

Case Study: The Effects of Displacements and Ecological Destruction – The Example of the Guarani in Mato Grosso do Sul, Brazil¹

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Development cooperation (DC) is only indirectly related to the situation described here. Therefore it will be dealt with only as a fringe element in causing the conflict. This conflict can be classified within “Type 2;” i.e., it is resource- and ethnically-based.

Some facts about the Guarani peoples: The name Guarani describes, besides the language, the people of three Indian tribes who reside in eastern Paraguay, northern Argentina, and southern and southwestern Brazil, as well as in Litoral Paulista. Altogether they number approximately 80,000 people. Here we will focus on the situation of two tribes, the Ñandéva and the Kaiowá/Paĩ Tavyterã in the southwest of the Brazilian state of Mato Grosso do Sul (MS). Today they number about 26,000 people.² The Guarani once inhabited a completely forested area of subtropical forest with very fertile soil, which has recently been classified as Mata Atlântica. The Guarani identify themselves as forest Indians, calling themselves "those from the forest" (*ka'aygua*). They are excellent farmers, growing corn, manioc, sweet potatoes, beans, pumpkins, peanuts and other crops, and complementing their diet with hunting and gathering.

Their traditional homeland covered about 6,000,000 hectares (15,000,000 acres) at the beginning of this century, although by then their autonomy was already being disturbed by wars and the industrial use of the Mate plant. In the 1930s, sedentary settlement by Brazilians began to slowly encroach on the area from the north. This also marked the beginning of conflict for the Indians. The agency charged with protecting the Brazilian Indians at that time, known as the SPI, planned to put the entire Indian population into eight reservations of 3,600 hectares (8,892 acres) each. The SPI entirely lacked clear information about Indian population and habitat, mainly because the Guarani avoided contact. All reservations were created by the late 1940s, and they were all smaller than originally planned. They were populated by force, roughly to the same degree that the Guarani were displaced from areas enclosed by the large landowners.

The conflict began to escalate in the early 1970s. The mechanization of agriculture accelerated the clear-cutting of forests and the mass displacement of Indians. The

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² In the 70's, I worked with the Paĩ Tavyterã in east Paraguay with a development project (PPT - Projecto Paĩ Tavyterã) focused on the securing of land rights, health, and information. Since 1996 I have been working with the same people on the Brazilian side (known as the Kaiowá in Brazil) and with Ñandéva EAG - Equipe de Acompanhamento dos Guarani do Mato Grosso do Sul).

Guarani were needed for the massive clearing work, but afterwards they were pushed off onto the reservations. On the whole, this process was completed by the mid-1980s. The entire state of MS had by then been completely deforested. The traditional settlement areas of the Guarani today are used predominantly for cattle ranching. African pasture grasses were imported to support the growing cattle industry. These grasses are extremely aggressive plants. They cover every inch of open ground, can only be kept under control with herbicides, and are now considered an ineradicable problem.

At present the conflict seems to have stagnated, but we still cannot speak of a de-escalation. The Guarani managed to support themselves physically, and they are also still able to put up a sort of resistance – mostly by pulling back into themselves, and only seldom in the form of outer aggression. However, they have had virtually no opportunities to develop new life perspectives for themselves within this destroyed world.

At the time of the military dictatorship towards the end of the 1970s, two small NGOs³ began to support the Guarani in their land rights movement. The reservations were by then already overpopulated, even though many small groups of Guarani were living hidden in small niches of land which belonged to the large land estates (*fazendas*). Because they were afraid of eviction by these new “owners,” they attempted to avoid drawing too much attention to their problems. Traditionally antagonistic groups were also forced to share reservations, which has added to the social tensions. With the efforts of non-governmental organizations and thanks to increasing international pressure to acknowledge Indian rights, fifteen additional reservation areas, known as “Áreas Indígenas,” were regained starting in the mid-1980s through 1997. These are all in different stages of the legal process, and only half of the cases have been finalized. The more or less officially recognized settlements in MS number twenty-three communities with 26,000 people living on a total of 50,000 hectares. (123,5000 acres). By comparison, the Paĩ-Tavyterã on the Paraguayan side of the border, a tribe of 10,000 members, were able to acquire 58,000 hectares (143,000 acres) since 1973. Per capita, that is 3 times as much land as their neighbors across the border.

And now we shall come to the effects of the displacements and the intense ecological destruction:

Most of the communities can engage in rudimentary agriculture. Because there is not enough space for them to practice traditional plant rotation, the soil is being farmed over-intensively. The African prairie grasses, which quickly cover any ground left uncultivated for even the shortest period of time, also impoverish the soils. Once a field has been left uncultivated, the only way to make it workable again is with the use of a tractor. The Brazilian bureau of Indian affairs, FUNAI,

³ PKÑ - Projeto Kaiowá Nandéva an anthropologically oriented organization, 1978-1991 and CIMI - Conselho Indigenista Missionário, an organization related to the Catholic Church.

provides tractors in some cases. However, until recently this was only under the (actually illegal) condition that they be exchanged for the last few remaining trees on the reservations. The fields are not plowed often enough, and no leveling lines are set, so that the mechanically plowed fields end up eroding very quickly. Some communities have been pushed onto sandy and infertile land. They keep a small number of chickens and some pigs. Now and then the Guarani get cows given to them, but raising cows doesn't really suit them, and their success at it is very limited. They also periodically receive hybrid seeds, which become quite unproductive after just two to three years. In the meantime they lose their traditional, resistant seed stocks. Wild fruits and wild game, except for a few armadillos, no longer exist.

After the land clearing work of the 1970s and 1980s, the seasonal work on the sugar cane plantations became the most important source of income for the natives. The men go to work at distant plantations about three or four times a year for an average of two months. The families stay behind. This takes its toll on relationships, especially among the young, making them unstable. The social fabric is further weakened, and they have more and more difficulties in successfully carrying out decision-making and conflict-resolution processes. Ambitious political leaders are mostly "bought off" by FUNAI. For some time now the state has been providing food (a so-called *sesta básica* = basic food basket) to the hungry to avoid the threat of starvation. Of course, to keep these subsidies coming it is necessary to keep up good relations with FUNAI.

Now we come to the Guarani state of cultural affairs. Like all forest natives, the ecosystem heavily influenced their conception of the world and their religious life. These aspects of their lives have completely disintegrated, since the content of their wisdom and the basis of their rituals can no longer find a living relationship with the environment. The forest is no longer there. Because of the massive cultural and environmental collapse, people no longer feel a calling to become *shamans*. Herbal medicine is still being practiced to some extent, but without the herbs which grow in the forest. The same is true for the traditional spiritual healing practices of the Guarani. There are less and less healers and even less newcomers among the young. The only ritual still being practiced is the corn festival, a type of thanksgiving harvest festival.

The Guarani nonetheless strongly identify themselves in terms of their religious life and the values derived from it, just as they did before. Missionary work among the Guarani has been increasing, mostly from new, more or less fundamentalist sects. However, they have retained a strong connection to their "way of being" and their "holy customs," and they do derive a lot of resistance from this identity. Guarani alliances with missions are generally for pragmatic reasons. However, the Pentecostal Mission (*Pentacostales*) has won increased influence in some communities in the past few years.

The fact that the Guarani as individuals and as a community have suffered under the events of the past years is manifest in the epidemic of suicides, which started in the early 1980s. Within the context of this phenomenon, I would urgently point out that it is very important to pay careful attention to how suicides are reported by the media and dealt with. Studies have shown that a carefree, and especially a sensationalist reporting of such events leads to an increase in suicides among the readers, viewers, and listeners of the media. This occurred to the Guarani in 1995. When the local press reported about suicides at length, the number of Guarani suicides more than doubled.

The suicides are mostly committed by hanging, often from the branches of shrubs and while kneeling. Herbicides and insecticides are also used. Approximately half of the suicides could be prevented. In many cases people who are rescued no longer recall their actions, which suggests that these mostly occur in a state of “diminished capacity.” The Guarani interpret suicide as a form of communicable disease brought about by a demon. Therefore it has become a big taboo, about which one should avoid talking. Suicides occur mostly among the young, and often in series among family or friends. In the 1990s the number of suicides averaged between 0.1 percent of the population (approximately 25 people) up to a maximum of 0.22 percent. Suicides occur in only half of the communities. The community with the most cases averages 1.5 percent of the population annually. The suicides are used by FUNAI and a regional NGO as a political issue. It has been suggested to the Guarani, at least indirectly, that they should threaten mass suicide as a way of improving their bargaining power on land claims.

In general the suicides could be interpreted as their reaction to the violence from the outside world, to the massive destruction of their ecosystem and the displacement from their homeland. Suicide is a reaction, seen in many cultures, to extreme powerlessness. Most of the attempts to study this phenomenon have been unprofessional and questionably executed, consisting more in assumptions and projections than in convincing explanations. Since 1997, the Paĩ-Tavyterã on the Paraguayan side of the border have been able to contain the epidemic using traditional methods. We may safely assume that the Guarani have the potential to use their self-healing methods, in combination with measures to soothe the conflict-ridden state of affairs, as an effective strategy in Brazil.

The measures necessary for a de-escalation are relatively easy to list:

- first of all, an adequate and timely guarantee of the territorial rights granted to the Guarani in the Brazilian constitutional amendment of 1988;
- cooperation between the indigenous population and outside experts in developing economic models, especially for the agricultural use of their territories;
- a suitable health care system (The number of people with tuberculosis has been increasing in the last few years. One reason for that could be that the Guarani are increasingly frightened of the only hospital that can treat this disease);

- educational and informative programs which have been adapted to their real needs.

The largest obstacles which hinder these developments are:

- the Brazilian government's relative lack of political will to implement the rights of indigenous peoples, particularly when this conflicts with the interests of major landowners;
- a lack of readiness on the part of Brazilian experts to carry out the (admittedly often laborious) measures which are needed;
- regulatory factors in development cooperation work, which make the financing of such projects increasingly difficult (e.g., the increasing pressure to provide short-term effects, extreme organizational planning pressures, tendencies towards one-sidedness, pressures to support measures which nurture the market economy, the lack of leeway for supporting small experiments and initiatives by the "target group" that could lead to self-made solutions, and the increasing complexity of petitions for project grants);
- the "ossification" of the Guarani.

In the 1970s I got to know the Guarani as self-confident and eloquent people with a critical consciousness. They were able to put together and present a concept for a project, one which has proven its value up to the present day, without ever having heard of development cooperation (in Paraguay they have remained, up to this today, monolingual and predominantly illiterate). Their well-balanced, critical view of the society surrounding them, their strong resistance, and their openness to trying out new and unknown ideas were deeply impressive. Even then, they suffered intensely from being displaced, from new illnesses and acute discrimination. In those days, however, the forest had not yet been cut down.

Today, on the Brazilian side of the border, many of these traits can only be found in rudiments, if at all. Only recently have I noticed the apparent lack of perspective and reflection on events of the last decades, or an overall inability to articulate visions of the future – these being symptoms of a collective trauma. These types of reactions are also to be found, on an individual level, among survivors of the Holocaust and their children. The challenge now for subsequent stages of DC work is in finding a way of dealing more consciously with this state of helplessness among the Indians.

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