

# **Community, society, and property: REDD+ and indigenous groups in Mato Grosso (Brazil)**

## ***Comunidade, sociedade e propriedade: REDD+ e grupos indígenas em Mato Grosso (Brasil)***

## ***Comunidad, sociedad y propiedad: REDD+ y grupos indígenas en Mato Grosso (Brasil)***

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**Abstract:** The article investigates the impact of REDD+ programs on indigenous livelihoods. Referring to Ferdinand Tönnies' distinction, it argues that the involvement of indigenous groups with REDD+ fosters a transition from locally oriented, self-sustaining "communities" towards individualistic and market-oriented "societies" that are integrated into the global REDD+ architecture. Although international REDD+ initiatives attempt to integrate indigenous perspectives with the help of consultative procedures, the necessary conditions for a context-sensitive transformation remain unfulfilled, as long as indigenous groups do not obtain secure property titles for their lands. The inherent contradictions of the prevailing REDD+ approach create social tensions and dilemmas both for the participating indigenous groups and the initiators of these projects. Based on semi-structured interviews and participant observations, these dynamics are illustrated by the interplay between indigenous groups, public officials, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and international REDD+ financiers in Mato Grosso (Brazil).

**Keywords:** REDD+; indigenous rights; land conflicts.

**Resumo:** O artigo investiga o impacto dos programas de REDD+ nos meios de subsistência indígenas. Referindo-se à distinção de Ferdinand Tönnies, argumenta que o envolvimento de grupos indígenas com REDD+ promove uma transição de "comunidades" autossustentáveis e orientadas localmente para "sociedades" individualistas e orientadas para o mercado, que são integradas à arquitetura global de REDD+. Embora as iniciativas internacionais de REDD+ tentem integrar as perspectivas indígenas com a ajuda de procedimentos consultivos, as condições necessárias para uma transformação sensível ao contexto permanecerão insatisfeitas enquanto os grupos indígenas não obtiverem títulos de propriedade seguros de suas terras. As contradições inerentes à abordagem predominante de REDD+ criam tensões e dilemas sociais tanto para os grupos indígenas participantes quanto para os iniciadores desses projetos. Com base em entrevistas semiestruturadas e observações participantes, essas dinâmicas são ilustradas pela interação entre

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grupos indígenas, funcionários públicos, organizações não governamentais (ONGs) e financiadores internacionais de REDD+ em Mato Grosso (Brasil).

**Palavras-chave:** REDD+; direitos indígenas; conflitos de terra.

**Resumen:** El artículo investiga el impacto de los programas de REDD+ en los medios de subsistencia indígenas. Refiriéndose a la distinción de Ferdinand Tönnies, argumenta que la participación de los grupos indígenas con REDD+ promueve una transición de “comunidades” autosustentables y orientadas localmente para “sociedades” individualistas y dirigidas al mercado que están integradas a la arquitectura global de REDD+. Si bien las iniciativas internacionales de REDD+ intenten direccionar las perspectivas indígenas con la ayuda de procedimientos de consulta, las condiciones necesarias para una transformación sensible al contexto permanecerán insatisfechas mientras los grupos indígenas no obtengan títulos de propiedad seguros de sus tierras. Las contradicciones inherentes al enfoque predominante de REDD+ crean tensiones y dilemas sociales tanto para los grupos indígenas participantes como para los iniciadores de estos proyectos. Con base en entrevistas semiestructuradas y observaciones participantes, estas dinámicas se ilustran mediante la interacción entre grupos indígenas, funcionarios públicos, organizaciones no gubernamentales (ONG) y financiadores internacionales de REDD+ en Mato Grosso (Brasil).

**Palabras clave:** REDD+; derechos indígenas; conflictos de tierra.

## 1 INTRODUCTION

For a couple of years, REDD+ programs have become the focal point of criticism against the financialization of climate mitigation efforts. Many scholars, indigenous spokespersons, and non-governmental organization (NGO) activists claim that Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation programs entail a commodification of natural resources that leads to the disfranchisement of indigenous peoples (BUCKLEY, 2018; WEISSER; MÜLLER-MAHN, 2017; BOND, 2011). They associate the use of economic incentives for environmental protection with “accumulation by conservation” (BÜSCHER; FLETCHER, 2015) and “green grabbing” (FAIRHEAD; LEACH; SCOONES, 2012), i.e. the eviction of local communities for the sake of nature preservation. But if this is the case, why do some indigenous groups support or even initiate REDD+ projects (HEIN *et al.*, 2018; ALVAREZ; ELFVING; ANDRADE, 2016; AIPP; IWGIA, 2014)? Their open-mindedness for an economic valorization of natural resources seems to indicate that the advocates of REDD+ are not entirely wrong when they emphasize the potentials for development, welfare and progress (DUCHELLE *et al.*, 2014; LARSON *et al.*, 2015).

In this article, I argue that the ambivalent attitude of indigenous actors results from the ambiguous consequences of REDD+ projects for their livelihoods. To sustain this claim, I draw on Ferdinand Tönnies’ interpretation of societal

transformations in an emerging capitalist political economy. Referring to Tönnies' ideal-typical distinction, I argue that the involvement of indigenous groups with REDD+ fosters a transformation from locally oriented, self-sustaining, and group-oriented *communities* towards market-oriented *societies* with a potentially global stretch. This transformation mainly affects the spatial imagination (BRACKING, 2019) and socio-political dimension of indigenous livelihoods. It promotes individual emancipation especially for indigenous women and facilitates interactions with non-indigenous actors within the transnational "climate assemblage" (ARORAJONSSON *et al.*, 2016), but also disturbs the cohesion within indigenous groups. Moreover, REDD+ hardly supports and partially even impedes a transformation towards the society mode in the economic sphere because indigenous groups are denied enforceable property rights for their lands and resources. The resulting tensions and contradictions create dilemmas for indigenous groups, public authorities, and transnational REDD+ stakeholders.

Empirically, the article investigates the interplay between indigenous groups, international REDD+ financiers, and local public authorities in Mato Grosso (Brazil). In this state, several REDD+ projects have been initiated by indigenous groups as well as by international organizations in cooperation with state authorities (CORBERA *et al.*, 2011; LONG, 2013). At the same time, some indigenous groups explicitly repudiate the cooperation with REDD+ actors. This specific context makes Mato Grosso (MT) a very suitable case for exploring the socio-political dynamics in this field because it allows to investigate a broad range of different trajectories under comparable context conditions.

Apart from an extensive review of the (mostly Brazilian) literature, the article draws on 21 semi-structured interviews with indigenous spokespersons, NGO representatives, politicians, and public officials in this region between March and August 2019. The interviews took place in Cuiabá and in the settlements of indigenous groups. Additional important insights were obtained at the participant observation of a three-day meeting with indigenous spokespersons in the context of the REDD+ Early Movers Program, one of the largest REDD+ initiatives in Brazil. Because of rather accidental cultural affinities (many indigenous participants and the author have a shared interest in pipe tobacco), this participant observation made it possible to have confidential talks with indigenous spokespersons during the breaks. At other occasions, the formal interviews were complemented by pub

nights and other informal gatherings with key stakeholders. Moreover, the author discussed the preliminary results of his study at a public lecture at the Catholic University Dom Bosco in Campo Grande. In view of the political and partially also personal sensitivities of this public sociology approach (NICKEL, 2012), all interviews are de-personalized.

The article is structured as follows. First, I provide an overview on REDD+ and its interpretation in the academic literature. I show that the prevailing assessments do not pay sufficient attention to the contingencies of socio-political dynamics that result from the integration of indigenous groups into the global carbon offsetting market. The discussion of these shortcomings lays the ground for the introduction of Tönnies' frame of analysis as an alternative interpretive lens (section 2). Section 3 shows how REDD+ initiatives in Mato Grosso are essentially based on a contractarian logic that motivates all actors to engage in what Tönnies would subsume under the society mode of interaction. In section 4, I describe how the participation of indigenous groups is stimulating a transformation of their social fabric with regards to political and social dimensions. Section 5 shows that these changes frequently fail to improve indigenous livelihoods, because the transformation remains incomplete and partially is even retrograde in the economic sphere. The article concludes with a discussion of the resulting dilemmas for indigenous groups and all other REDD+ stakeholders involved.

## **2 THE DIFFERENT SHADES OF REDD+**

REDD+ as an instrument of the emerging transnational "climate assemblage" (ARORA-JONSSON *et al.*, 2016) was introduced in 2005. Diplomats from Papua New Guinea and Costa Rica suggested at the 11<sup>th</sup> Conference of Parties (COP) of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to remunerate developing countries for their efforts to decrease deforestation. The basic idea of REDD+ is rather simple: Governments and development banks from industrialized countries, international organizations, and multinational corporations reward public authorities in developing countries for the preservation of forests. The agreed projects are subsequently implemented by local (indigenous) communities with the help of transnational non-governmental organizations (BOYD *et al.*, 2018). The UNFCCC developed a classification scheme to calculate the carbon storage potential of forest areas as a baseline for compensation payments for

avoided deforestation. During the first half of the 2010s, sophisticated measuring, reporting and verifying mechanisms were specified to enable result-based remunerations and to transform natural resources into distinctly measurable financial assets (BRACKING, 2019). At the Paris Summit (2015), REDD+ was officially declared as one of the key instruments for climate mitigation (LOFT *et al.*, 2017).

Although the majority of REDD+ projects are publicly funded, many political ecology and geography scholars strongly criticize the underlying economic rationale, esp. with regards to the consequences for local and indigenous communities. Based on an essentially Marxist interpretive framework, they perceive the use of financial incentives for the preservation of nature as an expansion of capitalism into hitherto unaffected territories (NEIMARK *et al.*, 2020). In their view, the financialization of the environment changes the relationship between nature and human beings, because the indigenous focus on the “use value” of natural resources (subsistence, but also spiritual functions) is replaced by an “exchange value” perspective (BRACKING, 2019). Local animals and plants are subjected to a process of “individuation”, which means that they are discursively transformed into measurable objects. The use of these resources undergoes a process of “privatization”, i.e. activities with commercial purposes. Individuation and privatization are preconditions for “valuation”, by which both the natural resources themselves and their utilization are defined as tradeable goods (BENJAMINSEN; KAARHUS, 2018, p. 49).

When natural resources are portrayed as commodities, indigenous communities are assumed to lose their intimate relationship with nature. In consequence, they are subjected to self-alienation which reinforces their exploitation by the capitalist valorization of their habitats (DEHM, 2016, p. 29-33). Critical political ecology authors compare these processes with the enclosure of the rural commons, which laid the grounds for the emergence of capitalism in England (OSBORNE, 2015). As REDD+ requires a centralization and bureaucratization of forest policies, they are afraid that this instrument will be used by state elites to dispossess local communities and to transform them into an “eco-preariat” within the expanding class-based structures of global green capitalism (NEIMARK, *et al.*, 2020).

The critical perspective is predominantly challenged by liberal scholars. They assume that the risks of dispossession and self-alienation can be mitigated by procedural standards for indigenous participation. From a liberal perspective, REDD+

has the potential to stimulate a “social contract” (HALL, 2013) that transcends the borders of the nation state. It is expected that the reputation of indigenous groups as “guardians of nature” helps them to bring their positions to the attention of a larger, potentially international audience. This may compel domestic authorities to take their demands into account (LEDERER; HÖHNE, 2020; DUCHELLE *et al.*, 2014) and to defend indigenous land claims against local elites (SUNDERLIN *et al.*, 2014, p. 37-38). Some authors put particular emphasis on the advantages of REDD+ for tribal women. According to international REDD+ guidelines, they understand the participation of tribal women as a means for emancipation and gender equity (LARSON *et al.*, 2015). Liberal authors sustain their appraisal by the fact that indigenous groups hardly subscribe to the radical criticisms of left-wing academics and NGOs. Quite to the contrary, several projects have been initiated by indigenous groups themselves (LONG, 2013, p. 166-168), and the representatives of tribal women are explicitly supporting REDD+ in the context of international negotiations (AIPP; IWGIA, 2014).

Postcolonial authors criticize both liberal and critical scholars for their lack of sensitivity for the particularities of enduring colonial relationships (COLLINS, 2019). Against the liberal defense of REDD+, they argue that the contractual conceptualization of these projects is at odds with the community-oriented understanding of legitimacy of indigenous peoples. Moreover, they refer to racist attitudes in settler societies that impede a recognition of indigenous values by domestic authorities (COULTHARD, 2007). Although the latter point resonates with some critical political ecology writings, postcolonial authors also have some reservations about this literature. In their view, the equation of green economy instruments with the emergence of capitalism in Europe ignores the different historical and political contexts. Postcolonial scholars do not believe that the dispossession of local communities necessarily leads to a capitalist economy. Instead, they think that political processes are more contingent and cannot be subsumed under economic determinism (COULTHARD, 2014). These caveats resonate with the literature on “political forests” that also refers to the “variation and limits” of green neoliberalism in local settings (PELUSO; VANDERGEEST, 2020, p. 1098).

As of yet, the Marxist critique and the liberal appraisal of REDD+ are mainly perceived as antagonistic and mutually exclusive interpretations (VIJGE; GUPTA, 2014), while the postcolonial caveats remain sidelined in the mainstream literature

(COLLINS, 2019). In this article, however, I show that liberal and postcolonial perspectives shed light on the blind spots of the critical literature and help to achieve a more comprehensive understanding of the impact of REDD+. In order to do so, I suggest to structure the analysis with the help of Ferdinand Tönnies' ideal-typical distinction between the community and the society modes of interaction. While such a perspective is rooted in Marxism, it offers a subtle understanding of capitalist transformations that remains open for the contingent impact of REDD+ on indigenous groups in particular political contexts.

### **3 TWO MODES OF SOCIAL FABRIC**

Ferdinand Tönnies was one of the leading left-wing academics during the late 19<sup>th</sup> and in the first decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century in Germany (BOND, 2011). Like Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels, he attempts to understand the transformation of European societies under the conditions of emerging capitalism. Although he agrees with them on the exploitative nature of capitalism, Tönnies also emphasizes the emancipatory potentials of the new societal order. Moreover, he rejects the monocausal explanation of capitalism by a changing distribution of the means of production (MIRANDA, 1998). Instead, he assumes that societal interactions are interwoven with mental configurations of space and nature while being rooted in political, social, and economic beliefs and practices. This understanding led to the rejection of Tönnies by the dogmatic Marxist writers of his era (HEBERLE, 1937). But he was equally opposed by conservative and liberal scholars because of his critique of the inequalities in modern capitalist societies (SAMPLES, 1987). The rejection from both camps and the loss of his professorship under the Nazi regime (TILMAN, 2004, p. 580) explain why Tönnies' writings vanished into oblivion after the second world war. However, his interpretation of societal transformations gained relative prominence in Brazilian academic discourses after the democratization in the 1980s (OLIVEIRA, 1988; MIRANDA, 1998; LEMOS, 2011).

Tönnies' point of departure is rooted in social psychology. He assumes that human behavior is either inspired by communitarian or by individualistic values. Accordingly, these two basic orientations lead to either self-sustaining, group-oriented "communities" (*Gemeinschaft*) or to individualistic, market-oriented "societies" (*Gesellschaft*) as the two basic modes of social coordination. This section first describes these two modes in more detail and concludes with a synthesis.

### 3.1 Community: When the entirety is more than the sum of its components

According to Tönnies, the coherence of the social fabric in communities is fundamentally welded together by the human *Wesenswille* (essential will). He assumes that all human beings are endowed with a force of will that instinctively links their existence with the adherence to a particular social group or “community”. The *Wesenswille* is an integral part of an individual’s existence, but it can only be enacted collectively (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 140-55). An individual’s self-actualization depends on its integration and subjection to the general will of a community. (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 188).

Communities are often constituted by biological bonds. They consist of families and clans that may unite in larger units such as tribes and fiefdoms (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 45-53). A community’s identity is connected to particular spaces (ADLER, 2015, p. 47). The natural environment is understood as an integral part of the human collective existence (WIRTH, 1926, p. 416). Legends and myths associate certain elements of the local landscape with divine forces. Simultaneously, the physical space serves as an intergenerational link, as it connects deceased ancestors with the present generation. Expressions like “land of the elders” indicate the emotional bond between communities and their physical habitats, even if these relationships may, over time, transform into a merely imagined (mythological) interconnectedness (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 285-87).

Against this background, it becomes understandable why communities perceive natural resources and the results of their being processed as collective property (DURKHEIM, 2013). Land use practices strongly rely on common property, and artisanal production in a community is regulated socially. Emphasizing common property is neither at odds with private or household possessions nor would it preclude an unequal distribution of means of production. The allocation of usufruct rights for land and other resources depends on the social status of particular members, their merits regarding the fulfillment of collective tasks, and on a community’s religiously founded hierarchy (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 52-77).

Social relationships among community members are characterized by unwritten rules of super- and subordination (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 51-5). Traditions, customs, and beliefs legitimize the status of individuals, families, or clans. These social norms are symbolized by rituals such as the seating order at common meals or benedictions by the elders and religious authorities (TÖNNIES, 1887,



p. 53-68). In this context, gender roles are usually fixed and give superiority to men. Masculine supremacy is justified by men's superior physical forces which enable them to perform better in physically challenging activities (e.g., hunting) and to defend the community members against aggressors. On the other hand, the internal and intergenerational coherence of a community is safeguarded by women as moral enforcers and in their predominant role in parenting (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 219-20).

In political terms, communities are characterized by rather authoritarian structures, but all obedience requirements are restricted and remain fluid. Superiors must constantly prove that they are able to enhance a community's well-being. They are required to take all community members' perspectives into account. Ultimately, a leader's authority is based on consensual decision-making, ensuring that they execute the will of the community as a whole (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 58). Religious ceremonies and feasts symbolize and simultaneously reinforce the intrinsic connection between a leader's political authority and the *Wesenswille* of his community (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 53).

### **3.2 Society: When individuals agree on a contract**

As an antithesis to *Wesenswille*, Tönnies introduces the term *Kürwille* (arbitrary will). The *Kürwille* rests on the assumption that human beings are endowed with reason. Implicitly referring to Descartes, Tönnies assumes that the capacity of a separation between *res cogitans* (intellect) and *res extensa* (tangible and intangible subject matters) provides human beings with the liberty of choice to decide autonomously about their own social relationships and to dominate nature (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 162-63). Although Tönnies usually refers to large urban centers as an example, he assumes that the detachment of the human intellect from the physical world makes it possible for the society mode to transcend spatial limitations and to eventually subject the whole world to its rationale (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 97).

In Tönnies' perception, the social relations of any given society are based on a contract. While symbols and rituals are still be used for ornamental purposes, individuals rationally weigh the costs and benefits before they subject themselves to the rules of an association. Although the contractarian base remains usually implicit, the concrete norms of a society are usually enshrined in laws. As fictious

underwriters of a foundational contract, all human beings are imagined to be endowed with the same co-decision rights. Their interactions are based on mutual agreements between formally equal partners. Although somewhat grudgingly, Tönnies acknowledges that this holds equally true for the will of men and women (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 249). He hereby anticipates the emancipation of women in the societies of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

To be clear, equality before the law does not exclude different positions within societies. Quite to the contrary, the political coordination of different interests necessarily require an authority that is able to enforce collectively binding decisions and to sanction infringements. However, the legitimacy of this authority does not rest on tradition or religion, but on a rational decision of the members of a society (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 241-42). Thus, political power ultimately results from conscious and (at least fictitiously) voluntary acts of delegation. This enables societies to develop institutions of interest representation, majority voting, and a functionally defined separation of powers (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 300-03).

As the *Kürwille* allows for a detachment of human beings from their material environment, human interactions with nature become merely instrumental. This makes it possible to interpret the processing of natural resources as labour, i.e. a conscious and purposeful activity. Implicitly, Tönnies cites Locke and perceives the connection of natural resources with human labour as the justification for individual property. The delineation of ownership rights makes it possible to institutionalize norms for the exchange of goods and constitutes the beginning of trade (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 246-48). Tönnies understands property and trade as the driving engine of a capitalist society (CAHNMAN, 1968). The possibility of trading property titles transforms the original “use value” of physical or immaterial things into an “exchange value” based on speculative expectations of future demand and supply (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 75-83). At the same time, the interpretation of purposeful human activities such as labour empowers women in the society mode, because they can sell their workforce instead of sacrificing their vital energy for the wellbeing of their community (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 222-24).

The decoupling of labour, natural resources, and (fictitious) value creation becomes even more prominent with the introduction of credits and interest payments. In a capitalist society, money becomes a tradeable good in itself. However, Tönnies refrains from the term “capital” for tradeable money and instead uses the

word *Vermögen* (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 104-06). In German, this word means both wealth and capacity. Tönnies' preference for this term is not accidental, because it allows him to integrate the Marxist interpretation of capitalism into his own understanding of society. The increasingly unequal distribution of wealth-capacities undermines the formal equality before the law. Those who are endowed with more wealth-capacities (the "capitalists") are able to subject less fortunate society members to their will (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 106-07). This leads to an intrinsic tension within the society mode of interaction. Tönnies acknowledges that this may lead to class conflicts as described by Marx and Engels, but he also assumes that the outcome of these conflicts are contingent, as long as the lower classes can make use of the at least formal equality before the law in order to develop alternative organizational forms (trade unions, cooperatives) to at least mitigate their class-based oppression (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 297).

### 3.3 Community and society as ideal-types

At the risk of over-simplification, Tönnies' distinction between community and society are summarized in the following chart:

Table 1- Tönnies' distinction between community and society

	<b>Community</b>	<b>Society</b>
<b>Rationale</b>	Social cohesion	Individual liberty
<b>Relationship between humans and nature</b>	Spiritually interconnected, holistic cosmology	Separated, instrumental understanding of nature
<b>Social relationships</b>	Based on kinship and traditional/religious status	Equality before the law, mutual agreements, power differences based on the distribution of capital
<b>Gender relationships</b>	Subordination of women	Legal equality of women and men
<b>Political relationships</b>	Consensual decision making, enforcement by traditional authorities	Contract-based coordination of interests, delegated enforcement authorities
<b>Economic base</b>	Collective property, revocable individual usufruct rights, subsistence production	Trade of individual property titles, capital accumulation

Source: Tönnies, 1887.

To do justice to Tönnies' distinction, one should keep in mind that the community and society modes of interaction are ideal-types. They help to distinguish different stylized categories that describe the interplay between functionally interrelated social mechanisms (HEBERLE, 1937, p. 15). By implication, the behaviour of social groups may simultaneously follow the community and the society mode of interactions in different contexts (CAHNMAN, 1968; MARCUCCI, 2017). In the same vein, it would be a misunderstanding to interpret Tönnies' distinction as a temporal sequence. Although he acknowledges that a full-fledged society depends on a capitalist economy, he assumes that the interactions in modern societies entail significant elements of the community mode (TÖNNIES, 1887, p. 285-87).

With this perspective, Tönnies rejects the assumption of a linear progression towards the society mode and avoids the implicit modernization bias of Marxism. Moreover, Tönnies believes that a transformation from a community to a society cannot only be triggered by economic changes but may also result from political and social processes or even geographical context conditions (MIRANDA, 1998). The openness of Tönnies' writing both with regards to the sources and the consequences of social transformation may be perceived as a shortcoming. Nevertheless, the distinction between community and society make this framework particularly suitable for the analysis of the ambivalent implications of REDD+ for indigenous groups.

#### **4 REDD+ IN MATO GROSSO: A NEW SOCIAL CONTRACT?**

Mato Grosso (MT) is the third largest state in Brazil. Although the Portuguese had already colonized this region in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, the wilderness of its vegetation prevented larger settlements (BIDONE; KOVACIC, 2018). Therefore, the natural vegetation remained relatively unaffected by large-scale human interventions until the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In 2013, more than the half of the state was still covered by forests (BNDS, 2014, p. 6). However, all biomes of MT are increasingly challenged by land clearances because of the ongoing intensification of industrial agriculture. In 2019, the massive forest fires in MT gained global attention, as they impressively indicated the massive and often violent expansion of industrial agriculture in this state (ROSSI; SANTOS, 2020). While 64% of the state's vegetation is still preserved, the expansion of soy, corn, and livestock production increasingly

threatens its biodiversity (IDH, 2020). Economically, the state depends on the exportation of commodities. More than 50% of its gross domestic product stems from industrial agriculture (IMEA, 2020). Local elites and politicians see the lack of industrial diversification as a justification to further expand the exportation of primary goods (INTERVIEW 499, 2019).

The coincidence of a high carbon-storage potential with the risk of increased deforestation has attracted the attention of many transnational REDD+ actors. Many international organizations such as the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program, and UN-REDD (the executive organization of the UNFCCC) participate in REDD+ projects in this state (GUERRA *et al.*, 2014; SUNDERLIN *et al.*, 2014). Apart from that, a great number of transnational environmental NGOs are involved. The Amazon Fund, the largest financial intermediary for internationally financed REDD+ projects in Brazil, mentions 12 concluded and 31 ongoing projects (BNDS, 2013). At the moment of writing, the most ambitious program is the REDD+ Early Movers program. This initiative is financed by the German and the British government with a total amount of 1.3 million USD (GIZ, 2018).

REDD+ initiatives would not be possible without the welcoming attitude of public authorities. The state government of MT is a loyal promoter of this policy instrument. Since 2008, government representatives have taken part in the Governors' Climate and Forest Task Force, a cooperation of 38 subnational governments to combat climate change under the lead of the government of California (LUEDERS *et al.*, 2015, p. 8-9). Moreover, the government of MT symbolizes its commitment to climate change mitigation and REDD+ by its prominent presence at UNFCCC meetings (INTERVIEW 484, 2019). As soon as 2013, the state assembly passed a state law for REDD+ and other instruments of the green economy (LEITE; DE ANGUITA, 2017, p. 117).

The enthusiasm of state legislators for REDD+ can at least be partially explained by the expectation of financial income. The abovementioned REM program, for example, is connected to a large subsidy of around 50 million USD for sustainable agriculture and forestry (BOYD *et al.*, 2018, p. 5). At the same time, the government of MT also perceives REDD+ and associated programs as a chance to diversify the exportation structure (BOYD *et al.*, 2018, p. 5). All green economy programs are coordinated within the government's PCI (Produce, Conserve, and Include) program for sustainable trade (INTERVIEW 494, 2019). The administrative infrastructure

of this ambitious project is partially financed by the REDD Early Movers program (INTERVIEW 484, 2019).

To fulfill their strategic goals, public officials in MT must find a way to cooperate with indigenous groups, mainly for two reasons. First, the maintenance of a high forest coverage practically depends on indigenous participation. Nearly 17% of the state territory is legally reserved for indigenous settlements (ISA, 2020), and the majority of these reserves is located in areas that are considered to be most relevant for carbon storage. Without indigenous participation, the government of MT would never be able to keep its promises to international REDD+ financiers, because it neither has the expertise to keep the forests intact nor would it have the capacities to effectively prevent illegal logging. Second, the majority of international donors demand that participatory procedures be respected. The implementation of REDD+ is carefully monitored by field visits and reporting requirements (INTERVIEWS 484; 491, 2019).

When public officials engage with indigenous groups, they inevitably enter a political minefield. The majority of the population, and, most notably, the elite of large landowners do not have much sympathy for indigenous groups. Economic reasons, i.e. the need to expand industrial agriculture, and racist resentments are mainly responsible for a political discourse that massively discriminates against indigenous groups (INTERVIEWS, 478; 482, 2019). Frequently, *indigenistas* (pro-indigenous activists from the civil society and the Catholic church) receive threats of murder (INTERVIEW 488, 2019). Nevertheless, both the prospects of international REDD+ funding and their own moral convictions motivate public officials to act against the prevailing colonial attitudes of the rural elites (INTERVIEW 494, 2019).

To gain indigenous support, public officials make considerable efforts (INTERVIEW 494, 2019). Together with international development organizations and domestic NGOs, they organize workshops in remote areas that can only be reached by multi-day road and boat trips (INTERVIEW 484, 2019). If indigenous groups keep the forests intact, they are promised to be remunerated. Depending on the project, the remuneration entails material support, logistical and technical help with the monitoring of territories, or “capacity-building” workshops that acquaint indigenous actors with political communication tools for further transnational negotiations (INTERVIEW 498, 2019). At other occasions, indigenous groups take the initiative and proactively contact transnational actors to offer them

REDD+ programs on their grounds (ZWICK, 2019). In each case, the negotiations are characterized by a high degree of formalization both in form and content. The procedural rules for the negotiations follow the internationally formulated REDD+ guidelines, and the final goal is a written contract with mutually agreed rights and obligations. If indigenous groups take part at or initiate REDD+ projects, they have no other choice than to interact with external actors in the society mode. As the following section will show, this has important consequences for their internal social fabrics.

## **5 SOCIAL AND POLITICAL TRANSFORMATIONS: TOWARDS AN INDIGENOUS SOCIETY?**

Previous writings characterized the living situation of indigenous groups in MT as a “reservation situation” (FISHER, 2015, p. 224). With the notable exception of the Surui tribe (ALVAREZ; ELFVING; ANDRADE, 2016), most indigenous groups have century-old experiences with the “white man”. Today, most indigenous reserves are, albeit rudimentarily, integrated into the public health and education programs of the Brazilian state. Although some indigenous group members complain about the paternalistic attitudes of white doctors and teachers (INTERVIEW 492, 2019), indigenous customs are at least partially safeguarded because local staff are recruited within the indigenous groups themselves (INTERVIEW 464, 2019). However, these interactions increase the ambiguity between indigenous autonomy and integration into the Brazilian mainstream society.

But if indigenous groups decide to initiate or to participate in REDD+ initiatives, the “rules of the game” are determined by public officials and the staff of international development organizations. To start with practical inconveniences, the most important meetings take place in the capital of MT. Thus, indigenous spokespersons have to accept quite uncomfortable night bus trips and to eat the (from an indigenous perspective) bad food of their hosts. Because of these inconveniences, indigenous groups are usually not represented by their elders but by younger group members that can put up with these strains. The spatial expansion of their world of experience increases their status within the communities, frequently to the detriment of traditional authorities (INTERVIEW 487, 2019). But power balances also shift when the meetings take place within the indigenous settlements themselves. NGOs focus their activities on group members that are

willing to engage with REDD+. They hereby often empower individuals (especially women) that previously enjoyed a lower status (INTERVIEW 475, 2019). This tends to threaten traditional and often patriarchic hierarchies (INTERVIEW 495, 2019) and favours a shift from the community to the society mode of interaction.

Indigenous spokespersons develop diplomatic skills to identify potential allies and adversaries in a highly complex political environment. They learn how to adapt to various potentially contradictory discourses such as environmental protection, anti-capitalism, and the need for development. Their intellectual and rhetorical flexibility enables them to pit different actors against each other. For example, they threaten domestic public actors that they will directly contact international financiers if the former are not willing to accept their demands (PO 010, 2019). Nevertheless, indigenous spokespersons carefully balance confrontational and cooperative strategies, because they perceive REDD+ negotiations as a means to establish contacts with politicians that can also be used for other purposes (INTERVIEW 490, 2019). This enables them to influence the political discourse in MT and sometimes even to influence the selection of personnel in the state administration (INTERVIEW 487, 2019). However, even the most skillful indigenous spokespersons need to get used to the procedural order of meetings with external REDD+ stakeholders (INTERVIEW 487, 2019). Many indigenous spokespersons are at least irritated by the strict time planning and the rather businesslike atmosphere of the workshops. Such a setting is completely at odds with the colorful and festive customs of indigenous general assemblies that usually go on for weeks (PO 010, 2019).

Inevitably, the participation at REDD+ projects raises cultural and even aesthetic questions. During official meetings, public officials and NGO intermediators motivate indigenous participants to wear traditional headdresses, because this helps to produce colorful pictures for an international audience and potential financiers. Indigenous participants react with an ambiguous attitude. On the one hand, they are proud to show their culture, but on the other hand, they know that they are being displayed for public relations purposes. At the observed meeting, the indigenous spokespersons ultimately decided to follow the example of the non-indigenous male participants. During the official negotiations, when public officials were wearing their jackets, the indigenous participants set up their headdresses. During the unofficial moments (mealtimes, breaks), when the public



officials cast off their jackets, the indigenous participants followed suit and put their headdresses aside (PO 010, 2019). Admittedly, this is a detail from a single observation which cannot be generalized, but the adaptation of the distinction between official and casual illustrates how the participation at REDD+ fosters a nearly Weberian separation between public and private roles that is fundamentally at odds with the community mode of interaction.

From an indigenous perspective, the decision-making rules within REDD+ negotiations are often problematic, because they directly contradict the community mode. When participating at internationally financed REDD+ projects, indigenous spokespersons must accept that the deliberations take place in a comparatively small round of elected or appointed representatives. Such an approach contravenes the practices of consensus-seeking. For many indigenous participants, it is unthinkable that a decision can be made in the absence of important group members. Even if they delegate some executive tasks to elders and shamans as well, these authorities would never dare to make important decisions without the explicit consent of all group members (PO 010, 2019). In the same vein, the idea of majority voting is often perceived as illegitimate, because it entails the risk of internal conflicts and divisions. Workshop moderators are aware of the indigenous concerns and try to avoid voting whenever possible. However, time planning makes it sometimes inevitable for them to ignore minority positions, because the budgets provided by international financiers are based on efficient decision-making procedures (INTERVIEW 495, 2019).

The adoption of the society mode in external REDD+ relations also transforms the decision-making procedures within indigenous groups themselves. The Surui REDD+ project, for example, established a directly elected indigenous parliament based on universal suffrage. Subsequently, the parliament passed a written constitution to define the separation of powers between the legislature and the executive body (NARAYAMOGA SURUI, 2020). However, the indigenous adoption of the society mode remains problematic, at least in this example. Although the composition of the Surui executive body incorporated the traditionally strong role of clan chiefs (MELO; SILVA, 2016, p. 155), the balance of power both between the several family-based fractions of the political body remained inherently fragile and contributed to the eventual collapse of the REDD+ project (ZWICK, 2019).

The clash between the community and the society modes of interaction becomes most visible in debates about women's rights. At least the larger REDD+ projects also attempt to improve the political participation of indigenous women (LARSON *et al.*, 2015). Indigenous women often seize the opportunity of REDD+ meetings to make themselves heard (INTERVIEW 475, 2019). It may not come as a surprise that this transformation is highly controversial. Many male spokespersons of indigenous groups try to fend off all gender equality provisions, let alone quota systems for women's participation. They sustain their position with the argument that equal rights of men and women are at odds with their customary norms (INTERVIEW 460, 2019). Despite harsh protests, however, REDD+ initiators refer to the principles of equality before the law in order to overcome the reservations of indigenous male spokespersons (PO 010, 2019; INTERVIEW 495, 2019).

To sum up, the indigenous involvement with REDD+ triggers a profound transformation of the indigenous social fabric from the community to the society mode with regards to its social and political dimensions. From an individual (especially women's) standpoint, this transformation has the potential to break open authoritarian structures within indigenous groups themselves. Moreover, the adoption of society mode facilitates the communication with local political elites. However, it also triggers internal conflicts and hereby weakens the political power of indigenous groups. Against this background, indigenous groups carefully weigh the chances and risks of REDD+ for their livelihoods (INTERVIEW 487, 2019). As the following section will show, economic aspects play an important role for this calculation.

## **6 AN INDIGENOUS SOCIETY WITHOUT PROPERTY?**

Especially in the northern parts of MS, the density of non-indigenous settlements remained very low until the late 1970s (BIDONE; KOVACIC, 2018, p. 425). From an indigenous perspective, the economic underdevelopment of the region was rather advantageous. Given the low commercial value of the land, government authorities were willing to demarcate a larger part of the state as indigenous territories. After democratization, the Brazilian state constitutionally defined the legal status of indigenous reserves. While the lands fall under federal ownership, indigenous groups are granted comprehensive settlement and usufruct rights for above-ground resources (SANTILLI, 2005, p. 90). Today, the "regional frontier

economy” (FISHER, 2015, p. 224) of most indigenous groups in MT combines traditional occupations (small-scale farming, hunting and gathering) with local trade (GÁLMEZ, 2013, p. 5).

The fragile balance of indigenous livelihoods crucially depends on secure land tenures as the most reliable source of income. Since the expansion of industrial agriculture, however, this basic condition has increasingly become challenged. Large landowners invade parts of the reserves to plant crops. Frequently, they spray pesticides over indigenous settlements to kill the inhabitants (INTERVIEW 499, 2019). In addition, the construction of hydroelectric dams leads to water shortages, and the pollution of the groundwater by pesticides makes it often impossible for indigenous groups to farm their lands (INTERVIEWS 481; 479, 2019). The situation is aggravated by illegal logging, gold mining, and diamond seeking. All these activities are proactively defended by the federal government and partially financed by multinational banks and corporations (AMAZON WATCH, 2019). Thus, it is nearly impossible for indigenous groups to defend themselves against these attacks.

It is against this background that indigenous groups consider to get engaged with REDD+ projects. The example of the Surui tribe is illustrative in this context. While international observers praised the decision of this group to initiate its own REDD+ project as a textbook example for indigenous sustainability practices (GÁLMEZ, 2013), the Surui themselves were mainly motivated by the hope for additional incomes and the protection of the reserve against trespassing (ZWICK, 2019, p. 4-5). However, REDD+ projects do not necessarily lead to a better protection of indigenous reserves against encroachments. International development organizations and NGOs neither have the capacity nor the legal competence to directly intervene with land conflicts. Even public officials admit that they cannot effectively protect their lands if they participate in REDD+ (INTERVIEW 495, 2019). Given the power relationships in MT, it is impossible for them to effectively execute any policy that contravenes the interests of the large land owners (INTERVIEW 494, 2019). Against this background, REDD+ projects usually only entail technical assistance for the monitoring of the reserve borders by the indigenous groups themselves. However, they do not guarantee any protection against the invasion by large landowners, loggers, and diamond seekers or the more structural problems of ground water pollution and hydroelectric dam constructions (INTERVIEW 487, 2019).

If indigenous groups nevertheless consider the minor improvements of land rights security to be a sufficient reason for the participation at REDD initiatives, they are required to adapt their relationship with nature and the use of natural resources to the society mode. As a preparation for REDD+, individual group members cooperate with NGOs and employ sophisticated information technologies (geo-mapping) to calculate the carbon storage potential by avoided deforestation. These data also document the socio-cultural land use practices of indigenous groups. Quite often, the maps are published online (MELO, 2018, p. 55-85). In this way, REDD+ initiatives trigger a change in the spatial imagery of the indigenous participants. Increasingly, the understanding of the local habitat as an extension of their own existence is replaced by a more instrumental interpretation that focuses on the commercial value of avoided deforestation on the global market (ZWICK, 2019).

Moreover, activities which were previously considered to be vital necessities for subsistence become “labor” in the sense of the society mode. Indigenous groups become increasingly aware that many traditional practices can be associated with a monetary value (SILVA; 2014, p. 170). This has important implications for the work division between man and women. The activities of the former (selling small-timber products, artisan craftwork) are appreciated, whereas housework and caring are relatively depreciated, because they cannot be exchanged in monetary values. Against this background, indigenous women demand that their contributions to the preservation of the forests should also be considered as an economic activity (PO 010, 2019). This in turn reinforces the monetization of sustainable practices, albeit under precarious conditions (SILVA; FERREIRA NETO, 2014).

In line with Tönnies’ expectations, the diffusion of the society mode via REDD+ fosters individual emancipation. This becomes most visible by the increasing resistance of tribal women against traditional practices to arrange their matrimonies in childhood (INTERVIEW 485, 2019). If alternative sources of income become available, the breadwinning pledges of older tribal men appear less convincing as a reason to promise a young girl as a wife (SILVA; NETO, 2014, p. 178). At the same time, however, the prospect of financial income furthers individual greed and triggers distributional conflicts. In the abovementioned example of the Surui REDD+ project, financial demands led to serious conflicts and finally even prevented the group from fulfilling its part of the contract to keep the forests

intact (ZWICK, 2019). To a certain extent, this confirms the view of the Suruí clan chef Henrique Labaday, who had described the REDD+ project as a “social bomb” already before its initiation (MELO, 2018, p. 62).

Because of intensive communication via social media, indigenous group members are well aware of the ambivalent effects of REDD+ for their everyday practices. Although the participation at REDD+ provides smaller investments for local trade (PO 010, 2019), it is questionable whether indigenous groups are legally entitled to benefit from these initiatives. As the Brazilian constitution grants them only the usufruct rights for their reserves, any economic activity beyond the subsistence level falls into a legal grey zone. In the end, the permission of commercial activities depends on the fragile benevolence of public authorities (INTERVIEW 483, 2019). What is even worse, REDD+ initiatives increase the probability that public authorities will enforce the environmental regulations for indigenous reserves more strictly. That puts indigenous traders at a disadvantage compared to other peasants in the region, because they have to abide by comparably more rigorous standards for their farming activities (FISHER, 2015, p. 228-29).

Given that REDD+ only partially helps to enforce indigenous land rights and may even reduce their local trade opportunities, many groups decide against a participation at REDD+, if they have alternative options. Direct contacts to NGOs and international organizations, for example, make it unnecessary to give up the community mode of interactions for a comparably small enhancement of territorial control (INTERVIEW 485, 2019). Other indigenous groups have completely adopted the society mode of interaction. The Haliti-Paresi succeeded in concluding beneficial agreements with the surrounding large land-owners and use some fractions of their reserves for industrial farming. As long as the large-landowners receive the promised amount of soy, they also make use of their political connections and protect the indigenous producers against unwelcome questions from public authorities. Today, the average household income of the Haliti-Paresi surpasses the medium income of the Brazilian middle class and many group members are even billionaires. Against this background, the Haliti-Paresi reject to participate in REDD+ because this would only worsen their financial situation (INTERVIEW 480, 2019).

## 7 CONCLUSION

The previous sections have illustrated that the participation of indigenous groups in REDD+ entails pervasive, yet inherently contradictory transformations of their social fabric. To a certain extent, REDD+ triggers a “new social contract” (HALL, 2013). It redefines the relationship between humans and nature and creates transnational contractual relations between indigenous groups, NGOs, and subnational governments. The adoption of a rights-based, individualistic approach furthers the individual emancipation especially of indigenous women and facilitates an integration of indigenous groups into global discourses. This helps them mitigate the oppression by domestic governments and the local elites. But the adoption of the society mode remains inherently contradictory. Although indigenous groups perceive market-based conservation projects as an opportunity to politically strengthen their rights (ASHER, 2020, p. 965), they are usually denied legally enforceable property titles for their lands and resources. Economically, REDD+ initiatives challenge the community mode of interaction but do not allow for a full-fledged integration into the emerging “climate assemblage” (ARORA-JONSSON *et al.*, 2016). However, if secure property titles were granted to indigenous groups, they might not be willing to contribute to the internationally envisaged preservationist goals because less sustainable alternatives might be commercially more attractive.

To be clear, the impact of REDD+ remains strongly dependent upon specific local circumstances, and some of its consequences may still be welcomed from a (gender) emancipatory perspective. However, REDD+ puts indigenous groups, but also all other stakeholders in dilemmas. To begin with the indigenous groups, they often have to choose between a pervasive reshuffling of their social fabric and the continuation of external threats. Participating at REDD+ means that they become subjected to massive assimilation pressures with only little improvements of their precarious subsistence situation. But in many cases, the decision to repudiate REDD+ implies that they cannot expect any protection of their livelihoods against the invasions of their settlements by large landowners and other trespassers. In view of the current political climate in Brazil, such a decision can be life-threatening.

Public state officials may try to connect REDD+ more strongly to the protection of indigenous livelihoods. Such efforts, however, are likely to increase the opposition of the rural elites that use all available legal and illegal means of intimidation against

those who endanger their interests. If public officials nevertheless decide to go against the large landowners, they must anticipate that indigenous groups would not necessarily use an increased legal certainty of their reserves for sustainability goals. As soon as indigenous groups transition more comprehensively towards the society mode, preserving natural resources will become a commercial service whose value will be compared to alternative economic activities such as industrial farming. This, in turn, would put public officials in conflict with the international REDD+ financiers. From the perspective of the latter, one might wonder whether they could feel morally obliged to increase their financial commitments instead of abusing the weak position of indigenous groups. Especially in the current economic situation, however, such an expectation appears rather utopian. The attractiveness of REDD+ is mainly based on allegedly low expenditures (LUEDERS *et al.*, 2015, p. 2), and a comprehensive internalization of social costs would radically change the calculations among all REDD+ financiers. Here, the exploitative nature of the global society mode of interaction becomes visible.

More research is needed to assess whether the findings of this single case study can be generalized. As long as a modernization theory bias is avoided, Tönnies' distinction between community and society provides a helpful interpretive framework. This holds particularly true for the gender dimension of REDD+, which requires more in-depth investigation both from analytical and normative perspectives. In each case, more context sensitivity and a deeper understanding of indigenous social fabric would be necessary to avoid that REDD+ perpetuates postcolonial power structures in the name of climate mitigation.

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