

Woes Compounded

One year after an oil spill hit Brazil's Discovery Coast, the COVID-19 pandemic has worsened the lot of indigenous fishing communities

The biggest oil spill disaster in Brazil began in late September 2019. It extended along the coast, affecting 11 states, nine along the Northeast Atlantic and two along the Southeast Atlantic. About 3,000 km of the coastline was affected. The oil slick spread over beaches, mangroves and rivers, and reached also marine protected areas (MPAs) such as the Abrolhos National Park, one of the main coral banks and cradles of marine biodiversity in the South Atlantic.

5,000 tonnes of crude oil residues have been removed from beaches, coral reefs and mangroves. Most of this removal was possible thanks to the action of civil society volunteers—fishers, local communities and non-governmental organizations—along with city halls and government environmental agencies, who, even without adequate equipment, did the necessary work. There were several local initiatives, without initial central co-ordination, which hampered the actions.

The negative impact caused by the oil spill goes beyond the lasting environmental contamination of water and mangroves, putting at risk the life of birds, fish and corals, apart from the people who were exposed to the oil during the removal. There is also the socioeconomic impact, for example, on the tourism and trade value chains that mainly are focused on the region's fishing resources. It goes from those who manufacture fishing gear to the restaurants that buy the fish, significantly reducing income up and down the chain, from the fishing communities to the ultimate consumer.

The oil spill hit the Bahia state's southern coast just before the beginning of the high season in the summer, when profits should be higher. However, the opposite occurred and fishers made little money in the season; they depend on the fish trade for income to buy other items of daily sustenance, among other demands.

Demand reduction

The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020 reduced the demand for fish drastically, aggravating the socioeconomic consequences of the oil spill. The requirements of social

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The Brazilian government was criticized for the delay in taking action to contain the arrival of oil on the coast, as also for showing low commitment towards affected communities. The federal government has the responsibility of co-ordinating the response to sea oil spill cases. The National Contingency Plan (Decree 8127/2013) is the instrument for oil pollution risk management, falling under national jurisdiction. It determines the responsibilities of public and private entities in the event of a spill. The plan is supposed to be executed by a council chaired by the ministry of the environment. In Brazil, councils that were not created by law, like this one, were extinguished by Decree 9.759 of 2019. Thus, its involvement was not properly triggered.

Despite the poor co-ordination of the federal government, more than

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Oil on a beach in the Brazil Northeast, October 2019. Most of this removal was possible thanks to the action of civil society volunteers—fishers, local communities and non-governmental organizations—along with city halls and government environmental agencies

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isolation hit the tourism sector that is intrinsically linked with beaches and seafood in this coastal region of the northeast. This further affected the income of families dependent on fisheries.

To gauge the impact of this disaster among the Bahia state fishing communities, a field survey was conducted a year later with fishers who encountered oil in 2019. A total of 40 fishers and shellfish gatherers were interviewed, half of them women, from three fishing communities in the municipalities of Porto Seguro and Prado, where the Corumbau Marine Extractive Reserve (Resex) is also located. Resex is a special Brazilian type of MPA that has territorial protection as an objective, besides conservation.

This region is called the Discovery Coast because the Portuguese arrived here first in the year 1500. It has indigenous communities that practice extractivism—fishing and hunting—at a subsistence level, though they also sell the surplus. In 1805, the *Pataxós* ethnic group began to concentrate in an area near Monte Pascoal. In 1861, they lived in a village called Barra Velha,

along with other indigenous groups: *botocudos*, *maxacalis* and *camacãs*. Further, in 1960, when the Monte Pascoal National Park (a protected area) was created, laws prevented the *Pataxós* from cultivating land in the territory. Living in the surroundings made them vulnerable to colonization processes. This changed both their way of working the land and its relationship with the environment, leading to the development of cocoa crops for export, and cattle rearing—practices unfamiliar to the *Pataxó*. The traditional practices of subsistence agriculture and fishing are still around, however, surviving through oral traditions.

Can the oil spill be seen as another impact of capitalist colonization? Are these communities paying the heavy price of progress? Or is it the price of their ‘backwardness’? This disaster has, no doubt, multiplied the injustices of the past: pollution, real estate speculation, monocultures and mass tourism, among others.

Oil spill damage

Of the survey respondents, 85 per cent said fishing is their main activity, in

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Location of the municipalities of Porto Seguro and Prado in Bahia, Brazil. To gauge the impact of the 2019 oil spill among the state's fishing communities, a field survey of fishers in these municipalities was conducted a year later.

addition to tourism and handicrafts; 60 per cent were of Pataxó ethnicity; and 55 per cent had a government fishing register. As many as 95 per cent of the respondents said the oil spill damaged their fishing areas. A minority of respondents said the spill did not damage fishing areas, while 97.5 per cent said they stopped their regular fishing activities due to the oil spill.

A fisher who beach-trawled for seabob shrimp on the shore where the oil stains hit described the plight: "Our arms were in constant contact with the oil stain. Sometimes we would forget and touch our face with the hand, causing itching and irritation. There, at the mangrove forest, we removed the oil with our hands as we grabbed nets, handing it over to another person who put it in a bucket. The oil would cling to the mangrove roots, and the mud was full of oil and the crabs were all dead."

There was no income for 60 per cent of the respondents during the period of the oil spill. The remaining 40 per cent saw their income drop 50-70 per cent. Further aggravation ensued with the arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic, continuing to this day: Communication between fishers was reduced to zero since the meetings at the 'fishers associations' were cancelled. The pandemic brought disarticulation of the fishing community at a time when greater organization and unity was required to repair the damage.

Moreover, the Resex Council is the only governmental body where fishers have a representative and participate in decisionmaking related to their territory. It brings together all stakeholders from civil society and government for deliberation. The body has not met for more than a year due to a lack of access to an Internet connection or mobile devices for remote meetings.

Fishing activity

Last but not least, the locality was hosting tourists during the summer holiday months of January-February 2021, the period of the study. Despite the pandemic, there were signs of fishing activity and the tourists were consuming fish. Not all visitors were following World Health Organization recommendations like using face masks. External visitors have been the main vectors of the coronavirus for traditional communities in Brazil.

In general, municipalities that specialize in fishing are small, score poorly on the human development index (HDI), have low-income concentrations, high illiteracy rates, foster people with a reduced education level, have high infant mortality rates, a high dependency ratio, and limited health infrastructure. Communities with active tourism do not reflect the reality of the fisher community because the HDI indicators get masked. The unreliability of the data became apparent when the fishers' association president said that the city halls underreported the weight of oil sludge collected by volunteers; this was aimed at not driving away the tourists because the oil spill occurred during the peak tourism season.

In the course of the study, 75 per cent of fishers and shellfish gatherers said their income from fishing had recovered to what it was before the oil spill. Nevertheless, the country resumed strong restrictions and went back to the lockdown in March 2021 due to increasing cases and deaths from COVID-19. This had again reduced fish trade and tourism activity. This oil spill case demonstrates the resilience of traditional peoples and the environment in which they live, but the real impacts on the environment and the fauna will be known clearly only after studies are carried out to understand the true consequences of the disaster. That will open the doors to compensation and, most importantly, the means to prevent future disasters.

The communities continue to demand meetings to monitor active projects, such as a project approved by the state government to obtain salvage equipment for receiving tourists

on boats, as also the acquisition of beneficial equipment such as fishing nets, hooks and long lines. "After removing the oil, even the local fishers' associations got closed," said a fisher. "We had no more meetings, not even council meetings. This pandemic stopped everything. It has been like this for over a year now. Everything got slower. When we demand something, it takes a long time to get addressed."

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The federal government suspended the investigation of the oil spill in March 2020, without any conclusions on how the disaster occurred. The fishers are frustrated by the lack of resolution of the tragedy. The causes remain unknown; lots of questions are begging for answers, including the matter of compensation for those affected. There is also the need to continuously monitor the environment and the health of the fish.

Digital inclusion

The affected communities need digital inclusion to make possible their communication and meetings. Only then will participatory decisionmaking and real democracy be possible for these communities.

For more



An Unsolved Case

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A Many-sided Munificence

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