

IN LATIN AMERICA, DROUGHT COULD POTENTIALLY ESCALATE INTO A POLITICAL-HUMANITARIAN CRISIS

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S. MEGENS, 2024

In the final months of 2023, several publications and social media platforms recognized how important it is to educate the public about the serious issues that the Amazon is facing, such as the unexpected dryness of the rivers (hydrological drought) and the unprecedented death of fish and birds. The Rainforest Foundation stated in a publication that the Amazon River is drying up in the worst possible way, leaving our Indigenous brothers with nothing to drink but contaminated water. They show that the Amazon is experiencing a severe drought, which is causing transportation problems, isolating populations, and endangering the existence of species. Furthermore, the region's indigenous peoples were pushing their governments to declare a climate emergency, stressing the severe conditions brought on by El Niño, deforestation, and wildfires. According to some news sources, the drought in the state of Amazonas has directly affected over 600,000 people as of November 2023. The consequences of climate change and on some occasions human or government negligence resulted in victims with permanent damage to communities, where the problem of drought in these areas is not fully understood. A pertinent example that goes beyond the fact that climate change is having a significant effect on this region of the world is the Negro River section of the Brazilian Amazon jungle near Manaus, which dropped to less than 12.7 meters in November 2023—its lowest depth in 120 years. The food supply to the cities along the riverbanks is also being impacted by the drying up of additional lakes, wells, and streams. the Pará-Brazil major basin is an example.

A particular case was from the SIONA and COFANES community, which occurred on October 2023, in the Ecuadorian territory, where an emergency produced by an oil spill dramatically affected the well-being of their communities, *"The fish are dying, and the population does not have water, they are sick, they need medication and their access roads are fluvial"*, expressed with concern Willian Criollo, president of this SIONA nationality. Moreover, considering that another perspective does not change the situation as a whole, where areas of the agricultural frontier with their expansion is threatening more and more the sovereignty of these territories, for example. To enhance agricultural planning, reduce disaster risk, and mitigate climate change, scenarios involving the destruction of the Amazon rainforest. But first, let's talk about the primary cause of this issue, the river drought.

The SIONA and COFANES community are part of the CONFENIAE . This organization is made up of 11 Amazonian nationalities belonging to 22 grassroots organizations and federations in the 6 Amazonian provinces from a total of 22 National provinces: Kichwa, Shuar, Achuar, Sapara, Shiwiar, Waorani, Andwa, Quijos, Siona, Siekopai, Ai' Cofán.

In Ecuador, the Siona community is linked to the Cuyabeno Reserve, a pristine rainforest deep within the Amazon jungle, and the Yasuni. Here we find the Siona Lodge, which sits on a peninsula facing a massive lagoon, the "Laguna Grande," which almost disappeared in the last dry season. These are the two most biodiverse areas in this country. Approximately one month every year, between December and January, the lagoon dries up due to a lack of rainfall (Image provide by M. Cando 2023).

Figure 1 The Cuyabeno River and Reserve



"In October 2023, an indigenous community in the Amazons region, including the Cuyabeno Lagoon, is facing a crisis due to a drying river, and shrinking lagoon, highlighting ongoing climate disasters such as a catastrophic drought, wildlife survival threats, isolating communities, and transit issues"

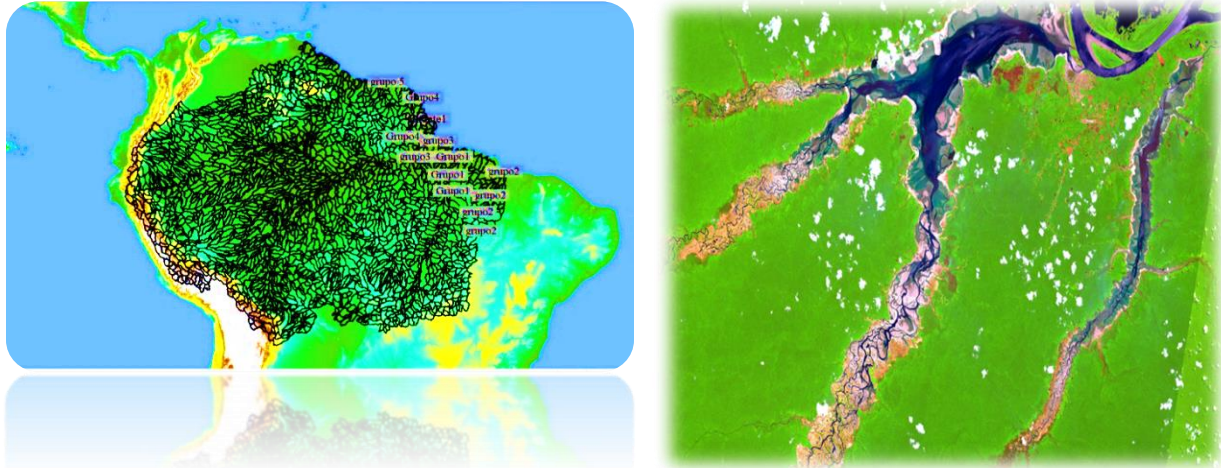
Dry of rivers at the Amazon

The drying of rivers, which developed into a "humanitarian crisis", in countries such as Ecuador, Perú, and Brazil, originated when UNICEF declared The State of Amazon, in Brazil, emergency¹ for 100% (62 in total) of the state's municipalities (since October 2023). There were an estimated 150,000 families affected, totaling more than 600,000 people. Communities reliant on family farming on the floodplains of the Amazon River have had severe difficulties as a result of the drought in the rainforest, therefore, the relationship between water scarcity, droughts, and people's decisions to migrate or stay is multifaceted and complex. This has interfered with the movement of goods and grains down the river as well as the transfer of energy. Moreover, according to the United Nations Development Program, people in drought-affected areas of Ecuador and Amazonia can better adapt to the effects of climate change by using water-efficient irrigation. Moreover, collective and simultaneous action have proven to be more effective. It is therefore necessary to establish what is destroying not just the Amazon rainforest for agricultural plans, but also the climate impact of the Amazon River.

¹ <https://reliefweb.int/report/brazil/unicef-brazil-humanitarian-situation-report-no-2-amazon-drought-22-november-2023#:~:text=The%20State%20of%20Amazon%20in,totalling%20more%20than%20600%2C000%20people.>

We could explore two potential avenues of comprehension; 1) improving research: why do rivers occasionally dry up? 2) improving justice: How does restorative or transitional justice contribute to repairing environmental damage?

Figure 2: Amazon project RAISG 2022² & Amazon river water surface Sept 2023
ECU/MapBiomass³



Source: Souza Jr et al. 2023

Improving scientific knowledge

Researching these cases allows us to define the optimal process of finding data, and then to analyze, to do the assessment and the interpretation of that information. However, what about the proof that is considered necessary to address the issues occurring in many South American countries beyond Brazil, such as the Ecuador Amazonia example, where its rivers have shrunk? In other cases, particularly in the Southern Cone of South America, are we dismissing the issues occurring in these nations inexplicably and rapidly?

A study published by ECHO, 2023, indicates that from August 2022 to March 2023, the drought decreased in Brazil and moved south, affecting mainly northern Argentina and Uruguay; Hydrology and vegetation are severely affected by the drought, with impacts on crops, river flow, and energy production. After three years of La Niña conditions, the tropical Pacific Ocean has entered neutral ENSO conditions, and a transition to an El Niño phase is forecast for the coming months. Seasonal forecasts point to warmer temperatures, close-to-average precipitation, and lower-than-average river flows. Reflecting on harm to South America's ecology and economy due to the current drought.

The countries of southern South America provide us with the right data, but perhaps not entirely the sufficient evidence that we need. There is no doubt that one of the worst and most extensive droughts in decades has been caused by precipitation deficits, above-

² <https://www3.socioambiental.org/geo/RAISGMapaOnline/>

³ Reduction of water surface in the Amazon River nearby the Urucú River in central Amazonas

average temperatures, and recurrent heat waves. But how do we live in the moment and stop thinking about what drought affected the past? I think a comprehensive approach has the potential to appropriately redirect these emergency calls. Another beneficial option is to use the resources provided by the UNCCD/CLP, the Community of Learning and Practice on Drought Management⁴.

Improving justice response

Why justice? Because it's critical to acknowledge environmental equity as a fundamental human right that gives everyone some degree of control over the choices that affect their life. Whose pollute, must pay, and repair (I must say). Moreover, the relationship, respect, repair, and reintegration are an excellent lens through which to see the restorative justice, the environmental justice, or the well-known intersectional justice as a community process. They could be the topic of potential reparations related to the drought, and probably making it politically uncomfortable for some governments to discuss it. Nevertheless, there is a thin line between granting victim with justice and holding responsible for individuals or organizations accountable for their environmental negligence in the context of possible alternative scientific approaches to addressing the scarcity of water.

The influence of the drought issue on humanitarian crises lies in providing those affected with reparations through multiple strategies, each with a distinct purpose—preventing harm, for example, or reconstructing society. When it comes to bridging the gap between the evident drought and the urgent need to address current harmful behaviors, restorative justice and/or transitional justice provide an extraordinary opportunity. It defends the collective rights of local and indigenous communities. It seeks to restore the earth's systems and human relationships with the natural environment.

As stated on UNCCD/CLP objectives, it will, among other important stakeholders working on desertification and drought management, foster trust, cooperation, and a shared sense of identity among national and regional actors as well as increase the political profile of drought management and support the design and development of integrated policies and governance frameworks in Latin America countries (UNCCD white paper, 2016), that can represent the necessary knowledge in a broader context and variables. I think it is time to rewrite this history and then this evidence is necessary. On October 6, 2023, I learned from the crisis that an indigenous community was experiencing with the drying up of a river and shrinking lagoon that this was only the start of an even longer chain of climate disasters that would devastate the Amazons, a geographical region that is extremely important to humanity. The decision to address the problem is a current one, not a future one, and should be acknowledged before considering future political moves.

⁴ <https://droughtclp.unccd.int/clp/home>; https://catalogue.unccd.int/881_whitepaper_land_degradation.pdf