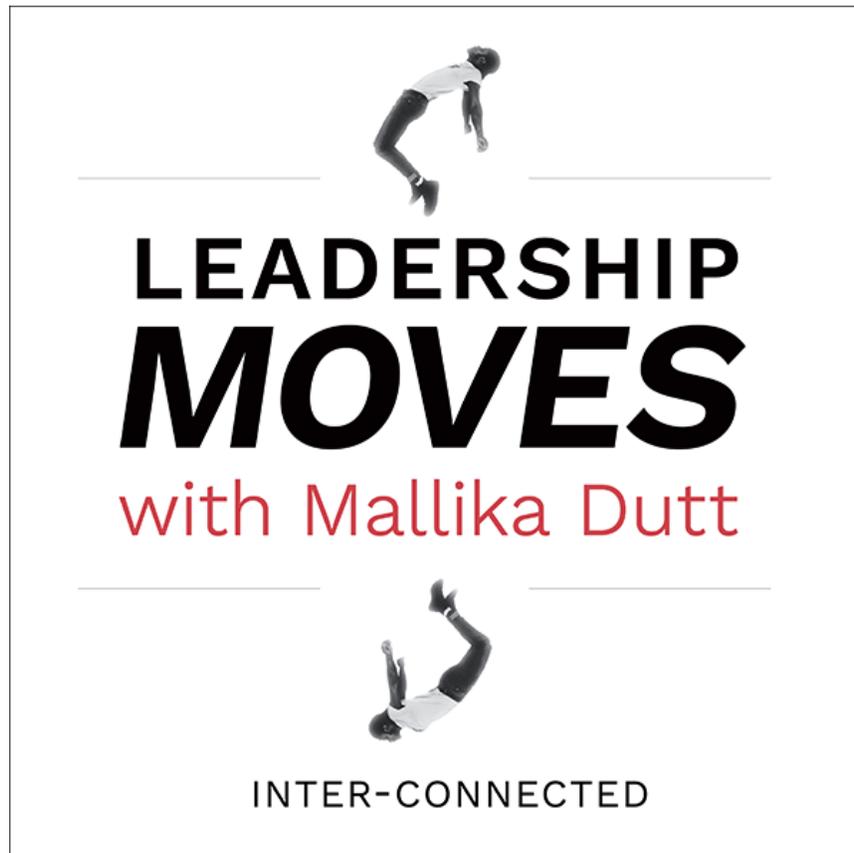


**S2 Ep10: Focusing on Diversity, Care, and Sustainability in Building a Collective Capacity to Respond to Oppression with Lydia Alpízar Durán**



**Full Episode Transcript**

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## **S2 Ep10: Focusing on Diversity, Care, and Sustainability in Building a Collective Capacity to Respond to Oppression with Lydia Alpízar Durán**

How would your life change if care became the central organizing principle of how you do your work? Join Lydia Alpízar Durán, co-founder of the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders to explore how we can build collective capacity for our wellbeing in the face of increasing repression.

Welcome to Leadership Moves, a podcast for visionary changemakers ready to shake up and re-envision the world. I'm your host, Mallika Dutt. Join me and my extraordinary guests as we discuss how to generate social change through leadership and the entrepreneurial, non-profit and philanthropic fields.

**Mallika:** Welcome, Lydia, I am so delighted to welcome you to this conversation for Leadership Moves. You are the Co-Executive Director of IM Defensoras, which is the Mesoamerican Initiative of Women Human Rights Defenders. And it is an incredible time for you to be doing the kind of work that you are doing in the world, really looking at how we protect women on the frontlines of social justice. And how we support the ones that are really fighting for justice for all of us and for the Earth itself.

So, Lydia, the work that you do is so powerful and so important. What are some of the things that are really taking up your time right now? What are the things that you are focused on right now at this moment in history?

**Lydia:** Well, first of all, thank you, Mallika, for inviting me to join this space and conversation with years that you have been working with. And it's a pleasure for me to meet with you. Yes, these are definitely challenging times in many different ways. And the work that we do at the IM Defensoras, yes, is strong and powerful. And I think it's strong and powerful because it's been collectively with very diverse groups of women defenders which are six women and non-variant [inaudible] people in Mexico, Guatemala, Honduras, Nicaragua, and El Salvador.

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And I guess in terms of what you're saying, what I have been putting my attention on recently, I think I mean one of the challenges we're facing is that everybody is really exhausted and affected in the context of the pandemic. And that context have meant not only all the challenges that came with this health crisis globally, which is still very much going on in the countries where we're working with.

But also, an increasing violence and repression, and increasing authoritarianism and an advance of different actors that are not committed to the transformations that we feminists talk about. No, on the contrary. So, we see rising fascism in some of our countries and our authoritarianism, and increasing violence on the ground which very diverse groups of women defenders are facing.

So, when you mix the accumulated effects of the pandemic with this increase in violence and repression on the ground, particularly in territories where a lot is at stake like the control of resources for example. Then after all this time since the pandemic hit we are struggling, how we sustain the organizational tissue, the collective capacity that we have built because it has an emotional toll. It has a physical toll. And it has a spiritual toll as well, all the people that are mourning losses.

And so, for example, so we have been working a lot on how do we sustain the accompaniment and the different forms of protection that we do in the IM Defensoras that are based on a framework of, we call feminist holistic protection? Or how do we sustain all of that work as we sustain ourselves? Because we understood that it might seem really obvious, but without caring for ourselves as the people that are doing these accompaniments, these processes of collective protection, we are putting attention on our care.

We were about to break because of so much pressure. So, a lot of our attention is how do you build an organization, in this case, is an articulation,

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is a coalition that can help sustain everybody. So that we can do the work in a better way for the other people that we are accompanying in this context that I was describing? And how do we build leadership and structures of leadership that are resilient and that can sustain each other? And so, I am actually part of right now, of our leadership structure that is called Leadership and we are four. Four co-executive directors.

And we realized that in this context we have to really [inaudible], because there was no way one person could hold the complexity and all of that, so the emotional effect that is involved in this work. And so, we've been looking at how do we create alternative ways of organizing or building the structures, of putting care at the center but in the culture and the practice that we build every day so that we can be there to respond to emergencies or the different kinds of violence that we've been responding to?

That is affecting the people on the ground but in a way that it doesn't take away our lives and that we can continue having lives with dignity as well with pleasure. And enjoying our rights as much as possible in the process that we accompany. And so, it's been a challenge because the models of NGOs that we have and coalitions come from models that are quite informed by capitalism. And by these logics of sacrifice and working nonstop, especially if you're working at an emergency, the logic is that you have to work nonstop.

And so, we're trying to think, how do we organize in a different way, in a way that is more sustainable and takes account not only of the actual work that we're doing every day. But also, the emotional toll that it's taking on our bodies, on our souls and the energy that we put and how we work together. So that's been taking a lot of our time [crosstalk].

**Mallika:** So, Lydia, that's really pretty revolutionary. I mean it's going in the face of the capitalist models, even the non-profit structures, even for those of us who do social justice work, who have been trying to transform the old

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paradigms. We often find ourselves reproducing the same patterns of work in trying to end the old paradigms. And then burning out, or hurting each other, or harming each other in ways that can be even more painful for our own leadership and for the movement.

So, I'm curious, for executive leaders, shared leadership models, looking at how to create connective tissue for the health and wellbeing, and sustainability of the whole, what are some of the practical things that you've done to allow this new way of organizing and leadership to emerge?

**Lydia:** Well, it's a work in progress. I'm learning a lot. And we learn the hard way because there were a lot of us that were getting sick or simply exhausted [inaudible] at all levels, from the frontline. People that are doing the work on the frontline to also the people that are working in the structure at the regional level. So, we are actually taking several measures. For example, agreeing to stop at the same time during a certain amount of time. And creating a very clear system of chiefs.

Who is going to be available for responding to emergencies, if any emergency comes up? And in our context it's very hard to plan sometimes. So, that if you go on vacation, you can really disconnect. This might sound obvious but it's not. So, organizing better the time off, organizing better the chiefs on the weekends. Really making everybody respect the stop of the use of chats and common communication spaces in the evenings, early mornings and on the weekends when it's not necessary.

Doing an assessment on how the care is for each person so that if they need to take particular breaks they can, if they need medical attention they can have it. If they need to take a break for a while, like a leave of absence, so that we do. But the big difference is that those are not thought as individual measures. So, we are trying to be thoughtful, okay, if this person is not going to be there because she needs a leave of absence right now,

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how we reorganize the work in a way that her leave of absence doesn't mean that the workload for everybody increases significantly.

So, the other thing is we realize how important, I mean this is something we do with the defenders that we accompany. But we realize how important it is to provide it also for all the teams. It's psychosocial support, individual and collective in different ways. For example, one of the teams on the ground is being accompanied by a traditional healer from Guatemala. And she works with a collective and she works with individuals of the collective to help them process some of the violence that they are [inaudible] right now, vicariously experiencing.

But also, to look at how the violence also effects the collective tissue of the team to work together. Or it can be other types of therapists that understand. I mean typical therapists tell the activists working on this field like I did, "What you need to do is to stop doing what you're doing." And generally, people want to continue doing what they are doing, we just need to continue doing it in a different way. And so, we need therapists and healers, some people that can accompany us, without wanting for us to get out of the organizations or the struggles that people are in.

So basically, each team did an assessment on how they were and they were already making some of these measures but they were fragmented. So, what we did is we created a conversation with all the teams that gives credibility, [inaudible], and permission to everybody to say, "Actually I need a break." I know it's not vacation and it's not just time off in general. It's, we need to look at whether we need to relook at the work plan, which we did. And we decided at some point last year, for example, that we had to do only essential work.

That we were not going to do additional workshops, public presentations, respond to invitations and things like that. And we were just going to focus on the day work because it's a lot. And that reduced some of the [inaudible]

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work. We were going to do the public celebration of our 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary which was 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary plus really, because we couldn't celebrate during the pandemic initial year. And we decided that doing the public celebration events, that's going to put so much pressure on everybody that we decided that the celebration was going to be care.

And so, we engaged in a conversation around care and this year, yes, we'll do a public celebration. So, it's been a whole bunch of things. But believe me, agreeing that we were not going to be there 24/7 and that we had to rest and take [inaudible], it's a really hard thing to implement on a daily basis. But it has started to make a difference. So, it's a working progress, Mallika.

**Mallika:** Yeah. No, absolutely. But these are such great examples of how we can actually take practical measures to take care of ourselves. And what you just said about our celebration was care. I mean that is just such a profound and powerful statement to make because we are so used to having all of our work be externally focused. So, to think about celebration as care is really, I mean when you said that I could just feel my whole body go like wow.

The other thing that I've been sort of reflecting on as you've been speaking, Lydia, is that your community of activists that are part of the organization are very diverse. I mean people are in different countries, people are coming from many different indigenous backgrounds, non-indigenous backgrounds, working on a multiplicity of issue areas. And one of the things that we often see when there is that kind of diversity in a coalition is a lot of tension, and division, or competition.

And this is another aspect of the work that you've been doing not just here but also through your work with AWID which is the Association for Women's Rights and Development. Where you've really been leading the coming together of diverse leadership and building these coalitions of

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effectiveness. And I wonder if you would speak a little bit to what's been your experience of how to create those kinds of coalitions and make them effective and work for everybody in the coalition itself?

**Lydia:** You see when we started the work to create the IM Defensoras, we were not thinking we were going to create a coalition or something. We were just trying to come together to understand what was going on, on the ground because we started to see a lot of cases of violence against activists and we hadn't seen before. And we were concerned because we thought, okay, if the very people that are on the ground who are doing very crucial work on social justice, protection of mother Earth, environmental sustainability.

I mean they work across a broad array of issues, are getting targeted. Are not being able to do the work because they are facing backlash and different types of violence. Then this is going to have an impact. When we started, since the beginning we realized that the groups that were being affected were very diverse. And so, the people that work on being for the process came even from places sometimes that were not only different in terms of the issues that they were working on or their identities, but even the political positions in feminist movements or beyond.

But they had all one thing in common and is that different actors including the state were attacking them. And there were no good collective systems for responding. The systems that were there were the ones that were very importantly built, for example, by women's human rights groups but were responding to individual cases. We're not necessarily trying to build collective capacity to respond.

So, the process of building of the IMD has been a really interesting road because it's been realizing that we really need to show each other in the face of this increasing violence that we've been seen. And this empowerment of actors that use violence as a way to advance their

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agendas. And so, in that moment, that was end of 2009, 2010, that was starting to become evident. And unfortunately, that became really clear.

And so, what you have in the networks of women defenders in the different countries is very diverse women and also trans in some cases, people, very, very diverse among themselves. That are very clear that they need each other. But in that process, that came out of a necessity of responding to violence and building that collective capacity, we started to learn more about each other's struggles.

So, in the past if an indigenous land defender would be attacked and have community, you wouldn't see necessarily a reproductive rights group somewhere else in the country responding to do something about that attack, or distribution the alert. So, it's been a process where we have learned a lot from each other. And also, we were open for each other's perspectives to changes.

So, for example, in the cases of land defenders, indigenous women, their territories are crucial for the survival of who they are of Mother Earth and is so central to their cosmovision, and of their communities and cultures. And there has been a really interesting connection for example between people working on reproductive rights and land defenders where we say, "My body, my territory."

And we've been learning from the way in which land defenders and environmental defenders, indigenous women conceptualize their feminism where their bodies are their first territories, but are still their actual territories as a place for defense. And how structures of oppression and violence operate in a similar way that we repress our bodies and the way they try to take over the territories and exploit them.

So, I think the process of coming together with a very practical need, we need each other to figure out how we protect each other from all this increasing violence and repression has over the years become spaces

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where we have actually met each other at other levels. And I think we increasingly collectively realize how central care is for sustaining life, our lives as activists but also the lives of our movements and the struggles.

And so there have been some common topics, or common practices, or common political perspectives of transformation that I feel have helped us come together. It's not easy definitely but in moments where there have been situations of really intense and big repression like we've seen in Nicaragua with the dictatorship of Ortega. Or the situation of narco-state that Honduras has been historically in for the past decade since the coup. Now in an interesting moment with a new first woman president, that's very complex.

Or in Guatemala when we have seen so much racism affecting the lives of indigenous for example, defenders. In those moments we have seen how the power of being together is so important, breaking isolation and ensuring that there are others that are actually there. So just navigating the diversity it's been complex but when you have determinants in the context that means that we need each other. That there is so much power in coming together and so beyond the response to [inaudible].

I think I mean that has been part of what has allowed us to continue to be together. But for me, this space has been a space to ground some of our feminist values, [inaudible] or transformation which bet on collective power building and on building movements. So, what was once a palliative response to violence has become in itself also a proposal for transformation. And I think a proposal for transformation that has been built by these very diverse groups that we engage and we learn with every day.

Because providing protection on the ground for a trans person for example, whose life has been threat or affected, or a very young student that has been fighting for democracy. Or an indigenous woman leader that is resisting the taking over of her land and has to flee her community. How do

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you actually ground the way in which you work and build solidarity and protection? It needs an intersectional approach to understand how their needs and the violence expresses itself.

And the people that are providing the protection on the ground are women defenders themselves. They are not technical staff that came to provide protection to the people in need of protection. No, they are people doing activism on the ground. So, the fact that all of this is at play I think has really helped us meet each other and come together, learn from each other, push each other a lot. But at the end of the day realize that the collective project that we're building is worth the effort to overcome indifferences because it's a powerful effort and initiative.

**Mallika:** Lydia, I'm listening to you and I'm reflecting on the decades of work that you have been engaged in. And the ways in which you have moved feminist analysis and practice forward in the many roles that you have had. And I think I've known for you, what, 30 years or something at this point? And I'm really struck by the places of the frontlines that I find you in where there is this deep commitment to an investigation of circumstances that go way below the surface.

And that really are about bringing many, many different groups, many, many different individuals together to engage in this work of transformation. If you were to think about your own trajectory as an individual and the work that you have done these many decades. What would you say are some of the biggest lessons that you've learned as a leader and perhaps some of the biggest shifts that you have experienced in your own leadership as a result of this work?

**Lydia:** Well, I think more and more, and with my latest experience, trusting the collective process to build wiser, better decisions even if sometimes they take more time. And being open to be changed by the perspectives of the others for me has become a really important learning. Yeah, when I

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was younger I had very strong opinions of course about many things. And you will go into a meeting and you will state your position. But you were not necessarily there to build a big coalition or to understand how your action was there to build for the longer run.

A possibility to sustain transformation and I think over the years I have learned from so many incredible women and that have really broadened my perspective of how important it is not to be right but to do the right things together. And so yes, the IM Defensoras is not many cases, I think, no, this is what we need to do and we go into a meeting and then we really take the idea and with changes. And then I trust that it's a much better idea after the whole process.

So, for me that has been a really important process of learning because just it's not that you don't need people that are making decisions and ensuring that things move and so on. But what is the grounding of those decisions and where have they sustained on, and where are you contributing to in the middle and longer run is very important. And for me, what sustained is the fact that they are sustaining a collective effort, either an organization, a coalition, a network, a movement.

I think sometimes listening to each other, but really seriously hearing, it's a challenge. And I think capitalism and the way in which it influenced the way these NGOs, different structures were built, they fragmented us because the logic of capitalism and all these later stages, neoliberalism and so on, it's to create fragmentation, to break the wholeness. And I think very strongly that feminists want very deep transformations for the whole of society, including [inaudible].

And I think are stronger with a perspective of taking into account mother Earth as well. But if our struggles are so fragmented with this same capitalist logic I think they're only able to affect a little and they lose the perspective from the broader. So, my sense also is that part of my effort to

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bring us together, different issues, different actors, it's because I think we really need to overcome that fragmentation. And we've talked a lot about this over the years.

But I seriously think it's a challenge and I think we miss so much about not doing it because there is so much we need to learn from each other still. And so, I think in my trajectory, I have become increasingly clear of how important it is that is not only about my issue, or my group, but it is about betting for a more collective project. And I think right now with how we are seeing the world with so many states that are really failing to uphold rights and international agreements.

And really serving the big capital at so many levels, not caring for the most pressing issues of our times like climate change for example in a really serious way. I think building that kind of collective project is crucial and it's not only about a particular actor or a particular issue but all our capacity to come together. So, I think I have learned to be even more convinced that that is a very important way.

And the other one is there's so much learning that we need to do from the movements on the ground, especially people working internationally or regionally. I mean all their knowledge and experience, all the wisdom there, but also we need to build different types of alliances, different levels. I believe for me right now, that's increasingly more pressing. Yes, I mean I think I guess I could say other things, but those are some of the ones that come to mind.

**Mallika:** So much wisdom, Lydia, for these times, for our movements, for our deep desire for transformation. The desire for us to get beyond wanting to be right, to getting to a place where we can all come together to deeply listen to one another so that we can do the right thing together. I think that is such important and deep wisdom from you. Thank you so much for this conversation. Thank you so much for centering care as the celebration that

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we can all fall into and rest into. And thank you most of all for the powerful important work that you have been doing these many decades.

**Lydia:** Well, thank you, Mallika, it's a pleasure and honor to share this space with you and look forward to many more conversations and sharing in the road ahead.

Thanks for listening to the Leadership Moves podcast which is made possible by the BUILD program of the Ford Foundation. If you want more information or the resources from today's show visit [mallikadutt.com](http://mallikadutt.com), M-A-L-L-I-K-A-D-U-T-T.com. Until next time.

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