

In Bolsonaro's Brazil, Dams Are Ticking Time Bombs

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Today is the fourth anniversary of the Fundão tailings (mine waste) [dam disaster](#) in Mariana, a town in the South-eastern Brazilian state of Minas Gerais. The Fundão dam and the associated iron ore mine, called Samarco, is operated by a mining company of the same name – owned by British-Australian company BHP and Brazilian mining giant Vale.

The collapse of the dam which [held back toxic waste](#) from the mine on November 5, 2015, killed 19 people and devastated everything in its wake with the release of [48.7 million cubic metres of toxic sludge](#) into the 530-mile long Rio Doce, affecting an area of the Atlantic Ocean over 370 miles away from the dam.

Widely [referred](#) to as Brazil's worst environmental disaster, the Samarco disaster also displaced as many as 1.4 million people who lived in villages next to the river. Four years later, the devastating impacts are still being felt, and Samarco hasn't rebuilt one house.

In January this year, another tailings dam collapsed near the town of [Brumadinho](#). It was just 75 miles away from the Fundão dam collapse, also in Minas Gerais. The Córrego do Feijão iron ore mine and dam were solely owned by Vale this time. Some 270 people were killed, mostly workers who were in the canteen upstream of the dam when the collapse happened.

What happened in both Samarco and Brumadinho were not tragedies, but were the consequences of violent extractivism – the colonial and destructive manner in which common ecological goods are exploited. In both cases, affected communities are deeply traumatised. They are seeking justice, accountability and reparations.

Open for business

In October, I travelled to Geneva for negotiations on the [UN Binding Treaty](#); this proposal calls on governments to develop legally-binding rules which would hold transnational corporations for corporate abuses across the globe, under international human rights law.

From Geneva, I attended BHP's annual general meeting in London, to make plain what is happening in communities four years on from the dam collapse in Mariana. But everything about this space was violent, and the board had already prepared to dispute the community [demands](#) which I voiced, such as for affected people to participate fully in the reparations process, and for research to be done on the environmental impact of the collapse.

Brazil's president Jair Bolsonaro believes that the companies themselves are solving the problems, and in turn has not placed any government ministers in roles to oversee the repair effort, but has instead appointed people with no real influence or power. His government is leaving all the power to the companies, so, in Brazil, the state has no oversight over such operations.

The extractivist model

Brazil is now advancing other types of extraction, including deforestation, agro-industry and mega-dams. Bolsonaro's aim to 'open up the Amazon' in a violent expansion of agribusiness and mining is leading to deforestation and massively impacting the Amazon's rivers, which are being damned to provide energy for mega-projects. What is happening in the Amazon, with the fires and ecological destruction, is entirely connected to the arrival of corporate power in the region. Bolsonaro's government is [trying to expel](#) the indigenous communities who live there so that it can impose other forms of control and appropriation of the resources of the Amazon.

Lots of different minerals have been discovered in Brazil and new technologies have been developed to take advantage of iron deposits and other minerals. So companies are making mines deeper and that leads to more toxic waste, greater amounts of water to wash the minerals, and more manual labour to exploit. This model of mining and storing the waste in dams has been used for many years in Brazil, but it is a technology that is no longer used in many countries. It is based on high energy and water consumption, and these are also imposed in regions that are of low social indexes.

Mining companies often do not often sufficiently assess where to locate the tailings dams geographically so that they are safer for everyone. Instead they put the dams where construction is easier and cheaper. But these options are not cheap when the dams collapse because companies do not carry out seismic control studies of the region. In the case of Samarco, inadequate drainage and mistakes in depositing the mining waste left the dam so unstable that just three [minor seismic shocks led to its collapse](#).

A time bomb

Bolsanaro's government has made environmental legislation more flexible to boost the economy and shrink the size of the state. This freedom is allowing companies to exploit land and workers more easily, boosting their profit margins.

More than nine tailings dams have already collapsed in Brazil. Since 2002, every two years a mining dam has collapsed. Despite this, there are few officials carrying out risk control to prevent these collapses, and when they do, there is little investment in sustainable technologies which could increase public safety. All of these highly polluting tailings dams are riskily positioned above towns with large populations.

For communities affected by these crimes, the most important demand is access to justice. There is a large asymmetry of powers between communities vis-à-vis corporations. The second is reparations in line with international frameworks or standards of human rights.

The organisation I work for, Movement of People Affected by Dams (MAB), is lobbying to change the legislative frameworks for those affected, to recognize communities' needs for social development and for access to their rights. These points need to be recognised before the construction of mega-projects.



Eliene Almeida, head teacher at the municipal school in Bento Rodrigues district which was covered with mud after a dam (owned by Vale SA and BHP Billiton Ltd) burst. She is pictured carrying her child at a hotel housing displaced villagers, in Mariana, Brazil. November 9, 2015.

Women are leading the struggle

At MAB we work a lot with women, the main struggle in these cases is that people need to be recognized as affected, and in the case of women it is more difficult because they have many informal jobs and are under patriarchal control.

Mining companies always award reparations to the head of the family, usually men, thus limiting women's financial autonomy. At the same time, women look at reparation policies far beyond monetary compensation; they consider all of the other impacts, such as health and contaminated water, and how the community can manage these problems to guarantee the well-being of everybody affected.

In general, Brazilian society opposes women leaders more. In recent years, the defenders in MAB who have suffered the most attacks have been women. Dam disasters generate increased social vulnerability; including higher rates of alcohol and drug abuse and domestic violence – often following displacement, loss of livelihoods, land grabbing and ecological impacts.

This year on March 22, World Water Day, comrade [Dilma Ferreira Silva](#) was killed by a large landowner, who [according to](#) the police, was involved in illegal logging. She lived in a rural, isolated settlement in Tucuui, Pará state, which was affected by a mega-dam many years ago, with 32,000 Brazilians displaced. Dilma was fighting to improve access to public services in her community.

We must protect human and land rights defenders and develop binding legislation to ensure that Samarco and Brumadinho disasters, which have been repeated the world over – most recently in Siberia when a tailings [dam collapsed](#) at a gold mine on October 19 – are never permitted to happen again.

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