Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities

Brazil

MOVIMENTO IPEREĞ AYŨ

EQUATOR INITIATIVE

Empowered lives.
Resilient nations.

Equator Prize Winner

Equator Initiative Case Studies

Local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities
Local and indigenous communities across the world are advancing innovative sustainable development solutions that work for people and for nature. Few publications or case studies tell the full story of how such initiatives evolve, the breadth of their impacts, or how they change over time. Fewer still have undertaken to tell these stories with community practitioners themselves guiding the narrative. The Equator Initiative aims to fill that gap.

The Equator Initiative, supported by generous funding from the Government of Norway, awarded the Equator Prize 2015 to 21 outstanding local community and indigenous peoples initiatives to reduce poverty, protect nature, and strengthen resilience in the face of climate change. Selected from 1,461 nominations from across 126 countries, the winners were recognized for their achievements at a prize ceremony held in conjunction with the United Nations Convention on Climate Change (COP21) in Paris. Special emphasis was placed on the protection, restoration, and sustainable management of forests; securing and protecting rights to communal lands, territories, and natural resources; community-based adaptation to climate change; and activism for environmental justice. The following case study is one in a growing series that describes vetted and peer-reviewed best practices intended to inspire the policy dialogue needed to take local success to scale, to improve the global knowledge base on local environment and development solutions, and to serve as models for replication.
PROJECT SUMMARY

In the heart of the Brazilian Amazon, the territorial rights of an indigenous community—and the verdant ecosystem that sustains their way of life—has come under threat. Facing a proposal by the Brazilian government to build a large dam complex on the Tapajós River that would submerge their vast territories, the Munduruku of the Brazilian Amazon formed a resistance movement called Ipereğ Ayũ. Designed to safeguard the Amazon rainforest and protect the rights of the Munduruku people, the movement has helped to demarcate traditional territories, protect indigenous lands from illegal logging and mining, and create platforms for the Munduruku people to exchange experiences, knowledge, and best practices. The focus on territorial defense and resistance to destructive projects has not only empowered a broad segment of the Munduruku’s 13,000 people, but also encouraged greater organization among the region’s communities to stand as one against common threats and in favor of sustainable, culturally appropriate development. In addition to successfully demarcating the Sawré Muybu territory, which created a political imperative for the Brazilian government to permanently protect Munduruku lands, the movement was the driving force behind a groundbreaking protocol on the right to free, prior, and informed consent.

KEY FACTS

Equator Prize Winner
2015

Founded
2012

Location
Southern Para State, Brazil

Beneficiaries
Directly impacts approximately 13,000 Munduruku people

Areas of focus
Protection, restoration, and sustainable management of forests; indigenous peoples right to free, prior, and informed consent; land rights

Sustainable Development Goals addressed

The depiction and use of boundaries and related information shown on maps or included within in text of this document are not guaranteed to be free from error, nor do they imply official acceptance or recognition by the United Nations.
Deep in the Brazilian Amazon lies the Tapajós River Basin, a lush tropical rainforest ecosystem that represents almost six percent of Brazilian territory. The region is home to the Tapajós River, one of the last free-flowing rivers in the Amazon, as well as approximately 820,000 people, including 10 indigenous tribes. Among these indigenous groups is the Munduruku, numbering almost 13,000 people who have lived on their traditional lands for generations. Scattered across approximately 130 different villages, the Munduruku people rely on subsistence farming, fishing, and hunting for their livelihoods. The surrounding area also supports a rich array of biodiversity, including 324 fish species, monkeys, turtles, jaguars, bats, caimans, dolphins, and giant river otters, as well as rubber trees (*Hevea brasiliensis*), açaí palms (*Euterpe oleracea*), and buriti palms (*Mauritia flexuosa*).

Although the 1988 Brazilian Federal Constitution enshrines indigenous peoples with the right to the land they traditionally occupy, the Munduruku have historically suffered unwanted incursions from outside actors, such as illegal loggers and wildcat miners, who attempt to exploit the region’s plentiful natural resources without tribal consent. These acts of territorial encroachment both violate Munduruku indigenous sovereignty and threaten a critical ecosystem with destruction.

**Origin and structure**

Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ began at a demonstration in Jacareacanga, in western part of Pará State in 2012, following the murder of a local indigenous man. Since then, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ has grown into a resistance movement to assert the territorial rights of the Munduruku people. Made up entirely of indigenous members, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ aims to halt all infrastructure projects deemed to threaten traditional Munduruku land. In this respect, the name of their movement is fitting: in their local Munduruku language, Ipereğ Ayũ translates to, “I am strong, I know how to protect myself.” Five groups make up Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ: Pusuru Kão, Pukorão Pik Pik, Waremucu Pak Pak, Surup Surup, and Wakoborun. Maria Leusa Kaba Munduruku, a leading female member of the movement, works alongside Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ to organize demonstrations, protests, and other educational trainings. The organizational structure of Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ is modeled off traditional Munduruku political rites, promoting the active and democratic participation of men, women, and children in meetings. Members make decisions through a consensus-based process. The organization has also formed alliances with environmental nongovernmental organizations such as Amazon Watch and public prosecutors.
As Brazil’s population, energy demands, and economy grew in the 20th century, new development actors started to exploit the Amazon for its natural resources, including rubber, minerals, and primary rainforests. More recently, one of the region’s most distinctive ecological features—its wide, twisting rivers—became the site of proposed hydropower development. After decades of planning, in 2012, the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources, or Instituto Brasileiro do Meio Ambiente e dos Recursos Naturais Renováveis (IBAMA) issued a terms of reference for an Environmental Impact Assessment for a dam complex on the Tapajós River and its main tributaries. Part of this proposed massive hydropower expansion, known as the São Luiz do Tapajós (SLT) dam, planned to flood an area of 37,600 hectares, submerging the forests, fisheries, and sacred sites upon which the Munduruku people rely for their physical and cultural survival. In a direct challenge to the Munduruku’s right to conserve their social organization and traditions—which are intrinsically linked to the land they occupy—the construction of the dam would result in the forced displacement of some Munduruku people from traditional territory, including their small towns (povoados) and villages (aldeias). Three Munduruku villages—Karo Muybu, Sawré Muybu, and Dace Watpu—were at risk of being permanently displaced, despite the 1998 Brazilian Federal Constitution directly forbidding the removal of indigenous groups from their land except in instances of catastrophe, epidemic, or in the interest of national sovereignty. After any temporary removal due to these threats, under any circumstances, indigenous people are guaranteed the right to return as soon as the threat ceases.

The SLT dam posed a grave cultural, economic, environmental, physical, and spiritual threat to the Munduruku people—and to the ecosystem that supports their way of life. Although hydropower dams are billed as ‘clean’ energy sources, in the context of the tropical Brazilian Amazon, dam construction results in profound terrestrial and riverine ecological damage, as well as a sizeable greenhouse gas footprint.

The Amazon forest regularly functions as a carbon sink, removing carbon dioxide (CO₂) from the atmosphere. Yet when a dam is constructed and the forest floor is inundated with water, decaying vegetation and flooded soils release both CO₂ and methane, two greenhouse gases that contribute to climate change. Moreover, the construction process requires forest clearance for roads, accelerating the rate of forest loss and further opening access for illegal loggers. For example, when the dam construction plan was announced, an influx of non-local laborers arrived in Munduruku territory, eager to extract its resources before the basin was flooded.

Dams further disrupt riverine ecosystems, altering the water flow, sedimentation, oxygen levels, depth, and temperature of a river. Because many Amazonian fish species have adapted to the particular environment constraints of the pre-existing river, changes in these environmental factors could jeopardize the health of fish populations important both for ecosystem health and local food security.
LOCAL RESPONSES

Building on a legacy of indigenous resistance that existed long before the formal creation of the group, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ emerged as a key actor defending indigenous rights to territory and self-determination, including protecting traditional lands from illegal logging, mining, and dam construction.

Together with Brazilian allies, international NGOs, and federal prosecutors, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ has produced a groundbreaking protocol, which stipulated the Munduruku’s right to free, prior, and informed consent (FPIC) under the International Labor Organization (ILO) Indigenous and Tribal Peoples Convention 169. This protocol, which was the first of its kind to be delivered to the Brazilian government, set a precedent for how indigenous peoples should be consulted when their territory and way of life are under threat from development projects. It stipulated that a wide cross section of indigenous society be actively consulted, including chiefs, elders, the pajé (spiritual leaders), male and female warriors, students, and young people.

One of Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ’s primary initiatives was dedicated to halting the construction of the SLT dam. In order to achieve this result, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ has pursued an ‘auto-demarcation’ strategy, lobbying for legal recognition of their Sawré Muybu territory, the last un-demarcated swath of Munduruku land that lies downstream from the planned dam. To do this, the Munduruku people have marked out their own land boundaries by clearing a narrow strip of rainforest to mark the limit of their territory. In the past, they have also physically protected their land through collective demonstrations and land surveillance, as well as occupying the offices of Fundação Nacional do Índio (FUNAI, National Indian Association). In a 2016 report published by FUNAI, the agency recommended the demarcation of 17,000 hectares of Sawré Muybu indigenous territory, and in 2016, as a result of the movement’s sustained organizing and protests, IBAMA suspended the development license for the SLT dam, which would have been the sixth largest hydroelectric dam in the world.

In addition to upholding their territorial rights, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ has also prevented deforestation and ecological destruction that would exacerbate greenhouse gas emissions. Through their advocacy work, Ipereğ Ayũ promotes sustainable alternatives to dams, such as the diversification of Brazil’s electricity matrix towards greener energy sources like solar and wind power.

Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ has also focused on empowering indigenous communities by promoting indigenous languages, cultures, and ways of life. Members of Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ perform traditional songs during demonstrations, while the organisation hosts communications trainings to allow indigenous people to better tell their own stories. In collaboration with NGO partners and allies at the office of Brazil’s Federal Public Prosecutor, or Ministério Público Federal, Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ has also promoted trainings on the rights of indigenous peoples. Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ further supports the participation of indigenous voices at national and international events.
The movement’s trail-blazing work reminds the international community that upholding the territorial rights of indigenous forest stewards is an essential ingredient in conserving forests and the ecosystem services they provide, and that FPIC is a vital tool that can be used by indigenous groups across Brazil and the Amazon to further these efforts. Movimento Ipereğ Ayũ further highlights that indigenous resistance movements and voices play a critical role in the collective effort to address climate change.

**FUTURE PLANS**

In the future, the Munduruku movement will bring together indigenous leaders from across the basin to create a Pan-Amazonian movement and collectively defend the Amazon basin from further dam development.

**PARTNERS**

- *Amazon Watch*

**SOURCES AND FURTHER RESOURCES**


Munduruku Consultation Protocol (2014). Available online [here](#).

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UNDP partners with people at all levels of society to help build nations that can withstand crisis, and drive and sustain the kind of growth that improves the quality of life for everyone. On the ground in nearly 170 countries and territories, we offer global perspective and local insight to help empower lives and build resilient nations.

The Equator Initiative brings together the United Nations, governments, civil society, businesses and grassroots organizations to recognize and advance local sustainable development solutions for people, nature, and resilient communities.

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