

# The Rural–Urban Dialogue Festival: Community initiatives based on Popular Education and Intercultural Dialogue to Defend Territories and Natural–Cultural Heritage in Colombia

*Claudia Gimena Roa Avendaño\**

*Learning is not measured by the number of pages read in a night.  
Nor by the number of books read in a semester.  
To learn is not about consuming ideas;  
it is to create them and to re-create them.*  
(Paulo Freire)

In the spirit of Paulo Freire, the Rural Urban Dialogue Festival (Festival de Expresiones Rurales y Urbanas) held every year since 2010 in the city of Bucaramanga, north-eastern region of Colombia, has set out to share experiences, to retrieve values, to encourage solidarity and self-affirmation and to build collectively towards sustainable livelihoods.



Rural culture as a legacy originates in the locale, because it needs context in which to thrive: the context of people, agriculture, landscape, mountains, forests and the rivers that shape it. In this sense, cultural patrimony and natural patrimony are intertwined. Peasant, fisher-folk, afro-descendent and indigenous peoples are

not only harvesters of basic foods, but when given the opportunity, rural people are bountiful in life-experiences, creativity, mythology and traditional wisdom.

Likewise, although formal education and mass media have isolated the cultural expression of urban people, many youth groups, artists, teachers and social movements are developing initiatives that defend cultural values and promote alternative livelihoods in urban areas that have been inflicted by violence, discrimination and malnutrition.

Hence our Festival seeks to interconnect rural and urban communities who embrace the principles of sustainable and just societies. Moreover, with dominant development models that impose grave impacts on territories (monocrops, agribusiness, mining industries, consumerism, climate change...), these scenarios for collective action and memory are vital for cultural understanding between rural and urban people.



The festival has been held in the urban neighbourhood of La Joya of Bucaramanga, and indeed this is one major achievement: the urban community has taken on a leading role as hosts of the different activities and the rural-urban dialogue process. The festival includes a diversity of events: theatre, music, dance, exhibitions, conferences, panel discussions, video forums, seed exhibits and traditional food banquet, popular food and craft market, as well as artistic events, parades and workshops for children.

The festival, more than a 3 day event, must be seen as part of an ongoing process which seeks to consolidate and build upon the foundations of dialogue. Indeed, many of the participating communities are involved in local marketing schemes, urban agriculture, women's movements, environmental campaigns and a peasant school of agroecology and community forest reserves.

It is important to reflect on this territorial approach, which seeks to defend the commons as an essential part of people's food sovereignty, where rural communities are custodians of seeds, biodiversity, land, water and ancestral culture. Furthermore, as we move ahead to transform our local food systems based on the concept of solidarity between producers and consumers, our vision of territory has extended and come to include new rural-urban linkages (local economies, nutrition, traditional gastronomy).



The festival has demonstrated the potential of culture, diversity and participatory learning for change, as a source of inspiration, so that individuals, institutions and communities can implement their proposals for sustainable livelihoods based on the concept of ‘Buen Vivir Good Living’. It encourages dialogue and interaction within diverse social groups and institutions in urban and rural settings:

- Peasant, fisher-folk, afro-descendent and indigenous peoples
- Youth, women, urban neighbourhoods, students and teachers
- Artists, cultural activists and musicians
- Community media organizations (radio, newspapers and TV)
- Universities, local governments and public authorities



As the political, environmental and social conflicts in our country continue, and the Colombian government pursues an extractive model of development, a

strengthened and informed civil society will be crucial in the defence of natural and cultural heritage. We are sure that the festival, and the many processes that feed in and out of it, demonstrate the importance of creating and re-creating, based on shared understanding and collective action.

**Video-documentary on the Rural Urban Festival (Spanish, 21 min):**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ma7HBBU3Sak>

**Video-clip on the Rural Urban Festival (English, 4 min):**

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TEEccEYZX8M>

---

*Claudia Gimena Roa Avendaño* is Director of Fundaexpresion, an intercultural, educational and environmentalist NGO in Colombia that works with peasant farmers, women's and youth groups and participate in networks and campaigns on issues of biodiversity, women and climate justice.

You can view her complete profile and the organisation she is associated with at: [http://www.learn2change-network.org/?About\\_Us\\_\\_Our\\_Network\\_\\_Activists#anker\\_clgi](http://www.learn2change-network.org/?About_Us__Our_Network__Activists#anker_clgi)