The COP 16 in Cali: a hybrid forum for collective education and intercultural dialogue

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The 2024 COP 16 held in Cali, Colombia, emerged not only as a pivotal event in the global response to the biodiversity crisis but also as a transformative pedagogical space. In the context of the Anthropocene—a proposed geological epoch defined by profound human impact on the Earth's systems—COP 16 served as a hybrid forum, convening scientists, indigenous communities, policymakers, activists, artists, and educators. These actors came together not only to negotiate international biodiversity targets but to engage in collective learning, critical dialogue, and contested meaning-making. This paper argues that the dialogic educational dimensions of COP 16 warrant deeper exploration, particularly as they illuminate emergent forms of governance and epistemic plurality in environmental politics.

Rethinking dialogue: beyond participation

While the conference featured formal plenary sessions and negotiated outcomes under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the more transformative pedagogical practices occurred in unofficial and semi-official spaces—side events, roundtables, artistic interventions, and grassroots assemblies. Drawing from Paulo Freire's concept of dialogue as a liberatory practice rooted in mutual recognition and critical reflection, COP 16 can be seen as a living laboratory for what Santos calls an "ecology of knowledges"—a space where modern scientific epistemologies encounter and contend with indigenous, Afro-descendant, and local knowledges in asymmetrical but generative ways (Freire, 1970; Santos, 2014).

In this sense, the conference represented a shift from monologic transmission of information to dialogic co-construction of meaning. The presence of multiple ontologies— ways of being and relating to the more-than-human world—challenged the assumption that biodiversity governance should be grounded solely in technocratic expertise. For instance, the Arhuaco people from the Sierra Nevada de Santa Marta have been emphasizing their millennial relational practices with sacred landscapes, inviting other actors to reconsider conservation as a spiritual and territorial commitment rather than merely a scientific imperative (Escobar, 2008). Such engagements underscored the tensions and possibilities in hybrid forums where knowledge is not only exchanged but contested.

Conflict, contradiction, and collective learning

Dialogic education in the context of COP 16 was not characterized by consensus but by negotiation. This is consistent with Callon's, Lascoumes and Barthe (2009) theorization of hybrid forums as spaces where conflicting actors collectively address

uncertain and controversial issues. The tensions at COP 16—between conservation and development, local autonomy and global governance, ancestral rights and financial mechanisms—surfaced in discussions around biodiversity credits, land access, and benefit-sharing frameworks. The dialogue at COP 16, therefore, was not fully harmonious. Rather, it reflected the agonistic nature of democratic deliberation, as articulated by Mouffe (2000), where adversaries engage from divergent worldviews without erasing conflict. This perspective moves us beyond a naïve celebration of inclusion and urges a recognition of power imbalances that shape who speaks, who listens, and whose knowledge counts. For example, while indigenous leaders were given platforms to share their views, many noted the performative nature of their inclusion in high-level negotiations, where decisions remained largely technocratic and state-driven. Yet, these actors also subverted such dynamics through parallel dialogues and transnational solidarity networks formed during the conference.

Colombia as a stage: geopolitics and image-making

COP 16 also functioned as a symbolic stage for specific Colombian actors to reframe the country's geopolitical image on the international stage. The Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development, under the leadership of Minister Susana Muhamad, orchestrated much of the public narrative around the event. By positioning Colombia as a "megadiverse" country committed to environmental stewardship, the Ministry emphasized national leadership in biodiversity governance under the post-2020 Global Biodiversity Framework. The official slogan—"Peace with Nature"—reflected an effort to link Colombia's environmental agenda to its broader aspirations of post-conflict reconciliation and ecological transition.

This narrative was reinforced by presidential authorities, including the Administrative Department of the Presidency (DAPRE), which emphasized public-private coordination and Colombia's readiness to attract sustainable investment. At the local level, the Mayor's Office of Cali and the Governor's Office of Valle del Cauca actively promoted the region as an epicenter of ecological and cultural richness, aligning themselves with national messaging around green development and global visibility.

In parallel, Colombian business actors and international investors participating in the COP 16 Business and Biodiversity Forum echoed this positioning, presenting Colombia as a competitive and governable site for biodiversity markets and nature-based solutions. These efforts sought to rebrand the country not only as a custodian of global ecological patrimony but also as an emerging node in the global green economy.

However, this state-led image-making belied deeper structural contradictions. Despite its performative commitment to sustainability, Colombia's environmental governance remains interwoven with extractive industries, uneven land governance, and persistent social-environmental conflicts. The deployment of ecological imagery and discourses of investment risks reproducing colonial tropes—particularly the portrayal of Colombia as a natural "El Dorado," simultaneously rich and unruly. As noted by Ojeda (2012), this dual imaginary enables external

intervention and market integration while marginalizing local sovereignty and alternative ecological worldviews. Thus, while COP 16 offered Colombia a platform to recast its international image, it also revealed the tensions between geopolitical branding and the enduring legacies of territorial inequality and environmental contradiction.

Dialogic education as praxis for biodiversity governance

The dialogic practices at COP 16 were not only discursive but pedagogical and political. These spaces emerged through a hybrid configuration of official design and grassroots initiative. Some dialogues—such as youth assemblies, intercultural panels, and feminist ecological forums—were formally organized by the Colombian Ministry of Environment and allied institutions. However, a significant number of dialogic encounters took place in parallel and unofficial zones, particularly the "Green Zone" and the People's COP, which brought together over 700,000 participants and hosted more than 1,100 cultural and academic events, according to official bulletins and local reporting.

This hybrid configuration reflects a negotiated infrastructure of participation, where institutional actors opened space for dialogue, but much of its vitality and critical edge came from grassroots movements, Indigenous delegations, youth collectives, and artists, who reappropriated the conference as a living pedagogical process.

The field of political ecology and environmental justice—especially in Latin America—has long been shaped by pluriversal commitments, grounded in Indigenous cosmopolitics, Afro-descendant territorial struggles, and feminist ecologies (Escobar, 2008; Blaser, 2010; de la Cadena and Blaser, 2018). However, multilateral environmental summits like those under the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) tend to marginalize these ontologies, favoring technocratic, universalist modes of negotiation. In this context, COP 16 marked a partial shift, temporarily amplifying epistemic diversity and ontological critique within an otherwise modernist architecture.

The educational processes observed were not one-directional. While activists from Amazonian territories, the Colombian Pacific, and other frontline regions offered critical analyses of biodiversity financialization, these interventions were not merely oppositional—they became pedagogical vectors for broader epistemic reflection. Many participants—including scientists, bureaucrats, and development professionals—experienced what Mezirow (1997) terms transformative learning, moments in which their assumptions were challenged and reoriented through affective and cognitive dissonance.

These shifts were particularly visible in engagements that defied the conventions of expert rationalism: ritual performances, cosmopolitical storytelling, land-based testimonies, and artistic interventions. For some state and institutional actors, these encounters triggered what Lotz-Sisitka et al. (2015) describe as transgressive learning—learning that dislodges normalized patterns and opens paths for institutional unlearning.

Still, we acknowledge that this epistemic movement was uneven. As the reviewer notes, many of the most visible

transformations occurred among those already working from non-mainstream or community-rooted knowledge systems. This does not mean that institutional actors were unmoved; rather, their shifts were often quieter, partial, or mediated through discomfort and uncertainty. The learning was mutual, but asymmetrical. The dialogic pedagogy of COP 16 thus resided not in the resolution of ontological conflict, but in its capacity to be inhabited as a condition of governance.

While many of these dynamics faded from the official record after the conference's close, the pedagogical residues endure—inscribed in relationships, networks, and new commitments that continue to challenge the universalist norms of global environmental governance.

Investment, equity, and political agency

One of the most contentious threads in the COP 16 dialogue was the role of investment in biodiversity conservation. While public-private partnerships were celebrated as essential to bridging the finance gap, local actors warned of the risks of green grabbing—where conservation initiatives lead to land dispossession, particularly for indigenous and Afro-Colombian communities (Fairhead et al., 2012). The dialogue around investments illuminated a critical tension: can environmental finance be democratized, or does it inherently reproduce extractive relationships under a green guise (see for example Balán, 2023).

Educational interventions at COP 16 aimed to address this question by equipping communities with tools to critically evaluate and negotiate investment proposals. Workshops on environmental law, participatory mapping, and community protocols helped assert local agency. These initiatives align with critical pedagogy's goal of fostering *conscientização*—awareness of structural inequalities and the capacity to act against them (Freire, 1970). The pedagogical work of COP 16, therefore, extended beyond knowledge transmission to the cultivation of political agency.

Toward a politics of coexistence

As COP 16 concluded, its legacy lies not only in policy declarations but in the affective and epistemic infrastructures it helped build. The hybrid forum convened in Cali modeled an alternative mode of global environmental governance—one grounded in polyphony, reflexivity, and mutual care. Yet, its potential will only be realized if the dialogic spirit it fostered continues in concrete practices of solidarity, knowledge-sharing, and co-resistance.

Future biodiversity governance must institutionalize such dialogic spaces, not as symbolic gestures but as integral to decision-making. This includes expanding community-led monitoring, embedding intercultural education in environmental policy, and ensuring that dialogues do not end when the conferences do. The Anthropocene demands not only new technologies and financial instruments but new forms of listening, learning, and living together.

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