The Power of the Diaspora

First AfroInnova Meeting
Cartagena de Indias, December 2016

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AFRO INNOVA
GRUPO DE INNOVACIÓN COMUNITARIA PARA LA DIÁSPORA AFRICANA

ORGANIZA CON EL APOYO DE
MEET TO TRANSFORM

On the streets of Cartagena, Ivan Laranjeria, a young leader who works in cultural tourism in the Mafalala neighborhood in the heart of Maputo, the capital of Mozambique, moves like he is at home. It seemed like he knew the space, as if he was in his own territory. Not only the color of his skin, but the way he moved his body, made him a part of the landscape of the city that was the main slave port for the Spanish Crown in America. If Ivan came to imitate the dynamics of these days, if he came to be a part of the daily life, surely he would also feel what it means to be black in the city. Lucía Asué Mbomío Rubio, a journalist for Televisión Española, Afroféminas, and Radio Melanina, assures that the Palenqueros have the accent of the Angolans and that, for her, it was inevitable to feel like she was walking by some places in Angola or the Equatorial Guinea of her ancestors, while crossing the little streets of San Basilio de Palanque, a few hours from Cartagena.

These two images reveal the connection between the Afro-diasporic condition and the unifying elements that exist above the differences. This is clearly represented in the three days of work of the AfroInnova meeting that began in December 2016 at the Center for Spanish Cooperation in Cartagena, Colombia.

Susana Edjang explains the African diaspora as an amalgamation of the distinct diasporas of people of 54 states and African territories that live in different nations than where they were born. She references three moments in the diaspora: the first wave diaspora (from the 15th to the 16th century) in which 10.7 million people were forcibly transferred on boats from Africa to different parts of America. A second wave that is related to the colonial era and post-colonial Africa occurred in the second half of the 20th century when many left their country of origin for the colonial metropolis to look for better education. Others, in their capacity as workers, were exported from the former colonies to the empires. Susana indicates that the third wave of the diaspora is the most contemporary and she identifies with it. It is made up of people who take part in forced or voluntary migrations, are looking for political asylum, or people that are looking for better opportunities for themselves and their families.

Susana Edjang is an expert in public policy of development and health. She works for the United Nations; is vice-president of the Association of Black Workers of the same institution; is a member of the Royal African Society Council; and of the Council of leaders of Africa 2.0. Like Ivan Laranjeira and Lucía Asué Mbomío Rubio, Susana was part of the AfroInnova meeting. She walked the streets of the city with the same naturalness of her companions, finding clues that unite us. Susana also contributed an insightful document to the spirit of the meeting titled: Africa and its diaspora: a new global power?, which was her presentation at the launch of the Manos Visibles initiative, AFROINNOVA, at the Icesi University in Cali on May 19th, 2016.

This document reflects on its own history in the considerations about diasporic dynamics and finds a unifying element for all the participants of AFROINNOVA: “Independent of the diasporic wave to which people of African descent belong, Africa goes with them wherever they go and they represent it, and they feel represented by Africa, through time and space”.

Perhaps that unifying element is what Lucía Asué found in the accent of the inhabitants of Palenque de San Basilio and the one that Ivan Laranjeira discovered in the crowded city center. AFROINNOVA is about that: finding what unites to convert us into a transformative force.

To achieve this purpose, the meeting had four axes: (i) African
diaspora: definitions, understandings, and aspirations; (ii) the global context and analysis of the situation of Africans and African descendants at the regional level; (iii) the experiences of the members of AFROINNOVA, their commitment and structure; (iv) AFROINNOVA and its prospects for strategic connections.

HORIZONS OF POWER: AFRICA, THE PLACE OR AFRICA, THE PEOPLE?

Many will agree that one of the most inspiring statements at the AFROINNOVA meeting was said by Phillip Thompson, a professor at MIT, when he said that “Our power is love.” Knowing that we are not alone, that on the contrary, we are many on the road to constructing models of dignity and on the quest for the essence of true global power. It is about creating rapprochements based on what already exists, what we are and what we do.

To understand this global power, it is necessary to understand Africa in its complexity; to let go of the reduced idea of Africa. Thus, we can assume the African spirit as a reference to the diaspora. This exercise adds to the complexity of the diaspora to understand the diversity and its references to unity in the midst of diversity. When Phillip speaks of love, he refers to solidarity as a central element, and he refers to it in in another inspiring expression, “We all came in the same boat”.

It narrates that image of the visit of Nelson Mandela to New York after his release. He was received by thousands and thousands of people like an illustration that serves to explain that power is not obtained individually. But for this, it is necessary to build networks for knowledge, joint action and communication, all the pillars that turn solidarity into power.

The largest commitment of the diaspora and Afro-descendants is the construction of transformative, innovative initiatives, but for this, it is necessary, first, to change the narrative, to change the ways these people have been narrated. This is a common point that we find in descendants of the forced diaspora in America, the present African diaspora in the world, and those Africans who have never left their territory, but who suffer from the old vices of colonial dynamics. It is in this space that we can look for other definitions of who we are and the potential of the diaspora.

This first approach by Phillip speaks of a definition of diaspora as a mental and emotional global community, in light of a shared history and common challenges. Subsequently, other participants of AfroInnova ask the question of how the definition of diaspora differs from the perspective of the African continent and the perspective of Afro-descendants who reclaim their Africanness from different continents. A key question is how to build a real bridge between the African and Afro-descendent perspective today, to build real global power. A power that in one of the panels led by Susana Edjang and Aurora Vergara, was quantified in more than 1300 million people, who at a global level have grown in terms of power and incidence.

Africa, the place or Africa, the people? What type of diaspora interests us? How can we generate a vision of a shared diaspora? Do we want a painful diaspora or a new diaspora with a more balanced and present narrative? What do diasporas do? What is the relationship we want from Africa with the diaspora and from the diaspora with Africa? These are some of the questions that emerged in this discussion from different participants, which emphasized how to create power from the demands of different identities. Aurora Vergara proposed some approaches to this discussion: to look at the diaspora as a form of action, as a methodology, as a political form, or and a market. The majority of participants agreed to define the diaspora from the potentiality, from the incentives to renew the concept and the need to appropriate the creation of the future.
The meeting highlighted the African diaspora as a project of similarity, of similar conditions and challenges. The exercise of power and resignification, as mentioned by Abiola Oke, transcends geography and history, it involves rethinking what it means to be African and an Afro-descendant and what we are building and trying to build in the future, according to the challenges and threats of today.

It is recognized in the global order that everyone must take charge of the creation of their own future and not expect others to make changes. Undoubtedly, this is AfroInnova: to share knowledge, experiences and future renewed vision of meaning and shared power. In the end the common goal is to expand the image and the definitions, to quit claiming the minority. This way the assets are reconfigured to reiterate that the strengths of our community exist and allow us to meet now with a future perspective, not only the inspiration of specific cases, but the aspiration of transnational lines of actions that translate into greater welfare and impact.

**DISCOVERING THE COMMON REALITY**

The challenge of discovering what is happening in African countries and countries with the largest population of African descendants is not an easy task if one takes into account the complexities and particularities of different countries and regions. The diaspora is not a homogenous body; it happened for different reasons at different times, and the dynamics of the places of destinations have been decisive. Perhaps bringing together leaders from different places and provoking a discussion of different contexts helped to create more accurate images of realities. Some involve broad convergences, similar scenarios; others need sharper readings on particular scenarios. In each context, the subgroups defined two or three critical themes, highlighting trends that show a sense of hope amid complexities.

With relation to Africa, education was the first subject in question. The rising prices, lack of access, and low quality are viewed as major constraints to more fully developing the capacity of Africans. The second element that was highlighted was policy and institutional weakness, which makes many of the efforts of civil society precarious and insufficient since some governments do no generate the bases and advances at the scale that is needed for general well-being. The third element that was raised was the informal economy and criminal systems, which destabilizes and does not generate decent and fair access to resources.

In the end, group spokesperson Abiola Oke mentioned that one of the main reasons for hope is the emergence of “Creative Africans” and an Afrimedia, which has helped to increase a pan-African identity that creates and shares content, more and more digital, about the strengthening and pride of an African identity. It ends its presentation emphasizing that: “(…) whoever controls the images, controls self-esteem”.

Another reality is identified in Spain, where it is necessary to know one’s own history to strengthen one’s identity. It is a memory of which, in many cases, is not spoken. There is no concept of being Spanish and being black. The national culture does not include African descendants. This lack of recognition of racial and cultural diversity is evident in the advances of an idea of equality before the law which, however, does not mean effective equality in practice. Spain has had difficulties in accepting itself as a diverse country and it cannot lose sight of the racist ideology that accompanies the
imagery of the empire. As Pedro Martín stressed in summarizing the analysis of his group in Spain: “… racism is disguised as a joke, being a daughter of immigrants of a growing population, but still not having the equal recognition of full citizenship in the narration of the nation”.

The case of Brazil is disturbing and was summarized by the group in “Genocide”. Although the majority of the population in the country is black (53%), there are worrying imbalances evidenced in the mass death of black youths in the face of violence marked by racism and structural exclusion, as well as a symbolic genocide of black identity in the media.

However, the group composed of William, Edgard, and Adriana, who share the vocabulary to analyze the reality, emphasized that the Afro-Brazilian population has not been a passive population but an active one. This is a sign of the important trend of the creation of alternative means of communication as a form of resistance. Likewise, black feminism appropriates the labor struggle for decent work and different positions in society.

All of this forced recognition of a majority population that can speak of a black market, a black currency, and an offering of products that reinforce the identity. This is how the black population, for now, takes the economy more from the start, but seeks to appropriate resources, generate brands and markets to influence not only the media, but also the political renewal that the country needs. As Adriana sums it up, the hope lies in: “(…) retaking identity as an asset, as a decision, and as a fact affirmed in all the spaces where we are determinants”.

The politician and urban planner Phillip Thompson offered an interesting contextual view of the United States as a country that is even more divided in its recognition of civil rights. Phillip is a trade union adviser in his country and this, perhaps, allows him a look at the organizational context and from there he looks at reality. The arrival of Barack Obama to the presidency, he warns, shows a change in the way of thinking of Americans and that is something that we are still understanding, from the most radical and progressive perspective that coexist in the country. At this time, we are considering the weaknesses that may exist in the area of communication and organization, which have put many of the achievements at risk. It is a new moment to reinforce assets mapping, deepen collective planning, leverage assets, strengths, and rethink leadership development.

The analysis in the case of Colombia made evident the institutional difficulties in the state, represented in small low-level offices with little influence. Although there is an institutional presence of African descendants, there are weaknesses. Education, which can be understood as a form of access to power, is not perceived as a priority in the political will of governments. And finally, the survival of black communities was highlighted as a main challenge to the lack of basic needs, coupled with environmental and social issues with high negative impacts such as crime, drug trafficking, and illegal mining.

One of the main tasks, said Aurora Vergara, as a spokeswoman for this group, is the process of memory as a formula to deal with the eventual loss of identity of African descendants that today are concentrated in the largest urban centers of the country.

Each region has particular challenges to face, but in some ways, seeing the other is seeing oneself, to contrast experiences or to confirm those similarities in different contexts. This exercise makes it easier to understand this idea of the global in the diaspora with its difficulties and challenges. The five key words of this initial reading in the first meeting were:

**Education**

**Communication**

**Economy Institutionalization**

**Violence**

*(the preservation of life as a challenge)*

**WHO IS WHO?**

One of the most beautiful aims of the AFROINNOVA initiative is to let people get to know each other. It seems simple, but it encompasses a deep meaning with practical scope. The organization of the presentations is done in an individual way and the participants, according to their work experiences, are classified in six thematic lines: (i) Academia & Leadership; (ii) Communications & Culture; (iii) Economics; (iv) Government; (v) Youth & Violence Prevention; (vi) International Agencies. Here are some examples of these reflections from three of the six thematic lines.

We begin with Communications & Culture, with the presentation of Ifeanyi Awachie, a Nigerian artist and writer of diverse literary genres of fiction and nonfiction. She presented her experience with Africa Salon. It is a work focused on the arts, with initiatives of conceptual salons and festivals. African art is learned through experience. Its aim has been to create, expand, and change the narrative of Africa in elite universities in the United States, such as Yale University, showing an intellectual, aesthetic, traditional, and contemporary Africa, as she summarizes: “a continent to discover, not a country”.

For her part, Adriana Barbosa told us about Feira Preta, the largest African descendant fair in the Americas and in Brazil. The fair attracts between 10 and 14 million people daily and has generated a market platform of identity promoting entrepreneurship. She highlights Feira Preta as a market space around the African descendant identity and as a platform to position brands of identity with Black Codes, the appropriation of a market and in turn generate processes of innovations through AfroLab.
Bisilia Bokko, another participant, presented her organizational process: “The Bisilia Bokoko Project for Literacy and Sustainable Development.” It is an economic project linked to culture. Bisilia is an entrepreneur born in Spain, with parents from Equatorial Guinea. She is considered one of the most influential women in Valencia and one of the few Afro-Spanish women who have held leadership positions in the business sector. She established her commitment to corporate responsibility in libraries and the power of books and has supported endowments in different countries. Part of the question that arose is how to integrate the literature of the diaspora in the African countries and the African literature in the diaspora, through her initiative.

For his part, Abiola Oke presented on OKAY Africa, a global media company that connects African creativity. In this mix between economy, culture, and communications, OKAY Africa attempts to broaden and change the narrative about Africa from the power of communications. They seek more certain and close narratives, that neither sacrifice the truth nor try to hide the bad, but that say, “we have a voice, with quality and we control a part of our resources”.

From an economic perspective of labor rights, Mará Roa presented the Union of Domestic Service Workers in Colombia (UTRSAD) as an example of improving the conditions of a source of massive employment for the black population. Mará narrated how they were organized and how they achieved a political advocacy platform, proposing laws that dignify and improve the wages and legal benefits of domestic workers in the country.

In the dialogue between Abiola and Maria, we thought about how to better connect business to global competitiveness, just as OKAY Africa has done with the black labor base that, like the corporate sector, achieved massive redistribution of wealth schemes. Ivan Laranierla from the IVERCA Association presented us with his cultural tourism platform in the Mafala neighborhood in Maputo, the capital of Mozambique. It is an initiative, which he coordinates, where agency tourism proceeds support cultural events and a community museum. It makes a tour of this marginal neighborhood difficult to reach, but it tells the heart of the struggle for Mozambique’s independence. He emphasized the importance of tourism closer to communities, with a more critical, rich, and real reading, and that keeps the memory of independence and identity alive.

For his part, William de Almeida presented the experience of AfroReggae that was born in one of the favelas of Rio de Janeiro and has been a reference of violence prevention processes both in Brazil, and in African countries, including Cape Verde. He highlighted the cultural power of this initiative, with which a series of centers and training processes streamline the cultural industry of the Favela. Similarly, the initiative created a communications platform. Finally, the employment agency highlighted opportunities in the midst of a Brazil where the higher risk of death for black youth reaches levels that some call genocide. William coordinates the Caminho Melho Jovem project in 10 favelas in Rio de Janeiro.

In this way, each participant presented on their organization and the process they carry out. Each experience helped to recreate the context in which it was located, the needs and the challenges that they are willing to assume for their commitment. The presentations were not disconnected from that map of reality made at the beginning of the meeting. The realities are the reason that many of these organizational works arise as resistance and others have learned to move according to the challenges of their own region.
AFRICA IN COLOMBIA

To know who is who permits the construction of networks. In addition to the participants of the AFROINNOVA meeting, the agenda allowed for knowledge about other experiences in San Basilio de Palenque and La Boquilla, and to make a tour of the afro memory sites in the city. Within the working agenda of the first day a space was arranged to tour the historic center of Cartagena, specifically key reflections related to sites of memory and Afro consciousness. Historian Javier Ortiz Cassiani, who has worked on the issue with the Colombian Ministry of Culture, explained that Cartagena is the Colombian city most related to the African diaspora. What Susana Edjang calls the first diasporic wave characterized by the slave trade between the fifteenth and nineteenth centuries had as its destination countries in North America, the Caribbean, and Latin America.

Javier related that the mass influx of enslaved people to Cartagena is a fact of great impact in the historical conformation of the city. However, no subject has been more ignored than the recognition and appreciation of this evident truth. Unfortunately, the history of the city is full of references to the hierarchy of public spaces and the development of practices of denial of the enjoyment of those places to the poor black population. The processes of urban modernization have been characterized by establishing dynamics of marginalization and displacements based on racial components. This initiative of memory sites involves making the memory of the African descendants of Cartagena visible and iconic. The memory exercises are fundamental to building on citizenship today. They determine how the city accepts African descendants within the city, and how African descendants accept the city.

Another tour led the participants to the drumming night of La Boquilla. It is a black community that is part of the city of Cartagena, a town that moves to the rhythm of the songs of fisherman returning from their day, the passage of the wind through the mangroves, the voices of the elderly who tell how they came to settle there, and the sounds of the African drum. The Tambores of Cabildo School hosted the AFROINNOVA participants who, in the cool breeze, remembered the strength of the drum, their calls for freedom and nostalgia for Africa.

The last experience that was part of the agenda of the AFROINNOVA meeting was the visit to San Basilio de Palenque. It is a town southeast of Cartagena. It is part of those communities called palenques that were founded by fugitives slaves and served as a refugee in the 17th century. It is considered a unique cultural space, inscribed in 2008 in the Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity. UNESCO regards that San Basilio de Palenque has cultural, medical, religious, musical, and oral traditions that represent an important cultural space in African roots.

AFROINNOVA participants learned about the experience of Asoprudeuse, the Association of Typical Candy Producers Palenqueros, an organization of Candy vendors, which has an agricultural and ethno tourism line. They also met the legendary maestro Rafael Cassiani Cassiani, one of the most important representative of palenquera music, the last of a generation of minstrels, founder of the sextet Tabalá, bearer of the marimbula tradition – a typical traditional music instrument of San Basilio de Palenque that some experts consider descendent of the mbira or senza Africana.

Kombilesa Mi is another one of the experiences that the visitors of AFROINNOVA could have in Palenque. It is a folk rap kugaro whose music fuses urban rap with traditional rhythms and palenquera language. Hip hop is a common language, a black collective claim. Kombilesa Mi closed his presentation with an inspiring song for the participants. All of the audience sang regardless of their language, “Beautiful continent Africa, your heart is in Palenque”

In the end, Adriana Barbosa expressed the importance of bringing Kombilesa Mi to the Feira Preta, and meetings that talk about the importance of seeing, hearing, recognizing, and communicating in different ways, from roots, languages, and shared sensibility. The power of diaspora and Afro-descendants must be expressed in the construction of mechanisms that allow encounters, exchange experiences, and strengthen oneself, so that what is understood is experience, motivation, and inspiration.

The participants of the AFROINNOVA meeting could feel a kind of communion with palenqueros, especially those who had lived in Africa. San Basilio de Palenque is not foreign to them. It is familiar, close. However, some expressed concern about the idea that the people of Palenque have Africa as a reference of memory, as most seem to ignore the specific reality of African peoples. With exceptions, it is possible that it is necessary to reaffirm the understandings, to give support through knowledge, in Phillip’s words, to what is already understood.

This intuition is determined by the common situation that has generated the mobility of people who have left the African continent to many other places, at different times and for different reasons. Black people, if they do not know it, sense it. Knowledge is important to reaffirm what intuition makes us feel close to. Today, the African diaspora have become a component of unity and strength.
AND WHAT’S NEXT?

AfroInnova 2016 was a call to continue in this search. In this first meeting the WHAT was emphasized. It was the opening to begin drawing the map of what definition of diaspora we want to have as a group, what narratives we want to share from the basis of a more intentional Afro-Diasporic power. There is a strong need to continue to learn, deepening the learning about how each of these experiences and leaderships has transcended, to map more precisely the assets, to raise deeper connections, and to think about the pragmatic agenda that will come out in final meeting in November or December of this year.

AUDIOVISUAL REPORT OF THE MEETING

YOUTUBE VIDEOS

Playlist:

AFROINNOVA
https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PLnNy3rtjkeLq7gk2X8-KoO57dloBdHRUn

Africa and its Diaspora: A New Global Power?
Susana Edjang — Cali Master Conference of Manos Visibles

What is a slave and the enslaved?
Historian Javier Ortiz Cassiani l AfroINNOVA de Manos Visibles

Okayafrica’s CEO,
Abiola Oke is a member of AfroINNOVA of Manos Visibles

Constructing New Narratives, New Realities.
Grupo AfroINNOVA of Manos Visibles

Business Project to Provide Solutions for Social Problems of Manos Visibles

Connecting to Solve Structural Problems of the Afro-population of Manos Visibles

The Ethnic Struggle for the Rights of Afro-domestic Workers of Manos Visibles

Different Realities that Strengthen Ties — AfroINNOVA Group. Lucía Asué Mbomio Rubio of Manos Visibles

The Community Movement to Conserve the Cultural Heritage of Manos Visibles

Construction of Links from Cultural and Ancestral Manifestations of Manos Visibles

Aurora Vergara of Manos Visibles

The Union and the Power of the Afro-descendant Collective for Real Change
Abiola Oke of Manos Visibles

WHO IS WHO

Who is Who — Spanish Version:
https://issuu.com/manosvisibles/docs/who_is_who__espan__ol

Who is Who — English Version:
https://issuu.com/manosvisibles/docs/who_is_who_consolidado_en

BROCHURE 1st Meeting

Link Brochure 1st Meeting — Spanish Version:
https://issuu.com/manosvisibles/docs/brochure_afroinnova-2016-5esp

Link Brochure 1st Meeting — English Version:
https://issuu.com/manosvisibles/docs/working_paper_afroinnova_official_1

AFROINNOVO WORK DOCUMENT

Link 1st AfroInnova Working Document — Spanish:
https://issuu.com/manosvisibles/docs/africa_y_su_dia__spora-poder_global

Link 1st AfroInnovo Working Document — English:
https://issuu.com/manosvisibles/docs/africa_and_its_diaspora__a_global_p