



## CLIMATE JUSTICE AND PARTICIPATORY RESEARCH: BUILDING CLIMATE-RESILIENT COMMONS

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# Commons Governance and Climate Resilience: Intergovernmental Relationships in the Guapiruvu Community, Brazil

*Aico Nogueira*

What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to wholly dominate both it and human beings. Nothing else counts. Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths. (Horkheimer & Adorno, 2002, p. 2)

## *Introduction*

The effects of climate change, and its differentiated impacts on distinct social groups, are increasingly documented across the world (Gardiner, 2011; Shepard & Corbin-Mark, 2009; Porter et al., 2020). In this context, developing countries, which already suffer from serious problems of inequitable income distribution, low levels of education, hunger and malnutrition, poor access to healthcare, and lack of infrastructure, are also the ones that suffer most from climate change, which deepens social inequalities and further exposes the gap between rich and poor. The concept of climate justice expresses an

environmental justice response to climate change, contemplating the complex interconnections between environmental and social justice issues, and above all emphasizing the umbilical relationship between global warming and an economic system guided exclusively by growth. Studies on environmental justice movements emphasize how communities affected by climate change organize actions that mitigate its negative effects on people's lives, highlighting initiatives often developed in the interstices of society, in response to the negative effects of the current economic development model.

Examples include cooperation projects linking producers and consumers, fair trade arrangements, community gardens, alternative currencies, free open-source software, and many others, which proliferate in different parts of the world. They are based, above all, on a culture of cooperation, mutual support, shared responsibility, and cultural diversity, as well as social, economic, and environmental justice (Miller, 2010, p. 1). Among these initiatives, with particular reference to the rural areas covering most of the globe where nearly half the world's population lives, two things stand out: 1) the important role of associations and cooperativism in successful rural development projects (Develtere, 1998; Frantz, 2012; Pelegrini, Shiki, & Shiki, 2015); and 2) agro-ecology and alternative agricultural systems (Rosset, 2011; Rosset & Martínez-Torres, 2012; Wezel et al., 2009) as keys to asserting identities, safeguarding livelihoods, and defending disputed territories (Fernandes, 2008; Van der Ploeg, 2009).

Such initiatives have been particularly challenging for groups living in and around territorial areas that are protected by states for conservation or other reasons (Protected Areas or PAs), as they are usually subject to restrictive environmental laws that often have negative impacts on local people's traditional lifestyles (Andrade & Rhodes, 2012; Lane, 2001; Pretty & Smith, 2004; Wilshusen et al., 2002). In effect, PAs often reserve land-based ecological services for those living farther away from the territory, at the expense of the interests of those living closer (see Temper et al., 2020). In order to deal with these challenges, several studies have demonstrated the importance of strengthening community institutions, as a way of empowering local actors in decision-making processes to guarantee community autonomy, self-management, and access to common resources through effective inter-institutional dialogue with the official institutions that operate in and around protected areas. However, the real transformative potential of participation and empowerment of local groups has also been critically examined by

researchers, who emphasize how this can decontextualize and over-simplify local social structures (Eversole, 2003; Henry, 2004; Loker, 2000; Sesan, 2014). These groups sometimes express their agency by subverting the proposed objectives of an official or outside-determined project, showcasing their ability to mobilize their identity relationships effectively around specific issues (Gilmour et al., 2013; Sampson et al., 1997; Durham et al., 1997; Newman & Dale, 2005; Nogueira, 2018). Through this process strategies are created, and advantage taken of political opportunities, in support of their own demands for development, which are not always in line with officially defined objectives. Not widely discussed in the literature is the way some groups develop the ability to incorporate sustainability narratives in order to strengthen their dialogue with other levels of governance, eventually becoming an instrument of compliance and reproduction of the dominant agrifood or other regime. This in effect subverts or subsumes their locally grounded traditional governance, and cultural and risk-reduction strategies based in collectivism, mutual aid, and sustainable agricultural practices.

To explore these complex issues, I have conducted research in Vale do Ribeira in the State of São Paulo, Brazil (see Map 2, page 30). This area has been under various forms of environmental protection since the 1950s, as it comprises the main contiguous areas of Atlantic Rainforest remaining in the country.

My case study focuses on the Guapiruvu community in the Municipality of Sete Barras, where over the last thirty years environmental challenges and the implementation of two large conservation areas neighbouring the community (all in the context of an ongoing struggle for land ownership) have guided social processes of development. The Guapiruvu community, which includes people who have lived there for hundreds of years, has built local social organizations capable of establishing effective dialogue among themselves and with other levels of governance operating in the area; it is recognized as an effective community working towards its own development (Bernini, 2009; Grigoletto, 2018; Valentin, 2006).

In this chapter, I explore this story and how participatory research in the community has allowed me to include the viewpoints of many different community members in a relatively complex process of rural transition. The use of “environmental” discourse by some community leaders has allowed initially contentious relations with state agencies to be gradually converted into a more cooperative relationship. These community leaders’ claims to be

transitioning from conventional agriculture to agro-ecology, to take advantage of a niche urban market for agroecologically grown produce, has come to represent the peak of this process—a strategy that has become the foundation of some local organizations’ actions.

In contrast, most community members are committed to continuing the reproduction of the dominant agrifood regime, by producing for local markets where low prices are more important than an “organic” designation or agroecological production processes. Even for these farmers, the community is part of a new process of legitimation and consolidation of short, sustainable circuits of production, commercialization, and consumption. These circuits are extremely important in times of climate change for promoting agro-sustainable production, and for consolidating new patterns of responsible consumption, especially in and around large urban areas, such as the city of São Paulo (Bava, 2012; Feenstra, 2002).

This transition, with all its complexities, relies on the community’s strong social capital and the underlying commitment of its leaders to environmentally sustainable processes, with resulting benefits for the community in terms of pollution control, income generation, education, health, and infrastructure. The political strategies constructed by the community rely on their ability to communicate and organize (Levidow et al., 2014; Smith & Raven, 2012). This shows the importance of local groups’ internal structures in formulating public policies and dealing with higher levels of government, as well as the agency of local people and leaders in response to a lack of support and leadership from other public authorities.

My research draws on recent theoretical perspectives on sustainability transitions, agro-ecology, food security, multilevel governance/inter-institutional dialogue, and the participation of local communities in the management of common natural resources, especially in and near protected areas. My field work was carried out using qualitative methods, with primary and secondary data collected between September 2019 and April 2020 from three sources: published government documents and academic works, informal and semi-structured interviews, and field observations in Guapiruvu.

During visits and interviews with Guapiruvu residents and through documentary research about the community, I attempted to observe the internal organization and relations of the community with local society, society as a whole, and formal and informal institutions structuring cooperation and conflicts.

I conducted semi-structured interviews with representatives of federal, and state-government organizations present in the community, namely the National Institute of Colonization and Agrarian Reform (INCRA), the Fundação Florestal/Forest Foundation (FF) and the Intervales State Park (PEI). These interviews were organized around the following themes: 1) inter-institutional dialogue at the local level and with other levels of government, 2) the main obstacles faced by the stakeholders in these discussions/processes, 3) the main obstacles faced by the stakeholders in implementing policies, 4) the main advances and challenges in the process of converting traditional agriculture to sustainable agro-ecological systems in the territory.

### *Protected Areas (PAs), Local Communities, and Agro-Ecology*

Many areas sensitive to biodiversity loss and in need of conservation are also areas of high social vulnerability. They are generally characterized by elevated levels of poverty, repressive and unstable anti-democratic regimes, and problems linked to the struggle for land tenure (Brechin et al., 2002; Myers, 1988; Myers et al., 2000; Brüggemann et al., 1997). Often, ecologically sustainable human-land inter-relationship systems, sometimes evolved over millennia by Indigenous peoples, are under pressure from “outside” populations, extraction, and political considerations. Furthermore, these areas are frequently arenas of conflict (Ostrom, 2005), with disputes between groups representing such diverse interests as tourism, mineral and oil exploration companies, guerrilla groups, and drug cartels (Brechin et al., 2002). Such factors make these spaces a complex mixture of social, economic, and political disputes, which present further challenges for the management of environmental conservation programs. The question of who has access and rights in such spaces is therefore central.

There is a vast literature dealing with the often-contentious relationship between the management of PAs and the populations living in and around them. Researchers focus mainly on the impacts caused by conservation programs and policies on the traditional ways of life of local people, particularly regarding changes to their access to natural resources (Andrade & Rhodes, 2012; Bennett et al., 2017; Bernini 2009; Brüggemann et al. 1997; Chape et al., 2008; García-Frapolli et al., 2009; Pretty & Smith, 2004). The frequent prohibition of communities’ access to important natural resources, and even the

removal of some of these groups from their lands, has in many cases harmed rather than helped these communities, which sometimes brings the conservation programs into question (Anthony, 2007; Hamilton et al., 2000; Jim & Xu, 2002; Lane 2001).

In developing countries where there is unequal land distribution and ownership, the rural population's restricted access to resources such as water, land, energy, and environmental services builds pressure on these resources, driving social conflicts. The wealth these resources generate is often appropriated by a limited number of actors, further widening social inequities. Resource inaccessibility leads to environmental degradation in areas where local populations do have access, and to increasing inequality, constituting a persistent source of instability, and demonstrating the strong relationship between equity and sustainability (Guzmán Casado et al., 2000), which depends "critically on the institutional settings that structure interactions among agents" (Baland et al., 2018, p. 8).

Thus, the importance of local institutions, the participation of local actors in the management and conservation of biodiversity, and the transition to sustainable societies are increasingly recognized in the literature (Hagedorn, 2015; Ostrom, 1990, 2005; Pretty & Smith, 2004). These analyses show the difficulties faced when local communities are not co-participants in conservation processes (Andrade & Rhodes, 2012; Anthony, 2007; Grainger, 2003; Pretty & Smith, 2004). In these studies, especially those by Elinor Ostrom (1990, 2001, 2009a, 2009b, 2010) and her adherents, existing social dynamics, and processes that either allow or hamper the construction of appropriate institutional arrangements, designed to manage shared natural resources, have been identified in many places (Leroy, 2016; Perkins et al., 2017; Santana & Fontes Filho, 2010). However, the degree of participation of local populations in governance, as a way of ensuring better compliance with conservation policies (Wilshusen et al., 2002), and the factors that most influence communities' agreement with these actions, have been attributed generally to local specificities, especially the communities' capacity to engage in inter-institutional dialogue. The capacity of local actors to engage in discussions across levels of government is crucial for conflict resolution, especially due to the lack of legitimacy that external regulations may have, as they are often contrary to the customary practices of traditional communities (Brechtin et al., 2002). This ability to enter dialogue is at the basis of resolving conflicts in governance, which are seen as "processes of interaction and

decision-making among the actors involved in a collective problem that led to the creation, reinforcement, or reproduction of social norms and institutions” (Hufty, 2011, p. 405). Although authors also recognize difficulties, mainly due to the multiple power relations that may exist in these communities, and the great heterogeneity of the groups involved in terms of class, ethnicity, and religious and political orientation, they point to the importance of incorporating governance diversity in conservation initiatives (Brechin et al., 2002, Ostrom 1990, Ostrom et al., 1994).

## *The Guapiruvu Community and Environmental Issues in Vale do Ribeira*

Guapiruvu is in the Vale do Ribeira, a remote area strongly marked by the presence of conservation units and restrictive environmental laws. The pioneer settler families of the community, the Alves, Teixeira, and Pereira families, have struggled for recognition of their ownership rights on land they have occupied for more than one hundred years. The area is located in the buffer zone of a large state park, the Alto Ribeiro State Park.

In 1996, Guapiruvu was recognized by the non-governmental organization (NGO) Vitae Civilis<sup>1</sup> for its leadership related to disadvantaged groups in the area, especially dispossessed families, and the community was selected to lead an Agenda 21<sup>2</sup> pilot project to create local solutions for global socio-environmental problems.<sup>3</sup> One of the first initiatives was the creation of the Solidarity Economy and Sustainable Development Association of Guapiruvu, known as AGUA, in 1997.

The launch of Agenda 21, in 1998, also led to a closer relationship between the Guapiruvu community and public authorities, addressing provision of basic services that are theoretically guaranteed by law, such as income-generation projects and activities related to eco-tourism and environmental preservation. Following its creation in 1997, AGUA started a series of programs such as eco-tourism activities, production and commercialization of medicinal plants, courses on agroforestry, support for the creation of the municipal secretariat for rural development, the mapping of tourist trails in the PEI, the creation of guided activities, and fundraising from various sources for activities aimed at environmental sustainability. In 2000, AGUA started supporting the creation of a rural settlement in the area, where the community’s colonial history could be recognized (Grigoletto, 2018). AGUA



was thus responsible for bridging the gap with other institutions outside the community, such as local public authorities and the agencies of the federal and state government, which allowed for the formulation of public policy demands and support for sustainable development in the area. Also in 2000, AGUA, with the support of the Forestry Institute and Vitae Civilis, presented a proposal to INCRA to create a sustainable development project (PDS) in the area, using alternative forms of rural settlement developed by INCRA in the Amazon region to mitigate land conflicts (Paula & Silva, 2008).

Proximity to the park largely determines the community's relationship with the environment and its forms of local social organization, profoundly impacting the traditional practices of the local groups, as they are prevented from making their livelihood from the protected forest and land. Access to traditional resources has been limited by checkpoints and inspections carried out by the police inside and outside the park, seeking to prevent poaching of prohibited species and animal-hunting, especially the illegal extraction of *juçara* (heart of palm, *Euterpe edulis*) for family consumption and mainly for sale. Given the importance of the *juçara* tree, whose fruits are essential for the diet of birds and mammals in the Brazilian Atlantic Rainforest ecosystem, and due to the fact that after the extraction of the heart of palm the tree is totally discarded and does not regenerate, its removal became an environmental crime in Brazil. Some local residents who had depended on heart-of-palm extraction became targets of repression and even arrests (Bernini, 2009), while also deprived of one of their main means of subsistence.

In Guapiruvu, the interaction between local institutions and federal and state bodies happens through the various official agencies representing the community. At the state level, the main regulatory body for the conservation units is the FF of the State of São Paulo. It also manages the PEI, and its remit, as stated in its management plan, is that it “establishes specific rules regulating the occupation and use of land in its buffer zone and suggests ways to integrate the unit into the Continuum of Paranapiacaba<sup>4</sup>; promoting the socioeconomic integration of the surrounding communities and valuing their traditional knowledge as principles of governance” (Furlan et al., 2008). Federal actions in the community are carried out by INCRA, the agency responsible for the division of plots, selection and settlement of families, land credit, construction of houses, opening of roads, electricity, and technical assistance in the rural settlements. Once settled, the families in the community cannot sell, lease, rent, lend, or give the plots to private individuals.

## *Community's Socio-Productive Structure, Agro-Ecology, and Interinstitutional Dialogue*

As indicated by the classic work of Ostrom (1998), the cooperation mechanisms and the internal structuring of the community are key to the communication channels built by the subjects with other institutional levels. Hence, to understand how the process of internal community organization and dialogue with other institutions take place in Guapiruvu, it is important to analyse the community's leadership.

An analysis of the narratives collected from the community, as an essential source of shared mental representations (Hoff & Walsh, 2018), revealed subtle aspects of the existing social classification system shaping local organizations and determining leaders. Within this structure, six basic criteria are used by community inhabitants to mentally categorize each other within the community and to allocate everyone to a cognitive model that works not only to order, rank, and map each person in the broader group, but also to guide their likely reactions to specific situations. These criteria are: 1) whether people are born in the district (insiders or outsiders), 2) their socio-economic level (class), 3) their educational level, 4) the size of their property, 5) whether the agrarian reform allows them to be “settled” or not, 6) whether they use conventional agrarian practices or support a move towards sustainable development.

Two groups of leaders stand out in the community. On the one hand, there are those who are considered outsiders, meaning they were not born in the district and have no links to the pioneer families in the area, but instead acquired lands more recently and are linked, above all, to large banana producers in the region. They tend to have a higher economic, educational, and cultural level, and support social inclusion and agro-ecological transition. On the other hand, there are other leaders who are natives of Guapiruvu, generally have lower socio-economic, social, and educational levels, were mainly settled through the agrarian reform, and are thus part of the largest portion of the community's population. They tend to advocate for increasing investment in traditional agriculture and strongly criticize the high costs of organic production, lack of government support for farming activities, and absence of nearby markets.

The community's local institutions end up expressing not only the interests of these specific groups, but also the socio-educational and economic

divisions of the neighbourhood and different views of development. AGUA is the locus of action and expression of ideas led by the local “elite,” and COOPERAGUA is the space controlled by the poorest, oriented toward the consolidation and reproduction of conventional forms of development.

Although the first group is a minority and is composed of “outsiders” in the community, they are responsible for much of the local social organization and agro-ecological production. In addition, they are the main agents of interaction with higher-level government structures, and the main agents of the community’s resilience, ecological transition, and environmental justice.

AGUA became responsible for the commercialization of the neighbourhood’s organic production and contributed greatly to setting up a system of selling the family agricultural organic products of the town of Sete Barras and integrating it with the growing alternative agri-food systems in large urban centres. COOPERAGUA, on the other hand, is responsible for marketing the community’s traditional agricultural production. With COOPERAGUA as a model, and with the support of the municipal council for rural development of Sete Barras, in 2011 the Family Agriculture Cooperative of Sete Barras (COOPAFASB) was created. Its objective is to promote the solidarity economy, inspired by the principles of self-management, cooperation, economic viability, equal relations, and sustainability (Singer, 2002, 2008), by seeking market opportunities and supplying products to institutional and conventional markets.

## *Conclusion*

The literature on transitions from current models of conventional rural development and agriculture to more sustainable rural development emphasizes the vital role of the state in facilitating this process.

However, this study shows that in the presence of elements such as local capacity for inter-institutional dialogue, social capital, and community agency (regardless of the community’s socio-economic and cultural divisions), people can overcome the obstacles brought about by the absence of official support while creating alternatives for the production and marketing of agro-sustainable products.

The experience of agro-ecological transition initiated in Guapiruvu surpassed the limits of the community, influencing sustainable agriculture practices in the broader municipality and contributing to the strengthening

of an agrifood system that transcends Sete Barras, extending to the niches of consumer markets in large urban centres in the state of São Paulo.

In Guapiruvu, strong community social capital and agency, combined with an efficient appropriation of sustainability discourse, acts to reduce conflict, and facilitate inter-institutional dialogue. However, the community's socio-economic and cultural divisions make local institutions a reflection of these internal separations, whose actions result in a double movement. On the one hand, the community subscribes to conventional patterns of production and commercialization through growth and strong insertion in the markets; on the other hand, it also expresses resistance to the deepening of market forces, as stated by Polanyi (1980).

Examples such as the Guapiruvu community show us the creative power of local groups to promote environmental justice and social inclusion, amidst the uncertainties and adversities arising from climate change and an absence of government support for sustainable development initiatives. One way to overcome these problems may lie not in the easiest and most immediate option, conventional agriculture, but in a process of changes to sustainable production, marketing, and consumption practices based on rural/urban partnerships—social solidarity.

The interdisciplinary and participatory research approach, through collective self-reflection, cooperation, and participation, associated with ethnographic research, semi-structured interviews, document analysis, and focus groups, was fundamental in obtaining this understanding of the complex situation in Guapiruvu. This approach allowed for inclusion of local social processes, which are crucially important in commons theory. Local people don't often have an opportunity to reflect or comment on their own social processes, such as the complex networks of local social classification and their effects on the management of local social organizations, which centrally determine the community's ongoing socio-economic-ecological transition.

## NOTES

- 1 For an overview of Vitae Civilis' work in Guapiruvu, see the video: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q3n53Hg3X-k>.
- 2 See: <https://acervo.socioambiental.org/sites/default/files/documents/22D00056.pdf>.
- 3 See: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>.
- 4 The Ecological Continuum of Paranapiacaba is an Atlantic Forest corridor of more than 120,000 hectares, formed by the Intervalles Park, the Carlos Botelho State Park, the Alto Ribeira Tourist State Park (PETAR), the Xitué Ecological Station, the Serra do Mar Environmental Protection Area, and the Atlantic Forest Biosphere Reserve.

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