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Maíra Irigaray

*Amazon Watch*

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## “Killing a People Little by Little”: Belo Monte, Human Rights and the Myth of Clean Energy

**Maíra Irigaray**  
Amazon Watch

*I was there to see with my own eyes the destruction; the disrespect.  
Not in a million years I would wish that for Mother Nature; much less for human beings...*

### Introduction

Talking about Belo Monte is not an easy task. After having spent three years of intense work to understand this project and fight to preserve the Xingu River, I can only ask that you read this with no pre-conceived notions. I am not an extremist environmentalist. I am a lawyer with a Masters degree focused in human and environmental rights, currently working as a campaigner to try to avoid what I would surely consider one of the biggest disasters in the history of the Amazon Rainforest of all time (Figure 1).



**Figure 1.** Photo taken during fly over of the Belo Monte Dam sites. (credit: Maíra Irigaray)

The Xingu River basin is one of the most unique, diverse and beautiful places I have ever had a chance to visit. It is home to 25,000 indigenous people from 40 ethnic groups. The

Xingu flows north 2,271 kilometers from the central savanna region of Mato Grosso to the Amazon River<sup>1</sup>. The Belo Monte Dam is not just a dam. It is the “gateway” to the heart of the Amazon and it will set a precedent on how development projects take place. If this precedent is good or not, it will depend on how and if we can change the history that has been written for the Amazon and its people.

In a nutshell, the Belo Monte Dam is the world’s third largest hydroelectric dam, being built on the Xingu River in the heart of the Brazilian Amazon. It will divert 80% of Xingu’s flow, devastating an area of over 1,500 square kilometers of rainforest, displacing up to 40,000 people<sup>1</sup>. The project’s definitive installation license was approved in June of 2011, moving the project into an accelerated construction phase that continues to this day. The dam complex is expected to begin operating at partial capacity in 2014 and in full capacity in 2019. To date, innumerable protests and occupations have changed those dates, making it harder for the building consortium, Norte Energia, to keep up with its agenda.

Historically, this project stems from the era of Brazil’s military dictatorship. Known then as the *Kararaó* Complex, it was redesigned and revived in 2003 by the Lula administration and approved by the Brazilian Congress in 2005. Legal and political controversies have surrounded the push to build this dam, including inadequate environmental impact assessment and failure to implement mitigation plans to protect the environment and rights of affected communities. The authorization of Belo Monte by Brazil’s National Congress through Legislative Decree 788/2005<sup>2</sup> violated the right to free, prior, and informed consent guaranteed to indigenous peoples who are affected by the project<sup>3</sup>.

Belo Monte will cost over US\$16 billion (R\$30 billion) with 80% of the project being financed by the Brazilian National Development Bank, BNDES. It is the biggest financed project in the history of the bank using mostly taxpayer money without transparency, no socio-environmental safeguards, and lack of a monitoring program upon which to base their decision. In fact, even though BNDES received a number of extra-judicial notifications and letters about the violations of human rights and environmental impacts to be caused by the Belo Monte Dam, as well as finance reports stating that it was not a good investment, they moved ahead with the loan, completely ignoring civil society’s claims.

### **Impacts on Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Populations**

The impacts of this project on indigenous populations are immeasurable. Around one thousand indigenous people, from different communities including the Arara, Juruna, and the Xikrin are already being affected, although the project does not consider them as being “directly impacted” because their lands won’t be flooded.

The company’s unethical strategy of “buying off” communities has led to a visible increase in alcoholism, cultural disintegration, internal divisions, and many cases of depression, as described by Sheyla Juruna from the Juruna People (Figure 2):

I feel dead inside today when I look around my community and I see what I see. It makes me so sad and angry that I think I need a medical treatment. Norte Energia came, and because they couldn’t “buy me off,” they made promises to my cousin that took the leadership from me, and got a truck instead, so he could stay quiet. There is no more community here. Alcoholism took over, and the people never really got anything from Norte Energia, yet they say nothing. It hurts to see the destruction of the people I have fought so long to preserve.



**Figure 2.** Sheyla Juruna at the National Indigenous Mobilization prior to World Cup holding a ball with the following words "demarcation; respect; rights". Credit: Máira Irigaray

Because they have received food packages as mitigation procedures, most of the indigenous communities stopped producing food, and now find it difficult to live without relying on the government or the company. Another problem is the number of human rights abuses and death threats by land invaders such as illegal loggers, migrant workers, and land speculators.

Leoncio Arara, one of the elders and leader of the Arara People (the closest indigenous community to the dam) stated:

“The river was always prosperous until Belo Monte arrived. Since Norte Energia appeared, everything changed for the worse. Alcoholism and “laziness” has grown among our people. As the company has provided us with free food, our people have no drive to produce their own food anymore. Additionally, because of the food that they give at the indigenous center, no one wants to stay in the village. Our people have become very weak because of the movement of things, industrial foods, and boats. Boats are good [for transport], if ‘we’ have the river, they are good, but when the river ends? We will lose our road. How will we move when they close the river?”

Sadly, Leoncio is right. With the closure of the river, a huge portion of the Xingu will dry up to 80%. Because the river is full of big stones, it will be impossible to navigate, isolating communities like the Arara, or the Juruna from the world. In all tribes I have visited, the opinion is mostly the same. They see Belo Monte as a great disaster that came to destroy indigenous populations. Leôncio Arara states that “Belo Monte is a tragedy. Looks like a fire that came and burned everything down. It brings me great sadness to see everything that was alive before, now dying. I don’t know about the future but I’m sure things will get worse. Our grandchildren are the ones that will feel the real impacts.” Likewise, Sheyla Juruna calls Belo Monte “a major cancer in our Xingu, which is consuming and slowly destroying our people. There is nothing worse than killing a people while they are alive; to kill them little by little.”

In addition to the serious impacts on indigenous populations, Belo Monte is also causing diverse negative social impacts in its surroundings, including forced displacement, a

spike in criminal activities, and the collapse in health, education, and sanitation infrastructure in the city of Altamira<sup>3</sup>. The moral damages as well as economic, social, cultural, and environmental losses that have already begun to affect these communities were not measured in advance, nor within the adequate standards required for social and environmental impact assessments that the companies would be legally obliged to provide.

For traditional populations such as fisherman, the case becomes even more complicated. Despite of the indisputable impacts upon fish populations, Norte Energia does not recognize this area as having been affected. The situation for the fisherman is so serious that some of them went from fishing 500 kilos of fish a week to importing them from other regions because nowadays they catch as little as 5 kilos a week. As the fisherwoman Maria das Graças from Altamira states:

They say on the television that they want a Brazil free from misery. How can they say that when what they are doing is exactly the opposite? Taking me away from my home where I have built my history and not knowing where I will go: that is misery. I feel revolted and very angry. I would like to see if President Dilma would have the guts to say looking into my eyes that Belo Monte will bring progress and take people out of misery.

The disrespect and disregard happening in the city of Altamira and the Xingu's Big Bend region are outrageous. The region and the river are completely different from three years ago. Violations of rights have become routine for the people of the Xingu. It makes me wonder about, and fear for, their future.

### **The Myth of Dams as Clean Energy**

Contrary to claims that dams are clean energy, large dams in the tropics emit significant amounts of methane, a GHG over 20 times more potent than carbon dioxide (Goldemberg 2012). Due to ongoing methane emissions from decomposing vegetation in their reservoirs, dams in the tropics act as "methane factories," and GHG emissions from tropical dams can actually exceed those of fossil fuel plants for decades (Fearnside and Pueyo 2012). Large dam reservoirs in tropical forests like the Amazon can be significant sources of greenhouse gas emissions due to decomposing vegetation under their waters. Research has shown that Belo Monte's reservoirs will generate enormous quantities of methane (Moreira and Millikan (orgs.) 2012).

In every single community I visited, local people would question the notion that dams are clean energy, and it made me think about thousands of students and professionals from around the world as well as the decision makers that continue using that idea as a justification for having more dams. Ormazete, a locally effected woman from the city says: "They say that dams are a clean energy source. I don't understand. Is bringing down trees clean? Is polluting water clean? I don't understand this concept. The only thing I understand is that we are being massacred, humiliated. I hope that the world turns its gaze towards us because we are undefended."

Although Ormazete feels that the people of Xingu are undefeated, they are not alone. Around the globe, thousands of people have taken action in defense of the Xingu, and against Belo Monte.

The role of activism (national and international) is extremely important in the process of resistance. While Public Prosecutors have done an outstanding job that has translated in 19 civil lawsuits, history has changed when people mobilize. International mobilization is also key in this process, considering that retaliation against activists occurs mostly at national level. Internationally then, it is easier to expose the problems with no fear and to financially support social movements in a more consistent way.

## The Future

On the path towards respect for the environment and human rights, there will always be many cloudy days and the feeling of paddling against the flow. However, it is a worthy endeavor. This fight is not over. In fact, it's only beginning. Indigenous people are uniting themselves against all odds, prejudices, and difficulties in which they live. The fight for justice is not easy, but it's necessary. For every change there was a starting point. Hopefully, we can see sooner than later that a sustainable and respectful future is possible.

Alternatives to large hydroelectric dams in the Amazon include energy efficiency, wind, solar, and biomass (Voorhar and Myllyvirta 2013). These alternatives are real. All we need is to implement them, instead of using dirty energy sources. We don't have time to sit around and wait for a miracle. The change is in our hands and unless we make it happen, it won't. It is time for a revolutionary change. We can do it and we can stop the Belo Monte dam.

For those who think that Belo Monte is a fait accompli I'll leave you with Sheyla Juruna's words:

If people think that Belo Monte, the government, and Norte Energy won this battle, I say no, they didn't. The walls of Belo Monte will not defeat us because I am aware that all this one day will come to an end. One day our voices will be valued. One day the Brazilian government will have to respect the people who are the owners of this territory called Brazil.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The project is composed of two dams — Pimental Dam (233.1 MW) and Belo Monte Dam (11,000 MW). The Pimental Dam will divert 80% of the river's flow to the main reservoir. 668 km<sup>2</sup> of dry land would be flooded, including 400 km<sup>2</sup> of forest; in all, at least 1,522 km<sup>2</sup> will be affected.

<sup>2</sup> Available at: <http://www6.senado.gov.br/legislacao/ListaTextoIntegral.action?id=231371>.

<sup>3</sup> Article 231 of the Federal Constitution and the international human rights norms of which Brazil is a party, Convention 169 of the International Labor Organization, the American Convention on Human Rights, the San Salvador protocol and the jurisprudence of the Inter-American System of Human Rights.

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