

Summary of key findings of Projeto FORTE

Forest citizenship for disaster resilience: learning from COVID-19

The plan: FORTE assembles a multi-disciplinary team to understand and enhance forest peoples' collective action and transformational change in strengthening disaster resilience. We will advance empirical and theoretical understandings of forest citizenship, supporting on-the-ground improvements in disaster resilience. Our project is organized around the three objectives:

(1) Quantify linkages between forest citizenship and COVID-19 resilience

Demands for territorial recognition are foundational to the claiming of rights by Amazonia's forest-proximate peoples. We further developed the concept of forest citizenship as a normative framework and analytical tool based on Brazilian social environmentalism (*socioambientalismo*), *florestania* (a former political project in Acre state), Latin American scholarship on ecological citizenship, and Eurocentric political philosophy. Decades of struggle for territorial recognition and social inclusion have solidified the right to have rights for Amazonia's forest citizens. Hence, forest citizens are people who have become so through the sociopolitical dynamics of their rights claims. Forest citizenship is built on community mobilization to create legally recognized territories with participatory governance but becomes tangible only if individuals and communities can successfully claim other rights from institutions through everyday practices of citizenship. We assessed the current number and distribution of forest citizens across Brazilian Amazonia based on gridded population data and spatial analyses to calculate the resident population in four territorial categories that meet these democratic preconditions: Indigenous lands (ILs), extractive reserves and sustainable development reserves (SURs), ecological settlement projects (ESPs), and Afro-descendent Quilombola territories (QTs). The territories covered 31% of the Legal Amazon, were home to 1.05 million forest citizens, and had diverse primary policy objectives but shared goals of empowering communities and conserving forests. To be emancipatory, forest citizenship must be bottom-up, socially inclusive, and improve people's lives.

To ascertain whether forest citizenship improved birth-related health in Amazonia, we utilized maps of forest citizen territories, municipal mortality statistics, and live-births microdata. Our econometric analyses employed instrumental variables, natural experiments, and matching. We found, after addressing confounders such as unobservable health vulnerability, that creating forest citizenship territories has not yet led to overall health benefits. First, contrary to expectations, birth-related mortality was not lower in places with more forest citizens. Second, a higher number of forest citizens was associated with lower mean birthweight, and worse clinical assessment of newborn health, which was exacerbated during periods of high exposure to COVID-19. Third, lower birthweight among Indigenous newborns relative to others persisted in municipalities with ILs. Fourth, forest citizenship was associated with some improvements in healthcare access (especially to family health teams), while greater availability of food benefited traditional rural populations in SURs and ESPs. Overall, achieving territorial rights, even if strengthening healthcare access and food availability, has thus far been insufficient to improve forest-dependent people's health.

(2) Understand practices of forest citizenship in relation to COVID-19 experiences

Our qualitative work began with analyzing the actions taken by the State, external agents, and the forest peoples in confronting the pandemic in the Iriri Extractive Reserve (RESEX) in Altamira, Pará State, Brazil. This analysis drew on the theoretical notion of 'brutalism' as a form of political exercise, as proposed by Mbembe (2020). Accordingly, we hypothesized that the pandemic represented a rupture in a hierarchical and unequal organization that has historically produced various forms of exclusion and reinforced specific places for territorially marked peoples and bodies. Fieldwork in 2023 revealed that communities in the RESEX Iriri

adopted innovative measures to contain the spread of COVID-19 and, furthermore, to claim rights that had previously been denied to them. Most of these actions were made possible through external partnerships – a situation that exposes paradoxes in the exercise of rights. The qualitative research team also drew on the perspective of the bodily experiences of a local female leader to understand the resistance strategies of rural Amazonians *not* legally resident in a forest citizen territory. Specifically, non-Indigenous riverside families living in an Indigenous Land (proximate to the RESEX Iriri), and their efforts to access citizenship rights during the pandemic. We came to understand that this territorial and legal entanglement, combined with the pandemic context, encouraged these families to pursue alternative paths in order to break away from various forms of inequality and exclusion. We found that the strategies organized to gain access to healthcare rights were carried out outside—or parallel to—the formal spaces of territorial governance and were based on diverse negotiations and exchanges formed through intersubjective relationships. Results from fieldwork in the RESEX Unini (Amazonas State) are forthcoming, linked to a PhD (to be concluded in 2026).

Recognizing the democratic limitations of the ‘forest citizen’ territories mentioned above, we also examined the emergence of the Common Use Territory (TUC) as a novel modality of collective territorial rights recognition in Amazonia. We followed the sixteen-year grassroots struggle led by the Central Association of Agro-Extractivists of the River Manicoré (CAARIM) that culminated in the creation of the TUC Rio Manicoré in 2022, providing 389,932 hectares of legally recognized collective-use land rights to sixteen traditional communities. This case represents the first direct actualization of a traditionally occupied territory in Brazilian Amazonia, contrasting with previous conservation and agrarian reform kinds of reserve which repurposed existing legal categories. Drawing on Ng’s recent parsing of Fanon’s approach to decolonial recognition to theorize what constitutes freedom for forest peoples, we argue that the TUC transcends colonial and neoliberal multiculturalist frameworks by focusing on shared practices of common-use rather than bounded identity categories. The TUC model challenges capital’s expropriation of forest peoples through achieving freedom to practice traditional livelihoods and lifeways based in common use. The TUC has the potential to overcome historical grievances from problematic reserve implementations while establishing a more democratic form of territorial governance, with decision-making power resting in community hands rather than state authorities. We drew on oral histories and contemporary narratives to reveal how this initiative builds upon historical struggles against capitalist expropriation while responding to current threats from logging, land grabbing, and industrial extractivism.

(3) Understand and disseminate learning on conditions for promoting forest citizenship and enhancing disaster resilience across Amazonia.

These activities rely on analyses and insights from (1) and (2), completed in early 2025. Our three national teams have received no-cost project extensions until end-August 2025, and our principal dissemination activities will take place May-July 2025:

- (i) Academic. A four-day event with Amazonian academics and postgraduate students at the Federal University of Pará in Belém.
- (ii) Institutional. Meeting with public authorities, third-sector representatives, and partner institutions active in the Rio Iriri and Rio Unini RESEX territories, to present findings related to forest peoples’ citizenship and local organization during the pandemic and other crises. Each of these events (in Altamira, and Manaus) will include representatives from federal and municipal institutions, NGOs, and Residents Associations.
- (iii) Community level actions. Conversation Circles: Researchers will visit the Iriri and Unini talk with residents about social and territorial rights and access to citizenship in their territories. Leadership Exchange: Up to four leaders or residents from each site will participate in an exchange program. This exchange aims to share experiences on territorial organization and strategies for navigating extreme events.