

Oil and Uncertainty

The latest Atlantic tragedy reaches thousands in Brazil and remains unsolved

Oil spill disasters in the ocean often devastate marine and coastal ecosystems, profoundly affecting fisheries resources and fishing communities. Urgent and early-warning actions are needed to avoid a tragedy in biomes and communities when such accidents occur. In late-July 2019, Brazilian fishers alerted the first oil slick reaching the coast of Paraíba, weeks before the recognition of the biggest-ever oil spill disaster ever recorded in Brazil, extending across the entire Northeastern coast of the country. Their early voices were not properly heeded but those signals escalated into a gigantic spread of petroleum slicks. Almost 1,000 different localities were affected, including beaches, mangroves, rivers and “protected” areas. All the nine

and mangroves. Their accomplishment was tremendous.

Nevertheless, the undertaking of some undoubtedly heroic actions was not always accompanied by an awareness of the harm from direct exposure to crude petroleum’s chemistry. Several hands-on actions were undertaken without the right protection and the contamination risk was not adequately prevented. In several cases, hands and skins were not protected from the oily contact; it was even more pronounced in peripheral or remote communities. The human effects of removing 4,000 to 5,000 tonnes of oil sludge from the beaches are still not known.

Besides the cleaning action, fisheries were not officially closed. Female shellfish fishers with children were found gathering crabs and shells for their livelihoods, this time exposing themselves directly to new toxicological risks, with the usual lack of diagnosis and proper health monitoring. Official laboratory reports on fish contamination were not shared widely, so both fishers and consumers felt – still feel - insecure about the safety of seafood. And how about the real outcome? There was almost half-a-year of unofficial buyers’ moratorium. Fishing communities were not prevented from fishing, but they could not sell their catch, which further aggravated their privation.

Vulnerable communities

In the face of such a major socio-environmental disaster, it took time for the Government to act. The first samples for environmental analysis in the affected locations started to be collected only 40 days after the arrival of the sludge, and due to strong social pressure. In addition, the first support to the most vulnerable

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states of the region, encompassing a 2,300-km long shoreline, switched on a red light.

Since then, thousands of fishers from at least 130 municipalities were presented a peculiar gift from the sea: not more fish, but oil sludge on their shores. Such a tragedy could have been far worse but for the venerable people from the coastal communities who have been engaged in cleaning up the beaches and corals. They demonstrated to the world what collective action is all about. Social movements, fishers’ associations -- in some particular cases along with civil society and local organizations -- worked tirelessly and impressively along hundreds of beaches

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fishing communities was announced in December 2019, after pressure from social movements and academia. The support consisted of an assistance of about US\$ 200 per fisher for those living in municipalities directly hit by the oil spill, numbering about 60,000 fishers. The assistance was restricted to those fishers coming under the General Fisheries Registration (RGP) system, holding the Fisher's Card indicating that they work at sea.

The support was well received yet but there were serious problems. The last official registration on the RGP System was in 2012 - 2009 in some regions - so the number of fishers was seriously outdated and grossly underestimated. Also, several fishers registered in the system had not received identification cards, when they were last distributed in 2013. Several inland fishers had their communities, resources and production affected by the oil slicks, but they were denied support. In addition to the huge number of fishing households getting left out of the government support—possibly more than 100,000—the entire fishing economy of the region was disrupted and paralyzed as a result of the spill, including those municipalities unaffected directly.

The socioeconomic breakdown and in-practice exclusion of several families from the public emergency support have led both the Federal Public Defenders' Office and Ministry, with the support of social movements like the Conselho Pastoral dos Pescadores (CPP), to launch lawsuits seeking the inclusion of all members of fishing communities from the entire region in the monetary and legal support mechanism.

The fishing economy remains stagnant in several localities, and at best, functioning far below average historical income levels. Numerous traditional fishing communities are adversely affected economically and with no financial assistance. A large number of people are also not finding safe ways to sell their aquatic products.

The uncertainties along the value chain, on the levels of toxicity, the number of fishers affected, and on the protocol that should have been

FISHERS' PASTORAL COUNCIL / BRAZIL



Fishers from Sirinhaém removing oil from the beaches in order to protect their fishing and living places in Pernambuco, Brazil

followed to handle oil pollution and related developments, give an idea of what actions are still needed. Rather than emphasizing the heroic role of fishers we need to perceive their desperation towards the absence of the State in ensuring that the damage is contained.

At this point, the reader must be wondering who and how such an accident occurred, and who, and which particular industry, may be held responsible for the recent oil spill in Brazil. Unfortunately, the answer is not available yet, only the scale of the damage is emerging to the surface. The Brazilian federal police suspect a ship-to-ship transfer involving a Greek-flagged tanker around 8°S in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean for this disaster. The whole case remains unsolved, so does a calamity still facing a large number of people and ecosystems. 3

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<https://www.bbc.com/news/world-latin-america-50223106>

Brazil oil spill: Where has it come from?

<https://science.sciencemag.org/content/367/6474/155.2>

Brazil oil spill response: Time for coordination

<https://news.mongabay.com/2019/11/nearly-three-months-after-brazil-oil-spill-origins-remain-uncertain/>

Nearly three months after Brazil oil spill, origins remain uncertain