

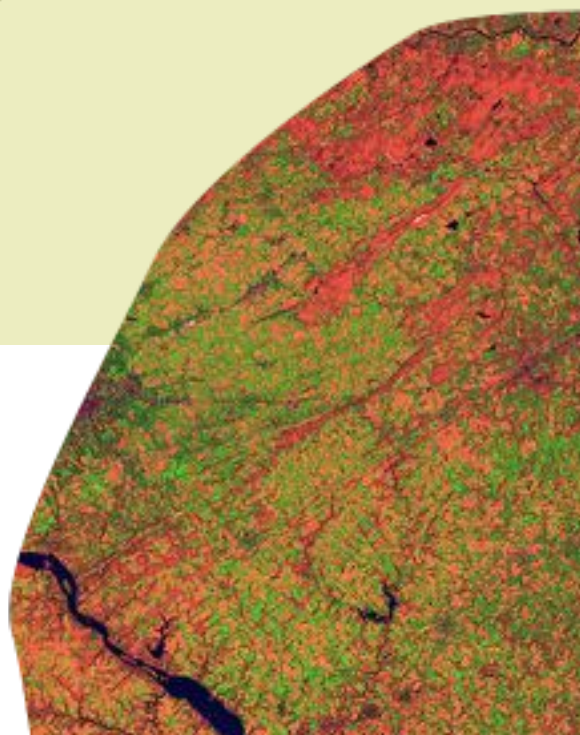
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**Occupy Climate
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*Grassroots initiatives
entry*



FORMAS





Children from the afterschool program at El Rincón del Saber in Cambalache (Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela) preparing a play. Photo credit: the author.

El Rincón del Saber: How Children’s Rights Can Foster Climate and Environmental Justice

Pedro Monque

Where is this grassroots initiative implemented? Who are the promoters? Who are the beneficiaries?

El Rincón del Saber [The Knowledge Corner] is a grassroots educational initiative led by Andreina Guarisma in the neighborhood of Cambalache (Ciudad Guayana, Venezuela). Ciudad Guayana was established in 1961 to host large steel and aluminum industries that would become Venezuela’s insurance against oil export dependency. Cambalache, on the other hand, was not meant to exist. City planners in the 1960s designated the northwestern part of the city as an industrial zone, adjacent to the Orinoco River for easy riverine transport of imports and exports. At the time,

Cambalache was populated by a few families that sold fish and vegetables to the early workers of the Orinoco Mining Company's steel mill. As the city grew, the regional development corporation "CVG" attempted many times to evict the people of Cambalache, but enough of them stayed put so that, as the new city grew, so did Cambalache. Over time, Cambalache became a hotspot of environmental injustices, from the draining of bountiful lagoons to host bauxite residue in 1979, to the installment of an open dump that served as the city's main waste disposal site from 1985 until protests by Cambalache residents in 2014 managed to shut it down. More recently, the people of Cambalache have turned things around, building an aqueduct in 2020 that delivers probably the best water in the city.



Picture of red mud pool nearest to Cambalache (below). Photo credit: the author.

It is within this context of struggle that El Rincón del Saber was born. The initial impetus came from Andreina's concern that most children in the community lack internet access at home, and there is no library where they might do their homework. With the help of a local nonprofit, [Buscadores de Libros](#), she turned her living room into a community library in early 2022. By May, Andreina and the author of this note began running an afterschool program in the front porch. The initiative has since grown, incorporating new teachers and an environmental education component

centered on gardening. Because of Cambalache's agricultural origins, El Rincón aims to instill in children a sense of pride in their community by teaching them how to grow their own food, compost, and raise animals. Yet, the cost and dedication needed to run a garden has limited its success, especially because it competes with reading, writing, math, and recreational activities.

How does this initiative engage with climate?

El Rincón del Saber engages the climate crisis indirectly at this stage, mainly through its twin goals of promoting food sovereignty by promoting gardening, and by developing children's commitment to environmental caretaking. I, the author of this entry, am a close collaborator of Andreina on this initiative. Because I am in charge of programming for the afterschool program, it is my aspiration that we will deepen the environmental theme so that climate change is tackled directly. So far, our focus has been on environmental caretaking, which we incorporate into reading, writing, and math activities. Because the children of Cambalache grow up in close contact with a diversity of animals and plants, as well as the impressive Orinoco River, stories about people's relationships to animals and trees work well for group discussion. We also use the plants at El Rincón to illustrate mathematical principles (for example, the notion of the average by counting flower petals). However, we have not yet had sustained discussions on climate change in the afterschool program. When climate change does surface, it is either as a way to convey the importance of food sovereignty to the city (a mid-term goal), or as a possible strategy to find allies and funding for the initiative (more of a short-term goal).



Children from El Rincón del Saber sowing (left). Deliannys shares a story she wrote (right). Photo credit: the author.

To an outsider, it might seem that climate change is a relatively low priority for impoverished communities with more urgent needs. Admittedly, most of our regular work on El Rincón does not mention the issue of climate change explicitly. Yet, when asked, Andreina claims that climate change is an extremely important issue. As a resident of Cambalache, Andreina has a strong sense of the consequences of pollution and environmental injustice on human life. She is aware that greenhouse gases are changing our climate and worries about local effects, such as changes in rain patterns, as well as the disasters reported in the news. So, if we take a more expansive view of what it means to be concerned about climate change, El Rincón del Saber's focus on food sovereignty, environmental injustice, and active environmental citizenship can be seen as a contribution to climate justice and its toolbox.¹

Throughout the Occupy Climate Change! 2023 Winter School, the idea of grounding climate struggle in local realities, of making it about more than planetary-level greenhouse gas emissions, was central. Whereas climate science has accurately diagnosed the main consequences of

¹ I thank Hanna Musiol for raising this point.

increasing global temperature, a key challenge remains to link climate disruption to local livelihoods and basic institutions like education, childrearing, and food—especially in the global south, where communities have little influence over key polluters or climate policy (at least for now). Yet, as Kyle Whyte (2017) has argued, climate disruption is not an unprecedented crisis for indigenous peoples and others who have felt the impacts of environmental racism, so the way that these communities respond to the environmental crisis can teach us something about what kinds of adaptations are important, even after granting that they are severely constrained by other urgent problems, and that they too have stuff to learn.

At the same time, I find it important to recognize that much more needs to be done to integrate the full insights afforded by a climate perspective to the work of El Rincón del Saber. In the first place, Andreina, like most people in Ciudad Guayana (including myself), has only a vague sense of what to expect locally from climate change. Moreover, none of the collaborators is particularly aware of the broader discussions on climate, the costs of a corporate energy transition, or the broader environmental crisis, happening at both the Latin American and global levels. A greater awareness of this topic could help make the case for Cambalache's importance as a source of food and agricultural knowledge for the entire city, which is hardly recognized because local food production is not taken to be important by most people. So, in addition to the work of developing incipient models of small-scale food production that could be replicated in the rest of Ciudad Guayana, Cambalache could help enact a deep cultural transformation that would change nothing less than the meaning of rightful residence in this industrial city through the act of growing food. El Rincón del Saber could play an important role in this transformation, but it will need to develop its political reading of our current situation and communicate its vision effectively to potential allies.

In sum, Andreina has expressed a commitment to aligning actions that address immediate needs (like malnutrition and educational deficits) with those that would make Cambalache and Ciudad Guayana more resilient in the face of climate change. I therefore see considerable potential in this initiative to become a locus of climate and environmental justice action in a city where few organizations address these issues. Yet, achieving this goal will require ongoing support from people and movements devoted to climate justice who can orient Andreina and her collaborators.

Moreover, sustained funding for initiatives connected to climate and environmental justice seems crucial if those dimensions of the initiative are to consolidate. One of the most promising directions for linking current priorities in Cambalache with climate change is through the theme of food sovereignty since both Cambalache residents and the larger city of Ciudad Guayana would benefit greatly from local food production.

What are the main objectives? What are the main values?

El Rincón del Saber's immediate aim is to enhance Cambalache children's wellbeing through educational and recreational activities. Particular attention is paid to children suffering abuse or neglect, which are themselves the consequence of broader economic and social injustices that have defined Ciudad Guayana for decades.² At the same time, there is a broader social and environmental vision animating the whole initiative, which Andreina describes in this way:

I started working for an NGO called Alinca in Cambalache. We would give talks to families about gender-based violence and positive parenting. We were surprised when we entered the homes and immediately observed the violence of the parents towards the children. That motivated me to continue my work with more strength. Not only to go investigate and make a report, but to take action so that the children of the community could recover values like respect for themselves and others.

Here, people can be very rude and intolerant. They struggle to accept people as they are and love them that way. That's why I am how I am: I'm a humble person who isn't looking for defects in others, because everyone has their defects and virtues. And I love everyone, okay! [She laughs]. I'm a person with a lot of love. And that's what we have to instill in children one way or another: that they accept people as they are. That they cannot bully others just because they are not like me, of the same social class, or because the other person is black and I am white. Those things should not exist in children.

The reality is that there is an enormous task to undertake in the community, and those of us who live here can see that better. In my three years with the community promoters at Alinca, we would get sick from being in the sun and rain so much, diving into the heart of the community's issues. Now I have my own space to transform those situations I saw. Look, here I am, supervising the construction of this roof and a new bathroom so the project can continue growing. Here again I have to thank Mariela for having found the resources, and I remain hopeful that other organizations, like Alinca itself, will be encouraged to actively support El Rincón del Saber...

² For an illuminating history of socioeconomic inequality in Ciudad Guayana since its beginnings, see Peattie 1968 and 1987. For the specific case of Cambalache, see Ponce 2004, Blanco and Moncrieff 2012, and Observatorio de Ecología Política de Venezuela 2018.

I would like to see in the future that the children of Cambalache... as well as other children who join, become professionals. It would make me proud to see them develop into whatever they want to be: athletes, engineers, farmers, fishermen, whatever they want, but that they are trained and develop their abilities to the fullest. And then that they become spokespersons for other children. That the project does not stay just with them, but that they change their way of thinking and also join in the rescue of values.

The people in Cambalache have been taking up farming, fishing too, but especially farming. People are growing their own food: all kinds of vegetables and fruit trees. I wouldn't trade this for a house in the city. Here I feel free, without pollution, even though people say it's polluted.

This area really is coveted by city people, and sometimes we don't realize the wealth we have here in the community. We have the river nearby that could become a tourist area. We have vast stretches of land to grow whatever you want, and even to raise animals for food and sale. We have the fishermen.

I am in love with Cambalache and would never think of returning to San Félix [the eastern half of Ciudad Guayana]. I spent 13 years there and I've been here for 25 years already! (Monque 2024, 59)

In addition to the educational and wellbeing goals of the program, I would highlight that its environmental themes arise organically from the semi-rural character of Cambalache. As mentioned earlier, the people of Cambalache are engaged in a struggle to redefine the meaning of the place: from landfill to riverside garden, from classist associations with poverty and ignorance to agroecological abundance and expertise.

One of the key challenges for Cambalache to overcome is its association with waste. As Marco Armiero explains: "some people and places have been transformed into dumping sites, sacrifice zones for the well-being of others and the purported common good of the nation" (2021b, 427), and, elsewhere, "Waste as a relation (wasting) produces the targeted community rather than solely selecting it as the ideal place for an unwanted facility" (2021a, 2). In other words, racist ideologies *produce* sacrifice zones while justifying their ills or blaming the victims. Recognizing this, many in Cambalache take fostering local pride and a strong sense of belonging as a crucial precondition for creating a culture of caretaking. For Andreina, whose family used to work recycling materials from the landfill, a personal sense of pride and self-worth is fundamental to recognize the proper value of recycling and growing food, activities that have traditionally been associated with poverty

but should not be. So it seems that the human and ecological wasting of contemporary capitalism can be fought, at least to an extent, by community-level processes of revalorizing place and questioning racist framings of the good life.

In my view, Andreina's initiative exemplifies how place-based attachment can harmonize social and environmental values. (This kind of place-based politics is being called elsewhere in Latin America *la defensa de los territorios* or the "defense of [subnational] territories.") It is my hope that El Rincón's approach to environmental education—through composting, recycling, growing food, and raising animals—eventually gives rise to sustained discussions and programming on environmental injustice and climate justice for Cambalache and the entire city. I believe that the people of Cambalache, including the children, have a lot to say about how to tackle climate and environmental justice in the area. However, there is still a need for spaces (educational, artistic, literary) where the Cambalache perspective can solidify.



Andreina Guarisma teaching drawing to the youngest students, and new teacher Yajaira Moreno in the back teaching Spanish to the older students. Photo credit: the author.

What is the timeline? Are there already visible effects?

The initiative began in early 2022, with the afterschool program beginning in May. Our curriculum has developed considerably since the start. At first, I would read environmentally-themed stories to the children and followed with philosophical discussion about them: the ethics of relating to other animals, the value of life and diversity, etc. We also made a point of including games that foster teamwork. The next addition was mathematics education linked to practical tasks, like counting plants and distributing garden plots to grow different things. Then we started growing things with the children. The plan is to start teaching how to cook with the food they grow and how to raise a variety of animals. Andreina raises rabbits and wants to build a chicken coop, and I have proposed developing vermiculture to sell worm humus. After an exchange in June 2023 with Atilano Azuaje, the leader of an agroforestry program called La Cosecha in Santa Elena de Uairén (a town about six hundred kilometers south of Ciudad Guayana), we discussed the possibility of taking the kids there for a visit. El Rincón is eager to form networks with other food sovereignty projects.

According to Andreina, the most important change has been in children's attitude: they seem happier and treat each other more respectfully and kindly. They have also improved in reading, writing and math, and they stay fully engaged during lessons. Sometimes they leave us in shock. One day they were begging for an extra day of afterschool that week, so I announced solemnly that I could only return the following day if we had a math day. They jumped in joy, screaming "yaaaay, math!" More recently, however, attendance has fluctuated. I have had to suspend my weekly visits to focus on dissertation writing, but the explanation shared by current teachers is that this is in part because of some children's work responsibilities (e.g., in street recycling or "trash picking", landscaping) to bring an income home, but also due to the natural ups and downs in interest. We believe that a stronger recreational component and an income for teachers would allow El Rincón to organize events with the families that could make attendance more consistent.

After the children and their families, the ones who have benefitted the most from this program are certainly Andreina and me. Andreina has grown more confident in her leadership and has been

interviewed about her initiative at local radio stations, a local magazine, and was featured in a documentary. I have learned a lot about the community's valuation of nature and their struggles for environmental justice. The next sphere of influence has been on visitors to the program who have been inspired in different ways. We are currently cultivating relationships to local food producers in the Bicentenario area of Cambalache, and with other community organizations. As these relationships strengthen, we hope for the program to become a referent on children's rights, food sovereignty, and environmental education for the city.

Who are the actors involved? What are their backgrounds?

The initiative's leader is Andreina Guarisma. She is a mother of two and used to work as a health promoter for a local NGO. Before that, she used to work in urban waste recycling alongside her parents and siblings. Currently, Andreina works informally from home and cannot take a job in the city without forgoing care for her younger daughter.

Mariela Mendoza has collaborated with Andreina for years on a sister project, Juntos Hacemos la Diferencia, that brings youth from Cambalache into the city for educational activities. Mariela directs her own small nonprofit, Buscadores de Libros, which promotes reading by, among other things, helping create small community libraries like the one that got El Rincón del Saber started. Mariela is the main force behind material improvements, such as the roof on Andreina's front porch to hold activities there.

Yajaira Moreno, Alvis Fuenmayor and Frank Lara are the new teachers. Yajaira is a local resident of Cambalache, she has teaching experience and superb organizational skills because of her work keeping the tabs at a well-known restaurant in front of the Orinoco River. Andreina hopes that collaborating with another woman from the community will help consolidate the initiative and provide crucial emotional support. Alvis is from the city center, in his twenties, and is passionate about sharing his love for poetry and literature with the children. Frank, the newest addition, is an enthusiastic college student doing a community service project required by Venezuelan universities.

I, Pedro Monque, have been curriculum coordinator and teacher. While Andreina works with the children under 6 years old, I work with the older ones. In addition to curricular planning, I seek partnerships with other organizations. I participate in this initiative while finishing a Ph.D. in Philosophy at the CUNY Graduate Center. My research focuses on environmental philosophy in connection to issues like racism, sexism, LGBTQ oppression, and colonialism. I am also part of Latin American educational collectives like Jóvenes sin Tabú and Empoderando a Latinoamérica.



Andreina Guarisma and the author. Photo credit: Andrismar Vivas (Andreina's daughter).

Which limits (institutional, physical, social, etc.) does it encounter?

By far, the greatest limitation we face is lack of funding. The initiative is run entirely on volunteer labor. For Andreina, especially, it would be transformative to receive a monthly income that

allowed her to devote herself more fully to the initiative. Andreina's household makes around 100 USD a month in a country where covering basic needs for a family of four easily exceeds 500 USD a month. Given Andreina's precarious economic situation, the fact that this initiative exists at all is remarkable.

We have also had difficulties finding teachers from the community, as well as enlisting active parental support for the initiative. Because the initiative specifically targets vulnerable children, parents often do not have the time or emotional wellbeing necessary to help. At a personal level, Andreina's reliance on my support and my own lack of time have made progress slower than we would desire. However, the addition of Yajaira, Alvis and Frank have been transformative for the project, and we are all working on diversifying Andreina's support network.

Despite these financial and institutional difficulties, we have found many groups willing to collaborate. Local farmers from the Bicentenario area of Cambalache are open to visits and sharing their knowledge. A volunteer group from the city, [Arepa Sonrisa](#), has visited to do recreational activities and share a meal. Atilano Azuaje, the leader of La Cosecha, has offered his help and counsel. The local mining company, Minera Volcán, has agreed to supply construction materials. Pediatricians from the city have volunteered medical services. My guess is that, after surmounting the relatively modest goal of funding Andreina so that she can fully commit to directing the initiative, many opportunities for deeper collaboration with local actors will open up.

Our vision for this initiative is to progressively realize the following goals:

1. To secure financial compensation for Andreina and extra teachers so that the afterschool program runs at least three days a week.
2. To consolidate a work team for the initiative that includes Andreina, afterschool teachers, and special collaborators.
3. To start providing a meal at the afterschool program, and to source this meal as much as possible from our garden and local producers.
4. To include cooking classes as part of our afterschool programming.

5. To strengthen our environmental education component by including site visits and environmental monitoring as part of our afterschool program. We would visit local farmers, fishermen, the aqueduct, restaurants, local mining and recycling companies, the landfill, the bauxite residue waste site, and, especially, the Orinoco River and local lagoons where we want the children to learn how to test for water quality.
6. To have bicycles that allow us to do site visits during the afterschool programs since distances are too long to travel on foot.
7. To host more educational events on environmental issues (and other project-relevant issues such as nutrition or gender-based violence) for the community of Cambalache and the city.
8. To get networked to other food sovereignty initiatives, especially those linked to cultural (re)valorization like La Cosecha, and to go on site visits and receive visitors.
9. To become a referent on children's rights, food sovereignty, and environmental education for the city and region.
10. To thereby become a leading voice in the fight for climate justice at the city level by highlighting strategies for mitigation and adaptation that simultaneously address histories of injustice and urgent social needs.

Are any shortcomings or critical points visible? What other problematic issues can arise from its implementation?

This initiative's greatest challenge is balancing short-term needs for education, nutrition, and health with longer-term environmental goals, such as strengthening food sovereignty in the area and addressing climate justice at greater scales. Our conviction is that the more ambitious environmental goals represent structural solutions (even if partial) to the urgent needs that got the initiative going in the first place. However, striking a balance between the short-term and the longer-term is difficult even when their interconnectedness is recognized.

I do not think that this initiative is likely to have problematic effects. Rather, where it may fail is in fully developing its climate and environmental justice orientation. The children's immediate needs are enough to keep the initiative busy while sidelining considerations of climate justice. Also, most anti-poverty work in the region fails to address root causes and ignores issues of

environmental justice. Yet, to me, the focus on climate justice makes sense precisely because the initiative works with children.

If this initiative is to consolidate its climate justice orientation, it will need committed local collaborators who are knowledgeable about climate change and environmental justice. It will also need sustained funding from organizations that sponsor climate justice-based initiatives, and such funding will need to be offered alongside climate justice training for the recipients.

How would it be potentially replicable in other settings?

This initiative is replicable in any place where community gardening is viable. More than any specific activities, what characterizes this initiative is its being based on the struggles and potentialities of the place.

The greatest lesson to draw from El Rincón is that environmental goals must be harmonized with immediate human needs at the local level, especially when working in areas subjected to marginalization and impoverishment. Discovering the links between some local reality and climate change takes time. It has taken time to connect the dots from children's wellbeing to climate justice. Indeed, only time will show how (or if) climate justice organically becomes a core element of this initiative over the years. My bet is that it will, and that the passing of time will only make climate change more pressing for El Rincón.

Another key lesson is the importance of local leadership in developing an organic interest in climate justice. Especially in impoverished communities, it is often the case that projects are executed while ignoring the agency or existing concerns of beneficiaries. Likewise, communities will often accept aid on strategic terms without identifying with broader goals. This means that projects whose goal may be to address climate change while targeting a local need (for example, planting fruit trees) might be executed by a community without thereby creating any deeper awareness of the climate crisis. So, fostering an interest in climate justice on the part of local leaders in places where such issues are not salient takes time and effort. In my opinion, there is no substitute to providing thoughtful support to an initiative for an extended period of time and

helping trace the connections between existing concerns and climate change. Many aspects of the climate crisis require zooming out from a local perspective, so local leaders can really benefit from the point of view of solidary outsiders.

Is this initiative conducive to broader changes (law, institutional arrangements, long-term sustainability or community preparedness, etc.)? If yes, which?

This initiative's most immediate effect would be on community preparedness to climate change. A considerable amount of the food consumed in the city is produced outside of the region, and climate change is expected to damage Venezuelan agricultural production, so promoting food sovereignty would increase the resiliency of the community of Cambalache to food shortages. Because Cambalache is currently zoned as an industrial area, this initiative could support local farmers in achieving a re-zoning of the area, especially if El Rincón serves as the educational and planning hub for such a campaign. The re-zoning idea emerged during a tour of Cambalache I organized as part of [a public environmental philosophy seminar for Ciudad Guayana I gave in the spring of 2023](#).

More ambitiously, we hope that El Rincón can support broader transformations in Cambalache, such as the establishment of a farmer's market, the creation of artisanal food processing industries, and the development of Cambalache's touristic potential as a site for river tourism, water sports, and mountain biking. The stumbling block for these projects is not just money and classism or racism but a lack of community cohesion in Cambalache that El Rincón del Saber aims to ameliorate.

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