

# Reimagining Development with Indigenous People: Reflections from the São Gabriel da Cachoeira Workshop

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**Abstract** Across the world, development is either failing or threatening indigenous peoples. The Brazil Reimagining Development event was held in the small Amazonian town of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, an important centre of indigenous political organisation which has recently elected an indigenous-led municipal administration. The discussions that took place there ranged across the themes of climate change, democratic governance and health system reform, and emphasised the profound ambivalence of the concept of ‘development’ for indigenous peoples. Indigenous participants highlighted the socially and environmentally destructive consequences of dominant development models, and called for greater access to opportunities and services to be combined with greater respect for their knowledges and greater responsiveness to their realities. In the process, they highlighted some of the key challenges that face efforts to reimagine development strategies for a world in which poverty is increasingly to be found among marginalised minorities in large and unequal middle-income countries.

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## 1 Indigenous peoples, poverty and development

Across the world, current development models are either failing to benefit indigenous peoples or actually threatening their lands, lives and livelihoods. The definition of ‘indigenous peoples’ is notoriously controversial, especially in Africa, and indigenous identities are often fluid and emergent (Levi and Maybury-Lewis 2010). However, the best estimate is that there are some 370 million people worldwide who fit the most widely accepted definitions of ‘indigenous’ (Ramos *et al.* 2009). In almost every country where they live, they are among the most marginalised minorities. Even where they form a substantial proportion or even a majority of a country’s population (as they do in some Latin American nations) they lag behind its non-indigenous inhabitants on all major poverty and wellbeing indicators (Hall and Patrinos 2006). Whether in richer countries, such as Canada, or poorer ones, such as Uganda, their health status in particular, is ‘behind everyone, everywhere’ (Stephens *et al.* 2005).

Although indigenous people are present in several of the world’s richest nations, as well as in some of the poorest, the majority live in middle-income countries, including China and India. Since they are almost always among the most disadvantaged groups in those countries, it is clear that within the rapidly changing geography of poverty, indigenous people now make up a significant proportion – perhaps as many as one-third – of what Sumner (2010) has called the ‘new bottom billion’ poorest people in the world.

Not least as a result of political mobilisation by indigenous groups themselves, there is growing recognition of the disparities in wealth and wellbeing between indigenous and non-indigenous populations. This has begun to spur governments and aid agencies into greater efforts to ensure that development can reach out to include these hitherto largely excluded and invisible groups.

At the same time, from India to Peru, the global commodity boom has intensified the pressure on indigenous lands. These lands – whether uplands, deserts, tundra or rainforest – are generally of marginal value for agriculture but are frequently rich in minerals, hydrocarbons, water, timber or exploitable biodiversity. The extraction of their natural resources has rarely benefited indigenous peoples themselves, and more often leaves a devastating legacy of environmental degradation, social dislocation, epidemics and violence (Survival International 2007). This in turn has led many indigenous movements and their allies to question whether ‘development’ can ever be anything but a threat to these peoples.

## **2 Indigenous peoples and development in Brazil**

Brazil has been a highly visible exemplar of many of these processes, despite the fact that fewer than 1 million of the country’s 190 million inhabitants identify themselves as indigenous (IBGE 2011). Although they have long since been pushed to the margins in the more densely settled southern and eastern regions of Brazil, indigenous peoples still inhabit much of the country’s vast hinterland, with legally recognised rights to territories covering more than one-fifth of Brazilian Amazonia. As calls for urgent action on climate change intensify, international attention has once again been focusing on the Amazon. The rainforest has been cast in the role of the world’s carbon sink, while indigenous peoples have been cast as the potential protectors of this global public good – with the result that their forest territories are being targeted by conservationists and ‘carbon cowboys’ alike (Shankland and Hasenclever 2011).

Brazil’s indigenous territories continue to be threatened by settler encroachment, logging and infrastructure mega-projects such as the notorious Belo Monte dam. Despite these pressures, they provide a strong base for the indigenous movement organisations that have coalesced around largely successful struggles for rights to land and to cultural self-determination. These rights were enshrined in the 1988 Constitution that marked Brazil’s return to full democracy, after a dramatic process of indigenous political mobilisation that began in the closing years of the military dictatorship.

For much of the period after 1988 (and especially around the Rio ‘Earth Summit’ in 1992),

indigenous movement organisations tended to maintain a consistent anti-development discourse. This often included allying themselves with international environmental NGOs, who helped to frame them as the stewards of a pristine Nature that was threatened by the destructive demands of development – with development in Brazil being described as a national pursuit of economic growth that enriched only a few, impoverished many and brought no benefits to indigenous peoples.

In recent years, however, several movements have adopted a more nuanced discourse and diversified both their aims and their political alliances. With land rights secured, they have turned their efforts to improve their communities’ wellbeing in other ways. This has included seeking resources for ‘sustainable development’ projects, campaigning for access to (culturally appropriate) education and demanding government action on their poor health status, which in Brazil, includes an infant mortality rate that is almost three times higher for indigenous people than for the population as a whole.

The Brazilian state, within the new and explicit commitment to tackling inequality that followed the election of President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva in 2002, has responded with a raft of measures. These have included the establishment of an ‘Indigenous Health Subsystem’ within the national health service, to provide additional primary care services specifically targeted at indigenous territories (Shankland 2010). In the wake of the financial crisis, the government increased the resources allocated to social protection, expanding its flagship ‘Bolsa Família’ conditional cash-transfer programme into the remoter and more rural municipalities where most indigenous territories are located. This included adding hundreds of thousands of indigenous Brazilians to the programme’s ‘Single Registry’ and issuing them with its trademark swipe cards – thereby ensuring that many became both visible to the state and fully connected to the cash economy for the first time.

## **3 The São Gabriel da Cachoeira workshop**

São Gabriel da Cachoeira (‘Saint Gabriel of the Rapids’) is a small town located on the upper reaches of the Rio Negro, the Amazon’s largest tributary, near Brazil’s borders with Colombia

and Venezuela. It has an urban population of around 7,000 people but serves as the administrative centre for a vast forested hinterland that includes over 100,000 sq km of territory officially recognised as indigenous lands. It has long been a major centre of indigenous political mobilisation, and serves as the headquarters for the influential Federation of Indigenous Organisations of the Rio Negro (Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro, FOIRN). São Gabriel is one of only a handful of indigenous-majority municipalities in Brazil, and when a slate headed by two former FOIRN directors won the municipal elections in 2008 it became the first Brazilian municipality to have a mayor and deputy mayor who came from an indigenous rights organisation – a testimony to the political capital built up by FOIRN since it was founded in 1987, at the start of the land rights struggle in the Rio Negro region.

In May 2010 FOIRN hosted the Reimagining Development event in São Gabriel, in collaboration with the Institute of Development Studies (IDS) and two of the Institute's partners in its recent work in Brazil: the SSL (Associação Saúde Sem Limites, the Brazil Health Unlimited Association), a health rights NGO with extensive experience of working with indigenous peoples in the region; and Cebap (Centro Brasileiro de Análise e Planejamento, the Brazilian Centre for Analysis and Planning), a leading social policy think tank. The event took place in FOIRN's *maloca*, or traditional meeting-house. This large palm-thatched building is a stunning example of indigenous architecture, erected by FOIRN in the centre of São Gabriel to highlight the determination of the indigenous movement in the Rio Negro to occupy spaces previously dominated by the non-indigenous population.

In the invitation letter jointly issued by FOIRN, IDS, SSL and Cebap, the Reimagining Development workshop was billed as 'a dialogue between indigenous, national and international visions of development'. It consisted of three days of presentation and discussion sessions around the themes of climate change, democratic governance and health system reform, followed by a further three days of workshops with indigenous leaders working to increase accountability and responsiveness in government health policy. In all, over 100 people took part, including indigenous representatives,

local and national government officials and Brazilian and international academics. The organisations represented at the workshop ranged from indigenous community associations and the São Gabriel da Cachoeira Municipal Administration to the Brazilian Ministry of Health, the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine and the World Bank. Indigenous and non-indigenous academics from Canada, Mexico and New Zealand joined the debates through video presentations and Skype discussions, in a link facilitated by the Alberta Climate Dialogue. The workshop featured no fewer than seven different languages, with indigenous and non-indigenous translators helping participants to make themselves understood as the presentations and discussions moved between Hup, Baniwa, Tukano, Nheengatu, Portuguese, Spanish and English.

#### 4 Reflections from the workshop

As the sessions moved across the workshop's core themes and explored the links between them, a number of key issues began to emerge.

- **Crisis impacts:** The discussion revealed that Brazil's robust social protection policy response to the poverty impacts of multiple global crises has had unintended consequences. Indigenous participants recognised that the rollout of cash transfer and food distribution programmes had brought important benefits, but also signalled their alarm that the sudden inflow of money and goods was undermining indigenous livelihood strategies and leading to the commoditisation of social relations. Indigenous leaders called for the agencies designing social protection programmes to show more 'care' and 'respect' in the way that they launched these interventions into indigenous territories.
- **Climate change:** The discussion revealed the extent to which Amazonia not only affects global climate change but is also deeply affected by it. Rapid and large-scale change has been perceived in the indigenous territories of the Rio Negro through shifting patterns of fruit availability, fish runs and migration of birds and game animals, associated with changes in temperature, rainfall and river levels. These rapid changes are making it hard for indigenous people to maintain their complex rainforest-based livelihood strategies, which

depend on sophisticated seasonal calendars. The changes were also associated with the emergence of new patterns of disease, which workshop participants discussed from the standpoints of both shamanic medicine and public health. The discussion also tackled the politics of climate change, as local indigenous leaders spoke out against the development model that they saw as responsible for it and called for those who had promoted this model to be held accountable. In the internet linkup with Canada, they also challenged their counterparts in the indigenous territories of Alberta's tar sands region to show solidarity and join with other indigenous peoples in resisting development activities that are worsening rather than mitigating the problem of climate change.

- **Democratic governance:** The discussion revealed the extent of the challenges that face indigenous efforts to achieve effective participation in governance. At the time of the workshop, the indigenous-led municipal administration was facing a political crisis, with divisions over strategy revealing powerful tensions between party-political and social movement loyalties. Many workshop participants expressed their disappointment at the administration's failure to deliver on its promises of change; the fact that indigenous people have won election to political office had clearly failed to bring about the expected transformation in relations with the state. This led participants from the municipal administration to stress that they have come to recognise the limits of what can be achieved without changing the political and bureaucratic machinery itself. The workshop discussion emphasised the importance not only of capacity strengthening for better service delivery but also of adapting public decision-making mechanisms to enable more meaningful indigenous participation in determining the nature of the services to be delivered.
- **Health system reform:** The discussion revealed the need for a fresh approach to tackling the intractable problems that beset the health of indigenous people. A massive increase in government spending on indigenous health services in recent years has failed to eradicate the extreme health inequalities between indigenous and non-indigenous Brazilians. At

the time of the workshop, the government had responded to indigenous protests and political mobilisation by promising to establish a new Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health, and the Secretary-designate was an active participant in the discussions in São Gabriel. Indigenous participants insisted that his department would not succeed in transforming their health services unless it could find ways of adapting the standardised packages of the national health system to local social and epidemiological realities. One of the key areas identified was the interface between biomedicine and indigenous medical knowledge; shamanic practitioners participating in the workshop called for reforms in the training of non-indigenous health professionals to enable them to engage more respectfully with traditional knowledge. A subsequent discussion on health system management highlighted the need for non-indigenous managers to receive similar training, in order for the participatory oversight institutions that have been set up within the 'Indigenous Health Subsystem' to function effectively as sites for shared decision-making.

By the end of the meeting, the Secretary-designate had undertaken to make the São Gabriel-based Rio Negro Special Indigenous Health District a pilot site for a more decentralised and participatory approach to health system management – attributing his decision to the depth of knowledge and commitment that he encountered among the indigenous participants in the workshop, which he frankly admitted had surprised him.

Despite this positive outcome, a recurrent theme which emerged across all the sessions was the profound ambivalence that indigenous peoples feel towards development policies, and indeed the whole concept of 'development'. While many indigenous participants called for greater access to the benefits associated with development, including transport, communications, economic opportunities and biomedical health services, many also voiced deep scepticism based on their experience of engaging with current development models. André Baniwa, a former FOIRN Director who is now Deputy Mayor of São Gabriel da Cachoeira, pointed out that 'not all "development" is good – cancer is also something that "develops"'.

## **5 Conclusion: reimagining development with indigenous peoples**

The overarching message was that indigenous peoples want a serious say in how development can and should be reimagined in Brazil and beyond. They are not isolated from development processes and their consequences, whether these are well-intentioned health or social protection policies, infrastructure investments, such as the dams and roads that are increasingly invading their territories or the disruption of traditional livelihood strategies by the climate-changing consequences of deforestation and fossil fuel consumption. They are increasingly experienced in engaging as political actors, whether through social movement mobilisation or through conventional electoral politics. However, they face barriers to their efforts to be heard that relate to the ways in which development policies are framed, debated and delivered – which all too often exclude indigenous knowledge and rely on the top-down imposition of standardised solutions.

In the wake of a financial crisis which it has weathered well, Brazil has grown in stature as a ‘rising power’ whose development model deserves to be taken seriously as an example for other countries. However, some aspects of that model – including the emphasis on infrastructure development that is driving the current wave of road- and dam-building in the Amazon – continue to threaten rather than benefit Brazil’s own indigenous citizens. There has been an exponential increase in interest in Brazilian policy innovations like Bolsa Família, not only in the South but also in some Northern countries. Yet the Reimagining Development discussions in São Gabriel showed that if they are to achieve their full potential in addressing structural inequalities, these innovations need to be adapted not only to other countries but also to other realities within Brazil, including those of the country’s indigenous peoples.

In Brazil and beyond, indigenous peoples pose a double challenge to development: how to combine the inclusion of the marginalised,

chronically poor groups who make up the greater part of the ‘new bottom billion’, with the transformation of development strategies to ensure a better fit with the realities and priorities of these groups. This is what Alcida Ramos and colleagues (2009) have called the challenge of ‘indigenising development’. As indigenous leader, Edmilson Terena, put it in one of the discussions on health system reform that led to the government’s promise to create the Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health: ‘Why should we change ourselves to get access to the system? Shouldn’t the system change in order to reach us?’ (Shankland 2010). In responding to indigenous demands by trying to adapt the health system to their realities, the Brazilian government has shown that it can be persuaded to listen, even although many obstacles to effective implementation remain.

Indigenous leaders, such as those who joined the discussions in São Gabriel da Cachoeira, have shown their willingness and ability to contribute to reimagining development. Showing our willingness and ability to listen to them requires more than just altering the content of development policies; it also requires changes to the way in which those policies are discussed. In this sense, the Reimagining Development workshop in São Gabriel set out to model a different approach, with representatives of powerful institutions like the World Bank and the Brazilian Ministry of Health travelling to a remote town and spending time listening to indigenous voices in a space ‘owned’ by an indigenous peoples’ organisation, rather than requiring indigenous representatives to come to them and do the listening. FOIRN and its allies have shown that the right combination of political legitimacy and national and international links can promote encounters that break with the conventional model of development policy discussion. It is not yet the shift in power relations that will be needed to consolidate a reimagined form of development which indigenous peoples can perceive as responsive rather than threatening – but it is a start.

## Note

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