

An Amazonian Wrangle

Apart from exposing vulnerable indigenous communities to infection, COVID-19 threatens a programme that provides livelihood to the vulnerable and helps conserve freshwater fish species

Indigenous people and rural communities in Brazil's Amazon region have been dramatically hit by COVID-19. A note issued on 10 June by the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB), in response to the Brazilian government, said the actions of the official agencies in response to the pandemic are regrettable: "So far the responses of the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) and of the Special Secretariat of Indigenous Health (SESAI) to the COVID-19 have been slow, uncoordinated and insufficient. COVID-19 has entered Indigenous Lands, and it is spreading fast. We're on the verge of chaos...Masking the reality won't solve the problem!"

COIAB has recorded the pandemic's impact in its newsletters, following tireless efforts and surveys by the indigenous people's movement. As on 5 September, 22,486 cases of COVID-19 were confirmed among indigenous people, along with 682 suspected cases and 646 deaths registered among 96 indigenous groups.

These results take into account the SESAI data plus the data from COIAB's surveys, not included in SESAI's official surveys, such as death certificates and information obtained directly from indigenous leaders, indigenous health workers and organizations in the COIAB network. The Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB) is a forum that includes COIAB. It has an independent monitoring system for COVID-19. Its data showed that in total, 127 indigenous groups are affected by COVID-19 in the Brazilian Amazon, including the Warao, a refugee indigenous people from Venezuela.

Apart from the pandemic, the political crisis also concerns the indigenous representatives. COIAB's address to the Brazilian government

said: "We are struggling daily to survive not only COVID-19 but to survive the dismantling of indigenous policy, the lack of protection and demarcation measures in our territories, the rise of greed in our lands and lives, the murder of leaderships, and the anti-indigenous legislative agenda of the federal government. After resisting COVID-19, this is not the national 'normality' that we will accept!"

Indigenous groups

In Brazil, the officially recognized territories of traditional communities are composed of 'Indigenous Lands' inhabited by indigenous groups, the 'Quilombos' for traditional communities

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of African descent, and 'Sustainable-use Protected areas' that can be territories of riverine peoples, for *caiçaras* (traditional coastal communities) and extractive workers. These territories are historically considered to be the largest and most protected areas in the Amazon. The guarantee of traditional tenure of their territories, health and education are basic conditions for these groups to live with dignity, food sovereignty, social security, collective well-being and autonomy.

The external pressures to these territories in times of the pandemic present even greater threats and risks. Other than the environmental and social impacts of careless and illegal exploitation of natural resources, the invasions of these territories expose the indigenous, *quilombola* and riverine

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The Paumari indigenous people of Brazil, travelling along the Tapauá's river in their traditional boat, prepare a meal with the fish they catch for their subsistence.

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communities to COVID-19. It makes the pathogen penetrate deep into villages and communities, even the ones far from urban centres. Such places face no inspection by official agencies. The condition of health services in such remote areas is precarious, with poor infrastructure and very few trained and qualified personnel. Then there is the huge distances and geographic spread of the Amazon to consider. The collective customs of social interaction in indigenous communities—the sharing of meals, of accommodation and rituals favourable to gatherings—make for ideal conditions for the rapid contamination of large numbers of people, affecting whole villages and communities.

It might appear that indigenous groups in voluntary isolation or limited contact are more protected against COVID-19, especially since their territories are certified by the government. The truth is the exact opposite. These groups are immersed in a deep lack of territorial security to address the ceaseless invasions of illegal mining, logging and drug trafficking. The level of alarm is much higher in the vicinity of the Solimoes

river, known for the largest number of isolated indigenous groups in the whole world, and those who have been recently contacted.

In contrast to these territories in isolated areas, there are indigenous groups living in territories (certified or not) close to the cities. These groups are the most vulnerable ones, considering that there is generally more dependence on external products, and more social and commercial interaction with non-indigenous people. It is where a more significant flow of people entering and exiting the villages and towns can be seen, not often without conditions to apply the necessary individual prevention measures. Add to that the urban indigenous people who inhabit the towns of the interior of the Amazon, as well as the provincial capitals of Brazil—not often living in peripheral areas of the city in groups, communities or by themselves—generally facing strong social vulnerability.

Fishing, an age-old practice in the Amazon, portrays very clearly the complexity of COVID-19's impact. As an original source of livelihood in the Amazon region, fishing has

historically gained local commercial relevance, developing what is known today as small-scale fisheries (SSF), employing thousands of workers directly and indirectly, spread through the entire Amazon basin. Being a main source of livelihood in the Amazon, fishing provides food sovereignty and abundance for communities in their territories.

It also carries with it the risk of virus contamination in situations when the fishers have to expose themselves in the effort to sell the surplus production in the local market, something that happens frequently in indigenous and riverine communities that are closer to towns or other places. The flow of boats—from small canoes for short travel or big ships that undertake medium- and long-distance trips between municipalities—is the main conduit spreading COVID-19 in the Amazon. This has already reached remote areas. Of the 62 municipalities in the Amazonas state, only two have not registered confirmed cases of COVID-19 so far. Among them, only the capital, Manaus, has hospital beds with Intensive Care Units (ICUs).

The dangers of COVID-19 and of the environmental damages caused by invasions also surround the areas of community-based management of the fish species *pirarucu* (*Arapaima gigas*, among the largest freshwater fishes in the world) in the Amazonas. As a result of the engagement of local communities in partnership with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and governments, the management of *pirarucu* has changed for the better the aggressive fishing practices that threatened its wild populations; the fish is commercially extinct in areas where fish management has not been applied.

Since the first initiative that undertook commercialization of managed fish 20 years ago, the community-based management of *pirarucu* has been recognized as an impressive economic activity, extremely effective to achieve biodiversity conservation and well-being of local communities. It is done in protected areas (Indigenous Lands, Extractive Reserves) or areas that have

legally recognized fishing agreements. More than 5,000 people (indigenous and riverine) are directly involved in *pirarucu* management, protecting millions of hectares of forest, swamps and natural aquatic environments.

Quota control

They generate around 3,000 tonnes of managed *pirarucu* annually under a regime of quota authorization and control by the responsible government agencies. This activity makes direct contributions to the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), including poverty alleviation; achieving food security and food quality; safer and healthier environments; inclusion of women and youth in economic activities; sustainable economic growth; fairer income distribution; access to high-quality food; protection of local livelihoods; and attenuation of climate-change impacts.

In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, however, fishers' groups and supporting organizations have tough challenges ahead, with the coming

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of the fishing season in the period between August and November. The territorial protection of the managed areas is sustained by a surveillance system that is operational throughout the year, with intensified monitoring in the flooding season, when invaders have easier access, and, in the lean season, when it is easier to fish. These surveillance and monitoring activities are carried out by fishers themselves, with no specific pay, and with inherent costs such as fuel for transport and food for the surveillance teams.

On average, about 40-45 per cent of the costs of *pirarucu* management are incurred due to the maintenance this communal protection system. If the fishery management groups do not perform these tasks, there are bound to arise territorial invasions

aiming for the large stocks of *pirarucu* protected by the fishing communities. On the one hand, these invasions would result not only in the loss of fish illegally caught by invaders, but also in chasing away entire shoals of fish that flee to other areas, something that affects directly the fishing quotas of the management groups. This will translate into significant financial losses. On the other hand, to maintain this protection system, paid by the fishers themselves, it is absolutely necessary for them to perform the fishing of the authorized quota, so that a part of the financial resources arising from commercialization covers the surveillance costs.

Annually authorized *pirarucu* fishing requires a series of activities and operational procedures such as population counting, harvesting, processing and transportation to the purchaser, that can be either free markets, or large plants that will process the fish. These activities are conducted collectively. They involve planning workshops, team organization, infrastructure provisions for camps and expeditions to the managed lakes, fish capture, and transport and transit between communities to the closest municipality or to the final destination of the product.

Currently, indigenous and riverine communities, health workers and supporting organizations in Brazil are making collective efforts to provide attention and care...

Generally, representatives of the fishery management groups have to be present in all of these stages that are clearly adverse to the sanitary precautions currently being recommended to prevent the spread of COVID-19. Besides, the existing economic conditions present a severely affected market that cannot guarantee industry and market demand for managed fish, something that might affect the product prices, possibly bringing them down even lower than the values realized in 2019, which were already below reasonably profitable levels.

Currently, indigenous and riverine communities, health workers and supporting organizations in Brazil are making collective efforts to provide attention and care to community members who have fallen sick, and to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the rural Amazonian communities. They aim to control and reduce as much as possible the serious impacts caused by this pandemic. 3

For more

<https://www.devex.com/organizations/coordination-of-the-indigenous-organizations-of-the-brazilian-amazon-coiab-135182>

Coordination of the Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB)

<http://toobigtoignore.net/small-scale-fishing-community-mobilization-in-brazil-amidst-multi-faceted-challenges/>

Small-scale fishing community mobilization in Brazil amidst multi-faceted challenges

<https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2020/07/20/fears-brazil-health-workers-brought-covid-19-indigenous-communities/>

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<https://www.nationalgeographic.com/history/2020/06/disaster-looms-indigenous-amazon-tribes-covid-19-cases-multiply/>

Disaster looms for indigenous Amazon tribes as COVID-19 cases multiply

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Indigenous people may be the Amazon's last hope