




A journey to Ribeirinhos country, BETWEEN THE RIVER AMAZON AND THE AMAZONIAN FOREST

BRAZIL MISSION
APRIL 2023



For six days, **Clémence Aubert**, general secretary, and **Sophie Gardette**, director, accompanied by **Julien Denormandie**, former Minister of Agriculture and Food of the French government, went to Brasilia, then to Santarem and finally to Belem. Their objective: **understand the Brazilian context (focusing on rivers and agriculture), identify the actors working in the field, better analyse the conflicts of utilising the rivers, dialogue with those responsible for public policy, and forge partnerships.**

The journey was intense, rich in emotions and meetings with organisations, institutions and associations that fight every day to preserve their lands and rivers.

Discovering Brasilia to better understand the global context of Brazil

The journey of IFGR's team started in the capital of Brazil, **Brasilia**, which has a population of more than three million. It was the opportunity for the team to **better understand the country's political and socioeconomic context, particularly agricultural and environmental, aided by the service of the French Embassy.**

The meeting with **Fabrice Papa, of the Research and Development Institute, and Stéphanie Nasuti, a researcher at the University of Brasilia**, helped the team to understand the progressive extension of Brazilian farmland, especially on the Cerrado (a "savannah" that represents 22% of the country's surface area) and the Amazonian forest.

This first stage of the journey also allowed the IFGR delegation to get to know **Naziano Filizola of the Federal University of the Amazonas, and the teams of the Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation, notably its executive manager, Carlos Alfredo Lazary Teixeira.** The **Rios On Line** project (to which we dedicated an article in our June newsletter), supervised by the former, and **the Amazon Regional Observatory (ARO), founded by the OTCA**, work with different but synergetic methods to achieve the same objectives: **the observation of the River Amazon and the collection of information relating to it.**

Rios On Line is based on the collaborative participation of the neighbouring population whereas the ARO has available technological resources such as satellites and hydrographic stations along the river.

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The Amazon Cooperation Treaty Organisation (Organización del Tratado de Cooperación Amazónica or OTCA) groups eight South American countries that have the Amazon Forest in common. It brings together Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, the Cooperative Republic of Guyana, Peru, Suriname, and Venezuela. It was set up following the Amazon Cooperation Treaty signed between these eight countries on 3 July 1978 in view of preserving the Amazon Forest and managing its wealth sustainably. The OTCA was founded in 1995 to implement the goals of the treaty and provide a global view of the sustainable management of the Amazon region.



The Research and Development Institute (IRD), based in Marseille, works under the joint aegis of the ministries responsible for research and cooperation. Founded in 1943, this public establishment participates in scientific and technical research through agreements signed between France and certain developing countries. Its research programmes are intended to provide development aid to the countries of the South and deal with the human and social sciences, health, nature, and the environment.

The IRD is particularly present in Brazil, and collaborates with many local universities.



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The Belo Monte Dam: towards the programmed death of the people of the River Xingu?

The watershed of the Xingu, a tributary of the Amazon, covers more than 500,000 km² (almost the surface area of France). IFGR met the Xingu community, severely impacted in recent years by the construction of the Belo Monte dam, and the association WWF Brazil. The neighbouring populations have progressively witnessed the drying up of the Xingu and its fishes vanish. The survival of a large number of indigenous communities and the river and forest have been threatened since the construction of the dam. Indeed, the water of the river, diverted for the needs of industrial activities and intensive agriculture, is now lacking for biodiversity. The impact of these economic activities in this region is also being felt in terms of pollution (gold prospection, the discharge of mining waste, phytosanitary products, etc.) and threats for the survival of the local populations whose culture and economy depend on the river.

The neighbouring population has set up an independent monitoring network to document the threats against their river and propose alternative solutions to better manage the diversions of water, ensure fish continuity and adjust the discharge downstream of the dam, but they feel they are being ignored. Their proposal, called Hidrograma Piracema, can be found on www.xingumais.org.br



Computer-generated image of the completed Belo Monte dam - source: rampedre.net



Exchanges with communities of the Xingu basin and WWF Brazil, with teams from the French Embassy in Brasilia

“We have to protect our ecological corridor, our territory, our houses, our traditions, our roots, the biodiversity, from the source to downstream. We must forge an alliance between the peoples, to save our river and our communities.

This message must be presented at both national and international levels to put a stop to this apocalyptic scenario

demands one of the people living along the Xingu

Going further

Still on the same subject, IFGR met with the Movement of People Affected by the Dams a few days later in Belém. This is a national militant association that proclaims the following message: “water and energy are not goods but the heritage of the people.” The movement claims the right of information and transparency for new developments, impact studies and alternative solutions. For them, “All developments must take into account the global impact on biodiversity and the communities, with a more protective vision of the notion of “person affected”, which cannot be limited to only expropriated owners. The whole of the territory must also benefit from the income generated by the economic activity linked to the dams (industry, agriculture for exportation), which should not benefit only a few industrialists to the detriment of local communities.”

Our view



The testimony of the Xingu community was most poignant. The local populations do not feel they are informed and even less consulted. There is a lack of dialogue and transparency according to them, and above all a lack of consideration of the global impacts that the dam has on the lives and the communities and biodiversity. They say that fairer sharing of the income generated by economic activity on the territory must also be encouraged.



With the movement of people affected by the dams, Belém





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The combat for farmland and fishing rights: organising to exist

In Brasilia, the IFGR team discovered the combat of the Landless Workers Movement that goes back to the 1980s and whose motto is “Occupy, Resist, Produce”. It has become one of the largest social movements in South America. This small farmers’ organisation fights for the fair redistribution of land through agrarian reform as well for the development of family farming capable of ensuring food security for the country. At Santarem, the association FEAGLE has made an impression: it gathers farmers from the region of Curuai who practise agroecology. They act against the seizure of their lands by agribusiness, against mining companies, the illegal extraction of timber and intensive soya farming. This combat costs them dear since they feel constantly threatened.



The meeting with the union of fishers Z20, whose organisation was made possible during the 1990s to allow the fishers to gain their autonomy from the military and industry, also led to a clearer perception of the challenges faced by these collective movements on the rise which demand solutions that above all start with the preoccupations of the actors in the field.

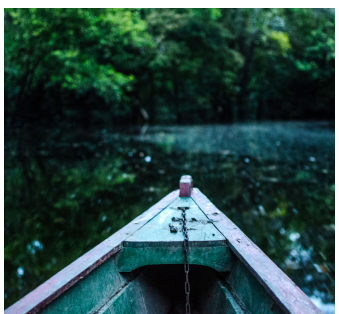
FOCUS: The war for the pirarucu



Fisherman of Santarém and his Pirarucu : folhadoprogresso.com.br



The next step of the journey made the team aware of the challenges relating to fishing in Santarem, located on the Amazon. A meeting with the NGO SAPOPEMA, which makes fishers aware of more sustainable practices and carries out actions to better document the state of the rivers, provided better understanding of the threats that currently endanger the fish of the Amazon (pollution, over-fishing, gold prospection, turbidity linked to mining and port activities, etc.). The team was able to go by boat to meet the fishers of the pirarucu, one of the largest freshwater fish in the world. Although the State has implemented fishing agreements, it does not exert any control. Thus, the fishers have mobilised to prevent unauthorised fishing on their territory: they organise armed patrols at night to protect themselves from clandestine fishing. They want more effective support from the State to enforce the regulations and genuine public policies to ensure access to water and electricity for the fishing communities as well as the collection of waste and the cleaning of the river.



Our view



We were particularly surprised by the notion of “common good”: in Europe, this notion is often considered as a lever for protecting our resources and preventing their appropriation by certain actors. In Brazil, this notion in fact appears as a barrier against protecting the resource: since it belongs to nobody, nobody feels responsible for protecting it and everyone feels they have the right to exploit it!



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Belem: a very strong green ambition

IFGR was able to speak at length with **the mayor of Belem, Edmilson Rodrigues**, during a meeting at the French institute. It gave the opportunity to understand the ambition of the mayor, who wants to implement a more ecological policy that includes in particular reforestation, more harmonious relations between the city and the river, and ecological transport. An entirely new strategy with a plan for transition and sustainability has been drawn up to achieve it.

The federal government of Para, which received the IFGR teams at the Governor's palace, is also very active in protecting the territory's rivers and taking better account of the risks that threaten them. An original fund has been set up that will lead to better management of the rivers' health, and implement concrete actions with the populations via nature-based solutions. Reflection is being conducted on the governance to be adopted to manage these actions, and on the payments for environmental services that could be used to finance some of them.



Belem could also soon become the first international signatory of the Plastic Free Rivers charter that IFGR is promoting with CNR and the Tara Ocean Foundation.

Joint work will be carried out from now to the COP30, which should mark a new turning point for IFGR in its action for the Amazon, in particular via an international conference..

Perspectives

Lula's return to power appears to many of the actors encountered as a sign of hope to better reconcile economic development and the preservation of resources, even if the alliances made necessary for his re-election augur several barriers. The COP30 scheduled at Belem in 2025 will certainly give a boost to certain ambitions.

This provided a positive note at the end of a journey that often revealed, despite the powerlessness of a large number of communities confronted by the changes affecting their territories, the ambition of all the actors encountered to turn a new page for Brazil, so that socioeconomic development and environmental protection can co-exist in a better way for all.

IFGR will be active in the coming months to assist those who act to change the situation and promote sustainable management for rivers. Contacts have been made, partnerships will be forged, events will be organised.

Thank you to all the people we met and who contributed to helping us discover the challenges and projects in progress in Brazil.



Santarem: Develop and protect

Exchanges with **the mayor of Santarem** and his teams allowed us to perceive the full complexity of the subject: in addition to needs in the field, it is the entire political and budgetary situation that makes the environmental and socioeconomic development of the territories complicated: cleaning the river, waste collection, it is also the financial contributions for the populations, who lack the resources to take on the share incumbent on them. The link between local, federal, and national public policies must also be taken into account.

"We don't want any more errors from the past, where the lure of easy money outweighed the value of rivers and forests. We want to develop activities with a positive socioeconomic impact in sustainable conditions."

While ensuring development for the populations, with access to drinking water and wastewater treatment. The support of private companies and NGOs will be vital for us to succeed in this collective challenge."

Nélio Aguiar, Mayor of Santarem

How can more sustainable sectors be developed and supported? How can new value chains be created that allow young people to project themselves more sustainably in their territory (despite the difficult conditions)? How can communities be involved in monitoring the state of resources, so that they can identify solutions accessible to them and their territories, starting from their realities? How can agroecology and ecotourism be developed, by ensuring sustainable incomes for the communities? All these questions are on the table and must be tackled by future public policies, as recommended by the association IPAM, with which IFGR was also able to exchange with during its stay in Santarem.



The Amazonian Forest: dissuasion through surveillance



FOCUS

The mission ended with the visit to the deforestation monitoring centre with **Claudio Almeida, a researcher at the National Space Research Institute (INPE)** to better understand the challenges linked to deforestation in Brazil. The satellite surveillance system, completed by audits by technicians, allows the **IBAMA** to control suspicious activities and punish unauthorised activities, thereby preventing deforestation from becoming generalised.

However, this monitoring remains insufficiently dissuasive: 20% of the Amazon Forest has already disappeared in comparison to 50% of the territory of Cerrado.

There is still hope: a progressive slowdown of deforestation has been observed over the past months and Lula has proclaimed the target of zero deforestation from now to 2030.