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How can we do more for the Indian chiefs of the Amazon?

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The visit to Sciences Po on January 29th of [two chiefs emblematic of the struggle of the Amazonian Indians](#) once again sounded the alarm about the vital threats hanging over these peoples, and received [quite a media response](#), supported by an [unique photographic exhibition](#). On this occasion, French public opinion was moved to hear these voices telling how their lands are being monopolised and polluted, their crops destroyed and their children murdered as they seek to defend their habitat. What levers, particularly political and economic, are available, both in the Amazon and in Europe, to protect these populations and their environment?

Socio-cultural specificities under threat

Davi Kopenawa, shaman and spokesman for the Yanomami Indians of Brazil, and Almir Narayamoga Surui, leader of the Paiter Surui of Brazil, do not only represent their respective communities; through them, the "indigenous peoples" of the world speak to us. Some 300 million people live in areas that are still resisting to the radical changes in land use that are primarily the result of agricultural expansion, itself primarily motivated by the growth in the consumption of animal products on the planet.¹ The "local communities" add to these peoples and as well live and produce in accordance with traditional methods and preserve specific cultural characteristics. Altogether, we are talking about one and a half billion people, or 20% of the world's population, spread over all the continents, most often in the forest massifs or savannas.

Four-fifths of the biodiversity that remains today is found in areas that their management methods preserve from the abuses of extractivism and the unbalanced practices of agri-food productivism.² And they are the gatekeeper of most of the languages, cultures, spiritualities and cosmogonies that still differ from ours and its globalised version through mass consumption. As Davi Kopenawa, a shaman of the Yanomami people, puts it very clearly, our industrialized societies "can no longer dream", and see the future only through modes of exploitation and extraction. The disappearance of any one of these cultures is in itself a planetary catastrophe, and each of these disappearances, moreover, locks us more and more into our mode of development.

So what can we do to counter the forces that are crushing them?

These are often encouraged by government policies, such as those of the current Brazilian government, which proposes to provide the Amazon with the means for monetarised economic development, and to make the Indians producers and consumers assimilated to the rest of the nation. The path of international coercion that would be imposed on the Brazilian government, the sending of "green peacekeepers", sanctions or judgments of international courts for "ecocide" seems to neglect a fundamental fact: the current Brazilian policy towards the Amazon is the application of the explicit electoral program of the candidate democratically elected by the majority of the states whose federation he governs. The deforestation that threatens the Indians is the result of a certain vision of development, enrichment and social progress, which has received the approval of universal suffrage, or on which a majority of the Brazilian electorate has at least turned a blind eye. In this context, the duty of humanitarian interference would not confer legitimacy on another government to intervene. Indeed, it should be remembered that the vision of development held by the current Brazilian government is very similar to the one that has presided, and still presides, over the "development" of our own forests, prairies, wetlands and mountains, with its disadvantages and advantages. It is no more conceivable, therefore, to pretend to impose another policy on a State in the name of the common good of humanity: what if Brazil had claimed to prohibit France from draining the Poitevin Marshlands or "developing" the Landes, thus pushing for the disappearance of the traditional practices and communities that lived there? Finally, deforestation is not only caused by Brazil, it continues in almost all the forest countries that still have large forests, in Africa and South-East Asia, and serves the production and consumption patterns of all. We in the Western world, in particular, can therefore influence our political and consumption choices.

Moreover, this continued colonisation of space by agri-food systems and mines does not respond to a material necessity that would be unavoidable for the development and enrichment of these countries. In all the regions

subject to deforestation, research suggests that there is an immense amount of land available that is no longer remarkable ecosystems and indigenous territories.³ These "degraded lands" would represent reserves of space that would allow decades of growth in agricultural production typically incriminated in deforestation, without taking away from remarkable ecosystems: cattle breeding, soybean, corn, palm oil, etc. However, "developing" them implies investments that reduce the potential economic profitability of their use. And, in fact, deforestation continues because it is now more profitable to appropriate, legally or illegally, the lands of the Yanomami rather than to invest in converting other lands; likewise, mines proliferate because the gold produced illegally by illegal gold miners who assassinate indigenous people is more profitable than gold produced sustainably.

The central and collective question of the choice of development model

Deforestation, which destroys the cultural and natural treasures of humanity, is the final result of a (political) choice of development model: it is, directly and indirectly, caused or allowed by the exponential growth of industrialised agricultural production in response to globalised consumption, three-quarters of which is associated with animal products.⁴ We therefore have an important responsibility, particularly in Europe, insofar as we can participate to a certain extent in this development model, support it, supervise it, reform it or turn away from it. For example, the problem of so-called "imported" deforestation by European countries, which stems primarily from our imports of soybeans for animal feed.

The diplomacy of countries committed to biodiversity would thus have a role to play in promoting the multiplicity and variety of local social actors (and scientists, who can also be an important force) involved in the development policies of forest regions, more or less organised in networks that cross borders, and in giving them greater recognition in the diplomatic processes underway (at regional or global levels) aimed at strengthening the international community's ambitions in terms of protecting biodiversity and its sustainable use. In this framework, development models that respect the balance between natural resources and human needs, beyond industrialised agriculture and wage-earning as the only horizons, must be proposed. It is in this sense that we can read, for example, the "Letter of São Paulo"⁵ that the local authorities gathered in the Brazilian megalopolis have just written to make their own mobilisation heard. This is a diplomatic path already well explored by various actors, including France, and which must be encouraged, but which requires European unity, and above all the negotiation of a framework of international commitment giving a voice to local governments and other non-state actors.⁶

Finally, countries whose public opinion is concerned about the fate of indigenous peoples should, in their own interest, increase the selectivity of their production and purchases: by specifying, through appropriate European regulations, the way in which Europeans wish to produce their food, how it should not be used to convert forests into pastures, meadows into soybean or corn fields, wetlands into irrigated plots, European countries would at the same time provide themselves with legal bases for replicating these specifications in their imports. France now has a national strategy to combat imported deforestation, and the European Commission has produced a position paper on the subject. It is by giving these texts much greater political weight than they have today that we could concretely respond to the call of the Indian chiefs.

Embedded content (not available in PDF)

<https://www.youtube.com/embed/sCo9w9Uqus4?autohide=1&controls=1&showinfo=0>

Vidéo de la conférence du 29 janvier 2020 à Sciences Po : "Le combat des peuples amérindiens, un enjeu planétaire", avec Davi Kopenawa et Almir Narayamoga Surui

1 <https://www.iddri.org/en/publications-and-events/issue-brief/ongoing-biodiversity-loss-and-how-it-can-be-stopped>

2 <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

3 Strassburg B.B.N., Latawiec A.E., Barioni L.G., Nobre C.A., Silva V.P. da, Valentim J.F., Vianna M. et Assad E.D. (2014). ?When enough should be enough: Improving the use of current agricultural lands could meet production demands and spare natural habitats in Brazil ?, Global Environmental Change, vol. 28, pp. 84 ?97.

4 <https://ipbes.net/global-assessment>

5 <https://cbc.iclei.org/carta-de-sao-paulo-perspectivas-brasileiras-para-o-marco-pos-2020-da-biodiversidade/>

6 <https://www.lefigaro.fr/international/paris-va-s-associer-a-neuf-etats-bresiliens-pour-preserver-la-foret-amazonienne-20191209>

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