
The Amazon Summit: Extractivism and violence in the name of the “bioeconomy” and of “sustainability”

On August 8 and 9, 2023, the Brazilian city of Belém hosted the Amazon Summit, an uncommon gathering that brought together the presidents of Brazil, Colombia, Peru, Bolivia, Ecuador, Venezuela, Guyana and Surinam to discuss the region’s questions. A key agenda item, among others, was the main motive for the meeting: the urgent challenge of combating deforestation.

The Summit resulted in the Belém Declaration, where the presidents suggest two lines of action. The first is promoting “sustainable development”; the second is the “full protection” or “preservation” of the Amazon region, with the target of “zero deforestation” by 2030. In one of the sentences in the Declaration the presidents state that they intend to “fight deforestation” and, at the same time, “eradicate and halt the advance of *illegal* natural resource extraction activities” [emphasis added].

Following this line of reasoning, the Declaration seems to suggest that there would be no problems if corporations or other actors involved in extractivism in mining, oil, timber and agribusiness, or the large scale hydro-electric power plants, highways, railways and ports that the extractivist model needs, conducted their activities legally, with up-to-date licenses.

But the reality of the Amazon region demonstrates the exact opposite. The abovementioned sectors connected with the model of industrial extractivism are notorious drivers of deforestation. When conducted illegally they only tend to increase their destructive and violent impacts. The Belém Declaration, fails to even mention these causes, let alone analyze their serious impacts on the territories of indigenous peoples, riverine populations, and traditional and peasant communities.

The stark reality is that in the name of “sustainable development” the governments of the Amazon region continue to provide incentives to extractivism. Owing to this, they do not admit committing themselves to structural measures that break with the extractivist model, like ceasing oil extraction in the Amazon region, as proposed by one of the presidents who took part in the meeting. For this reason, the very concept of “sustainable development” has become an underlying, indirect cause of deforestation. It means that when the presidents call for more “sustainable development” in the Belém Declaration, in practice they are also calling for more deforestation.

At present, it is hard to find a destructive sector in the Amazon region that does not term itself “sustainable”: “sustainable” forest management, “sustainable” soy beans, “sustainable” palm oil, “sustainable” mining, everything has become “sustainable”. The sectors also use other artifices, such as “quality seals” issued by voluntary “sustainability” certifiers.

Amazon Dialogues and the bioeconomy

In the days leading up to the Summit, thousands of people, including many indigenous people, gathered in Belém for an event called “Amazon Dialogues”, an initiative of the Brazilian government itself, claiming to intend to encourage civil society participation in the Summit. However, the content

of the proposals and reflections handed in, in the form of letters, was not included in the final declaration.

At the same time, what was notable about these “Dialogues” was the strong presence of major conservationist NGOs that make a habit of using such spaces to emphasize concepts and new narratives. In Belém, they talked a lot about the “bioeconomy” and the idea of promoting a “living forest”, in a reference to the Amazon forest itself.

“Living forest” is an expression that sounds nice, but also sounds weird. After all, which forest would not be alive? It reminds one of another term these same NGOs have propagated: forest standing. “Forest standing? I’ve never seen a forest lying down,” said a community leader once, upon hearing the term.

The “forest standing” symbolizes well the vision that the promoters of the bioeconomy – large scale transnationals responsible for the destruction of the Amazon region, as well as the big conservationist NGOs – have of the forest: an opportunity for new business deals, like the sale of carbon credits that benefit polluting companies, now “carbon neutral”, at the same time they re-christen their “old” extractive business activities as part of the “green economy”, producing “biofuels” and expanding mining for the “green transition” of the economy.

The promoters of the bioeconomy seek to ally with governments and major organizations of indigenous peoples and traditional populations. They make invitations to closed-door events with few participants. For example, in January 2023, the governor of Pará state, Helder Barbalho, attended the World Economic Forum in Davos to present his state’s “Bioeconomy Plan” to the elites of global capital – a plan formulated by conservationist NGO TNC, by the way. (1) In June, the “Pan-Amazon Bioeconomy Conference” took place in Rio de Janeiro, with the participation of billionaire Jeff Bezos’ Earth Fund, the World Bank, WWF and also the regional Amazon indigenous organization COICA, among others. (2) In August, the “Amazon and New Economies International Conference” was held. It was supported, among others, by the Pará state government and by Vale, (3) one of the world’s largest mining corporations, responsible for two of the most serious environmental crimes in Brazil’s history, in Brumadinho and Mariana, Minas Gerais state.

Despite not using the word “bioeconomy”, the Belém Declaration summarizes perfectly the idea that its promoters seek to impose: more “sustainable development” with more “conservation” and always with a view to new business opportunities.

“Enough talk about the bioeconomy”

The Belém Declaration also talks about “Guarantee[ing] the rights of indigenous peoples, local and traditional communities, including the right to the territories and lands inhabited by such peoples, [with] full and effective possession”. But events surrounding the Summit soon questioned the validity of this promise.

On the eve of the Summit, in Tomé-Açu municipality, 200km from Belém, four Tembé indigenous people were shot during two confrontations with security guards of a company called Brasil Biofuels (BBF). The Tembé are fighting for the Brazilian government to demarcate their territory seized by BBF. This is a company that with all sorts of state support has and is expanding a monoculture plantation with the aim of producing *dendê* palm oil and biofuel for the bioeconomy ([see the article in this bulletin](#)).

One of the participants of the “Amazon Dialogues”, leader Alessandra Munduruku, from a people that has fought for years to have its territory demarcated, vented: “We must put an end to this violence urgently. What we need is the demarcation of indigenous territories. Enough talk of bioeconomy, of sustainability, when there is violence in the here and now.” (4)

The Tropical Forestry Action Plan (TFAP) released by the World Bank and FAO in 1986 was similar to the Belém Declaration of 2023, proposing actions to promote “development” with the “protection” of the forest. It is worth remembering that TFAP failed. It resulted in more destruction of forests and more problems for communities that depend on the forest and were unjustly blamed for deforestation. Forty years after the World Bank’s failed plan, history repeats itself, thus signaling that for the indigenous peoples and traditional populations of the Amazon region there is no option but to continue strengthening more and more their coordination, their integration and their resistance struggles.

(1) WRM Bulletin, [REDD and the Green Economy exacerbate oppression and deforestation in Pará](#), Brazil, July 2023.

(2) [Conferência Pan-Amazônica pela Bioeconomia reúne líderes e especialistas para debater formas de impulsar a bioeconomia na Amazônia](#), June 2019.

(3) [Conferência Internacional Amazônia e Novas Economias; Pará e mineração valorizam bioeconomia para promover desenvolvimento sustentável da Amazônia](#)

(4) [Na véspera da Cúpula da Amazônia, duas mulheres e um homem do povo Tembé são baleados no Pará](#).