
10 Years of REDD+ in Acre and its Impacts on Indigenous Women and Female "Extrativistas"

This article is part of the publication [15 Years of REDD+](#):

[A Mechanism Rotten at the Core](#)

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For years, proponents of REDD+ like WWF and the World Bank have advertised the REDD+ program in the state of Acre in the Brazilian Amazon as a model for the world. WRM talked to Letícia Yawanawa, an indigenous leader from Acre, and Dercy Teles de Carvalho, ex-president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union and an advocate for *extrativistas*¹ about how REDD+ has affected the lives of women in communities that depend on forests.

The REDD+ program in the state of Acre in the Brazilian Amazon region has been used as a model for the world for many years by promoters of REDD+ like WWF and the World Bank. But in all of the assessments of this program, little is said about the impacts of REDD+ on the lives of women in communities that depend on forests. WRM talked to Letícia Yawanawa, an indigenous leader from Acre, and Dercy Teles de Carvalho, ex-president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union and an advocate for extrativistas.

Acre is a state in the Brazilian Amazon region. More than 80% of its territory is covered by forest. The history of the process of [commodification of nature](#) in Acre began in 1999 with the arrival in power at the state level of the Workers' Party. This government named itself the 'government of the forest' and adopted a narrative that said it was possible to start a new business cycle in Acre, while keeping the 'forest standing', and make the state join the era of so called 'green capitalism'.

A milestone in this process took place in 2010 with the approval of the state SISA law, creating the State System of Incentives for Environmental Services. This law made feasible the first jurisdictional REDD+ program in the world, encompassing the whole of the state's territory. (2) In 2012, the German government, through its public bank KfW and its REM (REDD Early Movers) program rewarded the government of Acre for having created this law and for the reduction in deforestation in the state in the previous decade, when REDD+ did not exist. Then, KfW forwarded 16 million euros (more than 18.5 million US dollars) over 4 years, followed by other sums in their millions.

WWF, one of the international NGOs that helped formulate the SISA law, has called the REDD+ program of the government of Acre "a pioneering initiative" (3). The program received strong support also from the World Bank, which over the years facilitated visits by people linked to NGOs and governments from other countries of the global South to Acre, and considered it a great example of REDD+ in the world.

WRM talked to Letícia Yawanawá, in the indigenous language Atai Yawanawá. She has been active in the indigenous movement since 1996 and currently is a council member of the indigenous women's organization SITOAKORE – Organization of Indigenous Women of Acre, Southern Amazônia and Northwest Rondônia. She headed the organization for two terms. Letícia is also part of the National Council of Indigenous Women (CONAMI). WRM also talked to Dercy Teles de Carvalho, who was born in Xapuri, Acre, and lives in Colocação (4) Pimenteira, part of the Boa Vista rubber tree area. In 1981, she was elected the first woman president of the Xapuri Rural Workers' Union, the first of her state and one of the first in Brazil. She preceded Chico Mendes, who was elected at the end of 1982.

WRM: How do you evaluate these 10 years of REDD+ in Acre with regard to Indigenous Peoples? This is a program that has always said that Indigenous Peoples would be one of the priorities.

Letícia: My evaluation is very negative. I was a council member of SISA for almost 6 years. When the coordinator of REM/SISA arrived from COPs (UN Climate Conferences), she would say that many indigenous people would benefit. Then I started to observe what benefits Indigenous Peoples had. What I remember from when I was the coordinator of SITOAKORE and would spend time in indigenous lands was that **I did not see any community that had a single benefit from this REDD+ program. Furthermore, we still have lands that need to be demarcated here and this was never supported; land demarcation is a struggle.**

Now, what I would see in the city, in the government, is that they had some pretty departments, well equipped, with lots of technicians from other places that stood to gain from SISA. But I did not see one indigenous person working there, neither women nor men. You cannot say that indigenous people do not have the capacity; there are many indigenous women, relatives, who are educated as well and who could be working there, but we used to see, and continue to see to this day, only the technicians.

As a council member of SISA in the past, I said that the resources that came for the Indigenous Peoples should be something that yielded results, that stayed in the villages, that stayed there for the good of the community. Walking into the SISA office was very pretty, but the Indigenous Peoples did not even have a structure of reference for Indigenous Peoples, neither for women, nor for men. I would say these things and often people would look at me saying she only comes here to criticize. There are other relatives that would come for a meeting at SISA, they would receive a daily allowance and they could not say anything.

I was never well regarded by the government. They were compelled to call our organization because we were an organization of women and we were all legal, which is what they ask for. So there was no way not to invite us, also because we were an organization with representativeness in three states, the whole of Acre, Southern Amazônia, which is Boca do Acre municipality, and Northwestern Rondônia. While SISA would present itself as working with 20-30 associations, I would say: that is a lie! Because most of them do not exist any more. Nowadays you see other [associations] NGOs that looked after these resources, CPI (Pro-Indigenous Commission) itself, AMAIAC (Association of the Movement of Indigenous Agro-forestry Agents of Acre).

WRM: The REDD+ program brought about a change in the organization of the peoples, creating more associations so that the government could distribute resources. You have already said that you did not see any changes, that the REDD money also did not help in the demarcation of indigenous lands. How did all of this affect indigenous women in their

communities?

Letícia: As the coordinator of the women's organization, I said that we indigenous women were neither bees nor ants, to live just by smelling. We live from concrete action, however little. There was a meeting with people from many countries in a very luxurious hotel here. There were authorities from various countries. But they did not invite me because they did not want me to show up and tell the truth.

But I went to this meeting. I waited for everyone to speak. There were many people looking at me, worried, because they knew I was going to speak. So then I asked to speak, because I was a council member of REM/SISA, I was a full member. We were four women and I said: look, women, I am going to speak. I do not lie, I do not say things that are not correct. They have talked about various budgets, worth millions and millions. Then I said: where are the millions? We, women, where are we included in these millions? Everybody looked startled. I said: where are we? We are forgotten in the middle of the forest with this REM program, which is the same program as REDD. The woman from Germany, Christina, she heard me, she said: Ms. Letícia, I need to talk to you. I waited and when she left she stopped caring. She did not even look at me again. Then I wrote a letter resigning from the council.

So I do not see a good result, we women were not included, maybe for the CPI people or our relative Francisca Arara, she is the representative of the government, but not of the indigenous women in the villages. Because an indigenous association that has a woman elected by the village, that is something else, let's make this clear. I'm not mocking, I'm telling the truth. Women have no participation. If there are women that go to another country, they are representatives of the government that is different. But the indigenous women of Acre do not have any participation.

WRM: And how has REDD affected women working as extrativistas inside the Chico Mendes Extractive Reserve over the course of these 10 years, where various REDD+ projects were implemented to supposedly benefit families and women? For example, the 'green grant', a project of 'planted forest' and forest management, which is the name given to [selective logging](#).

Dercy: In 2010 when the government of Acre took on the REDD+ policy, it decreed 'zero fire' and brought in the 'green grant'. It was a quarterly payment to compensate for the fact that people could no longer open up farmland in the forest. This was an irrecoverable cultural loss because it was always the women, both indigenous women and the women extrativistas who worked the land. With this ban from 2010 on, they stopped producing. And food is one of the fundamental things in life, without food nobody manages to live and be happy. The women used to plant vegetables and sell them. Today, people depend on buying food, polished rice that comes from another state, from Mato Grosso. The 'green grant' is charity, I don't know if the amount has increased, but it used to be 100 reais [less than 19 US dollars] per month. And right now, ICMBio (5) is distributing big sacks of industrialized products inside the Reserve. So it is something that affects women's lives deeply because they also cease to hand down to their children this culture, of producing what one consumes, without agro-chemicals, with quality, in the community itself.

With regard to the 'planted forest' project, also called 'agro-forestry system', I talked to a woman who took part in this program and she complained a lot. Firstly in relation to the volume of work that gets added to the family's life. Secondly, because while they received the saplings to plant, they had no support to carry out the work, like a brush cutter and fuel, to maintain the agro-forestry system according to what they wanted. And the family was constantly demanded about this maintenance by the president of the association that was leading this project and visited regularly to check if things

were within the standards set for the project. She said her life became hellish. Another problem was that the saplings were only offered outside of the rainy season, because the plants were meant to take hold during the dry season. For this reason, many of the plants did not sustain themselves, because people were unable to irrigate them. In conclusion, it only worked for 5 people, and these 5 people were all linked to the government, in other words, they didn't do any heavy lifting. They would pay someone to do the work. That is why it worked for them.

About 'forest management', this in fact had nothing sustainable about it, on the contrary, it opened up precedents for the communities themselves to destroy the forest. Why did the government, in these 20 years it governed Acre with this discourse of sustainable development, not implement any policy to ensure the sustainability of families? This management did not leave resources that might change families' lives, on the contrary, it impoverished them. And created a precedent for families to continue selling wood regardless of whether there was a company doing management or not, they are selling to large-scale ranchers for them to fence off their pasture lands. And we know that this will only cause the impoverishment of the population, especially of women, who will end up in the peripheries of cities, needy, seeing the daughters they still have selling their bodies or joining factions [linked to the drug trade].

This is a very complicated fact because we know that before, women managed to raise their children within a cultural standard of respect and responsibility. **Nowadays we see girls aged 14, 15, with babies on their arms, there are cases of sexual abuse of minors and there are families that have been destroyed. But people remain anonymous, invisible and nothing changes. So the entry of these external agents led to a deep de-characterization of the way of life, and left behind only ruins, nothing positive.**

There is a range of other elements that contributed to a sort of naturalization of what is happening. For example, the most modern cell phones are inside the Reserves, in various different corners. Television too. These are elements that disperse attention, that prevent people from reflecting. Another element that contributed significantly is the evangelical churches. They contributed to this process of people's dispersion in relation to reality and to the future.

WRM: One of the proposals of the REDD+ program is to transform indigenous women into micro-entrepreneurs, to create markets even abroad for their crafts. What do you think of these initiatives?

Letícia: I went round various indigenous lands. I saw that 90% of crafts makers are indigenous women, who make their crafts, their paintings, for their use and for sale. It creates self-sustainability within the village. There are many women, widows, sometimes women abandoned by their husbands, who are there, with their children. This woman helps herself, with her children, she does her craft work, it is with these women that we had a commitment to do something, to have a space for us to receive these women's crafts, to sell them and to give back the money to the women. This is what we said to them, this was the women's wish, but it did not happen.

Craft work has always been for our use, it has a symbolic value and it cannot be done in any old way. You are transforming that bead into a drawing that has meaning to remind ourselves of our paintings back when we did not have contact with the outside. And whenever we sell our crafts, we hold a ceremony. The person who takes it is blessed. There is a black ring that the Apurinã make, right? They hold a ritual when a woman has period cramps, it's really a women's thing, she puts it on not to have such bad cramps. So all crafts in our eyes have meaning, a cultural and spiritual value.

WRM: REDD+ states that it is a mechanism to reduce deforestation, but after 10 years of REDD in Acre, deforestation is increasing, and even more with Bolsonaro in power. How has this affected indigenous lands and Extractive Reservations? What are the challenges for women in dealing with this?

Dercy: Women from traditional communities used to have a lot of activities, including working with creepers. Recently I went to a locality and noticed an area that used to be forested, where in the past, when I was a health worker, I used to walk on foot, now the forest has disappeared. This has been harmful to women, because they used to make things out of creepers and earned some money: brooms, baskets to harvest corn or rice in the fields, or to keep used clothes, or to keep eggs in, because they are well ventilated and this helps keep them fresh. Nowadays this is no longer possible, there are no more creepers because everything has been turned over to pasture.

Deforestation sped up violently in this period of Bolsonaro in power, 2019, 2020, 2021, as a function of the devaluation of extrativist activities. Since this extrativist activities cannot sustain the demand for consumption that came with the increase in ramais [large dirt roads] and the arrival of energy, people as parceling their colocações into lots, and as they do so, each one clears a number of hectares, so a big farm with many owners is gradually formed. Because one sells off 3 hectares, another sells 5, another, 6. Today, you leave the nearby town of Xapuri, and you can cross the Extractive Reserve, from one end to the other, by ramais.

About this whole process that came about with REDD+, my perspective is that we might reverse this picture based on an educational process in conjunction with these communities, with conversations in accessible language so that people can understand. If for no other reason, because **people have no means to counter, because they [REDD+'s promoters] use language that nobody manages to understand what it means.** And when you don't have information, you can't counter the argument.

As for women, we need to make an investment in the field of politics, really, to insert women in this debate so that they understand this process because we are the majority in Brazil. So, we can make the difference from the moment when we understand everything that is happening, the seriousness of this process, and we position ourselves politically.

Letícia: We look upon this with much sadness. Our Samaúma, according to our history, to our spirituality, is a very large tree in the middle of the forest, that is why we call it a woman, she means fruit, she means shade, she is the greatest of all. Now things are worse because with tree after tree being felled, wood that grew for 40, 50 years being chopped down in a few minutes, it's very sad for us to see this.

If the Samaúma were a woman who could speak, she would be crying, she would be shouting when her children are taken away. With that come the droughts, which affect the people of our lands because our lands are surrounded by people we don't even know. The animals end up leaving that deforested place, the igarapés – name given in the Brazilian Amazon region for a stream that flows into a river – are drying up, as are the rivers at the other end. As an indigenous woman, I look upon this with much sadness.

But **we are going to remain on our land, with money or without money, it is our obligation as Indigenous Peoples.** With support it will be better, and may there be budgets not only to benefit the government offices in the cities, but mainly support for the women, women need it.

(1) **Extractivista / Extractivismo.** Not to be confused with extractive industries, extractivismo in the Brazilian context describes a way of life pursued by a variety of traditional communities. The harvesting of non-timber forest products, often in combination with subsistence agriculture, defines extractivismo. Rubber tapping, the extraction of latex from rubber trees growing inside the forest is one example. The palm fruit açai and Brazil nuts are other examples of products that form the basis of extractive economies. Extractivismo is often associated with rubber tapping and the Brazilian Amazon. However, there are traditional extractivista communities outside the Amazon region such as the quebradeiras de coco babaçu who gather and process the fruits of babaçu palms.

(2) A program is termed “jurisdictional REDD+” when its implementation is not only on the land attributed to specific projects, but in a whole jurisdiction, like a department, a province, a state or a country. [Read more here.](#)

(3) WWF, [Acre é primeiro estado a realizar transações com REDD+](#)

(4) Name given to the place where rubber tappers and their families live and work; usually constituted by the home and an area meant for small-scale agriculture and livestock rearing, surrounded by rubber tree trails. The average size of these *colocações* is around 300 hectares.

(5) ICMBio: Chico Mendes Institute for Biodiversity, the federal government agency responsible for the management of Extractive Reserve – RESEX.

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