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Belo Monte Blog

"It is a monster"

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Meeting with Ambassador to the EU, Brussels, Wednesday 17th July 2013



Ulrike Lunacek met with Vera Machado, the new Brazilian Ambassador to the EU, this afternoon after the end of our delegation visit to the controversial Belo monte mega dam site. Ulrike handed her a [first debriefing paper](#) (agreed with our other two delegation members Eva Joly and Catherine Grèze who could not be in Brussels today) with our main findings and recommendations. The Ambassador acknowledged our efforts but made it clear that from the Brazilian government's side the decision to build the dam had been taken. Nevertheless she acknowledged that there are (procedural) problems at the legal/rule of law level as well as with implementation of conditions and with communication. The Ambassador expressed surprise about a 'spy' following us and taking pictures of us and assured us of follow-up on this issue. She also mentioned concern about the recent vote in the EP on the reduction of the percentage of bioethanol added to fuels. During our talk with Ambassador Machado, Ulrike also raised the very difficult and often violent situation created by the fact that tens of thousands of male workers are operating at the site, in and around Altamira, which has created grave concern about an unprecedented rise in prostitution, sexual abuse and even rape, against women and girls in the region. Ulrike told the ambassador that we would strongly appreciate measures taken on this issue by all Brazilian government levels (federal, regional, municipal) and Norte Energia. We agreed on keeping in touch and a future follow-up meeting with all three MEPs in September.

- [Debriefing on the Green Group Delegation to Belo Monte \(Brasilia, Belem and Altamira\) July 8-13, 2013 \(.pdf\)](#)

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Last day in Altamira, Friday 12th of July 2013



We started our last day in Altamira at 07:30 in the Cathedral do Xingu, in order to deliver Dom Erwin our best wishes for his 74th birthday. A special mass had been organised in honour of the very popular bishop who defends indigenous and poor peoples' rights and speaks out against powerful lobbies - which has resulted in threats against his life in the past years, which is why he has bodyguards with him 24 hours a day. The church was crowded by people, who were singing and celebrating the liberation theologian Dom Erwin, who received the Right Livelihood Award, (in German, the Alternativer Nobelpreis) in 2010.



Afterwards we visited one of the parts of the city that will be flooded as a consequence of the dam. The people living here (5000 families in this part of the city and between 30,000-40,000 persons all in all) will have to be resettled, which means that they will have to leave their houses and will be relocated outside the city, far from schools, shops and medical centres. We tried to visit the site where the first houses are being constructed, but were not allowed to enter. When we saw these model houses we understood why the people were not willing to move into these cement houses, as they were used to living in light wooden constructions in the centre of the city with (the few existing) services nearby. In the Amazonian heat, cement houses most probably will be like saunas - and why weren't they consulted?



As Norte Energia SA, the company in charge of the whole Belo Monte project, including implementation of the conditions, had been declining our request for a meeting, we went to their office in Altamira and asked them again to receive us. The person responsible for the resettlement programme received us in the lobby of the Altamira headquarters. She did not answer any of our questions but promised us information for the next day in Brasilia. Thus we found out that Norte Energia was at last willing to meet us – not on the site or at their office in Altamira, but at least in an informal meeting the Austrian Ambassador Marianne Feldmann had been successful in arranging for us in Brasilia on Saturday morning. When we left the headquarters, we became aware that we again saw that we had been followed by a man in a white car who we already had seen the previous day and earlier on Friday. The person sitting in the car took pictures of us and followed us to all of our meetings and finally even to the airport when we left Altamira. We and the Head of the EU Delegation will inquire both with Norte Energia and the government. If they want to know what we are doing they can simply ask us and not follow us around like in a spy movie.



A much more pleasant good-bye was the one we had with Antonia Melo, the president of Movimento Xingu Vivo Para Sempre: Before our departure she came to our hotel in order to thank the Green delegation for our visit and support, and she gave us banners with the inscription: "BELO MONTE JUSTIÇA JÁ" - Belo Monte Justice Now! as goodbye presents. In this Spirit: Até logo Altamira y Viva Xingu! [Top](#)

Altamira, Thursday 11th July 2013



Life in the tropics begins early in the morning. Our meeting with representatives of communities affected by the Belo Monte dam is scheduled for 8 o'clock. We doubt that people will arrive that early, and Antonia Melo, the organiser of the meeting, grants us a half hour delay. We were mistaken. Everybody is in when we arrive at the Xingu Vivo Para Sempre Headquarters in the centre of Altamira. Antonia Melo, the heart and lungs of Xingu Vivo, has gathered men and (many more) women from all the different groups affected by the Belo Monte dam, around 35 in total. Again: it is 8:30 in the morning. But they are proud: They have never had a parliamentary visit, let alone from the European Parliament. "Brazil has signed international conventions, so it has to fulfil the standards it agreed to. We are here to listen to you and hear what your complaints are", Eva Joly said. Valdemir is the first to take the floor, as he is a guest in a way. Valdemir is an indigenous leader, and serves as a contact between the different villages coordinating resistance between the opponents of the dams which according to many observers will need to be built in order to ensure the functioning of Belo Monte. In May this year, Valdemir's people, the Munduruku, occupied a construction site of Belo Monte. They sat for two weeks in the offices of the site to demonstrate their resistance to the hydroelectric hydra which is popping up in the Amazon region, and which, very soon and in very real way, will be grasping at the Tapajós River.



The occupation was, in the end, rather successful. The Munduruku action echoed in the capital Brasilia. They were invited to speak to the government but received only half-hearted responses. Their actions a few days later had a much deeper impact. They kidnapped the researchers doing studies on the feasibility of the Tapajós dam, confiscated the studies they had with them, and expelled them from their territory. The result: the Tapajós project is on ice.



This clear message was followed, one after the other, by representatives of indigenous communities, fisherfolk (men and women), small peasants, people already expelled from their land, a representative from the Catholic church accompanying the communities, a female teacher looking at Belo Monte from a women's perspective, and finally a 14 year old girl representing the youth perspective. Their testimonies gave a clear and incredibly impressive picture of what the project means for the people: "It is a monster", they said again and again with slightly different wording, "....which kills our way of life and in due course, will kill us altogether". Valdemir insisted that only resolute action, like the occupation, can stop the construction. Others insisted that at the very least the 40 conditions that had been set for the construction must be fulfilled - but they are not. A complete lack of consultation and respect for rights was a complaint by all. Many appreciated that we, the Europeans, regretted the negative roles played by European companies in the construction. Ormazete, a young black woman, shared Ulrike Lunacek's view that energy saving, wind and solar power should be the alternative. Amazingly, it was at this very moment of the morning, that the electricity was cut. A common phenomenon, everybody in the room said the construction of Belo Monte is leading to an incredible expansion of the city of Altamira, the infrastructure of which cannot keep pace. Hence "chaos" was the word we heard again and again to best characterise life in Altamira. Over the course of the morning, anger grew. Many felt that even the PT government, which many had applauded when it came to power in 2003, behaved as a dictatorship, as there was no real dialogue at all; that FUNAI, the state agency dealing with indigenous affairs, has employees, cars and fuel paid by Norte Energia, the consortium that runs the Belo Monte construction, and hence will not defend indigenous rights, the very reason for its being. It was a sort of a relief after all these well founded accusations and fears that there was no way out were expressed, that the last speaker was the youngest, and at the same time the most optimistic: "We will stop the dam", she said. And she continued that for this to happen international support was needed.

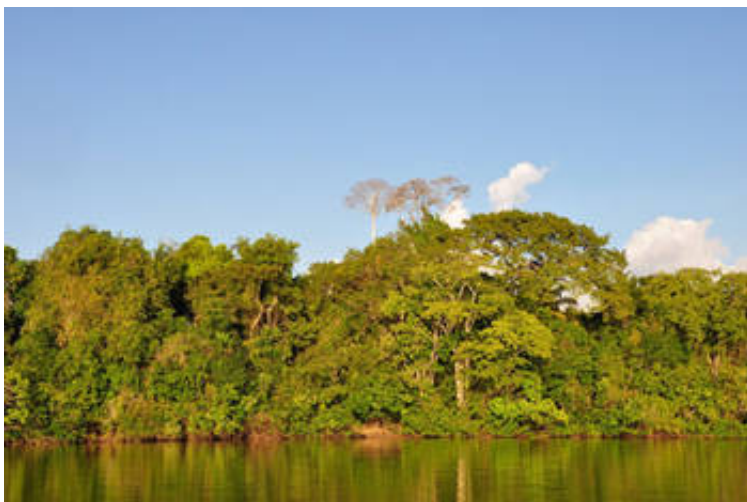


Thus the ball was back in our court, and we have to work through an urgent to-do-list in the days to come.

"The trip could have been even ten times longer; it was worth the time to come hear and listen to you", Catherine Grèze summed up. "Be sure that we will do what we can." The afternoon brought home for us even more clearly the urgency to act.



We left in a small boat, a "lancha", for the Big Bent, which is that part of the Xingu River that will be cut off and dry out, while the Xingu water will be diverted to the Belo Monte dam, for electricity production. None of us had foreseen the challenge ahead. The Xingu river is not what we understand as a "river" in Europe. Sitting in the boat, it looks like a big lake, with many entries, exits and bays. We could never anticipate where Rodrigo, the pilot, was heading when he turned the wheel. And we had not thought that the river, which is so flat while following the Big Bent, could put so many obstacles in the way. Rodrigo was a true artist of circumventing sandbanks and stones which we could not even see, but which he easily discovered just by looking at the slight crawling at the surface of the river. We passed Pimentel, an elephant's foot being put into the Xingu, which will completely close off the Big Bent, once it has been expanded fully.



After another two hours whirlpooling through an ever flatter river - as the Pimental dam, though unfinished, has already its effects - we reached Paquisamba, one of the fishing community villages condemned to extermination by Belo Monte.



The villagers know what will happen. It is a sad place. Some have already left, others have split the village in two so that each village gets money from a national plan for compensation (which, of course, does not work). The villagers are divided, as Norte Energia sends pickups with "aid". There is an overall suspicion that some get food, freezers or fuel and other don't. Solidarity and the common fight are under attack. New people arrive and stay for a while looking for jobs at Belo Monte. All in all, a programme extermination of the village is underway.



Back to Altamira we know this project is against people. If it happens as currently designed, it is simply a crime. [Top](#)

Altamira, Wednesday 10th July 2013

We arrived this morning in Altamira. First stop: an overview of the project. The river is still flowing. But for how long?



It took 30 minutes to get from the first dam to the turbines. Taking in the site of 660 square km, it was startlingly clear to us that Belo Monte is no longer a project on paper, but a reality and an example of human dementia.



This afternoon, we met two men of courage: the prosecutor Felício Pontes, the first to have said that the Belo Monte dam was unconstitutional. There has indeed been no prior consultation with Indians, as required by the Brazilian Constitution and Convention 169 of the International Labour Organisation that Brazil has ratified. Instead of respecting its own constitution, the Brazilian state has suspended all judicial decisions made against the Belo Monte dam through a procedure that dates back to the dictatorship.



Mr. Pontes explained to us the decisive role of the Brazilian Supreme Court in it. Its 11 judges could totally reverse the situation by declaring this "suspension" procedure as unconstitutional. This has

importance beyond the construction of Belo Monte as no less than 40 dams are planned in the next 20 years. The prosecutor does not stand down.



The second man is the "Bishop of the Xingu." He pays a high price for his commitment: since 2006 he is suffering under death threats. This is why two bodyguards accompany him all day long. Erwin Kräutler, Alternative Nobel Prize winner in 2010, shows the destruction and chaos in Altamira : housing price increases, insecurity and addiction to drugs. The social desolation has no limits. A few days prior, an underage prostitute was murdered (prostitution has enormously increased due to the arrival of many male workers since the beginning of construction)



As Felicio Pontes and Erwin Kräutler tell us how our visit is important (this is the first time that the European Parliament has come here), we hear how they feel alone. They told us how President Dilma Rousseff has never come in the region of Altamira, and since her election, she has never met the victims of this anachronistic and unacceptable project. The fight goes on! [Top](#)

Belem, Tuesday 9th July 2013

Arrival in Belem



Press Conference by Green MEPs (Left to Right) Ulrike Lunacek (Austria) Eva Joly (France) and Catherine Greze (France) in Belem, Brazil

Meeting with Experts

On arrival in Belem, a meeting was held with 6 experts at the Federal University of Para, who had computed different studies on the consequences of the Belo Monte dam. The independent expert panel is composed of 40 experts researching for 15 different Brazilian universities. In October 2009, these experts presented their studies to IBAMA (Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources) which, however, argued that they did not have the time to evaluate the studies and swiftly proceeded to grant the general licence to the Belo Monte dam early.



20 Brazilian NGOs recommended the experts' work to President Dilma, but the President did not react to the experts' report. 4000 Brazilian scientists followed suit and did the same, and still no reaction from President Dilma. According to the experts, the position of the government is clear: no matter what they say, they will go ahead with the project. The 6 experts we met summarised the consequences of the Belo Monte dam as follows: **Effects related to energy:** - reduced water flow in the big belt, a 100km long part of the Xingu River, which will be largely cut by the first of two dams. This will affect people living there, interfering with fishing, transportation and water quality. - supersizing of the capacity: of the 11,233 MW of installed capacity, the average power delivered to the national power grid would be only 4,428 MW (39%). The full target of 11,000 MW is only possible with additional dams, which were already planned in the initial proposal of the 1970s - controversies over the real cost of the project: although the government mentions 9 billion dollars, the professors speak of 17 billion dollars. Meanwhile, construction companies talk of about 32 billion dollars. - according to Brazilian law, 20 % of energy has to be bought by public companies at a fixed price, contributing to losses Environmental effects: - several plants won't survive the

permanent flooding - CO2 emissions would increase due to rotting of organic material in the flooded area. - Fish movements and migrations will be affected (only 2% of fish can pass fish ladders) - huge loss of biodiversity - fisheries production reduced by 70% - breeding territories of turtles would be endangered due to thermal changes and the change of the soil composition. - high number of endemic species could be extinct - Belo Monte is built in an important Mining region, thus there is a high interest of mining companies to dry the terrain (eg. for gold mining). Drying up the area facilitates access to mining ground, while electricity from the dam is needed for the mining activities themselves.



Social impact: -Social insecurity 30-40,000 people will be displaced. The government underestimates the real numbers as they assume and count for small families, while families typically have more members in the region - 11 indigenous populations and 13 indigenous territories are affected by the Belo Monte project - Belo Monte does not comply with the 169/ILO standards, nor with the Brazilian Constitution - As most of the persons working for the Belo Monte dam are men without families, prostitution in the region may drastically increased. As will the consumption of drugs and alcohol. - Resettlement programmes comprise a very low number of families; the others have to find solutions themselves. - family conflicts (between generations, children demanding share of lands from parents) - disorganised migration mostly from indians - thousands of workers are settling down and changing local lifestyle - extinction of whole communities - decrease of domestic spaces, as new houses are much smaller - marginalisation **Health issues:** - negative effects on health of local population - danger of epidemics & diseases - increase of AIDS, sexual diseases, health problems related to alcohol and drugs - Intense traffic of machinery leads to increasing emissions - water passing indigenous villages is polluted



General: - too many interests are involved. Energy is not sole main aim; mining industry is one of the main reasons as well. - more dams are needed to make the project feasible. In a concluding discussion the experts suggested that the main aim behind the project was not electricity. The construction is an aim for

itself as it is a huge business. The construction companies and companies providing equipment are large supporters of electoral campaigns and the current government has to pay them back. The dam itself is a crucial object of speculation.

Meeting with Judges



Meeting with 3 judges from the First Federal regional Tribunal

We met the former, current and the future judges working on Altamira. The current judge has 13 cases on Belo Monte, mostly related to indigenous and other affected people not having been consulted properly throughout the process. Eva Joly and Ulrike Lunacek informed them about the WWF study on renewables and energy efficiency, which was new to them and resulted in a fruitful dialogue. [Top](#)

Brasilia, Monday 8th July 2013

The first official day of the delegation started with an intense programme: In the morning we had a briefing with Ambassador Ana Paula Zacarias at the EU delegation, who stressed that the current demonstrations are the outcome of the huge imbalances which exist in Brazil (e.g. the discrepancy between the legal framework and its implementation, rhetoric and action).



In early June, people started pouring out onto the streets of Sao Paulo to protest against an increase in bus fares. The demonstrations rapidly took on other issues, beginning with the fight for better health and education systems, but also for access to rights in general. These continued with anger and frustration being expressed against the gigantic sums invested in mega infrastructure projects, combined with corruption, in particular with respect to the series of pharaonic stadiums for the World Cup and the Olympic Games. In contrast to President Erdogan in Turkey, the government of Brazil quickly showed understanding for the demands of the protestors and consequently its willingness to enter into dialogue. The big challenge facing Brazil is that the government sees the only way to continue its programme of getting people out of poverty in economic growth. However, this is often in contradiction with the principles of sustainable development, greater social equality, the preservation of the environment and the rights of indigenous peoples inscribed in the Brazilian Constitution. At Rio+20 the Brazilian government was promoting sustainable development & the Belo Monte Project in the same breath; how can this be coherent? For which kind of development does Brazil strive and can it be implemented in a socially and environmentally sustainable way? Does the Belo Monte mega dam project even fit into the 21st century? Won't there be a very high price to pay for this energy in the long-run? And is this energy really needed? A study done by WWF ([2007](#)) shows that Brazil could save 40% of the energy needed until 2020 through energy efficiency. The Brazilian government quickly reacted to the protests on the streets, but where is the reaction to the indigenous peoples and others supporting them protesting against the Belo Monte mega hydro electric power plant? On Monday we heard two perspectives on these issues:

Meeting with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs:



Andre Correia do Lago, the Head of the Environment Department of the Ministry of External Relations stressed that sustainable development is crucial for the Brazilian government and that they were well aware of its three pillars: economic, social and environmental development. Moreover, he stressed that being a democratic and very transparent country, the Brazilian government is happy to enter into dialogue. However, he asked the three MEPs not to point their fingers at Brazilian authorities, as policies which might be right in their own countries may not necessarily be right in other countries. He and the other representatives from the Ministry of Foreign Affairs stressed that the Brazilian economy was rapidly growing and that the demand for energy was increasing drastically at 5.7 percent per year. As far as they were concerned, energy efficiency was not the only answer to this growing demand, and thus the energy produced by the Belo Monte dam was needed. According to the Brazilian government the Belo Monte project is fully coherent with the country's sustainable development strategy, as sustainable development also involves making sure that people - especially the poor whom the government has already succeeded in bringing a substantial number out of poverty - have access to energy and new jobs that will be created (according to the government, Belo Monte will create 42,000 new jobs). They assured us that the indigenous societies are not *directly* affected by the Belo Monte dam and that the social & environmental aspects were taken into account.

Meeting with 2 NGOs CIMI (Conselho Indigenista Missionario) and ISA (Instituto Socio Ambiental)



According to the civil society representatives we met, the Belo Monte dam (of which 30% has already been built) clearly stands in contrast with sustainable development as it will have dreadful consequences for the environment and the people living in the area. Moreover, due to the high fluctuations of the water level during wet and dry seasons, the Belo Monte dam could on average produce only 4,000 KW, far lower

than the 11,000 KW capacity predicted by the government. In order to compensate for this shortfall, further dams are planned with additional burdens on indigenous and other local societies and the environment. The Belo Monte dam has already had and will have an enormous impact on the region and the people living there. Nonetheless, the government is going ahead with the project. Adriana Ramos, Executive Secretary of the Instituto Socioambiental emphasised that while the government says it is very open for dialogue, this dialogue does not exist in practice, as the Brazilian authorities at the same time openly state that they will finish the project at any cost. CIMI and ISA criticise the Belo Monte dam for:

1. legitimising a process in which indigenous peoples' rights as inscribed in the constitution and also in ILO Convention 169 (consultation procedures) have been denied;
2. denying people the ability to deal with land in their own way and allowing companies to take over and rule the land. e.g. gold mining by international companies, contracts for aluminium companies;
3. creating external dependence and a loss of autonomy - the consortium has been delivering food, motors, fuel and other means of everyday life to the villages affected. That means making people's existence dependent on external factors, which makes them very vulnerable;
4. deforestation and thus much higher vulnerability as regards climate change in the long-run

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Brasilia, Sunday 7th July 2013

Brasilia, Sunday 7th July 2013 - Arriving at a sensitive time Brazil is currently going through a very sensitive period. There is even talk on the streets of an "Amazonian Spring". All of a sudden thousands, and then hundreds of thousands of people, mostly under the age of 25, have come out onto the streets of Brazilian cities. From Sao Paulo to Amazonia, several huge "development" projects have come under scrutiny from citizens, putting the Brazilian government in an uncomfortable position.



Tents of demonstrators next to the Brazilian Congress

It is a tense time to discuss such sensitive subjects as the Belo Monte Mega-Dam project and others concerning our delegation. That is why we feared that maintaining our contact with the Brazilian government would not be easy, as the government does not want the situation to further heat up. Nevertheless, we decided to go ahead and landed in Brasilia to begin our delegation mission.



Controversial newly constructed stadium

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Responsible MEPs



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