



# Report

INTERNATIONAL WORKSHOP  
ADVANCES IN CLEANER PRODUCTION

“CLEANER PRODUCTION TOWARDS A SUSTAINABLE TRANSITION”

## Study Notes on the Brazilian Amazon Countryside

BOTELHO, L.<sup>a, b\*</sup>

*a. Federal Institute of Amazonas, Amazonas, Brazil*

*b. PhD Student at Erasmus University Rotterdam, The Netherlands*

*\*Corresponding author, lissandro.botelho@ifam.edu.br*

### Abstract

Since June of 2003 we have worked as consultant in native Amazonian communities. Our goal with this article is to describe our experiences as a consultant and researcher in the largest tropical forest on earth. To that end, we organized our arguments describing the authoritarianism of the development policies in the Amazon, the top to bottom policies, the reverse accountability, the reproduction of poverty hand in hand with the environmental destruction and, finally, on new paths, we make our final considerations. Our methodology is based on facts witnessed over these years, without subtracting the viewpoint of an economist as a social scientist. Our in loco experiences allowed us to observe how the development institutions operate, how the social-political game is played in the interior of the Amazon, and how the communities deal with their limitations in political and economic representation. Our final considerations work toward bringing greater autonomy to the people who live in the communities. Even though they are poor, the people who live in the native Amazonian communities don't need philandering NGOs, inefficient development institutions and shameless policies. Thus, we work toward policies without middlemen, dealing with the families directly, without necessity of bookers or Amazon experts.

**Keywords:** The Amazon, Communities, Governance, Environment.

### 1) Introduction

Since June of 2003 we have worked in the interior of the Brazilian Amazon, as a consultant, in traditional communities and indigenous tribes. Our work is to promote development through incentive to small businesses in the Forest Projects. After all these years in the field we can note some common features in the economic promotion policies in the communities in the Amazon forest in Brazil.

During our institutional analysis in the Amazon countryside some bias is possible because we are educated in economics, which may influence our way of seeing the communities' problems. However, we believe this type of analysis can be made, even though it is useless to the Brazilian development institutions. These institutions are in feuds with their czars entrenched in their air-conditioned offices in

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Manaus, Belém or Brasília, defining the future of those who have no political and economic representation and, because of that, are treated as ignorant “Indians”, third class citizens, etc.

This article is written without many academic details due to being a Project that did not have an experienced researcher as an advisor. Of course we would like to have such a one, and who knows in the future we may be able to count on this feedback, so fundamental to scientific activity.

To attain our goals we structured this article in five parts, excluding the introduction. In the next part we make observations on the authoritarianism of the development policies over the communities in the Brazilian Amazon. As an experienced Brazilian economist once said, “Brasília locuta causa finita.” In the third part we show the consequences of development policies’ authoritarianism in the Amazon – policies from top to bottom. In the fourth part we describe our observations of what we call reverse accountability. In the fifth we show the result of the whole, which is the construction of misery combined with the destruction of the environment. Finally, in the last part, we make our final considerations, which were the first to be written in this text.

## **2) The Authoritarianism of the Development Policies for the Amazon**

The planning in Brazilian development institutions is centralized. In all these years of activity as a consultant in the interior of the Brazilian Amazon I never heard of or saw a community that had been consulted independently about its needs.

Thus, policies are built that, in the crushing majority of cases, do not help the communities. During the process of policy elaboration for the communities, there are inflamed speeches, daring goals, etc., but as the planning activities come to a close, the world goes back to normal, and nothing that was established makes sense to the actors involved. There is no guarantee of effective results.

The bureaucrats know they can’t make the planning propositions. The population knows that this planning has nothing to do with the local reality and needs. So the economic development organizations of the Amazon continue as they always have, that is, meeting only what is of interest to maintain political seats and elect politicians of the dominant party.

Some native citizens are even active in their speeches, but don’t have any power over the financial administration of the resources destined to promote the development of the communities. Some institutions and NGOs let the natives give opinions on the budget, but the financial administration is centralized in the hands of those who have control over the political processes, that is, in the hands of the development institutions, in partnership with politicians and, sometimes, with professional NGOs that tutor the communities. This way the communities, in practice, don’t decide anything and are always hostages of the daily rumors of these organizations, which are extremely sensitive to the humors of the political parties.

In Brazil we say “those who can, give orders, and those who have sense obey”. In the Amazon it could not be different, and following orders from Brasília is the rule. The economic development projects come from Brasília and taken over by “Coronéis de Barranco”, the local bosses, who see in these same old new ideas opportunities to make political plays and get votes. Under the “coordination” projects of economic development are carried out in the Amazon with local participation, but under the supervision of all-powerful managers established in Manaus, Belem and Brasília

Especially from Brasília do we see policies where the basic function of the local managers is nothing more than to squeeze in between the dictations from the Federal District and the local coronels’ need for votes. Thus, the managers in the Amazon do all they can to keep their “negative certificates” up to date, and follow the norms for the Court of Auditors of the Union (TCU) and Comptroller General of the Union (CGU), and obey the charismatic local political leaders.

Notwithstanding these facts the managers of development projects in the Amazon GO to the Field without any autonomy to make decisions, and any eventuality must be reported to their superiors who, oftentimes, are in Brasília. The experiences and the needs of those who execute the projects are not taken into consideration. Not leaving a margin for the local managers to maneuver, the activities in the interior of the Amazon are invariably pathetic.

### **3) Policies imposed from top to bottom**

Above we described the centralization of the decisions. In this topic we will write about the consequences of the centralization of decisions, which are the policies imposed from top to bottom. There is no doubt that some development projects for the communities are good ideas on paper, but the fact that they do not include even a minimum participation of the local actors in the initial phases removes the legitimacy of any good intentions that there may have been

Brasilia plans, defines and sends the guidelines for the local institutions to execute. Oftentimes the local institutions are not consulted about what is happening in Brasilia, but receive the incumbency of carrying out what was unknown to them. Before the local institutions realize it, the chronograms are running out, and they hurry to put together projects that never had the participation of the public they were aimed at. Travel into the interior of the Amazon is uncomfortable, due to the severe climate and the lack of infra-structure, such as telephones, internet, hotels, etc. Knowing these difficulties, the bureaucrats prefer the air-conditioning of the offices in the capitols. Thus, projects are made to carry out policies bound to fail, in terms of impact for the populations in the interior of the Amazon.

The introduction of policies imposed from top to bottom generates such a waste of resources that we consulted some of the most experienced economists in the Amazon on the matter, and they were unanimous in affirming that, with very rare exceptions, the experiments from Brasilia never turn out. In not-so-rare cases, such as settlements surrounding Manaus, these experiments produce hunger and misfortune for the families involved, besides serious attacks on nature.

### **4) Inverse Accountability**

Our approach on accountability here is that of a virtuous cycle in which institutions, organizations and citizens respect the rules of democracy with effective participation and mutual respect among the social-political actors. In such a scenario accountability is the raw material for the formation of social capital. However, we have made observations on a phenomena which is exactly the opposite of accountability, and which we call inverse accountability, as described below.

The social-political actors of the interior of the Amazon present peculiar behavior in relation to the development projects. These projects represent financial resources for poor places, which therefore have few economic options.

Businessmen, public servants, and local politicians know that they can gain financially and/or politically with the development projects. Consequently, battles are engaged in over the resources of the development project. The mayor wants to win votes, and frequently money as well. The aldermen want to maintain an electoral corral in their communities. The merchant wants to do business. The public servant wants to know how he can benefit from the situation and run for something in the next election. They form a cast of characters in which few want to serve and many want to be served.

Examples for them to behave thus are not lacking. The public servant knows that the mayor will benefit himself before giving anything in benefit of all. The alderman knows that the mayor is shrewd,

and he cannot falter in the political game. Thus, in a game where only shrewd people play, the public interest is of no matter.

In the communities it is not much different. Family and party associations set the tone in discussions and actions in the development projects in the interior of the Amazon. The communities rarely are treated as a whole for the good of public interest. The private matters (family and/or political parties) are always on the table.

There is no lack of motivation for the social-political actors in the interior of the Amazon to act in this way. Cases of corrupt people making money at the cost of the local societies are not an exception. In these places, politics was never at the service of the public good, but served the interests of the local coronels. Since the corruption is blatant in these far corners, the best business is to be mayor, and the second best is to be an alderman.

With the negative examples above, the lower scales of society behave no differently and also want a piece of the pile. The main local employer are the city governments. Working and producing are activities for the less fortunate, who do not have the political status to get an ordinance from the mayor at their nomination. The lucky nominated ones go to work serving coffee, making copies, and peeling fruit for the mayor, who doesn't want to bore himself with such tasks.

The consequence of all this is the inverse accountability in which all the social-political actors mutilate each other based on behavior which is prejudicial to all of society. It does no good to denounce excesses, for you will be called insane. Very few have the autonomy to denounce excesses of their mayor, and even so would never take such a venture. One cannot deny helping illegal activities, or you will be labeled as a traitor.

The good public servant is, often, he who shares the same table with the corrupt local bosses. They cannot criticize or escape from the taint of "untrustworthy" or traitor. The criticism is always taken personally and no one wants to be indisposed with the local powerful. That can be dangerous.

Thus, there is a vicious cycle in which the social-political actors sink each other, with very few doing well and doing good business, with the crushing majority of the population surviving without economical options. Thus, the economic activities that degrade the forests are the only option left to the communities, and not a decision based on rational calculation of entrepreneurship by opportunity. The capacity and creativity exists, but with an entrepreneurship from necessity. This occurs simply because of the lack of options to obtain the minimum to feed their families without destroying the environment.

## **5) The reproduction of poverty hand in hand with environmental destruction**

In a place where institutions are fragile; where the laws are not respected; the ties between organizations and social actors are tenuous – the initial result is a systematic destruction of social capital in a context where distrust, illegality and outrage reign.

Under these circumstances the environmental matters are considered of lesser importance. Faced with the economic crisis in a context hostile to civility the most viable business options are connected to the illegal exploitation. Our intention is not to criminalize the people who carry out illegal activities in the forest. In part because these a crushing majority of these people don't have other economic options. Our goal is to show how poverty in the Brazilian Amazon is intimately linked to environmental destruction.

Given the lack of economic options it is not difficult to recruit men and women to work on cattle and soy farms, even if this may be illegal. But working on soy or cattle farms is for well off people. Putting your life at risk with illegal lumbering, often in semi-slavery, is the most accessible option to guarantee

survival. Thus, for millions of people who live off the resources of the Amazon forest there is no other option besides illegal activities, destroying the environment.

It is not about criminalizing. It is not about judging. The fact is that poverty and environmental destruction are strongly related. To change this adverse scenario the greatest challenge for the people really concerned with the Amazon is the development of businesses that do not compromise the forest. But this is hackneyed, cliché. What must be taken into consideration is that it will not be possible to change the current adverse scenario in which these populations find themselves with the current institutions.

Thus, we point to the importance of considering the institutions in the environmental actions. In the Amazon the public sector has great weight in the economy and regulates all aspects of people's lives. Large scale actions in the Amazon are not possible without the concurrence of local public institutions, but we must not be childish and forget that these institutions are the most behindhand part of the Brazilian society.

However, it is to the informal institutions that we should pay more attention. Many of the local social rules are not written. Thus, it is necessary to pay attention not to what the social-political actors say, but to their attitudes. Attitudes which are often contradictory and full of nuances that only those who live in the day to day of the communities can perceive, and consequently study.

## **6) New Paths – Final Comments**

It must be very interesting to defend the preservation of the Amazon in New York, Berlin, London, or other great international capital. Facing adversities in the real Amazon is not a heroic act, on top of which it is dangerous to one's health, uncomfortable, besides obliging one to communicate with people whose Portuguese is less than perfect, and who know nothing of English.

We recognize that facing the real social-economic and environmental problems of the Amazon is not as noble as many expect or imagine. After all, a good marketing campaign in Europe or the USA has better results for those who busy themselves selling the Amazon as a product of the ignorance and fantasy the northern part of the planet.

If you really want to collaborate with the native Amazon communities so that they preserve their forests it is easy. It is sufficient to give each family a debit card with the right to draw a quantity per month, as long as they make the commitment to be guardians of the forest. Without tutelage, without restrictions, without financial management regulated by the interests of political parties.

Of course we need a structure that guarantees that the money makes it to the communities, but that is also very easy. The crushing majority of the families who live in the forest are benefited by the Family Allowance from the Federal Government of Brazil. One could use the same account to deposit the money for the counterpart of preserving the forest.

Without NGOs to take advantage, without corrupt and inefficient development organizations, without corrupt politicians and with low operational costs. The debit card from the Family Allowance is an easy and safe way to avoid the destruction of the Amazon on the scale we are already used to accepting passively.

This article is an initial mark for future research in the area of governance in the native communities of the Amazon, and organizations for economic development. Our goal is to seek liberty. We do not accept that human misery of the native communities of the Amazon continue as a product of NGOs which take advantage unduly, and development institutions that have no respect for the people who live in the largest tropical forest of the world.