

THE ROOTS OF LEADERSHIP

A conversation between Beto Borges and Puyr Tembê

Bridging ancestral knowledge and 21st-century government policy isn't easy, but it's where the real change begins if we're going to start living within planetary boundaries. Here's a conversation (edited for length) between Beto Borges, Director of our Communities and Territorial Governance Initiative (CTGI), and Puyr Tembê, the Indigenous Peoples' Secretary of the State of Pará in Brazil. To watch the entire interview, please scan the QR code.

Beto Borges:

I imagine you didn't have a single defining moment when you decided to become a leader. You simply saw what needed to be done, and you've been doing it ever since. If you could share with us a bit about that process, and what led you to take on the responsibilities that you have carried so capably all these years.



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Puyr Tembê:

I always say we're born with it. We carry our ancestry within us. No one “becomes” a leader by going through training. It's in our bodies and our spirits. We gain tools that help us strengthen that calling.

My inspiration comes from my family, from my mother, from my people, from Aunt Verônica, and from so many women and leaders who came before me. I look back to their history and say ‘sometimes we need to pause, to look at the past, in order to move forward.’ Because ultimately, this isn't just about me. It's about those who came before me, and also about the future—my daughters' future, my grandchildren's future.

Beto Borges:

You're currently serving in government. Sometimes the priorities of government don't line up with the priorities, wants, needs, and realities of Indigenous Peoples. How do you understand these challenges? What has your experience been like as Secretary for Indigenous Peoples for the State of Pará?

Puyr Tembé:

Indigenous priorities need to be translated into public policy—into concrete, lasting actions. We need to build public policies that actually reach territories, populations, and communities. That's our challenge, because we know the needs have been neglected for many years. The creation of the Secretariat (*editor's note: Brazil's Secretariat for Indigenous Peoples of the State of Pará was created in early 2023*) won't fix everything overnight or immediately.

Beto Borges:

Could you speak a bit more specifically about ensuring that climate finance and conservation funding actually reach the communities, not just the Tembé people, but all Indigenous Peoples in Pará? How do you see the government's role in making sure resources reach the local level and in a strategic way, for example, to implement environmental and territorial management plans and other priorities of Indigenous Peoples?

Puyr Tembé:

The Secretariat's role is to seek funding, [and] support indigenous communities and indigenous organizations capable of managing these resources. Pará went through five land

clearances during Lula's government, and now we need to help Indigenous Peoples manage the territories that were cleared. It's a huge challenge because removing invaders isn't enough—we must think and help Indigenous Peoples construct the management they want for their territories. The State and partners have the obligation to strengthen funding, which is often talked about everywhere but rarely reaches the right people. There are [many] intermediaries, and resources don't always reach those who truly need them. So we seek support, understanding, and recognition that success depends on everyone working together to strengthen indigenous communities and organizations and ensure they have direct access to funding mechanisms.

Beto Borges:

You mentioned technical support and partners. This makes me think about Forest Trends' role, especially through the Communities and Territorial Governance Initiative (CTGI). How do you see our role in supporting you in the work you've described, and how could we improve our support?



Puyr Tembé:

I think Forest Trends is one of our allied partners in this process. We recognize it as a respectful organization that came to add and contributes, not only financially, but technically and respectfully, when listening and understanding that Indigenous Peoples have the right to be assisted, benefited, and most importantly, heard.

Collaboration without listening doesn't work. Forest Trends has been the ideal partner in guiding us, the Secretary of Indigenous Peoples and the Federation of the Indigenous Peoples of Pará State (FEPIPA), in helping safeguard indigenous rights.

We need technical perspectives [like yours] that respectfully integrate traditional perspectives into these processes, which is essential for any funding initiative. I'm truly grateful, Beto, for this strong relationship.

Beto Borges:

It reminds me of [the National Articulation of Indigenous Women Warriors of Ancestry] ANMIGA, when talking about listening. There was a time in which we cultivated a collaboration for the global climate negotiations in Dubai. You, as one of the leaders of ANMIGA, helped us secure support for an indigenous women's delegation—the largest until then at a [UN Conference of Parties] COP, if I am not mistaken. Could you briefly share that process and what resulted from your powerful presence there?

Puyr Tembé:

We don't want to just be beneficiaries [of climate finance], we want to be leaders.

Forest Trends has made it possible for this relationship and co-construction to strengthen and show the leadership of Indigenous Peoples. Attending those climate negotiations was very significant for us.

And Beto, no one can stop women now—women arriving in places we'd never been but needed to be, and it was necessary. It's still hard to find partners who understand this, who have the vision that you had to say, 'Wait, it's difficult, far away, expensive, but we need to bet on this.' I always speak about these results,

and we will act the same here in Brazil: women will arrive at this COP and, as our Minister Sônia says,

[there will] never again be COPs without Indigenous Peoples. And I speak of the COP in Dubai, but it's not just that—I also talk about the Indigenous Women's March, where we had significant support for Indigenous women in Brazil in the third march. It was fundamental. This year, again, you gave me critical support, enabling us to have the structure for Pará to be part of the dialogue. It was very important; we got the women there. And the women—it was beautiful to see—they were concerned about what the Jurisdictional REDD+ system is, what REDD+ is, what carbon sequestration is, we need to understand, we want to understand.

Beto Borges:

I believe we are in another historical moment in Brazil, and despite major challenges, we have the first Ministry of Indigenous Peoples led by a woman—the first Indigenous woman. There are so many "firsts," so many extremely significant moments. I see the importance of Indigenous youth taking the lead, as many are

standing out. What message would you give to other young Indigenous people?

Puyr Temb :

I'm Secretary now, I'm a leader, but I don't know for how long. We need to prepare these young people. I always say, I was once young, I came from there. I know that when you want something, you learn. So take advantage, youth—take advantage, because many of our elders didn't have the opportunities we have today. They lived in a different context, a context of our ancestors. Today is my context, tomorrow will be yours. And you should take the tool of communication, the internet, and extract the best from it.

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Beto Borges:

It's crucial to combine Western modern science with Indigenous traditional knowledge. This was a very important message from my warrior friend, Puyr, a woman of many struggles. This was a very important message that Puyr gave to Indigenous youth, and in the same vein, what is a call to government leaders, at federal and other levels, in Brazil or globally, that you can give regarding Indigenous Peoples' realities, where we are and where we need to be? What would be a message you would send to decision makers?

Puyr Temb :

Partnership is still the way. Governments cannot act alone, private organizations cannot act alone. Indigenous communities have knowledge, know their needs, and have proposals. The role from outsiders is to respect, add, and co-build. Everyone must step out of their world and recognize the message and role of Indigenous Peoples. And what we are doing is not about us, it is about life on the planet, about the life of future generations. I am talking for myself, for your children, for your grandchildren, and so on. For as long as society, governments, and philanthropy do not understand this, and do not go down to the territory to feel the calling from Earth, we will all be stuck...and we will not move forward. Now is time for action, concrete action.

