



## Socio-economic and environmental conflict over the construction of Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant

### *Conflito socioeconômico e ambiental ao redor da construção da Usina Hidrelétrica Belo Monte*

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**ABSTRACT:** This article aims to do an analysis of the construction of Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, characterizing it as a socio-economic and environmental conflict over two main themes: a) the impact of large infrastructure constructions on the local populations as well as on the territory in which they are built; b) the risks and benefits they generate for the development of the region and the country. This is done by analyzing empirically the concept of “political opportunity structure” in relation to the political opportunities that arose for the action of the different social agents involved in the conflict over the construction of the hydroelectric power plant. In this analysis, it was found that within the actual political opportunity structure presented by the Brazilian energy policies, the groups that are against the construction of large infrastructure edifications, such as Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, and those that suffer the most with its direct and indirect impacts are also the ones with less power to influence the decision making processes and the outcomes of these constructions. In Belo Monte’s case, the contentious repertoires utilized by these agents were not able to generate mobilization with political power enough to change the construction and the operation schedules. This situation is also due to the cohesion and political power of the groups that support this kind of construction. The way these groups act gives them autonomy to decide about the course of the Brazilian energy policies and aim them for the continuity of projects of expanding the number of large hydroelectric power plants in the Brazilian Amazon rivers.

*Keywords:* conflict; risk; political opportunity structure; Brazilian energy policy; Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.

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**RESUMO:**

O presente artigo tem como objetivo fazer uma análise da construção da usina hidrelétrica Belo Monte, caracterizando-a como um conflito socioeconômico e ambiental que gira ao redor de dois grandes temas: o impacto de grandes obras de infraestrutura sobre as populações locais e sobre o território onde se instalam, e os riscos e benefícios que elas geram para o desenvolvimento da região e do país. Isso é feito por meio de uma análise empírica do conceito de “estrutura de oportunidade política”, em relação às oportunidades políticas que se configuraram para a atuação dos diferentes agentes sociais envolvidos no conflito ao redor da construção da usina. Nesta análise, constatou-se que, dentro da atual estrutura de oportunidades políticas da política energética brasileira, os grupos sociais contrários à construção de grandes obras de infraestrutura como a usina hidrelétrica Belo Monte, e aqueles que mais sofrem com os seus impactos diretos e indiretos, são também os que possuem menor capacidade de influenciar os processos decisórios e os resultados dessas construções. No caso do conflito em torno da usina hidrelétrica em questão, o repertório contencioso utilizado por esses agentes não conseguiu gerar uma mobilização contrária à obra com poder político suficiente para alterar o cronograma de construção e operação da usina. Essa situação se deve também à coesão e força política dos grupos sociais favoráveis a esse tipo de construção. A forma de atuação desses grupos lhes confere autonomia para decidir sobre os rumos da política energética brasileira, e orientá-la para a continuidade do projeto de expansão do número de usinas hidrelétricas de grande porte nos rios, da Amazônia brasileira.

*Palavras-chave:* conflito; risco; estrutura de oportunidade política; política energética brasileira; usina hidrelétrica Belo Monte.

## 1. Introduction

The construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant (HPP Belo Monte) has been studied by researchers in the past and has continued to be the object of research for contemporary social scientists, who have an interest in analyzing and discussing it as a symbol of a development model adopted in the last decades by the Brazilian government, in partnership with private sector agents, and very opposed by a few academics, traditional peoples, non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and environmental movements, including international ones. Thus, the main objective of this study, when analyzing the construction of HPP Belo Monte, is to characterize it as a socio-economic and environmental conflict. Moreover, the idea that there are important elements in this type of conflict to comprehend the disputes around the large infrastructure constructions in the Amazon is

reinforced, as well as its relation to the development of the region and Brazil.

Essentially, an analysis of the conflict surrounding HPP Belo Monte will be developed: its main agents, speeches and matters of disagreement. In order to achieve that, ideas from Brazilian and foreign authors that study contemporary political and social conflicts will be used, and more specifically, Brazilian conflicts surrounding large infrastructure constructions, such as the construction of hydroelectric power plants in rivers of the Brazilian Amazon and the case of HPP Belo Monte. In addition, online collected documents and interviews carried out in our field research with different social agents involved in the conflict will be analyzed.

Twenty people were interviewed in two rounds of interview. The first round was carried out during a four-day field research, from September 10 to 13, 2013, in Altamira, Pará, in North Brazil. During this period, eight interviews were conducted with resi-

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dents of an Urban Collective Resettlement (RUC) and representatives of social movements, NGOs, from the House of Government and the Federal University of Pará (UFPA). The second round of interviews occurred between October 5 and 12, 2014, also in Altamira, Pará, in which other twelve interviews were conducted with representatives from the Altamira Agropastoral Commercial and Industrial Association (ACIAPA), the Public Federal Ministry (MPF), the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI), the private consultancy firm, PM21, responsible for the executive office of the Plan for Regional Sustainable Development of Xingu (PDRSX), the Belo Monte Municipalities Consortium, the Fishermen's Colony Z-57, the Belo Monte Constructor Consortium (CCBM) and UFPA.

The analysis of the interviews had as a main objective to offer empirical information for the characterization of the socio-economic and environmental conflict surrounding the construction of HPP Belo Monte.

This article is organized in five sections, aside from this introduction and the final considerations. Firstly, a brief chronology of the conflict surrounding the construction of Belo Monte will be presented. Subsequently, the social agents and institutions involved in the dispute around HPP Belo Monte will be mapped out and discussed. Thirdly, an empirical analysis over the concept of “political opportunity structure” will be developed, in relation to the political opportunities that emerged for the action of different social agents involved in the conflict surrounding the construction of the power plant. At last, there will be a discussion on repertoires of contention (section 5) and the interpretive frameworks (section 6) around Belo Monte.

## ***2. Chronology of the conflict surrounding the construction of Belo Monte***

Analyzing the chronology of the construction of HPP Belo Monte is essential to understand the conflict. Over thirty years had passed since its conception, in the 1970s, during the military dictatorship, until the start of construction in 2011. Throughout this period, the project had always been present in the public policy agenda of the Brazilian federal government (both in military and democratic governments), although it was the target of strong opposition by organized groups of civil society, for example, indigenous people and environmentalists.

The origin of the project lies in the period of Brazilian history marked by intense industrial growth and by the search for sources of energy, alternatives to oil and capable of sustaining that growth. Hydroelectricity in Brazil, due to its high generating potential, began to be seen as the main energy source to be explored and, since the 1970s, the presence of hydroelectric power plants within the Brazilian energy matrix has gained great momentum: between 1974 and 2004, the installed power of the hydroelectric power plants grew more than 400% and increased from 13,274MW to 69,000MW (Souza & Jacobi, 2010, p. 2).

In 1975, the Brazilian government, through Eletronorte (Electric Power Plants from the North of Brazil), hired the National Council of Engineering Consultants (CNEC) to initiate the Hydroelectric Inventory Studies of the Xingu River Basin, concluded in the 1980s and presented to the public in 1987, with the announcement of the National Plan for Electric Power 1987/2010 (2010 Plan) (Ministério de Minas e Energia, 1987). This report

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indicated the high generating potential of electric power by dams and hydroelectric power plants in the Brazilian Amazon rivers. In 1989, this proposal was directed to the Water and Electric Power Department (DNAEE), a government agency subsequently replaced by the National Agency of Electrical Energy (ANEEL), requesting its approval and the granting of concession for its hydroelectric potential.

Until then, the project had been debated primarily in the governmental sphere, based on the technical reports of engineers hired to perform feasibility studies. From the year of 1986, the media from the South and Southeast regions of Brazil started to announce that Eletronorte would soon implement the project and it led to an intensification in the mobilization of civil society organizations that resided in the Xingu River Basin. The mobilization was intensified even more, after indigenous leaders started to expose internationally the absence of prior consultation to indigenous people by the Brazilian government and others responsible for the construction of dam projects and hydroelectric power plants in the Xingu River, including the World Bank, a potential investor. Religious organizations active in the region, such as the Ecumenical Center of Information and Documentation (CEID), began to advocate the rights of indigenous people and to support them in their demands for more information about the construction. This process culminated in the First Meeting of Indigenous People of Xingu, from February 20 to 25, 1989, at the Roman Catho-

lic Territorial Prelature of Xingu, eight kilometers far from Altamira.

After the meeting, Brazilian authorities who were conducting the project chose to suspend it. To Fleury & Almeida (2013) this reaction was due to the intensity of the manifestations contrary to the project. To indigenous people, environmental and social movements, the suspension had represented an accomplishment. Whereas, according to Moran (2016), the suspension of the project was caused by a decrease, from the end of 1980s, in the World Bank funding for large dam construction projects in the world, due to a concern over the social and environmental costs of Hydroelectric Power Plants (HPPs).

However, the suspension of the project did not last long. Since 1993, the technicians of DNAEE, Eletronorte and of Eletrobrás began to meet in a work-oriented group to review the project and consider alternatives to make it viable. Thus, modifications were made in the original project, in order to alter locations and size of dams and, consequently, to reduce the local impact of the construction<sup>1</sup>. This new proposal was forwarded to Eletrobrás, which, in 1999, requested the Ministry of Mines and Energy the permission to initiate new feasibility studies over the construction. Thus, in 2002, the last year of the second mandate of president Fernando Henrique Cardoso (FHC), a Work Group (WG) was formed, composed by representatives of various Brazilian government agencies<sup>2</sup> with the aim of making the construction of the hydroelectric plant feasible. The

<sup>1</sup> This meant a reduction in the predicted HPP Belo Monte flooded area, from 1,225 km<sup>2</sup> in the original project, to 516 km<sup>2</sup> in the final project, and the decision not to flood indigenous lands (in the original project, two indigenous territories would be flooded).

<sup>2</sup> Staff of the Presidency of the Republic, ministries of Mines and Energy, Environment, Finance, Planning, Budget and Management, Eletrobrás, Eletronorte, São Francisco Electric Company (CHESF), Furnas S A, Brazilian Development Bank (BNDES) and the State Government of Pará (Fleury, 2013).

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project was incorporated into the Avana Brasil Program (modernization program) from the FHC government, and was continued within the Growth Acceleration Program (PAC), versions I and II, during the two mandates of the government of president Lula, reaching priority status. In 2005, this status was enhanced through the legislative decree 788/2005<sup>3</sup>, which authorized the implementation of HPP Belo Monte, located in a stretch of the Xingu River, in the state of Par, after the completion of feasibility studies by Eletrobrs.

The approach to conduct the project adopted by the government, without promoting popular participation and prior consultation to indigenous people, more specifically, was the target of numerous protests from social movements and organizations. Another aspect of the project that has continuously been questioned by these movements and by the Public Federal Ministry is the environmental licensing process; the Public Federal Ministry of Par (MPF/PA), for example, has already filed more than 20 lawsuits against the public and private representatives of HPP Belo Monte, the great majority of them with environmental licensing as an object and, more precisely, its conditions for licensing (Procuradoria da Rblica no Par, 2016).

However, it is worth mentioning that the effects of the protests contrary to the construction were barely noticeable over the process. A few momentary work stoppages were achieved, however, the fundamental stages of the process were maintained and approved by all of the government agencies in charge. The licensing process was maintained.

In 2007, it was released the Term of Reference for the Formulation of the Environmental Impact

Studies and the Environmental Impact Report (EIA-Rima). Between 2008 and 2009, the National Energy Policy Council (CNPE) and the National Agency of Electrical Energy (ANEEL) approved the Update of the Hydropower Inventory Studies of the Xingu River Basin, including only HPP Belo Monte (excluding the other power plants that were considered in the 2010 Plan). Throughout this period, the EIA-Rima was formulated by a private consultancy firm.

The Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources (IBAMA) executed technical surveys on the construction sites and made requests of detailed technical information relevant to the licensing process. During that period, the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) was requested to create research groups to measure the impacts of HPP Belo Monte over the indigenous communities of the surrounding territory and to propose mitigation programs of these impacts. These studies were incorporated in the environmental impact studies of HPP Belo Monte, and, in May 2009, the EIA-Rima final document was handed to IBAMA, along with the request from Eletrobrs to approve the Preliminary License (PL) of the construction of HPP Belo Monte.

It is worth mentioning that this is one of the main points for criticism of the environmental licensing process of Belo Monte, since the requestor of the PL is an agency of the government itself. To Vainer (2007), this fact, in a certain way, relieves the construction developer that will feature the use concession of the HPP of responsibility for all the stages of social and environmental compensation

<sup>3</sup> The decree was the target of a Direct Action of Unconstitutionality on the part of the indigenous people (defeated in the Supreme Federal Court, in August 2005).

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prior to the beginning of construction. For more information about this, see Vainer (2007).

The public hearings provided for in the Brazilian environmental legislation had been initiated. The civil society had an opportunity to express the arguments contrary to the construction. In this period, it was created the “Panel of Experts – Critical Analysis of the Study of Environmental Impact of Belo Monte Hydroelectric Use”, a document composed of articles from 38 experts from different areas of knowledge, which questions the credibility of information and conclusions presented in the EIA-Rima. Moreover, it was during this time that the Coordination of the Indigenous Organizations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB) sent a letter to the United Nations (UN) denouncing the breach of the free, prior and informed consultation and consent, provided for the indigenous people in the Convention 169 of the International Labour Organization (ILO) about the Rights of Indigenous Peoples.

Regardless of all this mobilization, on February 1, 2010, the PL of Belo Monte Hydroelectric Use was issued by IBAMA. Forty conditions for licensing were listed, to be met by the ones in charge of the construction before the release of the Installation License (IL). In April of the same year, the bidding for concessions of the construction was held, outbidding by Norte Energia S A<sup>4</sup> (Ministério de Minas e Energia, 2010). On June 1, 2011, the IL for the construction was issued, authorizing the company to initiate the construction work of HPP Belo Monte, even without having met most of the conditions of the PL within the set deadline.

In December 2013, the Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA) published the online magazine “De Olho em Belo Monte: 2013, no pico da contradição” (In English, “Keeping an Eye on Belo Monte: 2013, at the peak of contradiction”) and in March 2014, “Placar Geral do cumprimento das condicionantes socioambientais para a emissão da Licença de Operação da UHE Belo Monte” (In English, “Overall Score of compliance of the conditions for issuing the HPP Belo Monte Operating License”). These publications aimed to demonstrate that the construction developer was not meeting, even remotely, the conditions for the IL (Instituto Socioambiental, 2013; 2014). For the ISA, not even the prospect of release of the Operating License (OP) by IBAMA until the end of 2015 was feasible (Instituto Socioambiental, 2015). However, until the end of 2015, the OP was issued, authorizing the reservoir filling and the start of operation of a few turbines of the power plant, without having met all of the conditions of the IL.

It is important to emphasize that from the issuing of the IL, a new phase of the conflict began: monitoring of the conditions for licensing, and, civil society demands for the compliance of responsibilities adopted in the licensing process during the construction. The conflict surrounding HPP Belo Monte did not end with the start of construction: it had its configuration changed.

<sup>4</sup> Private company whose shareholder composition is: Eletrobrás Group – Eletrobrás, Eletronorte and Chesf – (49.98%); Complementary Pension Fund Entities – Petros and Funcef – (20%); Special Purposes Entity – Belo Monte Participations S A (Neo Energia S A) and Amazon (Cemig and Light) – (19.77%); Auto-producers – Vale and Sinobrás – (10%) and; Other Companies – J. Malucelli Energia – (0.25%) – Source:<http://norteenergiasa.com.br>.

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### ***3. Mapping of the main social agents involved in the conflict surrounding the construction of HPP Belo Monte***

Several representatives of the private sector and government companies joined forces to create Norte Energia – Belo Monte Hydroelectric Plant and are, therefore, responsible for the project. Norte Energia, in turn, initially hired the Belo Monte Constructor Consortium (CCBM) to perform the construction work, and subsequently, signed two contracts which, together, reached approximately R\$1.26 billion for the electromechanical assembly of approximately 141,000 tons of equipment in the Belo Monte and Pimental sites, where, respectively, the Main Powerhouse and the Complementary Powerhouse of the plant will be installed. This is the Belo Monte Assembler Consortium (CMBM). These consortia, then, subcontract a large quantity of outsourced companies from different fields of activities.

At municipal level, the government is represented by eleven municipalities that are somehow considered to be affected by the construction – five of which are considered to be directly impacted and six, indirectly<sup>5</sup>. The state government of Pará is another important agent in the conflict. At the federal level, in addition to the Presidency of the Republic and the General Secretariat of the Presidency of the Republic, various other public agencies are involved, among which are Eletrobrás, the National Agency of Electrical Energy (ANEEL), the Ministry of Mines and Energy (MME), the Brazilian Institute of Environment and Renewable Natural Resources

(IBAMA), the Ministry of Environment (MMA), the National Indian Foundation, the Ministry of Justice (MJ), the Ministry of Planning, Budget and Management (MPOG), the Public Federal Ministry (MPF) and the Federal University of Pará (UFPA), in addition to the House of Government, created to be the government agency representing the federal executive power in the territory, with headquarters in Altamira, Pará, Brazil.

Among the NGOs active in the dispute, it is important to mention the Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA), which closely monitors the environmental licensing process of the construction and the compliance with its conditions, with a particular focus on the relationship of the project with the indigenous ethnic groups of the region. Furthermore, there is the Xingu Alive Forever Movement (MXVPS) a collective of organizations, social and environmental movements of the region of Altamira and areas of influence of the HPP Belo Monte project that were historically opposed to its installation in the Xingu river. The Live, Produce and Preserve Foundation (FVPP) also has a central role in the region, particularly with rural communities, applying resources from the federal government and from HPP Belo Monte, to implement programs to develop productive and income-generating activities in the region, particularly those connected to agriculture.

However, it is worth mentioning that the complete list of associations and organizations of civil society active in the region is much more extensive. It involves, for example, the Movement of People Affected by Dams, Catholic Church organizations, neighborhoods and rural villages

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<sup>5</sup> Altamira, Anapu, Brasil Novo, Vitória do Xingu and Senator José Porfírio are considered to be impacted directly by the project and Gurupá, Medicilândia, Pacajá, Placas, Porto de Moz and Uruará are considered to be impacted indirectly by the project (Eletrobrás, 2009).

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associations, agricultural cooperatives, trade unions, fishermen's colonies, among others. In addition to them, the action of the local traders and farmers must be stressed, with an emphasis to the Altamira Agropastoral Commercial and Industrial Association (ACIAPA). All of these entities, along with the government agencies of the municipal administrations, are being invited to participate in the Plan for Regional Sustainable Development of Xingu (PDRSX), which started operating in 2011. Created by Decree 7.340, from October 21, 2010, it is composed of representatives of the social, private and government sectors, structured in a format of eight technical chambers<sup>6</sup>, a managing council, a coordination office and an executive office that decide on the fate of five hundred million reais available to be invested over the period of twenty years in the development of the region.

#### ***4. Political opportunity structure around the different social agents involved in the Belo Monte conflict***

Among the main concepts of Political Process Theory – theory developed by North American authors, following the structuralist tradition of the Resource Mobilization theory – is the concept of “political opportunity structure” (POS) (Tarrow, 2009, p. 36). In order to understand, it is necessary to place it in the broader perspective of the “policy of confrontation” (Briegel, 2011). According to this perspective, there will always be confrontation

between groups within and outside of the political-institutional power, and social movements are part of the universe of permanent confrontation with the State. To Tilly (2010), these movements are a modern political invention and, in interaction with the political-institutional power, they are always attentive to the variations in opportunities and political constraints for their actions.

In summary, depending on the political opportunity structure set in a certain historical period, social movements will choose a particular “mobilization strategy” (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 153) and “interpretive frameworks” (Tarrow, 2009, p. 40) or “frames” (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 156) most adequate to initiate new phases of confrontation. The last two terms are used by authors such as Tarrow (2009) to “describe the shared meanings that inspire people to participate in a collective action” (Tarrow, 2009, p. 41). In the trajectory of the Brazilian Environmental Movement, for example, there are three main fundamental political opportunities: the process of redemocratization, the Brazilian Constituent Assembly and the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. During those moments, “cycles of protest” were established (Tarrow, 1983, p. 36, *apud* Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 158) and “the environmental groups had to define a minimum set of standard ways of collective thinking and acting” (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 158).

Throughout the history of HPP Belo Monte, the Brazilian political system has undergone pro-

<sup>6</sup>The technical chambers of the PDRSX address the following themes: 1) Land use, landholding regularization and environmental management; 2) Infrastructure for development; 3) Promotion of sustainable productive activities; 4) Social inclusion and citizenship; 5) Monitoring of the conditions of the Belo Monte environmental licensing; 6) Indigenous Peoples and Traditional Communities; 7) Health; 8) Education. Source: [www.pdrsxingu.org.br](http://www.pdrsxingu.org.br)

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found changes. These changes have reflected in the political opportunity structure that emerged for the different social agents involved in the conflict surrounding the construction of the plant. During the military government, Brazil's energy plan was decided exclusively within the scope of the federal government, with the support of private consultancy firms, for the creation of economic feasibility studies and participation of private developers willing to invest in the projects.

With the redemocratization, some of the representatives of the social and environmental movements were co-opted by governments. The Brazilian Environmental Movement (MAB), for example, mostly comprised by middle class members, was originally connected with other social popular movements active at the end of the military government in Brazil (movements of workers, public employees, residents of the outskirts of large urban centers, among others). Along with them, MAB was favored by the political situation of that time: internal crisis in the coalition of the government, liberalization of some forms of political expression and a decrease in prior censorship of the means of communication. (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 153).

In that context, the social movements assumed prominent positions in national politics and were able to influence crucial factors of the new constitution that would be made official in 1988. One of the main impacts of this process, however, was the "institutionalization of various social movements in the form of formal associations or political parties" (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 152). The MAB was particularly favored by the creation of the Special Secretariat for the Environment (SEMA) in the federal government, in 1973, and by the environmental agenda that began to be created internatio-

nally from the United Nations Conference on the theme, in Stockholm, in 1972; and culminated in Rio 92, having direct influences on the national environmental agenda. Thus, the development of the MAB culminated, at the turn of the century, in a broad process of "professionalization and the consequent depoliticization of the environmental issue – a similar process to the European one" (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p. 165).

#### *4.1. Legal aspects of the conflict around HPP Belo Monte*

Regarding environmental legislation, according to Vainer, although Brazil already counts with an institutional and technical-operational apparatus for protection of the environment, there might be a "resurgence of an insensitive and irresponsible treatment of the social and environmental impacts of large dams" (Vainer, 2007, p. 122).

According to Ferreira & Tavolaro (2008), in Brazil, there is a gap that separates a complex institutional and legal framework from effective results; we are living the absence of a "*binding legal order*" (Ferreira & Tavolaro, 2008). The Brazilian formal justice system functions, although actually it is largely subject to the influences of money and power, and the principles of human rights and popular sovereignty are unable to penetrate in society (Ferreira & Tavolaro, 2008).

These processes are clear in the case of HPP Belo Monte. Firstly, even though formally there is technical accuracy in the analysis of its socio-environmental feasibility, in the environmental licensing and in the monitoring of compliance with the conditions of the project - based on EIA-Rima

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(Eletrobrás, 2009), PL, IL, OL (IBAMA, 2010; 2011; 2015), and the technical opinion of FUNAI (FUNAI, 2009) - in practice, the decisions are politicized, and there is a very high flexibility on the part of regulatory bodies in relation to deadlines for achievement of the actions of socio-environmental compensation by the developer. When the previously established deadline for the socio-environmental condition for licensing is going to be delayed, the developer presents a new term of commitment with a revised deadline. This is considered enough by the government to approve new objectives, deadlines and results within the scope of socio-environmental compensation measures. In this context, the political opportunity structure does not penalize the ones in charge for the project (companies, concessionaires, construction companies and government agencies from the federal executive power) for delays and non-compliance of the license conditions and, thus, facilitates the lack of commitment of the developer with the socio-environmental compensation measures, assumed during the licensing process.

This process is related to the way the judiciary system positions itself towards omissions of the social and environmental issues of the Brazilian energy policy. Regardless of the numerous protests, reports of NGOs' public civil actions, social movements and the MPF against HPP Belo Monte, the Brazilian judges, especially those of the intermediate and higher courts, in general, invoke the public utility of a large HPP like Belo Monte with their decisions favorable to the continuity of the project, without penalty for delays in the compliance of the conditions. The priority is the energy generation for the development of the country, and these are the deadlines that concern them. For that reason, all of the decisions contrary to Belo Monte taken in the

past by courts of first instance have been suspended, for threatening the public order or the national security. In the interpretation of Bermann (2012, p. 18) of the article 4 of law 8.437 from June 30, 1992, which discusses precautionary measures against acts performed by public authorities and establishes other measures, it allows a judge of the Supreme Federal Court to claim “‘major injury to the public economy’ for the interruption of a project, usually referring to the investments already incurred or the loss of jobs due to the interruption”.

Thus, the judiciary system, along with the federal executive power, seem to be willing to use this argument whenever there is a real threat of stoppage of the construction. This allows the developer to maintain their schedule of construction and, in a way, exempts the government to perform a more rigorous evaluation of the compensatory socio-environmental policies of HPP Belo Monte. However, the main consequence of the actions taken by the judiciary system is the restriction of political opportunities of social agents opposed to HPP Belo Monte. The legality of the project is thus achieved by means of a legal mechanism that practically cancels the possibility of opposition, as the arguments contrary to HPP Belo Monte cannot be more legally persuasive than the “public order” and the “national security”. This mechanism also acts as a political “shield” for the government and the developer, since it provides them with enough autonomy to decide about the directions of the Brazilian energy policy, regardless of criticisms and complaints from the civil society.

For the opposition groups, there is the effort of interpreting this situation and acting to gain more political power within the conflict. Nevertheless, the current mobilization structure of environmental

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movements, for instance, based on the professionalization of NGOs, the technical training of its members and network activism, seem to be insufficient for this, since the main decisions about the Brazilian energy policy continue to be taken by the federal executive power together with private developers and with few effective mechanisms of public consultation.

According to Ferreira & Tavolaro (2008), another challenge posed to civil society, especially to the movements opposed to the current energy planning of increasing the hydroelectric energy supply through the construction of major hydroelectric power plants, is bringing environmental demands closer to the demands regarding economic growth, social equality and the fight against poverty. Ferreira & Tavolaro (2008) also argue that, today, environmentalists base their demands on general and abstract principles of modern normativity, but hardly find the corresponding legal structure capable of transforming their demands into effective regulations. Thus, environmental organizations need to rethink their strategies of political action and find a legitimate public language capable of reaching the whole of society, so their demands may gain legitimacy to enter the political arena.

In addition, the opponents of the construction need to worry about the demobilization of social movements and actors who have historically been opposed to the project. This demobilization is caused, among other reasons, by the processes of expropriation, resettlement and compensation of the people affected by the construction. The individualization of the decision on whether or not to accept resettlement or compensation, as well as others compensatory measures, weakens community movements and organizations. Families are

forced to make fundamental decisions regarding the future of their members in a short amount of time and with little bargaining power in the negotiation with Norte Energia S.A., since, if the public utility of a particular expropriation is proved, ultimately the judiciary system is most likely to decide in favor of the enterprise and the expropriation. The psychological impact of this process on the people resettled is immense. The impact is even greater for the fishermen who lived in the localities that will be flooded and are having to leave their properties: with this change, they lose their contact with the river and with the source of their subsistence, which is artisanal fishing. According to Magalhães *et al.* (2016, p. 112), the lifestyle of fishermen and families who live and work in territories affected by these constructions is “plagued by this modality of socio-environmental disorganization”.

It will be very difficult for the groups opposed to the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant to stop this resettlement process. Those who have already been compensated or resettled will hardly mobilize in the same way as before. Such groups are more likely to redirect their actions to the fight for constitutional rights of resettled populations, such as the right to housing, transportation, education, health etc.

#### *4.2. Popular participation in the decision-making processes of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant*

As previously discussed, there are many interests surrounding the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. However, the analysis of the most relevant decision-making processes in the history of the

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conflict — Legislative Decree 788/2005, PL (2010), IL (2011) and OP (2015) — indicates that the interests of the government and the entrepreneur prevail over the others. This does not mean that there is no consultation or dialogue with environmentalists, affected populations and other social movements. This only indicates that, within a given structure of political opportunity, participation in public hearings, in development councils and in technical chambers, along with other formal instruments of popular participation, is not necessarily translating into greater democratization of the planning, licensing, construction and operation processes of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.

Fainguelernt (2016) acknowledges three main obstacles posed to popular participation in the public hearings regarding the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, which occurred in 2009: a) the location for the public arenas was far from the indigenous villages and other communities involved, and the roads that connected the municipalities in the region were precarious; b) the time offered to the affected populations to expose their interests and doubts about the project was short; and c) several riverside populations stated in interviews with national communication vehicles that the language used in the meetings was inappropriate, which made it impossible to understand the project and the content related to the environmental and social impacts of the hydroelectric power plant.

For authors linked to the line of research known as “Sociology of environmental conflicts”, the dissemination of participatory practices and institutions in the Brazilian environmental licensing process did not result in consensus. On the contrary: it produced a lot of conflict (Alonso & Costa, 2002, p.1). The deliberations carried out in these spaces

of participation are seen by the government, the entrepreneur and the judiciary system as suggestions. The decision to implement them would fall to the government, in agreement with the entrepreneur. This demonstrates that, due to the current structure of political opportunity, environmental movements, indigenous peoples, the Public Federal Ministry (MPF) and the Catholic church have insufficient powers to influence the results of the conflict regarding the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.

In addition, there is also a high degree of cohesion between the social actors in favor of the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant (the federal government, the judiciary power and Norte Energia S.A.), which allows the processes of popular participation to occur in accordance with environmental legislation, without them leading to a review of the decisions that favor the aforementioned social actors.

The Plan for Regional Sustainable Development of Xingu (PDRSX) is an example of this: the decisions that have been made in this council since the beginning of its meetings, in 2011, are unable to impose any changes in the construction schedule of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. The decisions made focus on the selection of local development projects, which are submitted by public administration agencies of municipalities, companies, and local associations. Its main critics — the Xingu Alive Forever Movement (MXVPS), for example — indicate a demobilizing effect caused by this development council on the struggles against the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. Similarly to compensations and re-settlements, participation in the PDRSX and the eventual receipt of funds for the execution of development projects weakens the social movements

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that were initially opposed to the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.

Regarding the specific case of the indigenous people and the resources that were allocated to each village in the context of the environmental licensing of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, the National Indian Foundation (FUNAI) official interviewed during our field research was emphatic in denouncing the negative effects that those resources had on the affected communities.

It could be argued that the PDRSX is a development council with real popular participation (its Management Council is 50% composed by members of the government and 50% by members of the civil society), capable of transforming the local population demands into development projects for the region, since it has, annually, approximately sixty million reais destined to investments in local development projects in the eleven municipalities considered impacted by the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. This counter-argument was, as a matter of fact, used by a director of the Live, Produce and Preserve Foundation (FVPP).

However, this type of analysis does not consider, for example, that the General Coordination — body above the Management Council in the hierarchy of the PDRSX decisions — is composed of three members of the government (representing the municipal, state and federal spheres) and only one member of the civil society. Therefore, the government is able to exert more political influence in the selection of projects than the civil society.

Another point of attention regarding the real contribution of the PDRSX to the local development resides in the fact that there is little systematization of results and rendering of accounts of the projects executed until this moment. In the first three years of

work, the management of the PDRSX was done by Norte Energia S.A. There was no clear definition of the process and the criteria used to select the projects that would receive investments. There were also no processes of systematization of methodology and results that would allow a monitoring of the approved projects' unfolding.

Only in February 2014 a bid was opened to hire a company to take charge of the management of the PDRSX. Since then, this process of bidding and hiring specialized consulting services to manage the PDRSX is repeated annually. The employee of the consulting firm, hired by Norte Energia S.A. in 2015 to manage the PDRSX, was interviewed during our field research. He mentioned that, as a company, they were aware of the challenge of continuing these projects. He also expressed concern about the legacy they will leave to the development of the region.

### ***5. Repertoires of contention of the different social agents involved in the conflict of Belo Monte***

According to Alonso and Costa, there are three types of agents in an environmental conflict: the social movement, the bureaucratic structure, and the experts and scientists. Each one has its way of acting and thinking (Alonso & Costa, 2002, 28). Souza and Jacobi created a matrix called “Hydropower Projects in Brazil: The Position Of The Main Social Actors Involved”. On the one hand, this matrix crosses the three main groups of social actors involved with this type of enterprise: a) the government; b) entrepreneurs; and c) affected populations, social movements, environmentalists and the Public Federal Ministry.

On the other hand, it crosses the main divergent points among these actors: a) Environmental Impact Studies; b) the need to expand the hydroelectric generation park; c) hydroelectric power plants and the economic growth of the country; d) legislation; and

e) arrangements with the affected populations (Souza & Jacobi, 2010, page 15). The resulting table is illustrative of the position of each of these groups of social actors in relation to the aforementioned points of divergence. It may be seen below:

TABLE 1 - Hydroelectric projects in Brazil: the position of the main social actors involved.

Divergent Points	Social Actors		
	Government	Entrepreneurs	Populations Affected, Social Movements, Environmentalists and the Public Federal Ministry
<b>Environmental Impact Studies</b>	Created the Energy Research Office (EPE) to coordinate the studies of new exploitations and carry out the integrated assessment of the basins.	The environmental viability is a component that guarantees the economic feasibility of the projects.	The studies seek to undersize the real impacts of the projects in order to make them feasible.
<b>The need to expand the hydroelectric generation park</b>	Developed countries take advantage of almost all the potential. Brazil only uses about 30% of the hydroelectric potential.	Non-development of infrastructure harms the poorest portion of the population.	Energy-intensive industries (mainly ore exporters) push for the expansion of electricity generation. The country needs to review its development model.
<b>Hydroelectric power plants and the economic growth of the country</b>	Enterprises guarantee the necessary energy supply for the country's growth.	Hydroelectric power plants generate jobs and royalties, contributing to development.	The enterprises follow business logic and generate more poverty and social exclusion.
<b>Legislation</b>	Sectoral planning has incorporated the social-environmental variable.	Brazilian legislation is modern, but social sectors with ideological positions opposed to hydroelectric power plants judicialize the expansion of the matrix.	The legislation is fulfilled bureaucratically in order to make the enterprises feasible without respecting the principle of socio-environmental equity.
<b>Arrangements with the affected populations</b>	There are listening channels and there is a growing recognition of the rights of the affected groups. Enterprises in Amazônia have been rethought in order not to flood indigenous areas and to reduce impacts.	Recognition of the rights of the populations is fair, but an enterprise can not solve problems that were there before itself was. If the compensation policy is overestimated, the enterprises lose their economic appeal.	The populations continue to have their rights disrespected. Dialogue is carried out in a superficial way. The contingent of those affected is undersized. The compensatory policies are insufficient in quantity and quality.

SOURCE: Souza & Jacobi (2010).

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On the one hand, affected populations, social movements, environmentalists and the Public Federal Ministry have a very critical position concerning hydroelectric projects in Brazil, mainly due to the way they are managed and operated, as well as to their impacts on local populations. On the other hand, the government and entrepreneurs are both supportive of the building model of hydroelectric power plants. They are seen as energy sources that enable the economic growth necessary for the country's development. This type of interpretation has a utilitarian character whose priority is the maximum development of the welfare of the majority of the population.

There are subtle differences in the positioning of both agents. The entrepreneurs, for example, interpret that there is a limit to the responsibility of major hydroelectric enterprises regarding the affected populations. According to the companies in charge of the enterprise, the “socio-environmental vulnerability” (Alves, 2013, p. 1) of these populations which was prior to the arrival of the new enterprise should not be exclusively addressed by the entrepreneur. If so, in this case, this could generate an overestimation of compensatory policies and loss of economic attractiveness.

The way the affected populations are currently being treated is satisfactory for both the government and the entrepreneur. The new enterprises in the Amazon are even being rethought in order to have their local impacts diminished. The Manager of Institutional Relations of the CCBM mentioned as an example of this the basic sanitation system that

is being implemented in Altamira, among other benefits for the region<sup>7</sup>.

The executive branch of the federal government and the entrepreneur claim they do their best to avoid and mitigate socio-environmental impacts, while not being able to stop thinking about the “national interest”. However — as they have greater political and economic power than social movements, environmentalists, experts and scientists (they are even more powerful than the Public Federal Ministry itself) —, they make their interpretive framework prevail in the decision-making processes and on public policies related to the constructions of the hydroelectric power plants, and suffer little political weakening with protests, denunciations and public civil actions carried out by their opponents.

In an environment in which the actions of both favorable and opposed groups to the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant are limited and restricted by the same structure of political opportunity, the groups involved in the disputes need, in order to achieve their objectives, to resort to different forms of “repertoire of contention” (Alonso & Costa, 2002: 126), motivated by a concern with the understanding of their actions by both the opponent and the society.

In the case study of the socioeconomic and environmental conflict related to the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, the theoretical effort to analyze the repertoires of contention used by the conflict agents, in a historical and procedural perspective, necessarily implies a simplification of the discourses used and the social actors involved.

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<sup>7</sup> It is worth mentioning that this environmental constraint is the subject of the Public Federal Ministry lawsuit against Norte Energia S.A. This lawsuit was motivated by the fact that the company has built the whole system of sanitation required, but has not connected it to the residences, claiming that the municipality is responsible for doing this. This means that the system, which should be operating since 2014, still does not work.

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Each of them has a long history within the conflict, with variations of positioning among its members over time. Therefore, the attempt to address each of these stories in detail would escape the scope of this article. However, generally, it is possible to make three main comments about the history and repertoire of the actions of these social agents.

First, it can be said that over the last few years — since the issue of the Installation License (IL) in 2011 — some groups opposed to the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant began not to condemn it so strongly. The licensing and compliance processes are still deeply criticized, but the interruption of the construction seems to be even less plausible, especially after the issue of the three environmental licenses of the enterprise (PL, IL and OP).

The fight for the interruption of the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant is suffering a demobilization process, mainly among some indigenous tribes who benefited from the recent social and environmental emergency compensation plans of the enterprise. They received large volumes of financial resources and material goods from Norte Energia S.A. With the mitigation of the repertoire of contention used by the indigenous peoples, the environmental movements lost legitimacy in their demands for the interruption of the construction.

The conflicting processes of expropriation, compensation and resettlement of thousands of people in the region also have a demobilizing effect, since the compensated and/or resettled, by accepting compensation and/or resettlement, symbolically

weakens the fight against the construction, signaling that this is the only way forward: without resistance.

Negotiations regarding the expropriation of properties in neighborhoods considered “risky” by Norte Energia S.A., in the city of Altamira, were carried out individually with the owner of each property. This has diminished the bargaining power of neighborhood residents’ associations. Fishermen are being directly affected by the changes in the Xingu River discharge, caused by the dam of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. In order to solve this problem, there is the promise of building new housing sets in Altamira, in localities closer to the igarapés. Even though many of the resettled people are dissatisfied with the new homes that are already being built, they do not have power to demand any alternative resettlement area or house model<sup>8</sup>.

According to testimonies of residents who have already been resettled in a Urban Collective Resettlement (RUC), which were collected during an interview conducted during our field research, the value offered by a compensation in the urban area was not even enough to buy another property within the city. An activist from the Xingu Alive Forever Movement (MXVPS) reported during the interview that, in rural areas and forest regions among small and medium cocoa producers, some people received large amounts of resources as compensation for their properties at the beginning of the construction, due to the urgency of the entrepreneurs to remove them from the site. However, in recent years, farmers have had their properties valued below the price they consider fair, and the compensation given is not enough to acquire similar plots of land in the region.

<sup>8</sup> At the public hearings and other presentation meetings, three possible housing models were presented for the communities that would be resettled. Representatives of Norte Energia S.A. claimed that the resettled family would be able to choose the model of their preference. Currently, housing sets are being built following a single model.

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The base organizations of civil society also seem to have abandoned the discourse of interrupting the construction and seem to have accepted the idea that the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant is inevitable. They began to direct their actions to the defense of the rights of the most vulnerable populations affected by the construction, and to demand the execution of the obligations assumed by the government and the private initiative.

Second, the local representatives of the trade and services sector appear to be undergoing a positioning change regarding Belo Monte. The analysis of the interview with the representative of the Altamira Agropastoral Commercial and Industrial Association (ACIAPA) conducted in our field research reveals that, from convinced supporters at the time of the discussion regarding the issue of the environmental licenses, this social group began to adopt a more cautious discourse, worried about the lack of a medium and long-term plan for the structuring of the local economy, in order not to depend on the resources of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. This was probably due to the realization that the benefits that were expected from the arrival of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant did not materialize. One of these expected benefits was the possibility to sell their products to the Belo Monte Constructor Consortium (CCBM). However, as a result of the large volume of the constructor consortium's purchases and other technical restrictions, local merchants are not able to handle the work.

Moreover, the peak of the construction has already happened. Thus, there is a fear that the momentary growth of the local economy, which favored the region in the beginning, especially the services sector of Altamira — hotels, restaurants and

construction —, will not last long after the construction is finished. The increase in the number of open commercial establishments responded to the initial phases of the enterprise, when a large contingent of workers arrived to work on the construction sites. The perspective from now on is a reduction of this number of workers, with the advancement and finalization of the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant. This may lead to a decrease in the demand for these services.

Third, the federal government of Brazil and the private companies involved in the construction and concession of use of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant have always maintained their favorable position regarding the plant. With 78,000MW of installed capacity in the Brazilian hydroelectric power plants, the current National Energy Plan (PNE) (2007) predicts that between 210,000 and 250,000MW will be installed in the electric matrix in 2030 (Souza & Jacobi, 2010, p.3). Belo Monte's defense is technical and objective: Brazil's Gross Domestic Product (GDP) needs to grow 5% a year over the next ten years. In order to support this growth, it is necessary to install 5,000MW of additional capacity each year. The federal government still links economic growth to the goals of poverty eradication and income distribution (Energy Research Office, 2011).

It is worth pointing out, however, that the position of the majority of the federal government in favor of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, designed by the Presidency, is not consensual among the public agencies involved with the public policy and with the conflict regarding the plant.

Within FUNAI, for example, there is still a perception that the licensing process for Belo Monte does not meet the necessary requirements regarding

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consultation and dialogue with indigenous peoples. In the same institution, there is also a concern with the impacts of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant on the culture and lifestyle of the various ethnic groups that inhabit the region. Most of this concern is related to the compensation policies that were directed to the indigenous peoples and were executed as emergencies, without planning. These elements of FUNAI's position regarding the conflict around the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant could be verified through the analysis of the content of the interview with the FUNAI employee, conducted during our field research.

Public Federal Ministry prosecutors linked to actions against the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant appear to be willing to maintain their functions of monitoring, controlling and reporting irregularities in the installation procedures of the plant, regardless of the outcome of previous lawsuits and the current evolution of the construction. IBAMA has a way of acting in the dispute that emphasizes the technical character of its positioning, which is based on legislation and bureaucratic procedures of environmental licensing. Some of IBAMA's reports point to delays in mitigation plans regarding impacts. They also contain suggestions on how to improve the actions that are being executed. However, the Public Federal Ministry, FUNAI and IBAMA do not have enough political power to alter the balance of forces within the federal government.

State and municipal governments had little influence on the final decision to build the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant and they still have a certain lack of autonomy in relation to the directions of the enterprise. They are essentially responsible for demanding federal and private in-

vestments for the construction of hospitals, housing, schools, sewage networks and water treatment, as well as for the purchase of goods and equipments such as automobiles, tractors, buses etc., for various purposes. They also seek to obtain funds to finance local development projects via the Plan for Regional Sustainable Development of Xingu (PDRSX). Thus, even though it is not consensual, the position of the Presidency of the Republic, along with the position of the Ministry of Planning, Budget and Management and the Ministry of Mines and Energy, prevails in the federal government.

### ***6. Interpretive frameworks of the different social agents involved in the Belo Monte conflict***

Like social structures, the cultural dimension is also part of the political process; therefore, it needs to be considered in the analysis of a socio-economic and environmental conflict. The "political confrontation is not born from the head of its organizers, but is culturally inscribed and socially communicated" (Tarrow, 2009, 39). In a structure of political opportunity shaped at a given historical moment, existing social groups form "interpretive frameworks", or "shared meanings", which "justify, dignify, and encourage collective action" (Tarrow, 2009, 40). Ergo, on the one hand, all collective action contrary to a public policy of state carried out by social actors and movements "depends on the activists' ability to construct interpretations about the conjuncture in which they are immersed and, through them, transform discontent in mobilization" (Alonso *et al.*, 2007, p.156). On the other hand, "states are also constantly framing issues, both to

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gain support for their policies and to challenge the meanings proposed by the social movements in the public arena” (Tarrow, 2009, p. 41).

In the case of the struggle for the shared meanings of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, it is possible to sketch three main interpretive frameworks.

First, the social actors that favor the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant have in common the interpretation that, in order to grow and develop, energy is needed. Thus, Brazil should exploit its hydroelectric potential to the fullest extent. According to this interpretation, the Amazon is seen as a natural energy supplier for the other regions of Brazil due to the high energy generation potential of its rivers. This means that, regardless of the local impacts of the plant, and without being able to prove the benefits of its construction for the region where it is being built and its “socio-environmental viability”, these social actors consider the construction strategic because of its usefulness to the majority of Brazilian society. Their assumptions are: improved infrastructure generates economic growth for the nation, the state, the region and the local community; and economic growth increases welfare. Thus, improved infrastructure enhances welfare for everyone.

Second, the group of social actors opposed to the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant interprets that plans for the generation and distribution of energy for the country should not overlap a medium and long-term planning for the sustainability of the Amazon region. The discourses used by these social actors are guided by an idea of prioritizing the sustainability of the Amazon in relation to the need to offer energy to the other regions of the country. The defense of this position is based on the human,

political and social rights of the populations that inhabit the territory, regardless of how many people they are. It is especially based on their right to discuss and, mainly, to decide on the direction of the development of their region. For these people, these rights are being disregarded by the way the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant is being built.

Third, there are the social actors with intermediate positions in relation to the two exposed above. According to these interpretations, it is necessary to better plan and improve Brazil’s energy policy, considering more precisely its local impacts and assuring the effective participation of local societies and communities of experts on the decision-making process regarding the construction of infrastructure enterprises in the Amazon. It is also necessary to better plan the Brazilian electricity matrix. In order to do this, it is important to consider plans for upgrading old hydroelectric power plants, to improve distribution systems, to consider power generation alternatives to hydroelectricity, and to consider the execution of socio-environmental constraints, along with more planning and antecedence in future constructions of hydroelectric power plants in the Amazon. However, these same actors admit that, as long as there is no concrete alternative plan, it is not possible not to continue to increase the potential for generating electricity in Brazil through hydroelectricity in order to support the economic growth necessary for the country’s development.

For analysis purposes, it is possible to group the last two interpretive frameworks against the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant in the way it is being built. These groups that are opposed to the current construction policy of the hydroelectric power plant in question are quite diverse: they include indigenous communities, prosecutors, professors

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and students, among others. But, essentially, they all share the common view that it is necessary to consider the natural environment as part of humanity's development and to include the costs of its preservation in the planning of major infrastructure works; in other words, there is an interpretive framework of environmental character that is common to all.

In this dispute of meanings, the social groups opposed to the current public construction policy of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant are at a disadvantage in relation to the social groups favorable to the plant. This is due to the fact that the latter can rely on the state apparatus to control the means of repression and of exerting political influence on the media, one of the main means of constructing meaning during a political confrontation. The shared identity between the groups opposed to the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant regarding the notions of sustainability and conservation of biodiversity, as well as the way these groups are mobilized, is not enough to change the current structure of political opportunity, which is favorable to the groups that support the plant.

## ***7. Final considerations***

In the present article, we aimed to analyze the socioeconomic and environmental conflict surrounding the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant using concepts from the Political Process Theory, documents and interviews, which were conducted in our field research. Through this analysis, it was possible to perceive that the conflict regarding the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant did not end with the advancement of its construction nor with the beginning of the operation

of some turbines. The conflict has only changed its configuration.

Hence, the existence of a major milestone in the licensing process of large infrastructure works in the country is noted: the Installation License (IL). From the moment a construction of this kind begins, the probability of interruption decreases with each passing day. The conflict then turns to the monitoring of the fulfillment of the socio-environmental constraints by the entrepreneur.

Another important aspect of the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant, which can also be seen in other constructions of the same size in Brazil, is the political "armor" of the government and the entrepreneur, which is provided by the "national security" argument. This gives them considerable autonomy to decide the direction of Brazilian energy policy, regardless of the criticisms and denunciations of civil society.

It was noticed that, with the issue of the IL, there was a demobilization of social groups that traditionally fought for the interruption of the construction, like some indigenous communities and part of the families that are being resettled. Ergo, environmental movements are faced with the reality of having to redirect their actions to monitor this public policy in order to keep other sectors of society informed of what is happening at the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant and to raise complaints of irregularities throughout this process. The focus becomes the struggle for the constitutional rights of the populations affected by the construction.

The article also analyzed the repertoires of contention of local merchants and identified that their initial discourse of support to the project upon its arrival in the region was modified by a more cautious one. It is recognized that the initial effect

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was positive for the trade and services sectors of Altamira, but a lack of planning to promote some local productive chains that could maintain the economic growth of the region after the construction of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant was finished, thus preventing workers from returning to their cities of origin, was also identified.

Finally, the main decisions about the public construction policy of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant are taken between the federal government and the entrepreneur. The popular participation spheres in the licensing process and the Plan for Regional Sustainable Development of Xingu (PDRSX) are very important as spaces of popular consultation, but they do not have deliberative character. Decisions regarding the fate of approximately sixty million reais per year for local development projects are important and civil society is being called upon to participate in this process. However, the decision to interrupt the construction until a minimum of constraints is reached is not within the reach of any organized group from civil society: such a decision is only up to the government and to the judiciary.

Together with the entrepreneur, this core of actors is very cohesive in its argument, defending national interests for economic growth and development. It has both the power to control the means of repression and greater ability to influence the mainstream media than the movements opposed to the construction. This demonstrates that due to the current structure of political opportunity, environmental movements, indigenous peoples, the Public Federal Ministry and the Catholic church have insufficient powers to influence the results of

the conflict regarding the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.

We see, then, that the populations that are most subject to the risks<sup>9</sup> generated by the constructions of hydroelectric power plants are those with less conditions to influence the decision-making processes related to these projects. The political strategies used by them until now have been unable to influence the subpolitics of Brazilian energy planning.

Although their voices have been more heard in these political processes, the definition of the acceptable risks for the population that inhabits the territory around this type of construction continues to be made by the government in partnership with the private sector. The current mobilization structure of environmental movements — which is based on the professionalization of NGOs and on the technical training of their members, as well as on network activism — seems to be insufficient to influence the main decisions within the environmental licensing process of the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant.

The discourses of sustainability and conservation of biodiversity were generalized to the extreme, and both groups in favor and against the Belo Monte Hydroelectric Power Plant use these terms when expressing their positions in relation to the project. The latter group has the task of interpreting this situation and acting in order to gain greater political power within the conflict.

It is the task of the government and the judiciary power to face the challenges of “preventive risk management”. In the context of constructions of major hydroelectric power plants, this could be translated into a more frequent use of the pre-

<sup>9</sup> Notion of "risk" linked to Beck's risk conception in "Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity" (1998).

cautionary principle by the judiciary, which says that it is better to avoid risks whose results are still uncertain and unpredictable. If there are still many doubts about the risks generated by these plants, then their construction should not begin until all the social agents involved are satisfied with the measurement of the possible socio-environmental impacts of the projects and with the necessary compensatory measures. However, this consent can only be achieved if the public decision-making forums are improved. The governance of these projects will not be democratic and legitimate without the main social groups affected by this type of public policy participating in the making of important decisions and thus influencing the results of them.

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