

Reaching out, holding hands

The President of the Association of Indigenous Communities of the Middle Negro River (ACIMRN), Sandra Gomes, speaks about the challenges indigenous communities face due to the COVID-19 pandemic

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The Negro River in the Amazon region is the largest black water river in the world. Its basin area of approximately 750,000 sq. km accounts for seven percent of the total area of the Amazon basin, and its length from pre-Andean Colombia to its mouth, is approximately 1,700 km, making it the Amazon's largest tributary.

The Negro River concentrates a population of approximately 97,000 inhabitants, located between the municipalities of São Gabriel da Cachoeira in the Upper Negro river area, and the municipalities of Santa Isabel do Rio Negro and Barcelos in the Middle Negro River area. This population depends directly on the river and its fish for daily subsistence. The municipality of São Gabriel da Cachoeira alone has a population of approximately 45,000 inhabitants while between the Içana and Uaupés rivers, more than 750 indigenous communities live. This is a region of wide cultural diversity, congregating 23 indigenous communities belonging to diverse language families.

The indigenous populations along the Negro River are among the most vulnerable in the world, facing grave threats from the COVID-19 pandemic. From May to June 2020, the numbers infected with the virus increased fivefold and the number of deaths doubled, according to data compiled by the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB). According to the president of Federação das Organizações Indígenas do Rio Negro (FOIRN), Marivelton Barroso, the great challenge is to safeguard the health of community elders: "They are like a living library in our midst. The main doctor and teacher is the traditional village elder". In fact, the region has already lost many village elders, artists and leaders, who carried a depth of knowledge, to the virus.

A collapsed health system and the lack of intensive care facilities in the region greatly increase the vulnerability of the local indigenous population. As of 12 July, São Gabriel da Cachoeira had 2,982 confirmed cases, 192 under observation and 47 registered deaths. To meet the challenge and build preparedness, the indigenous peoples have been organizing themselves in networks along with community associations, public institutions

and non-governmental organizations.

One of the most proactive community associations in the region is the Association of Indigenous Communities of the Middle Negro River (ACIMRN). Founded in 1994, its mission is to defend indigenous collective rights as guaranteed by the Federal Constitution of 1988, to encourage cultural preservation and the revitalisation of traditional medicine, and to promote the sustainable development of indigenous communities towards autonomy and self-determination.

The president of ACIMRN, Sandra Gomes spoke to us about the challenges faced by the indigenous peoples of the Negro River. Sandra Gomes de Castro is a Baré Indian, a teacher, current president of the association and a former city councilwoman. She has been active in the indigenous movement in the region for 14 years. In March 2019, she participated in the Indigenous Fisheries Seminar in Amazonas, which was organized in Manaus, the capital of Amazonas, by the NGO Operação Amazônia Nativa (OPAN) with support from the International Collective of Support to Artisanal Fisheries (ICSF).

Sandra described at length the impact of the pandemic and the response by civil society and other organizations.

"COVID-19 here in our municipality took a little while to arrive. Now (late July, 2020) it has reached its peak. In just one month there has been an absurd increase, both in the city and in the countryside."

Regarding the food security situation in Santa Isabel do Rio Negro, Sandra said, "In Santa Isabel, in the city, there has been no lack of fish or food in general. With activities paralysed, families returned to their homes in rural areas, to their family farms and traditional practices. So the city is emptier. The fishers from both the city and the communities fished a lot during the dry season, between February and June when the river level drops, so there was quite a lot of stock! Moreover, practically all indigenous communities are regularly receiving basic food



Sandra Gomes



Indigenous net fisher on the Negro river, a major tributary of the Amazon. Our main activities aimed at social and environmental sustainability in the region are projects associated with tourism

assistance through FOIRN, distributed by us at ACIMRN.”

“People have been given two masks each for protection and communities have received materials and posters for awareness-raising,” she added. “The ISA (Instituto Socioambiental) prepared booklets in different indigenous languages for distribution along the Negro River with guidelines for the prevention of the contagion and the identification of symptoms. Here we distributed the booklets in the community of Roçado, in Portuguese, Nheengatu and Nadeb.”

Regarding civil society response, Sandra said, “Greenpeace, through its Wings of Emergency campaign, has brought protective equipment and rapid test kits by airplane. The União Amazônia Viva has managed to send people some basic food aid. In general, this support is financed by the group of institutions that was already supporting FOIRN’s actions: the government, FUNAI, the Norwegian Embassy, the Rainforest Foundation and ISA. But now we have new partners like Greenpeace and also Nia Tero. ACIMRN fought hard to be part of the COVID-19 response committee, as the municipality’s health secretariat did not accept other institutions at first. However, with much effort and persistence, we succeeded. This representation with the municipal policy helps a lot to ensure the best assistance for the communities.”

Another worrying aspect of the pandemic is the negative impact on local livelihoods.

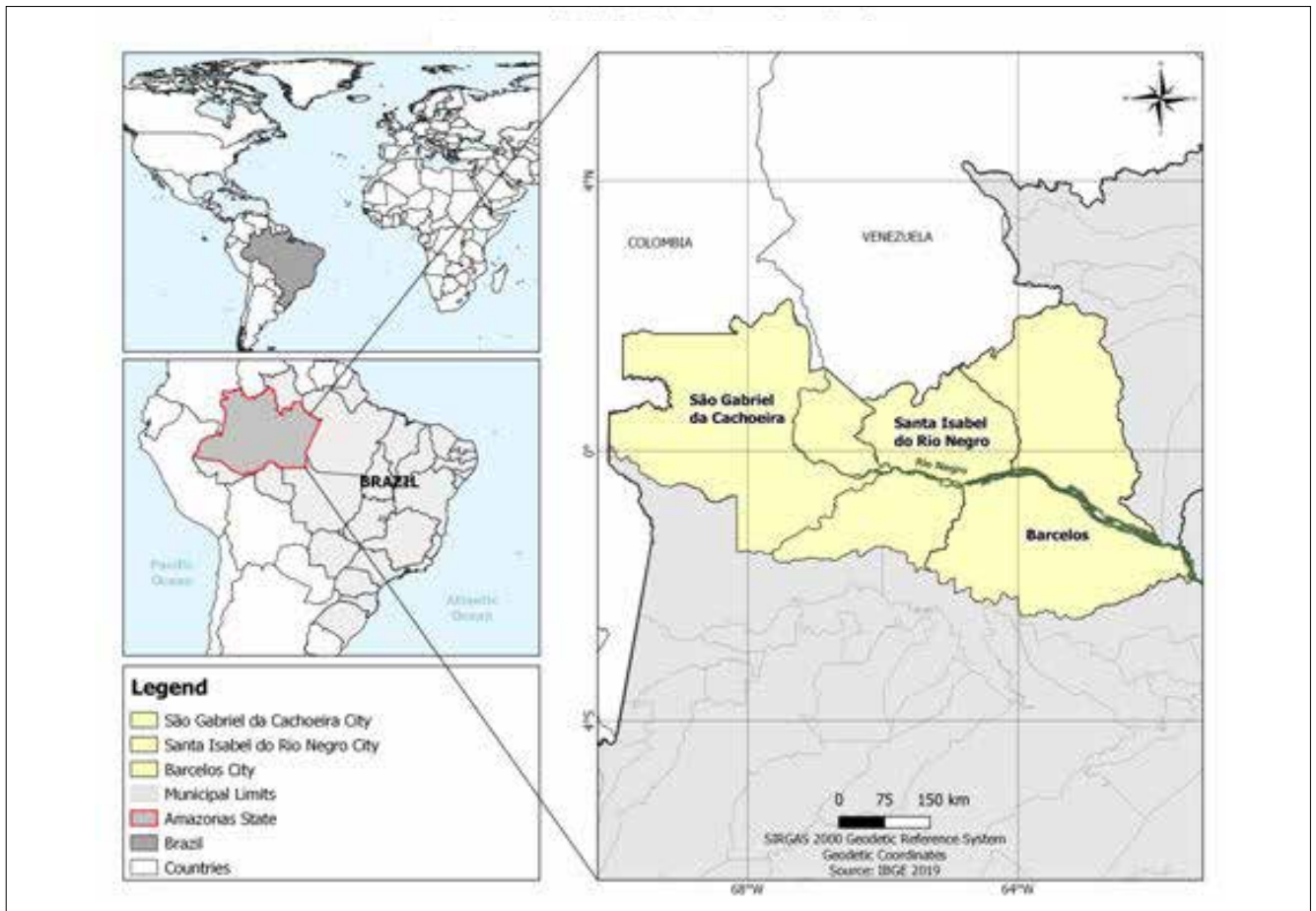
The ACIMRN represents 29 indigenous communities located on the banks and islands of the Middle Negro River and its tributaries, and also the indigenous population residing in the urban area. It is a bridge for the activities of FOIRN and the Coordination of Indigenous Organizations in the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB). One of the pioneering ventures to stand out in this part of the region along the Marié River, a tributary of the Middle Rio Negro, is the experience of community-based fish tourism. After years of exploitative pressure from companies that brought groups of tourists to fish for peacock bass (*Chicla temensis*), the indigenous movement, with support from the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) of the federal government and the non-governmental organisation Instituto Socioambiental, managed to guarantee contracts to regulate the activity in ways that respected the environment and the traditional population.

Sandra discussed the challenges in sustaining local livelihoods dependent on fish tourism.

“Our season starts in the middle of September and ends mid February. Nevertheless, we are concerned for the next season because FUNAI has suspended the letters of consent (authorisation documents for the legal entry of companies). Next week we will have a meeting with some business people to evolve a contingency plan. I imagine that together we can think of a way to safeguard the project. Our biggest concern is sustaining the wages of security guards in the territories, as

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Upper and Middle Rio Negro river basin (elaboration by the authors)



the money for that comes from the fish tourism contracts.”

We then asked Sandra to tell us about indigenous health regimens to build immunity against the virus.

“When people heard about COVID-19, they thought it was a complicated flu,” she said. “Consequently, to prevent it, many people started to drink homemade or bottled tea. The teas are mixed with ginger, lemon and garlic. However, the most commonly used concoctions are the ‘bottled’ ones: you take a bottle and put in it some *caranapaúba* bark (*Aspidosperma nitidum*), some *umiri* bark (*Humiria balsamifera*), some *saracura mirá* (*Ampelozizyphus amazonicus*) and let it sit overnight. In the Roçado community, they also use *tauari* bark (*Couratari tauari*). These are all very bitter plants, and must have some chemistry because they make the body strong.”

Finally, we ask her about future plans to strengthen the social, environmental and productive sustainability of indigenous communities.

“Our main activities aimed at social and environmental sustainability in the region are projects associated with tourism,” says Sandra. “This could be fish tourism in the Marié and Jurubaxi rivers or community tourism in the

Guerras Mountains. We believe that these are good ways to mobilise people in the community, generate income and protect the territory. In fact, last year we, from FOIRN and ACIMRN, with the support of ISA and the NGO Garupa, won the United Nations Development Program (UNDP) recognition award for innovative indigenous tourism projects. The prize money will be invested in infrastructure. And now the business people who work with us are our partners too.”

Sandra is full of strength and optimism about the future. “In general, with this pandemic,” she says, “we have learned to unite even more. The state, municipal and federal governments in Brazil had hardly been concerned with indigenous peoples, but we did not give up lobbying with them, as and when necessary. We have learned to open up more than ever before; we have learned that together we are stronger; we have learned that only those who live in the forest know what it is to take care of themselves and others. We have learned never to be intimidated by criticism and abandonment.”

Note: The authors are grateful to Sandra Gomes, who gave the interview by teleconference under challenging conditions of communication and connectivity. ❏