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Neglected Reparations: Itaparica Dam and the Tuxá's Ongoing Struggle for Land

Brazil has reaped tremendous rewards from hydropower. Big dams have provided cheap electricity that has undergirded Brazil's industrial and urban growth. In the mid-2000s, hydropower accounted for upwards of 95 percent of the country's electricity. That percentage has since declined, though hydroelectricity still provides over two-third of Brazil's electricity.¹ Cheap electricity brought incredible benefits but big dams also unleashed deleterious environmental consequences.

Indigenous communities have suffered tremendously as a result of Brazil's electrification. Large dams flooded indigenous land and degraded natural resources that indigenous communities depended on for their livelihood. Amazonian reservoirs were particularly damaging. Yet, indigenous communities displaced by dams in the Amazon have been able to obtain a lot of domestic and international support and as a result have been able to pressure the Brazilian government to compensate them. Indigenous communities displaced by dams outside of the Amazon have had a much more difficult time getting support and pressuring the Brazilian government to properly indemnify them. For example, in 1988, the Companhia Hidrelétrica do Rio São Francisco (CHESF) finished the Itaparica Dam, which flooded the land of the Tuxá. CHESF promised the Tuxá land, but thirty-one years later they remain landless.

Itaparica has been shrouded in controversy for a long time. In 1992, Vermont Congressman Bernie Sanders wrote US Executive Director of the World Bank Patrick Coady to complain that the Brazilian government was doing a horrific job of helping those displaced. The World Bank had funded the Itaparica resettlement programs and Sanders worried about the implications of the project's failure. He wrote: "If the problems affecting the relatively small-scale Itaparica Resettlement Project cannot be overcome, what message is the Bank sending to its project beneficiaries in other parts of the world?"² Sanders urged Coady to suspend loans to the Brazilian power sector until Itaparica resettlement was satisfactorily concluded. Coady took Sander's advice and terminated lending to Brazil's power sector. But Itaparica's resettlement problems were never resolved and the Tuxá are still fighting to be compensated for the damage Itaparica did to their community.

Part of the reason that the Tuxá remain landless is that their story has not received much attention, and, as a result, there has little pressure on CHESF to follow through on their promises. Those displaced by Itaparica once had the attention of Bernie Sanders and the World Bank, but the story of their ongoing struggles has since faded. This paper will discuss the history of Itaparica and its impact on the Tuxá as well as the history and current status of the Tuxá's struggle for land with the goal of raising greater awareness in the SOLCHA community about the Tuxá's ongoing fight. It is based on interviews with Tuxá, court documents from their legal battle with the government, reports from CHESF's archive, and master's theses and other academic papers produced by Tuxá scholars.

¹ <https://www.eia.gov/beta/international/analysis.php?iso=BRA>

² Sanders to Coady, Folder: BA-210-Itaparica, Archive of the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), Goiânia, Brazil.