
[Dercy Teles on the popular movement of rubber tappers in Brazil](#)

Dercy Teles of Carvalho was the first female president of a Brazilian Rural Workers' Union, in the town of Xapuri, Acre in 1981. Xapuri became known nationally and internationally because of the union leader who succeeded Dercy: Chico Mendes. We spoke with Dercy at the recent gathering—"Effects of environmental and climate policies on traditional peoples: forest management, REDD, PES [Payment for Environmental Services]"—about the rich history of the rubber tappers' popular movement, including difficulties, lessons learned and challenges (1).

Dercy is the daughter of a traditional rubber tapping family. Her father, like most rubber tappers, came from Northeast Brazil in search of a better life. Dercy's father taught her how to read, and also how to do basic math exercises. Dercy began her activism during the military dictatorship, in the Grassroots Ecclesiastical Communities (CEBs, by their Portuguese acronym). Inspired by liberation theology, it was in the CEBs that she began to reflect on how to make a difference in the communities. She later became one of the popular education teachers that worked in the communities for free. Inspired by Paulo Freire's methods (2), they developed didactic materials specific to the reality of rubber tappers, using the language of the community. She says that this work was very fun, even though they sometimes had to walk 12 hours to get to the classrooms.

When cattle ranching began to appear in Acre state in the 1970s, the conflict arose between rubber tappers and large landowning ranchers. It was at this time that the rubber tapping community, which depended on the forest, began to successfully use the '*empate*' tactic: a collective action involving a large delegation to raise awareness among the workers who drove the tractors that destroyed the forest.

In 1981, Dercy was elected president of the Rural Workers' Union by over 900 delegates. In those days, union leaders were not paid. Their comrades helped them with trips and meetings. At that time they also formed the Workers' Party (*Partido dos Trabalhadores*, PT in Portuguese), which has been in power in Acre for more than 20 years.

Question: What were the main lessons you learned from the rubber tappers' struggle?

Dercy: During the process of struggle which developed in Xapuri starting in the 1970s, we built many tools to strengthen the struggle; consequently Xapuri came to be known nationally and internationally for its labor movement, with the participation of Chico Mendes, etc. We could see that the rural workers' union did not address the specific reality of rubber tapping communities. So we created specific organizations, such as the Amazonian Workers Center, which worked on issues of health and commerce. In 1985, at the University of Brasilia, we held the first national gathering of rubber tappers in Brazil, and with the help of several collaborators, we created the National Council of Rubber Tappers (CNS, by its Portuguese acronym). From that point on, we began to ideate the RESEX (Extractive Reserve), which was a kind of agrarian reform, but different, since it met the specific needs of people who extract/collect. The CNS elected a direction, and we began to think about action areas aimed to help people who extract live their way of life. But in the end, it failed, because we were not vigilant and did not control the process. We ended up giving everything away.

We built a whole structure and handed it over to people outside the organizations and from the government—who used it in a way that was completely counter to what we had envisioned. The PT government co-opted everybody; and while it claims that everything is wonderful with "sustainable development," it has become the rubber tappers' worst enemy. Today we see how the government's intervention has destroyed social movements. Even though teachers today receive a salary, with the PT, the liberating schools of before have become traditional schools—schools that prepare people for the city, not to remain in the forest. It is very challenging to mobilize people. Lack of credibility is significant. People only go to meetings if they get something material out of it. If the purpose of the meeting is to learn something, they don't go. Today, the leaders of the Rural Workers' Union of Xapuri receive a salary, which distances them from their bases. The Xapuri union's recent elections have made it so that the union now works for the timber companies. (3)

Therefore, what I have to say today—mainly to the youth, to the people who are building a movement to defend their rights and their territories—is that we must trust, but we must be vigilant. And when we choose a citizen to assume any position that represents the community, they must really represent what the community wants. They cannot speak for the community without having first had a discussion with the community; otherwise they are acting illegitimately and not representing the community's wishes. This is very important, because that is what made us lose a lot of what we had built—by putting people in charge who we trusted, but who actually did not act in accordance with that trust.

Question: What does an extractive reserve (RESEX) mean for you all—not as it ended up becoming, but in the way you imagined it? What was most important about that idea?

Dercy: The main idea behind the extractive reserve was to institutionalize a model of agrarian reform that would meet the specific needs of the culture and traditional population. It wasn't meant to be a parcelation, since parceling land does not meet the specific needs of the culture and traditional population. Hence, the reserve was designed in that way, to promote an agrarian reform appropriate to the reality of the rubber tapping population, at a time in which this activity was still quite significant.

Question: What was the vision about decision-making—about what to do within the extractive reserve, and about who would make those decisions?

Dercy: A key point of the original extractive reserve project was that the inhabitants themselves would manage it. This was so important that we developed a land use plan with the participation of inhabitants, wherein they determined—point by point—what could and could not happen within the reserve. And they would be main people responsible.

Question: And what has the extractive reserve become today?

Dercy: Look, with the intervention of the government, of outsiders to the reserve, and of external agents operating within the reserve, the whole project became distorted. Cabinets in Brasilia [the capital of Brazil] gradually modified the land use plan for the reserve, with the participation of people claiming to represent the community. But really they do not represent anything, because today they are government officials, serving the government and not the community. Therefore the whole land use plan collapsed, and today it serves the interests of the government and not the workers. And living in the reserve has now become a miserable situation: people are constantly terrified and criminalized, they must pay exorbitant fees to maintain their subsistence gardens, and they receive only 100 reals per month [around USD 30 dollars] from the "forest market" (4). And there is no one to turn to for help, since the Chico Mendes Institute—which manages the reserve—only enters the

reserve to punish, fine, criminalize and threaten people. There is no educational process to help people live in harmony with nature. The government does not create the conditions for people to be able to live from extractivism without harming nature; even though it has been proven that one of the activities that *is* harmonious with nature is the extraction of rubber and Brazil nuts. Yet Brazil nuts do not even figure into land use plans, and rubber extraction is bankrupt, because there is no market to absorb it. All of this leads to a process of soft expulsion: people are spontaneously leaving.

Question: In addition to what you have already said, what else would you say to other struggles, and to young activists who are inspired by this struggle in Xapuri. How can we rescue what was lost?

Dercy: It is always necessary to be the yeast in the dough. Regarding lessons learned, I would transmit the following message to young people: we have to learn by doing and do by learning, because only then do we value our environment, culture and territory. The purpose of this meeting here is to unite indigenous and non-indigenous people living in the forest. Without the forest, we cannot live. The only thing left in the city is drug trafficking. We shall forget our differences, and we shall do so not for ourselves. Forty years of struggle have passed, and today I have the pleasure of encouraging others to fight. Our main enemy is capitalism; and we are not fighting it because we are not united.

1. See several interviews conducted at this gathering, including one with Dercy Teles (in Portuguese: http://encontrodexapuri.blogspot.nl/2017/06/blog-post_7.html)

2. Brazilian educator, famous for his contribution to the field of popular education.

3. See the article about how communities within the Chico Mendes RESEX in Xapuri denounce so-called “community-based forest management” at <http://wrm.org.uy/articles-from-the-wrm-bulletin/section1/brazil-voices-of-local-communities-in-acre-denounce-violations-in-community-based-sustainable-forest-management/>

4. A payment of 100 reales per month [about USD30 dollars] which the State gives to forest-dwelling families, on the condition that they do not touch the forest; for example, that they not set fires to prepare for crops.