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## Brazil's policies threaten *Quilombola* communities and their lands amid the COVID-19 pandemic

Marcondes G. Coelho-Junior<sup>a,b</sup>, Allan Yu Iwama<sup>b,c</sup>, Taís S. González<sup>d</sup>, Eduardo C. da Silva-Neto<sup>e</sup>, Francisco Araoz<sup>b,c</sup>, Katia Carolino<sup>b,f</sup>, Daniela Campolina<sup>b,g</sup>, Aico S. Nogueira<sup>b,h</sup>, Wagner do Nascimento<sup>i</sup>, Ronaldo dos Santos<sup>j</sup>, Patrícia E. Perkins<sup>b,k</sup>, Philip M. Fearnside<sup>l</sup> and Lucas Ferrante<sup>m</sup>

<sup>a</sup>Graduate Program in Environmental and Forest Sciences, Federal Rural University of Rio de Janeiro (UFRRJ), Seropédica, Brazil; <sup>b</sup>Network in Ecological Economics, Commons Governance, and Climate Justice, York University, Toronto, ON, Canada; <sup>c</sup>Center for Regional Development Studies and Public Policies, University of Los Lagos, Osorno, Chile; <sup>d</sup>Stockholm Resilience Centre, Stockholm University, Stockholm, Sweden; <sup>e</sup>Graduate Program in Agronomy – Soil Science, UFRRJ, Seropédica, Brazil; <sup>f</sup>Graduate Program in Environmental Science, University of São Paulo (USP), São Paulo, Brazil; <sup>g</sup>Graduate Program in Education, Federal University of Minas Gerais, Belo Horizonte, Brazil; <sup>h</sup>Department of Forest Sciences, Luiz de Queiroz College of Agriculture, USP, Piracicaba, Brazil; <sup>i</sup>Forum of Traditional Communities Angra, Paraty e Ubatuba, Paraty, Brazil; <sup>j</sup>National Coordination for the Articulation of Black, Rural, and Quilombola Communities, Brasília, Brazil; <sup>k</sup>Faculty of Environmental & Urban Change, York University, Toronto, Ontario, Canada; <sup>l</sup>Department of Environmental Dynamics, INPA, Manaus, Brazil; <sup>m</sup>Ecology Graduate Program, National Institute for Research in Amazonia (INPA), Manaus, Brazil

### Introduction

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the lives of people is not limited to health risks, but also to their livelihoods in nature, and consequently, to uses of ecosystems. In Brazil, among the different social groups, the *quilombolas* are even more threatened during the pandemic (Polidoro et al. 2020). *Quilombolas* are Afro-Brazilian descendants of slaves who fled slavery, and Brazilian legislation recognizes *quilombola* communities due to their forms of territorial occupation and use of nature according to their traditions, which are derived both from African ancestry and from traditions passed down from generation to generation (Leite 2015). The enslaved *quilombola* ancestors fled to the forest to create small settlements (called *quilombos*) as a strategy in their struggle for freedom. Over the centuries, they have maintained a harmonious relationship of respect and protection of nature, guaranteeing their survival in their own territories.

In times of pandemic, the Brazilian government's actions are widely considered by the international community as negligent with respect to scientific guidelines to deal with COVID-19 (Polidoro et al. 2020). The effects of this negligence on *quilombola* communities have been tragic (Ortega and Orsini 2020), as attested by the lethality rate among the *quilombolas* (11.1%) being more than double the national average (4.9%) (Brasil de Fato 2020). In this context, there is an urgency to implement social policies that minimize the impacts of COVID-19 on *quilombolas* that safeguard not only the lives of these people, but also their connection with their land, and socio-environmental justice.

### The threat to *quilombola* communities puts biodiversity conservation at risk

*Quilombolas* are at the forefront of the struggles against environmental destruction. The more than 5000 *quilombola* territories throughout Brazil protect important ecosystems, such as the Amazon Forest, the Atlantic Forest and the Cerrado (IBGE 2020). However, due to historical pressures from Brazil's land structure, just over 6% of these territories are legally delimited, corresponding to about 3 million hectares (IBGE 2020). The remaining territories are still in the land-tenure process, which puts them even more at risk. The importance of *quilombola* human-nature relationships in their territories is evidenced by the recognition of the first World Heritage mixed site in Brazil ('Paraty and Ilha Grande – Culture and Biodiversity'<sup>1</sup>) in July 2019. However, Brazil's current president has instituted a series of policy setbacks specifically affecting traditional peoples, including the *quilombolas* (Ferrante and Fearnside 2019). *Quilombolas*, as well as Indigenous Peoples, have rights over their lands guaranteed by the Brazil's Federal Constitution of 1988. Nevertheless, they are constantly threatened by political decisions, agribusiness, mining, and the impacts of oil and gas exploitation (Leite 2015; Polidoro et al. 2020).

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) recognizes the contribution of indigenous and local knowledge (ILK) to the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity (IPBES 2019). Including the diversity of knowledge systems (including indigenous and local knowledge) can contribute greatly to global goals for sustainability (IPBES 2019) and promote effective environmental

governance (Brondízio and Tourneau 2016). Thus, a key element in the IPBES conceptual framework is the notion of nature's contributions to people, which recognizes the central role that culture plays in the links between people and nature (Díaz et al. 2018). Ensuring the well-being and human rights of *quilombolas* would help safeguard their rich culture and traditional sustainable practices, since their local knowledge can contribute to sustainable ecosystem management in their lands and sustainable use of nature's contributions to people (Tengö et al. 2014).

### Supporting *quilombola* communities to tackle political threats

On 10 September 2020, the National Coordination for the Articulation of Black, Rural, and *Quilombola* Communities (CONAQ) filed a lawsuit<sup>2</sup> in the Brazilian Supreme Court against the Brazilian government that would require it to institute an emergency plan to address COVID-19 in these communities. Through the lawsuit, the CONAQ hopes that the Brazilian Supreme Court will order the government to establish specific health policies for these communities, a prerogative supported by the World Health Organization and the Pan American Health Organization. At the same time, national initiatives (such as the alternative platform for registration of COVID-19 cases in *quilombos*<sup>3</sup>) and local initiatives (Figure 1) are strategies adopted by social groups in the face of the government's negligence in caring for these communities.

Internationally, there are several urgent concerns about protecting vulnerable groups, given the prospect of further and ongoing infections in Brazil that would mainly affect the Amazon region and the southern region of Brazil, decimating hundreds of Indigenous Peoples and *quilombola* communities (Ferrante et al. 2020; Polidoro et al. 2020). Although the Brazilian government has been denounced several times to the International Criminal Court (ICC) for its actions on COVID-19 and the environment, and these cases await the court's consideration, the government has taken no action to safeguard the *quilombola* communities, their vulnerable societies and their role in conserving biodiversity (Ferrante and Fearnside 2019). Therefore, we should resist the dismantling of the environmental and social policies promoted by the government (Oliveira and Araújo 2020).

For traditional communities, the death of elders puts the traditional practices that relate with the management of nature at risk, since these traditions are passed on orally by the elders (Ferrante et al. 2020). Hence, the traditional management of biodiversity is also at risk. We here call for the presidential administration of President Jair Bolsonaro to guarantee the well-being of *quilombola* communities, as well as Indigenous Peoples, who have traditionally contributed to protecting our forests and now are disproportionately suffering the impact of COVID-19.



**Figure 1.** Traditional women from the “Cuidar é Resistir” (“Caring is Resisting” in English) campaign, that was launched by the Forum of Traditional Communities in collaboration with the Oswaldo Cruz Foundation (Fiocruz) through the Observatory of Sustainable and Healthy Territories of Bocaina (OTSS) to strengthen support for traditional territories of Angra dos Reis, Paraty, and Ubatuba heavily hit by Covid-19. Among other measures, the initiative aims to raise funds for the acquisition and distribution of food and essential items to traditional communities and enhance solidarity sharing of fish and agroecological products between Indigenous, *caiçaras* (local fishermen) and *quilombolas*. To see more, access to <https://youtu.be/BAGYFrODw-k>.

Photo credits @Eduardo Napoli (2020).

## Notes

1. World Heritage List: Paraty and Ilha Grande – Culture and Biodiversity, available via: <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1308/> [Last accessed September 2020].
2. Lawsuit in the Brazilian Supreme Court, available via: <http://portal.stf.jus.br/processos/detalhe.asp?incidente=6001379> [Last accessed September 2020].
3. Alternative platform launched by CONAQ and Socio-Environmental Institute (ISA) ‘Quilombo sem COVID-19’, available via <https://quilombossemcovid19.org/> [Last accessed September 2020].

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## ORCID

Lucas Ferrante  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-2636-5713>

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