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Climate change and its impact on the lives of Amazonian workers: environmental racism and the right to a healthy quality of life

Climate change and impacts on the life of the Amazonian worker: environmental racism and the right to a healthy quality of life

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SUMMARY

The Brazilian Amazon, a vast expanse of green crisscrossed by endless rivers, is a land of vast distances and structural obstacles that shape the lives of its inhabitants. The state's presence and effective public policies in riverside and rural communities are inversely proportional to the region's rich flora and fauna. In this context, Amazonian workers—strong caboclos, extractivists, chestnut gatherers, peconheiros, or rubber tappers—face the paradoxes brought on by climate change: severe droughts, devastating floods, scarcity amid abundance. Even though they contribute nothing to global warming, they suffer its effects most, experiencing environmental racism in its cruelest form. This essay argues that Amazonian workers, subjects of fundamental rights, cannot have their dignity compromised by the absence of the state and the repercussions of global environmental degradation. On the contrary, it is imperative to recognize their vulnerability and adopt public policies that overcome geographic and climatic obstacles, promoting environmental, social, and labor justice.

Keywords: Climate Change. Environment. Amazonian Worker. Environmental Racism.

ABSTRACT

Brazilian Amazon, a vast green expanse cut by endless rivers; a territory of long distances and structural obstacles that shape the lives of its inhabitants. The presence of the State, through effective public policies, in riverside and inland communities is inversely proportional to the richness of fauna and flora that characterizes the region. In this context, the Amazonian worker—resilient caboclo, extractivist, Brazil nut harvester, açaí collector, or rubber tapper—faces the paradoxes brought by climate change: severe droughts, devastating floods, scarcity amid abundance. Although contributing nothing to global warming, it is he who suffers its most severe effects, experiencing environmental racism in its cruellest form. This essay argues that the Amazonian worker, as a subject of fundamental rights, cannot have his dignity compromised due to State absence and the consequences of global environmental degradation. On the contrary, it is imperative to recognize its vulnerability and to adopt public policies that overcome geographic and climatic obstacles, promoting environmental, social, and labor justice.

Keywords: Climate Change. Environment. Amazonian Worker. Environmental Racism.

INTRODUCTION

The Brazilian Amazon, a vast sea of forests crisscrossed by seemingly endless rivers, is a territory of paradoxes. If, on the one hand, it is recognized globally as a heritage irreplaceable environmental factor for the planet's climate balance, on the other hand, it is a region marked by deep social inequalities, due to the historical absence of the State and the precarious conditions of life and work of its population. In this scenario, the advance of climate change will not



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presents itself as a future threat, but as a present and devastating reality, which disproportionately intensifies vulnerabilities. It is about the Amazonian worker – the riverside dweller, the extractivist who works to survive – who bear the most severe impacts of this crisis. Although their traditional activities represent a model of sustainable interaction with the forest, with very low climate impact, they are the ones who face the most cruel effects of global warming: droughts that dry up rivers and isolate communities, floods that destroy homes and crops, and the consequent shortage of food and drinking water in the middle of the largest river basin in the world. This perverse dynamic, where those who contribute least to the problem are those who suffer most from its consequences, it presents a clear picture of environmental racism. Faced with this systematic violation of rights, the central problem that this work seeks to investigate arises: how does the omission state to protect Amazonian workers from the impacts of climate change constitutes a Unconstitutional State of Affairs, violating your fundamental right to a healthy quality of life? The absence of effective public policies that consider the geographic and social specificities of the region, leaves this population in a cycle of vulnerability that threatens not only their subsistence, but their own existence and dignity. In this context, the main objective of this essay is to analyze the socioeconomic and legal impacts of the climate crisis on Amazonian workers, arguing that the inertia of the Public Power characterizes an Unconstitutional State of Affairs. To therefore, the concepts of Amazonian worker and environmental racism will be defined; they will be presented data on recent extreme weather events and their consequences, such as migration forced environmental; and, finally, the need for assertive action by the Judiciary will be defended for the implementation of public policies that promote climate and social justice. The justification for this research lies in the urgency of the topic. Discussing the condition of the worker Amazonian is to give visibility to a historically invisible population, whose rights fundamental, such as the dignity of the human person (art. 1, III, CF) and the right to the environment ecologically balanced (art. 225, CF), are devoid of social effectiveness. Protecting these workers is not just a matter of social justice, but an imperative for building a development model that values the standing forest and its true guardians. The method to be used will be deductive, starting from general theoretical premises for the analysis of cases specific, with the aim of building a solid argument that justifies the defense of a differentiated legal treatment for Amazonian workers as a solution to the challenges geographic and climatic conditions of today.



1. THE CONCEPT OF THE AMAZONIAN WORKER

To understand the depth of the socio-environmental crisis in the Amazon, it is imperative, first of all, define the central subject of this analysis. The figure of the “Amazonian worker” transcends a simple geographic or occupational classification. It is a complex identity, forged by a intrinsic relationship with the ecosystem, and which, despite its importance, is often invisible both in official statistics and in public debate. At the same time, this worker holds a robust set of rights that, although formally guaranteed, rarely materialize in their entirety. The identity of the Amazonian worker has to consider some essential elements, as will be seen below:

As explained elsewhere, the Amazonian worker's identity is not defined solely by mere residence in the vast geography of the Legal Amazon. The concept is complex, being a individual whose work activity, culture and way of life are essentially linked to the forest, to rivers and their natural cycles. As the Peabiru Institute (2016) diagnosis points out, this worker can be an extractor, a family farmer or a fisherman, adapting his tasks to the seasonality imposed by nature. This versatility is a survival strategy and a fundamental characteristic of its identity.

This category includes rubber tappers, who extract latex from rubber trees; chestnut gatherers, who collect Brazil nuts; and peconheiros, who climb the açai trees to harvest them. açai — an activity that involves significant physical risks and its own social organization. According to Little (2002), such populations have complex systems of traditional knowledge, transmitted orally and shaped by experiences accumulated over generations. They are workers who operate in symbiosis with the environment, managing resources sustainably, and whose existence represents a practical resistance to the developmental model that historically marginalizes the region.

This collective identity is not merely descriptive, but normative: it imposes on the State the duty to recognize differentiated forms of work and protection, as established by ILO Convention No. 169, internalized in the Brazilian legal system through Decree No. 5.051/2004. Therefore, not recognizing the uniqueness of the Amazonian worker is a violation international and constitutional commitments to promote sociocultural diversity and justice environmental.

As Porto-Gonçalves (2006) warns, "forest peoples do not live in the forest: they are of the forest". This distinction reveals an ontology that challenges Western notions of nature and work, demanding a new legal perspective that understands the Amazonian worker not as a marginal exception to the productive system, but as a legitimate expression of ways of life



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sustainable and plural.

It is imperative to recognize that the Amazonian worker is situated in a work environment and hostile climate, marked by long distances, structural precariousness and policy discontinuity public. According to Melo (2023), "geographic exclusion often translates into exclusion legal", and in the Amazon, this phenomenon is exponential. Informality prevails: it is estimated that more than 60% of workers work in informal conditions (IBGE, 2022). Without guaranteed rights, They face not only precarious work, but also food and health insecurity. Article 225 of the Constitution is particularly emblematic, as it imposes on the Public Power and the community the duty to defend and preserve the environment for present and future generations. In the Amazonian context, where work, housing and food depend directly on stability of ecosystems, environmental degradation represents a direct violation of this right fundamental. However, the Amazonian reality, marked by continental distances and the absence state, challenges the implementation of these precepts. As Melo and Corrêa (2022, p. 121) point out, the region faces a paradox: a justice system that is modernizing digitally, but without investment adequate, becomes inaccessible to the "Amazonian digitally excluded". This structural barrier to access to justice increases the vulnerability of workers, requiring differentiated legal protection that unites the social, environmental and labor dimensions to assert the rights of this population.

2. THE PARADOXES OF THE AMAZONIAN WORKER

The life of the Amazonian worker is marked by a series of paradoxes that intensify in the face of of the climate crisis. These contradictions expose a reality of profound injustice, in which The population that lives in greater harmony with the environment is the one that suffers most from its degradation.

2.1. UNIQUE GEOGRAPHY AND SCARCITY AMIDST ABUNDANCE

The State of Amazonas, the beating heart of the Brazilian Amazon, is a giant with a unique topography. It is the largest state in Brazil, with 1,559,161 km² (IBGE, 2020). Its dimensions exceed those of many European countries together — France, Spain, Sweden and Greece would fit within their borders. Gigantism, the difficulties inherent in displacement, generate assets such as maintenance of the standing forest and losses, such as the lack of appreciation of human labor (art. 170 of the CR). Only three of the 61 municipalities in the interior have a land connection with the capital Manaus. In all the others, the Travel is done by rivers, and distances are not measured in kilometers, but in days of travel.

This territorial gigantism highlights a paradox: a colossal State, but with a presence tiny state. The Amazonian worker — the caboclo, the riverside dweller, the rubber tapper, the peconheiro —



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suffers from shortages. Without roads and with expensive and time-consuming river transport, production does not flow, economy does not turn, work is aimed at survival. In the heart of the forest, in the municipalities, almost everything revolves around the city councils, which, in turn, depend on resources from the **Fund Participation of Municipalities (FPM)**, as there is nothing to tax in the middle of the forest. And the work without economic activity? Those who don't work for the city extract to live—and live to extract. A great paradox. The Amazonian worker, surrounded by rivers, suffers from thirst; surrounded by biodiversity, lives with scarcity; living on the green that sustains the world, feels it on your skin the abandonment of a State that rarely arrives. Lives and works in the municipalities located in the heart of the forest, where distances make any large-scale economic activity unfeasible.

It is in this scenario that the true Amazonian legal drama is forged — that of the worker who, as Hannah Arendt¹ well described , “has no right to have rights.”

While the planet celebrates the Amazon as a symbol of hope, the Amazonian worker remains invisible in citizenship statistics. The paradoxes are mounting. The Amazon is home to the largest river basin on the planet, a complex system of rivers that serves as the main transport route, food source and central element of local culture (MELO; CORRÊA, 2022). In

However, it is in this scenario of apparent water abundance that thousands of riverside communities find themselves, paradoxically, deprived of access to drinking water.

This contradiction extends dramatically to food security. The forest, which should be a perennial source of sustenance, becomes inaccessible. Drought prevents navigation to fishing areas and hunting, and the farms, generally located in floodplain areas, do not produce due to the lack of moisture.

In extreme flood situations, the problem is reversed, but with the same devastating result:

waters invade crops and homes, destroying entire harvests. In both scenarios, the worker who lives off the land and the river finds himself without food, depending on food aid emergency to survive (CIVIL DEFENSE OF AMAZONAS, 2024). Living thirst and hunger in

The world's largest tropical forest and river basin is the embodiment of socio-environmental injustice.

2.2. ENVIRONMENTAL RACISM

The Amazonian worker is, therefore, a victim of environmental racism with a bias towards injustice. environmental. Now, those who contribute least to climate change are precisely those who suffer most with its effects. Record droughts in the Amazon over the years are concrete evidence. According to data from SIPAM (2023), more than **600 thousand people were** directly affected by droughts in the municipalities

¹ ARENDT, Hannah. *Origins of Totalitarianism: Antisemitism, Imperialism, Totalitarianism*. Translated by Roberto Raposo. 8th ed. Lisbon: Dom Quixote, 2018.



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in the interior of Amazonas. Entire families were left without drinking water in communities where fresh water is, ironically, the greatest natural resource².

During historic droughts, such as those observed in 2023 and 2024, the drastic reduction in the level of rivers not only isolates communities, but also compromises the quality of the little water that remains, making it unfit for consumption. The lack of basic sanitation and water infrastructure drinking water treatment and distribution systems force families to consume contaminated water, exposing them to a series of diseases. This contradiction is the ultimate expression of state abandonment, experience of scarcity amidst abundance, the world's largest river basin having its riverside communities deprived of drinking water during historic droughts.

The concept of environmental racism describes the social and environmental injustice by which communities ethnically marginalized people — such as indigenous people, quilombolas and riverside communities — are disproportionately burdened by the negative impacts of economic development and ecological degradation. In the Amazonian context, this definition materializes in a cruel way. The Amazonian worker, whose traditional extractive activity has an environmental impact very low, is the main victim of the effects of global climate change, a problem generated, largely due to a production and consumption model that is far from its reality.

The situation experienced by these populations fits into what the doctrine defines as “zones of sacrifice”, territories where environmental degradation is tolerated in the name of supposed progress that does not benefit its inhabitants. In this regard, Melo and Corrêa (2022, p. 131) highlight the dimension of this injustice when describing the relationship of forest peoples with the environment:

“The riverside dwellers, for example, have a symbolic and affective relationship with the river, in addition to that cultural and economic, having it as a centripetal vector of the region, not only for them, but for all who live together with the environment: small producers, Indians, extractivists, miners, settlers, farmers, traders etc.; therefore, a traveling jurisdiction must consider this particularity for social approximation, responding effectively to social cartography.”

This “social cartography” is ignored when climate impacts are treated as a problem generic. The severe droughts that hit the region in 2023 and 2024 are an example forceful. According to data from the Civil Defense of Amazonas (2024), more than 40 municipalities have decreed emergency situation, directly affecting the lives of approximately 800,000 people. Rivers that were transport routes and sources of livelihood turned into sandbanks, isolating

² G1. Difficulty getting around, searching for water, unemployment: the drought in the Amazon and its impact on the lives of riverside dwellers. G1, November 1, 2023. Available at: <https://g1.globo.com/profissao-reporter/noticia/2023/11/01/dificuldade-de-locomocao-busca-por-agua-desemprego-a-seca-no-amazonas-e-os-impactos-na-vida-dos-ribeirinhos.ghtml>. Accessed on: October 5, 2025.

communities and preventing access to food, medicine, and clean water. This vulnerability is not a natural accident, but the direct consequence of a development model that externalizes its costs to the most vulnerable populations, constituting a clear violation of its fundamental rights.

3. FORCED ENVIRONMENTAL MIGRATION

Faced with a scenario of permanent uncertainty, where drought isolates and floods destroy, one of the most tragic consequences for Amazonian workers is forced environmental migration. When the forest and rivers, which have always been the basis of its existence, no longer offer the minimum conditions for survival, the only alternative left is the painful abandonment of their territory. This phenomenon, also known as climate rural exodus, does not represent a free choice in search of better opportunities, but an imposition resulting from the State's failure to guarantee the dignified permanence of these populations in their homes (MELO; CORRÊA, 2022).

This abrupt transition imposes a profound sociocultural rupture. By being uprooted from one's environment, the worker loses not only his main source of livelihood, but also his identity and their community ties. Traditional knowledge, accumulated over generations and essential for biodiversity conservation, loses its space and function. This loss is well captured by poetry by Thiago de Mello (2002), who, although in another context, describes the pain of a man separated from your land:

"Dawn, my love.
It's always the first time.
We learn to die
and to be born every day."

This symbolic "death" of the forest man's identity is the prelude to a new struggle for survival in urban centers. Without specific qualifications for the formal job market and, often facing social stigma, many end up joining the ranks of underemployment and poverty on the outskirts of Amazonian cities (IBGE, 2019). The migratory process, therefore, generates a vicious cycle of losses: the Amazon loses its historical guardians, making room for the advance of predatory activities, while cities suffer from a disorderly swelling that puts pressure on already precarious public services. Environmental migration is thus the most acute symptom of structural failure of the State and the urgency of rethinking a development model that, until now, has produced more exclusion than justice.



4. LEGAL REPERCUSSIONS AND FUNDAMENTAL RIGHTS

The humanitarian and environmental crisis experienced by Amazonian workers, detailed in the paradoxes of their daily lives, represents not only a social tragedy, but a profound and ongoing violation of basic legal precepts. The Federal Constitution of 1988, in its article 1, paragraph III, elects the dignity of the human person as one of the foundations of the Republic. Additionally, Article 225 ensures the right to an ecologically balanced environment as an “essential condition for healthy quality of life”. However, the Amazonian reality, marked by state omission, challenges daily the implementation of these guarantees.

The State's inertia in providing basic infrastructure, monitoring predatory activities and, mainly in creating climate adaptation policies for the most vulnerable populations, results in a context of massive and widespread violation of rights. This structural failure, which prevents the exercise of fundamental rights by a significant number of people and is perpetuated over time, fits perfectly with the concept of Unconstitutional State of Affairs (ECI). This institute, imported from the jurisprudence of the Constitutional Court of Colombia and already applied by the Supreme Court Federal Court (STF) in ADPF 347, is a legal tool to face complex problems and systemic.

As defined by Cruz and Lemos (2022), the ECI manifests itself in the face of a structural failure that requires complex solutions and the coordination of multiple state bodies. Its application in the context of climate crisis in the Amazon is therefore not only possible, but necessary.

4.1. THE UNCONSTITUTIONAL STATE OF AFFAIRS AND THE DUTY TO ACT

The application of the ECI thesis to the Amazonian context does not seek for the Judiciary to replace the legislator or the administrator, but who acts as a catalyst for public policies, forcing others powers to fulfill their constitutional duty. The situation demands a response that goes beyond decisions isolated judicial processes. As Kozicki and Van Der Broecke (2018, p. 161) explain when analyzing the origin from the institute:

“The ECI declaration is made in the context of concrete control of constitutionality, when reviewing decisions judicial decisions handed down in the tutela actions and was used by the Constitutional Court of Colombia for the first time in 1997, due to lawsuits involving the non-affiliation of municipal teachers to the social security system social. Since then, the Court has developed and refined the procedure in a series of similar decisions [...]”



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This same logic applies here: the violation of rights is not individual, but collective and structural.

The absence of the state in the Amazon cannot be justified by logistical or budgetary difficulties, because, as the authors themselves state, the ECI arises precisely to overcome “political blockages and institutional” that prevent the realization of rights (KOZICKI; VAN DER BROOCCKE, 2018, p. 173). The massive violation of rights is undeniable. As demonstrated by data from the Civil Defense of Amazonas (2024), extreme weather events affect hundreds of thousands of people simultaneously depriving them of access to water, food and transportation. Added to this is the endemic job insecurity, with 100% informality and 89% accident incidence among the peconheiros, without any effective state support (INSTITUTO PEABIRU, 2016). The persistent failure of the authorities is equally clear. The absence of sanitation policies basic, climate-resilient transport infrastructure and production support programs extractivism is not a recent failure, but a historical pattern of neglect. This inertia, as point out Kozicki and Van Der Broocke (2018), may be the result of “political and institutional blockages”, where the lack of political representation of these communities makes them invisible to the agenda government. Finally, the need for structural solutions is evident. A decision is not enough judicial system that guarantees a benefit to a single individual. The solution to the climate crisis in the Amazon requires a coordinated response between Ministries (Environment, Agrarian Development, Labor), federal agencies (INCRA, IBAMA), state and municipal governments. Kozicki and Van Der Broocke (2018, p. 161) explains the nature of these measures:

“[...] overcoming is only possible through the adoption of a coordinated set of government measures to legislative, executive, administrative and budgetary nature, that is, public policies that involve a plurality of public actors.”

Therefore, the application of the ECI thesis to the Amazonian context does not seek for the Judiciary to replace the legislator, but who acts as an inducer, a coordinator of the dialogue between the powers so that, finally, fulfill their constitutional duty. Recognizing the unconstitutional state of affairs is the first step to breaking the cycle of abandonment and starting to build true justice climate and social for forest peoples.

Faced with this scenario of historic droughts, insecurity in extractive work and racism environmental that penalizes precisely those who contribute least to the climate crisis, we have no choice but to resignation, but rather collective responsibility. Solutions cannot be isolated or palliative. They require: **structural public policies** — continued investment in water infrastructure, sustainable river transport and technical assistance for extractive communities, ensuring resilience in the face of extreme droughts and floods; **protection of traditional work** — inclusion effective participation of extractivists in occupational health and safety programs, with the provision of

adequate equipment, credit lines and oversight mechanisms that also involve the strong links in the production chain (industries, wholesalers, exporters); **economic diversification and cultural appreciation** — creation of local cooperatives and encouragement of grassroots production chains community, which strengthen the dignified permanence of workers in the interior, without the need for forced migration; **climate justice** — the recognition that Amazonian workers cannot be sacrificed by the State's omission nor by the market logic that consumes its strength work, but ignores his life.

It is necessary to understand that protecting Amazonian workers also means protecting the forest. The Amazon is not just a biome, it is a home to people, rivers, ancestral cultures, dignities that cannot be submerged or dried up by climate change.

FINAL CONSIDERATIONS

Throughout this work, we sought to demonstrate that the climate crisis in the Amazon is not a phenomenon abstract, but a reality that imposes severe and disproportionate consequences on its inhabitant most intrinsic: the Amazonian worker. This, who is a symbol of resistance and guardian of traditional knowledge, has also become a symbol of vulnerability, experiencing the paradoxes of a rich land that condemns him to scarcity and of an environmental crisis that he did not cause, but of which is the main victim.

The analysis revealed that the situation transcends natural fatality, configuring itself as a framework of environmental racism, sustained by a historical and structural omission of the State. The violation systematic of fundamental rights – to dignity, to a healthy environment, to health, to work safe and to access justice itself – does not constitute a series of isolated incidents, but a failure continuous and widespread that conforms to the thesis of the Unconstitutional State of Affairs. Therefore, the protection of Amazonian workers can no longer be treated as a secondary issue or left to the mercy of specific welfare policies. It is imperative that the Power Judiciary, provoked to act, recognize this unconstitutional reality and assume its role as catalyst for change, urging other powers to formulate and implement policies effective and permanent public policies. Such policies must go beyond mere emergency relief, promoting climate justice through investment in the bioeconomy, the valorization of traditional knowledge and the creation of an infrastructure that guarantees the dignified permanence of these populations in their territories.

Protecting Amazonian workers is, ultimately, protecting the Amazon itself. Recognizing its dignity and their rights is not just fulfilling a constitutional duty, but taking a decisive step for a future in which the forest and its people can coexist in a just, prosperous and sustainable way.

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There is a duty of the State and the collective to establish public policies in favor of Amazonian work.

structural, protection of traditional labor — with effective inclusion of extractivists in programs occupational health and safety, with the provision of adequate equipment, credit lines and inspection mechanisms that also involve the strong links in the production chain (industries, wholesalers, exporters).

The Amazonian worker must be included in specific social security policies, adapted to the realities of the countryside, the river, and the forest. Protecting Amazonian workers is protecting the Amazon in its entirety.

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