

## Interview with Sonia Guajajara: the Indigenous movement in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic

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**Abstract** *In this interview, Sonia Guajajara, the executive coordinator of the Brazil's Indigenous Peoples Articulation (APIB), addresses the analysis and strategies developed by the Indigenous movement to face the COVID-19 pandemic. Among other topics, she highlights some of the movement's strategies concerning communication, surveillance, and the monitoring of COVID-19, as well as its actions to support Indigenous territories, the initiatives carried out in the Legislative and Judiciary realms, the movement's international incidence, and its articulation with academia. Sonia shows the important role played by the Indigenous movement to control the health emergency and to defend the rights of the Indigenous peoples, in the framework of intense conflicts with the federal government and setbacks in public policies.*

**Key words** *COVID-19, Social movements, Indigenous peoples, Public health emergency*

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Sonia Bone Guajajara (b. 1974) belongs to the Guajajara/Tentehar people, who inhabit the Araribóia Indigenous Land in Maranhão, Brazil. She has a degree in Literature and Nursing and a postgraduate degree in Special Education. Her militancy in Indigenous and environmental rights started in her youth in grassroots movements. She soon gained national and international recognition for the struggle she waged in favor of native peoples. She has a voice in the UN Human Rights Council and, for ten years, has been taking complaints to several international bodies and authorities. She has already received several awards and honors for her work and is currently a member of the Executive Coordination of the Articulation of Brazilian Indigenous People (APIB) and the National Articulation of Indigenous Warrior Women of Ancestrality (ANMIGA).

**Interviewers: In the context immediately preceding the pandemic, what were APIB's main guidelines and strategies for action?**

**Guajajara:** Before the pandemic, we planned the 2020 Free Land Camp (ATL) agenda. Health was one of the first points because increasingly more actions in the area were being reduced, and territorial conditions were totally decaying. For example, today, fuel for health transport runs out by mid-month. Another point is that the withdrawal of Cuban doctors [*Mais Médicos* (“More Doctors”) Program] created a void that has not been resolved to date. Many doctors refuse to go to the villages for lack of conditions. It is not just the salary: SESAI [Special Secretariat for Indigenous Health] does not offer any structure for the medical team to stay in the villages. Of course, our priority was the public confrontation with the [Jair] Bolsonaro government. It is not just you fighting for the health, education, or land demarcation: it is a whole dismantling of policies, weakening of bodies, and attacks on rights and life. Increasing fires, deforestation, and conflicts overly impact Indigenous peoples. This situation has not stopped during the pandemic; on the contrary, it increased. We had to direct the focus to articulate a plan to face the pandemic. It was not easy for us, facing a new disease killing many people. We also had to reorganize ourselves to do what the government was not<sup>1</sup>. COVID-19 started to reach the villages, and the government did nothing to adapt its health plan to this situation. We started to articulate an APIB plan, together with the [National] Congress, the Representative Joênia Wapichana (Rede/RR), and the bench of

the Joint Parliamentary Front for the Defense of Indigenous People [FPMDDPI] for the elaboration of a bill (Bill No. 1.142). We articulated with the Supreme Court [Federal Court, STF] so that we could, at least, guarantee service to all Indigenous people. We did not change the focus but expanded it. We had to keep facing all the historical problems and challenges and the pandemic<sup>1,2</sup>.

**Interviewers: On March 12, 2020, APIB suspended the face-to-face ATL, quickly reorganizing it into a virtual event. It organized the Resistance Assembly in early May to discuss a plan to face COVID-19. How do you explain this clearly perceived urgency of that moment?**

**Guajajara:** We were really fast. I remember that, on March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a pandemic. On March 12, we released a general communiqué [Available at: <https://apiboficial.org/2020/03/12/comunicado-geral-acampamento-terra-livre-adiado/>], canceling the ATL, scheduled for April 27-30<sup>2,3</sup>. In this communiqué, we indicated preventive measures and guidelines from the WHO protocols and the need to strengthen the Indigenous Health Care Subsystem [SASI]. Many people thought it was premature to cancel the ATL, but we thought about it this way: “The virus is spreading very fast. It has an unusual proliferation through contact”. We, Indigenous people, have highly collective habits and understand that it would not be easy to contain the transmission. The virus could spread even more if we held a face-to-face camp. I also think that, back then, the experience of so many deaths caused by other viruses made us very fearful that everything would happen again. Therefore, we wanted to convey security and clarity to our people and avoid a tragedy.

**Interviewers: From the beginning, the Bolsonaro government assumed a denialist stance against science in the face of COVID-19. On the other hand, APIB articulated with the Xingu Project of the Federal University of São Paulo (UNIFESP) and researchers of the Thematic Group (WG) of Indigenous Health of the Brazilian Association of Public Health (ABRASCO). Could you comment on this partnership between the Indigenous movement and academia?**

**Guajajara:** This partnership at the outset was critical because we were at the forefront, articulating to guarantee the health and protection [of Indigenous people], and we needed this support and science. All the work that FIOCRUZ [Oswaldo

Cruz Foundation] and ABRASCO were already developing was a haven for us. You arrived safely, guiding us to continue with traditional medicine to strengthen our immunity, not as a cure. Thus, we managed to expand the partnerships beyond the Xingu Project and ABRASCO, and we prepared with other doctors the Indigenous Emergency Plan, which guided throughout 2020.

**Interviewers: APIB and its grassroots organizations have been monitoring cases of infection and deaths from COVID-19 and producing educational materials. How has it been for the indigenous movement to take ownership of debates and technical tools, such as COVID-19 surveillance, in its space of struggle?**

**Guajajara:** Right at the beginning of the partnership [with other sectors], we had the understanding of creating the National Committee for Indigenous Life and Memory [See: [https://emergenciaindigena.apiboficial.org/dados\\_covid19/](https://emergenciaindigena.apiboficial.org/dados_covid19/)]. Because we started to disclose data based on what we were receiving from our bases, the government began to contest, saying that APIB had false data. So, we created the committee, which articulates APIB's grassroots entities and is supported by organizations, groups, and activists, including academia, such as ABRASCO. We had all these professionals there to support the data we were gathering, which was very important for us to challenge the government's denialism. We also managed to have technical support to continue the data collection and systematization. We should also mention the prevention materials we prepared together, such as the document for hygiene guidelines in food donations [See: <https://apiboficial.org/2020/04/13/apib-constroi-recomendacoes-de-higiene-para-apoio-nas-comunidades/>], because when they saw the APIB there, with the partnership of ABRASCO, FIOCRUZ, and Xingu Project, everyone already felt a technical safety to follow the protocols.

**Interviewers: We have also seen the rapid emergence of initiatives at the local and regional levels by Indigenous communities and organizations. How much of these initiatives is related to the autonomy of Indigenous people, and how much is a response to the omission and insufficiency of the government response?**

**Guajajara:** We were very concerned about this at all times because we wanted to ensure safety and care but not assume the State's role. I think we got it right. The first support request came

to us for food in the villages. The people felt the need to produce their food and have food security autonomously. So, regarding what was ours, which entered in a complementary way [by state responsibility], we looked out for support. As for the government [obligation], we sought legal support and mobilization to pressure it to take over<sup>3</sup>. We separated the roles well, doing our own but also demanding the government.

**Interviewers: Can you comment on the *Vacina Parente* (Vaccinate a Relative) campaign and the work to combat vaccination-related fake news?**

**Guajajara:** The *Vacina Parente* campaign came right after announcing the start of the vaccination campaign against COVID-19<sup>3</sup>. We also anticipated the vaccine when we included this demand in the ADPF [Claim of Noncompliance with a Fundamental Precept] N° 709. When that rampant increase in deaths began, we said: "We are among the most vulnerable groups". Therefore, we also had to be in the priority group for the vaccine. You [Sonia refers to the group of FIOCRUZ and ABRASCO's Indigenous Health WG experts that prepared several technical notes to support the Federal Government's action in the fight against COVID-19 in the context of Indigenous peoples. Notes are available at: <https://www.abrasco.org.br/site/gtsaudeindigena/documentos/>] helped guide what should be included in APIB's demands in the ADPF. When the vaccine came out – and we were in the priority group – we started encouraging vaccination. It was not enough to be a priority; there had to be clarity and information on what this vaccine would be if it would have [adverse] effects, and how the application would be. Thus, we did a whole job of encouraging vaccination with the *Vacina Parente* campaign and combated fake news. Because they [the government] released the vaccine for us but spread many lies so that the people would not be vaccinated. They placed the Indigenous people in the priority group, and soon after, they said that they would send the vaccine destined for us to other groups because the Indigenous people did not want it. They worked hard to have the vaccine rejected. The whole campaign was worth it. Women met there in February [2021] with weekly live events to clarify and encourage Indigenous people to take the vaccine<sup>3</sup>. We continue to provide guidance until today where denialism thrives and prove that the vaccine is the most effective way to end the pandemic once and for all.

**Interviewers: How was the construction of the strategy that the path would be to reach the STF to face the pandemic?**

**Guajajara:** We had lost many lawsuits in other levels. When we prepared the Indigenous Emergency Plan, we determined that we would have some main axes: communication, to give visibility to everything we were doing; legal, to access all levels to demand and pressure the government; and international articulation, for strengthening an international network to continue with the pressure<sup>2,3</sup>. Each axis organized itself with allies from several areas and developed a strategy. Thus, we were collectively building the plan as a whole. In this broad and collective discussion, we arrived at the definition that it was essential to go to the STF. Of course, it is also necessary to note here the performance of Dr. Luiz Eloy Terena and the entire APIB legal advisory team for their great wisdom and professionalism<sup>3,4</sup>. We had to act at a high level to show the ability to articulate with Indigenous people and prove the fragility and disarticulation of the Federal Government. We aimed to have high stakes, and it worked very well. Doctor Eloy Terena was the great master of this action.

**Interviewers: Regarding ADPF n° 709, what is your assessment?**

**Guajajara:** ADPF was tremendous in the struggle of the Indigenous movement<sup>4</sup>. Just being accepted was a gain because it was the first time in history that the STF accepted a representation made by the Indigenous movement [See: <https://midianinja.org/luizhenriqueeloy/adpf-709-no-supremo-povos-indigenas-e-o-direito-de-existir/>]. The second gain was the whole set of measures we managed to articulate and were accepted in its main points by the Supreme Court. One of them was determining that the Federal Government create a situation room to deal specifically with isolated and recently contacted people and their health barriers. The other is creating a working group to prepare the Federal Government's plan to face [the pandemic] with Indigenous representatives and partners, such as the group of experts from FIOCRUZ and the ABRASCO's Indigenous Health WG. Other requests were removing invaders from the Yanomami and Munduruku territories and vaccination for Indigenous people in an urban context. Although Minister [Luís Roberto] Barroso indicated this extension only where there were barriers to accessing the SUS [Unified Health System], it was a clear recommendation for Indigenous people in the city to be vaccinated,

and that helped a lot. Another critical point was the vaccine for the people outside the demarcated areas. Initially, the government restricted the priority to those in the areas. However, the ADPF determined the addition of resources to make actions available to Indigenous people in other areas. So ADPF n° 709 was very important<sup>4</sup>.

**Interviewers: Please comment on the incidence in the partisan political field and Congress. Representative Joênia Wapichana is the first Indigenous woman elected, and, in 2018, you were a candidate for vice president for the Socialism and Freedom Party (PSOL). How do you evaluate these strategies and achievements?**

**Guajajara:** The year 2018 was a milestone for the struggles of Indigenous people because we had the first Indigenous presence on a presidential ticket. I was there composing, and until today, we have reaped significant results from participating in the election. The electoral results were not the best, but the political result was significant for expanding partnerships and the visibility of our struggle. Moreover, having Joênia Wapichana elected, the first Indigenous female Representative, also marked the Indigenous presence in Congress. We have partners and allies there, but having Joênia there has already made a big difference. They want to attack and disqualify her constantly, and she has resisted like a giant. We need more Indigenous voices in Congress to amplify Joênia's voice. The massive growth in the electoral dispute was observed in the past municipal elections. We had the most significant number of Indigenous elected councilors, and now we are articulating so that in 2022 we have the most significant number of candidacies articulated by the Indigenous movement, which is because we understand that we need to have our people there, as Congress is the place where our lives and rights are decided. Indeed, it is a critical contribution to Brazilian democracy. The institutional policy must be represented by Brazilian diversity, and we, Indigenous people, are one of those segments that must occupy the institutional policy to help rebuild this country.

**Interviewers: How do you evaluate the performance of Joênia and the FPMDDPI in the pandemic, particularly in the formulation of Law N° 14.021/2020?**

**Guajajara:** We, as APIB, and the Indigenous leaders participated in the construction of Bill N° 1.142, which became Law n° 14.021<sup>3</sup>. The role of

Representative Joênia was crucial in the construction [of the Bill]. There were five or six bills there [on the issue], and we managed to present just one and have the Representative as rapporteur, which showed our maturity, based on dialogue with parliamentarians, to present only one proposal and have the possibility of approving it. We approved it in the House [of Representatives] and the [Federal] Senate. When it reached the Executive, President Bolsonaro vetoed about 22 points, including access to drinking water, guidance materials on COVID, and ICU beds. However, this was just a demonstration that this government had no interest in containing the pandemic and was conniving with all the deaths and infections among Indigenous peoples. Furthermore, the [authorization for] the permanence of missionaries in the areas of isolated peoples was added during the process [of the Bill] in the House. This knot remained in this law, extremely harmful to isolated peoples, which we are reversing through the Judiciary. The whole process was significant, but it is a law that did not get off the ground. We could not see, in fact, a satisfactory implementation.

**Interviewers: How do you see the connection between what is done in the corridors of Congress, the STF, and the ground fight in the territory?**

**Guajajara:** Everything we do in the movement's struggle is precisely for the result to reach the territory. If we fight for rights, it is for our people to continue there with the right to live in the village, to have their territory and freedom. If we came to Brasília, it is so that our people who want to stay there [in the villages] do not leave. We want to leave, but we want to have the right to come back. We believe the territory is this sacred place that continues to be the flag of the greatest struggle of the Brazilian Indigenous people. It is a relationship between existence and identity. Our biggest struggle is to ensure the territory to guarantee our existence with our identity.

**Interviewers: During the pandemic, APIB appealed several times to organizations such as the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), the UN, and, now in August, the International Criminal Court (ICC). What are APIB's expectations for international advocacy in the struggle for Indigenous rights?**

**Guajajara:** The international space has been fundamental for us to increase the visibility of Indig-

enous people and exert pressure. Internationally, we have managed to articulate with civil society, parliamentarians, and organizations such as the UN and the OAS [Organization of American States] and have a relationship with companies to sensitize them regarding everything they do here or anywhere else has a cost and a direct impact. It is necessary to monitor the production, financing, and sale chain to ascertain environmental and human rights impacts, which has helped others realize that firms play a crucial role in change. Civil society also helps pressure both these companies in their chain and parliamentarians in their countries to create laws to monitor and guarantee the traceability of these products and these companies. It is an extensive articulation with direct results here. It is an articulation because it is not just you accessing these authorities to speak but to denounce, give visibility, and gain support from the international community to help with pressure. Moreover, now, at the ICC, we understand that APIB had to file a suit directly too to accuse the Bolsonaro government of genocide and ecocide. All the practices of this government prove institutionally planned genocide and ecocide<sup>3</sup>. Everything we have done has had a direct impact on the Federal Government. They may not change their action, but all this together ends up weakening and constraining more and more.

**Interviewers: How do you see COVID-19 immediate and future impacts on Indigenous people?**

**Guajajara:** Many elders, who were culture holders, died and led to an inevitable weakening. The pandemic imprinted an irreversible trail – so many losses and deaths, so much pain, and it is not over yet. I think the impact has to be positive now because we have to rethink the continuity of relationships, empathy, and care and broaden the discussion about the disruption of this economic model. We can no longer continue with the destruction of biodiversity. If we do, other pandemics will come because the imbalance is ever-increasing, disrupting all biodiversity and ecosystems. Not to mention climate change, which is on the rise. We also need to bring this up as a serious issue that must be contained now to ensure the future. It is thinking about the impact of all losses and pain but taking it as a learning, as a lesson on changing behavior and relationships to avoid other plagues and pandemics like this.

**Interviewers: In this context of global issues, such as other health emergencies and climate crises, how do you perceive the articulations between the sciences produced by universities and Indigenous territories?**

**Guajajara:** The 2014 New York Declaration on Forests and the Paris Agreement recognize the knowledge of Indigenous peoples and traditional communities as scientific knowledge. We are left but with implementing these practices, valuing this knowledge and associating it with scientific knowledge, understanding that one cannot go without the other. This articulation of the two sets of knowledge will ensure all the necessary changes to the world.

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