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The forced displacements of communities around the enterprises cause depression and suicide. Consequences last for years after the constructions

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A survey conducted by the National Electric Energy Agency (Aneel) in 2015 found out that Brazil is among the 24 countries that produce 90% of all the available energy in the world, being considered the largest hydroelectric potential. According to [data collected](#) in 2018 by Mariana Zanarotti Shimako, undergraduate student at the University of São Paulo (USP), the country has 12% of the planet's surface fresh water and 12 watersheds. About 70% of the energy we use comes from these hydroelectric power stations, and there are over 2,000 dams spread across different states that are required for energy production. They are located mainly in rural areas where entire communities are forced to leave their homes – which will soon be seized by water – behind. However, it is not only the families that have had their homes submerged that feel the changes in the environment. The changes caused by the dam construction affect a larger area around it, far beyond the portion that was flooded. People who remain close to the hydroelectric power stations suffer from geographical isolation and lack of supplies, as well as loss of personal connections with community members who have left the area to live elsewhere. From extensive field research around the Itá Dam, Professor of Psychology at the Feevale University [Carmem Giongo](#) points out the consequences that last for many years after the dams were built. The work was part of her doctoral thesis, submitted to the Graduate Program in Psychology at the Federal University of Rio Grande do Sul (UFRGS) and supervised by Professor [Jussara Maria Rosa Mendes](#).



Study involved communities living near Itá Dam - Photo: Wikimedia Commons

Located in the southern region of Brazil, in the states of Rio Grande do Sul and Santa Catarina, and using the Uruguay River for energy production, the Itá Dam was already active for 19 years when Giongo began her research. The researcher spent most of 2016 (from February to December) with the communities living around the reservoir and conducted interviews with traders, farmers, health professionals and politicians to analyze the situation of the region years after the dam was built. The motivation behind her project comes from the disregard for the lives of these residents, proved by studies that pointed out that only 10% of the people forced to evacuate have been properly indemnified in each construction. "It is a field full of environmental conflict and violation of human rights that has been trivialized," declares Giongo. For Mendes, families are not being properly advised by the state and are not given voice during the process. "They are told that progress is coming, which will benefit the country," she says. While some people are removed and lose their homes, others end up leaving due to fear and uncertainty of their situations. The loss of its roots and social ties with their neighbors causes great suffering, increasing levels of depression and suicide in the region. Even if environmental laws are enforced, there is not enough legislation to protect citizens under such risk. "What we are experiencing is a lack of investment in social security," says Mendes.

Despite the progress promises made to the residents of the flooded lands and to those in the surroundings, Giongo reveals that today it is proven that these constructions do not bring development to the place, it is precisely the opposite. Since the affected communities are primarily agricultural, food production is reduced as the level of diseases increase. The indemnities are unequal and the population has no participation in the discussions. "Those who stay and are not reached end up in isolated areas without access to public policies," she states. The consequences are varied, ranging from social, psychological and environmental impact to economic and cultural impact. Whole communities in all their complexity and interrelationships end up undone. Although there are many studies on these cases, the researcher also points out that little advancement has been made in terms of public policies to protect those who are affected. For Mendes, social laws are at odds with environmental laws, and work needs to be done to meet the needs of these families. "There is a trivialization of justice in the construction of hydroelectric power stations. We must raise awareness and give visibility to the social construction of this trivialization of human life, to those affected and to the environment," she says.

The research shows numerous problems arising from forced displacement and from changes in nature caused by dam constructions. Mendes remarks that the loss of social ties causes depression in both the residents who stay and those who move to other places. Families that remain are out of reach, lacking resources and even buses that reach the community. Instead of the promised progress, the lack of access came. They can no longer fish or plant, which were once their means of survival. Churches and schools are abandoned. Giongo also exposes that these residents experience periods of great insecurity, detaching themselves from the communities and suffering from the loss of contact with the river. "This water is often no longer accessible to people," she reports. There is a great feeling of injustice that comes along with depression. For Giongo, these sufferings are associated with the experience of environmental damage and social injustice that afflict them. Although their research had the Itá Dam as the object of study, the same scene and the violation of human rights are repeated in all constructions of the same kind in Brazil. "People's homes are invaded even before the dam construction starts when they are not part of the process. They are not treated as citizens, they are not allowed to take effective participation," explains Mendes.

Both researchers believe that, trying to minimize the damage done to the population, it would require greater respect for residents, allowing them to participate in a process that will change their lives so dramatically. Mendes says that all possible environmental and health risks should be analyzed before dams are installed. "Capital has the ability to exploit the blood and life of workers and the environment. The voracity for profit is what drives it," she manifests. Mendes believes that corruption has to be eradicated so that one can count on effective surveillance and protection of people's lives. According to Giongo, there are several strategies that could help residents in situations like this. The Dam-Affected Movement (MAB), which exists for over 30 years and which she is part of, has made some advances in the area. Specialist in community organization, the movement operates in over 20 states to assist those affected. For her, one of the most basic steps would be to improve legislation to ensure people's participation in the decision-making process and secure the rights of those affected. Not only that, it is necessary to broaden the concept of affected people. By law, it is only the ones who have had their homes flooded. However, those who live nearby also suffer damage. Nineteen years after the construction of the Itá Dam, people who still live in the surroundings reveal that the worst problems came much later, with isolation and lack of access to basic goods such as water. "These families need monitoring and redress for many years, not only while the dam is being built," says Giongo. She believes that public agencies need to be more involved in accompanying these families, helping them with indemnities and clear information about what is coming and which rights they have.

However, these strategies only minimize suffering, do not end it. While an effective relocation could make the situation easier, it does not erase the pain of those who've lost their roots. "The issue is broader than that, we do detach the environment from people's lives," says Mendes. Even those far from the dam site will suffer the consequences of these changes. Although hydropower is considered clean, both researchers believe it is not the best option. "There should be other alternatives that do not have such a high social cost," she points out. It is an evil that affects many workers, many people. For Giongo, there are energy alternatives that are less harmful to the environment, such as solar energy, which has almost no state support, or public policies. There are still many hydroelectric power stations that are planned or already under construction. Living with the communities around Itá for a year was an eye-opening experience for Giongo, who experienced for herself the isolation and lack of access that a dam of such size can cause. Despite the suffering that is already caused today and cases of dam disruptions such as Mariana and Brumadinho, both in Minas Gerais (Southeast Brazil), today there is a political movement to favor environmental licensing. "Sometimes the state is the biggest violator of rights because of the laws flexibilization. Despite the latest catastrophic events, we are moving in the opposite direction from what it should be," says Giongo.

Invited by MAB, the researcher was present in Brumadinho after the event, seeing firsthand what happens when these dams fail. Assisting families and communities, she worked by listening to those affected and comforting them when necessary, but mainly by guiding them about their rights. The movement helped communities to get organized, to make a list of what they needed and to ensure that amendments were made accordingly to the victims. According to her, the two most affected communities are being assisted by the government, NGOs and social movements. The mud, which in fact is toxic tailings, has already reached more than 24 miles in length and is affecting more distant *ribeirinho* communities (people who live by the river) that still remain uninformed, and keeps polluting their rivers and intoxicating them. Vale, the company responsible for the dam, offered only water and food to those affected. While they are trying to negotiate, Public Prosecutor's Office is advising people not to sign anything until the negotiations are completed, so they will not be deprived of their rights in the long run. She says that, to date of the interview, company representatives have not attended any of the meetings, and people do not have access to information. "They are falling short, especially in the process of offering something that can minimally repair the damage," she says.

For Giongo, close, proper supervision of these dams is needed, as well as a better environmental public policy. According to what she saw and studied, she believes that we lack a regulatory authority to fight corruption. The researcher points out that engineers were coerced into signing terms attesting to the safety of the dam and declaring that the government needs to be more careful to prevent the recurrence of events like this. She also reports that residents have an interest in forming their own oversight committees to demand that everything will be correct and emergency plans will be in place when needed. Giongo experienced the chaos that had engulfed Brumadinho for seven days. "This only shows how much we need to advance in environmental policies, respect and participation of people in these policies design. Brumadinho is a city that depends entirely on a venture; there are no alternatives. People are abandoned in such places," she states. The environmental damage is irreversible, and most families have not even found the bodies of their deceased relatives. For the researcher, this is far from an accident and could have been avoided. "There are very safe ways to build dams, but they are not built there because they chose what was cheaper. It's a crime, for sure," she affirms.

Thesis

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Scientific papers

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