultural contexts. The team is actively seeking financial and collaborative support to continue this meaningful work and expand its impact further.