

“Brazilian society should be proud to have 305 Indigenous Peoples and 274 indigenous languages”

“No indigenous land will be demarcated in my government,” declared Brazil’s former President Jair Bolsonaro at the beginning of his period in office, opening the door for illegal mining and land invasions, with devastating consequences for the indigenous people living there. The newly established Ministry for Indigenous Peoples seeks to give the people their territory back. And not only that. A talk with Joziléia Kaingang from the National Secretariat for the Articulation and Promotion of Indigenous Rights.

Ms Kaingang, in August 2023, you took over the position of Deputy Secretary for the Articulation and Promotion of Indigenous Rights at Brazil’s Ministry for Indigenous Peoples. What does the existence of such a ministry and your position mean to you?

The Ministry is a great opportunity for our country and for indigenous leaders who have been fighting very hard for its establishment. And my position as secretary and having the trust of Minister Sónja Guajajara is very important to me. Brazil must build public policies that make sense for indigenous people. Policies that protect women against violence and racism and support them in areas like health and education. There are so many needs that indigenous people have, so it is very important for them that this ministry has been created to address these issues and to have indigenous people as equals in such an institution to discuss public policies that concern themselves. Even though the Constitution has guaranteed many rights for Indigenous Peoples, these rights are often not respected. It is the Ministry’s task to implement these rights. So it has an important role to write a new history for Indigenous Peoples, who are the true, original peoples of this country, and who originally occupied this territory.

Where do you see the most urgent tasks?

The main objective of the Ministry is the demarcation of land and territorial management, and to guarantee land tenure. You must know that through the State’s own policies, many territories were removed from Indigenous Peoples. The people were forced to leave their land and placed into really small areas. Now they wish to go back, and the State wants to give them back the areas that were originally theirs. There are many invaders in indigenous lands, and most of them go there to plant soybeans or raise cattle. Today, for example, Minister Guajajara visited an area that had been occupied by 2,000 illegal invaders in the State of Pará. So demarcating the territories is an important task of the Ministry, as it means

guaranteeing the lives of the people as well as food security.

And the role of the Secretariat?

The Secretariat plays an important role in formulating public policies. It monitors various measures, for instance those concerning gender-related issues and housing, or measures addressing migration. So far, public policies have always been assuming that indigenous people live in small traditional villages, the aldeas, but today we have them living in completely different settings, in an urban context, or in an immigrant context – as in the case of the Warao people from Venezuela’s Orinoco Delta. We must be able to welcome these people. Thus the Secretariat is linking the State and the Indigenous Peoples. President Lula da Silva has approved a permanent committee – the Committee for the Promotion of Public Policies for the Protection of Indigenous Peoples. It will debate the construction of policies – ones that already exist as well as new ones. Twenty-three governmental ministries are members of the committee, and the respective document was signed by the Presidency of the Republic. The idea is that in case we again have an extreme right-wing government in the future, the Document will still be valid, so that we can go on with the approach of building policies for indigenous people.

I suppose that the fact that Brazil’s Supreme Court blocked the “marco temporal” in September last year was a very important achievement?

Indigenous people fought for the marco temporal to be considered illegal for several years. This law stipulates that land can only be designated as a protected area which was inhabited by Indigenous Peoples on the day the Constitution was declared, the 5th October 1988. But many of the people concerned here were violently driven from their territory before that date, and some of them were even killed. So it was very important for the Indigenous Peoples that the Supreme Court recognised this law as illegal. However, the National Congress has approved a draft amendment for the Consti-

tution which resumes the marco temporal, so Brazil’s legislative power has engaged in a serious fight against indigenous people. The agrarian lobby is very powerful in the country, and has strong representation in the Congress. It is against demarcation of indigenous territories.

What about Brazil’s society – is it taking indigenous people’s concerns seriously and supporting them?

As part of the construction of Brazilian society, indigenous people went through a violent process of having their history and memories erased. We do not have the support of all Brazilian people to defend indigenous rights. However, there is a part of society which understands that Indigenous Peoples are guardians of the forests and supports their struggles. We need to bring them into the national scenario. It is necessary to have campaigns so that Brazilians are proud of Indigenous Peoples and proud of indigenous cultures, and of having built this country together with other peoples: immigrants, enslaved black people, traditional communities and others. Moreover, it is important that indigenous people are seen as figures of the present. Often, society views them as stuck in the past and as if they didn’t exist anymore, and yet they maintain their traditions and languages. Brazilian society should be proud to have 305 Indigenous Peoples and 274 indigenous languages which have survived, and that these peoples have knowledge and science which they have built and preserved.

Are indigenous issues sufficiently taken into account in the education system, for example in school books and curricula?

Indigenous Peoples are portrayed in history books, and there is a law that prescribes teaching the history of Afro-indigenous culture at school, but unfortunately, in history, until very recently, indigenous people were still portrayed as people of the past. Now things are changing, and there is widespread mobilisation to update history books and acknowledge the presence of Indigenous Peoples in today’s spaces.



Joziléia Kaingang is Deputy Secretary for the Articulation and Promotion of Indigenous Rights at Brazil's Ministry of Indigenous Peoples. She is an indigenous woman from the Kaingang people from the South of Brazil and co-founder and coordinator of the National Articulation of Indigenous Women Warriors of Ancestry (Anmiga).

Photo: IISD/ENB

And what about indigenous languages?

There is a law that guarantees the teaching of indigenous languages at school, but this is not enough. We would like to have our languages to be present in other areas, too. Unesco is celebrating the Decade of indigenous Languages, and this is a way to strengthen and recognise the languages as part of the national culture. And in the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples, there is a general education coordination that has been stressing the importance of strengthening and recognising these languages. But there is still a lot of work to do.

You are one of the founders and coordinators of Anmiga – an activist group of empowering indigenous women. Could you tell us a bit about Anmiga's work?

On March 8th of this year, we celebrated the third anniversary of Anmiga, but the network was already founded some 30 years ago. In 2015, UN Women launched a project called "Indigenous Women's voice" to address violence against Indigenous women. Domestic violence and gender-based violence is a serious issue, especially for indigenous women. After the launch of the UN project, the network became stronger, and in 2021, we decided to give the network the name Anmiga, which stands

for *Articulação Nacional das Mulheres Indígenas Guerreiras da Ancestralidade*, which means National Articulation of Indigenous Women Warriors of Ancestry. The aim of the network is to bring to debate questions of gender, discuss how indigenous women are taking care of the forest and the water, of the territories and of lot of other ancestral knowledge, and empower them in these regards. Moreover, with support of public policies, we want to address indigenous concerns like health, combating violence and still having safe territories to continue living in.

How does this work in practice?

In order to raise awareness, we went through 22 territories with a caravan to hold debates about violence against women, climate change and bioeconomy, and how to act together with other indigenous networks and other networks in general. We took all these topics to debate and succeeded in strengthening the conditions of indigenous women as well. This also resulted in two indigenous women being elected to Parliament – Sônia Guajajara and Célia Xakriabá. Already in the election campaign, the two politicians had decided to form a *Bancada de Cocar* – a coalition of feather crowns – in order to politically back the setting up of indigenous protected areas, putting an end to logging and illegal mining and opposing industrial agriculture.

But Anmiga is also present in the capital city ...

Yes. We organised an indigenous women's march in Brazil's capital of Brasilia in 2019, with 500 women participating. In a further march in 2021, there were 5,000 women, and last year, in 2023, 8,000 indigenous women were marching through Brasilia. This gave us visibility and drew the attention of the Brazilian media and politicians regarding meeting the demands of indigenous women. During this last march, the women got to the National Congress and had a meeting with Minister Guajajara and the President as well as several other ministers.

Does the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples cooperate with other Ministries?

Yes, for example with the Ministry of Women. We now have technical cooperation within a project for a building to host women who are in violent contexts. In this context, it is very important for the Ministry of Indigenous Peoples to be ruled by an indigenous woman. Having this support within the Ministry is essential to address the particular challenges indigenous women face.

Indigenous communities play a crucial role in protecting biodiversity and the climate. But their knowledge is often not heard and recognised. What can the international community contribute here?

We know that Indigenous Peoples make up six per cent of the population, but protect 82 per cent of biodiversity. So there is a need to recognise the role that they have in taking care of their territories. And we look after it for everyone, not just for ourselves. The clean water we want to drink is the same water that all of us want to drink. The clean air we want to breathe is the same air all of us want to breathe. There is a line by Minister Sônia Guajajara that says: "We don't have a planet B. We only have this planet, and we are responsible for taking care of it." Today, for example, the Mercosur agreement with the European Union is still being discussed. Has the EU already debated how much this agreement will violate indigenous rights? It is necessary for the international community to realise that sometimes, these agreements hurt very badly and actually kill the bodies of indigenous people. In Brazil we have the concept of "body and territory", and both are seen as combined. So these agreements kill body and territory.

In this regard, it is crucial to guarantee the security of human rights defenders. It is absolutely necessary for the Escazú agreement to reach Brazil because indigenous people are the most threatened environmental defenders. So international agreements need to look at Indigenous Peoples and see whether their rights are being violated and their lives are taken.

In 2025, COP 30 takes place in Brazil. What do you expect from this?

I hope that at COP 30, the fight for climate change will reflect the entire fight for life, biodiversity and forest management. We expect commitments by partner countries that will really make a difference, whether it be about reducing carbon dioxide emissions, guaranteeing standing forest or demarcating indigenous lands. And we expect that these commitments will actually be implemented. Every year at conferences, these countries make commitments. Now it is time to honour them so that we can guarantee life on this planet. We as the Brazilian government have to assume responsibility to make this point, but also to ensure that indigenous people will be there as negotiators to bring forward these kinds of reflections.

Joziléia Kaingang was interviewed by Silvia Richter.