

5 years of the Rio Doce dam disaster

Interview with Joelma Fernandes Teixeira, fisherwoman and affected person by the collapse of the Fundão tailings dam

**By Caritas- Minas Gerais – Brazil, Conectas Direitos Humanos and
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1. What is your name? Where are you from? How were you affected by the collapse of the Fundão tailings dam?

My name is Joelma Fernandes Teixeira from Ilha Brava; a district in Governador Valadares/Minas Gerais, Brazil. I was affected as an islander (“Ilheira”), because I am a fisherwoman and part of the small/family agricultures here in my municipality. I work in Acomfafa, which is the Association of the Family Agriculture and Farming of Governador Valadares, for seventeen years. I principally supply Cooperativa Regional de Economia Solidária da Agricultura Familiar e Agroecologica (Cresafa), a regional cooperative in my town, which distributes to PPA and Merenda Escolar (a school meal program). As a result of the disaster that happened, my family income drastically dropped and none of the responsible companies has gotten in touch with me until now.

2. After five years, how is your situation and the situation of the affected communities in general?

After five years, our situation is worse. We lost everything in 2015 but we tried to put up our irrigation back, planted several fruits such as lime, pears, etc. to sell again at the Family farming fair. But in 2020 there was another flood that struck us which damaged and left the Island worse than in 2015. It wiped off our four-year pears plantation, destroyed the fence and water irrigation system beyond repair. So, reparation... no, we haven't had any reparation because of the disaster.

We tried to fight for our rights several times by presenting back up documents and evidence in terms of receipts, invoices, etc. that we got from meal deliveries to schools... but to no avail. There are invoices as far back as 2017. Even though I don't belong to any entity, I am a traditional Islander. My father was a fisherman, he wove net and other fishing tackle. We have always had this life. As a kid, we started by helping to extract sand from the canoe, holding bags over quarry for my father to put the armored fishes, the toadfish among others, daily, so we were born into fishing as it was passed on to us by our fathers and down to our children, automatically. We enjoy our way of life and it means a lot to us doing what we love daily. A life of quality that involves fishing, planting, meeting up with our customers' orders and demands and every other thing involved in fishing. You might not see me as fisherwoman because I didn't learn the trade; like I said, I was born into it and didn't just start at a specific time. [...]After this disaster, people started rejecting our products. They claimed the fishes are contaminated with Samarco's mud which automatically affected our means of livelihood. And I can't switch to a different occupation as fishing is the only way of life that I have and know. The mud has directly affected all our sources of income; fishing and farming. Sales have dropped drastically because of this...

I have been called twice by PIM [Renova's Compensation Program] but when I could not present a proof of ownership they did not attend to me, but this is not my fault as we have always acquired lands and properties among ourselves solely on trust and verbal agreement. No one has ever felt the need to register or involve a lawyer. We either acquire the land as an Islet after the passing of a flood as yours or buy from someone who has a piece, which is what happened in my case. I bought the land from my next door neighbor and there wasn't a need for documentation because of high level of trust we operate on amongst ourselves in this neighborhood. It has always been this way and now they [companies] are asking me for non-existing documents. Where will I get that from?! They are also saying I got the piece of land after the disaster struck to lay claim to benefits which is not so. I swear, I have owned this piece of land way before then. [...]

So many of us are in this precarious situation. They [companies] keep beating about the bush about paying compensation, not to mention other failed promises and the height of it is charging us all to court. Having to pay a lawyer as low as 10% and high as 15% charges from my pocket as a victim with all my loss doesn't sound right to me. [...] I don't deem it fit to and can't even afford it with all the losses procured, health challenges, emotional pains, struggles, daily walking in mud, asides other.

We have been through a lot as female-only workforce which makes it more difficult and no one is showing empathy. I forgot to mention that I am beekeeper too, which I use to pollinate my fruit tree also on the Island, up to 15 boxes and my girls handle the part of honey business.

I would also like to shed light on my health challenges. Coming from a generation of fishers, our main meal are fishes and vegetables which we get on our way from setting or checking our fishing tackle and I have never had to go to hospital for any health issues until this tragedy with the mud struck. I have always had easy access to fish which has constantly supply my body with the needed amount of Omega3, in fact as fishers, we only eat meats and chickens occasionally. When I started feeling sick, I went to the hospital and they discovered my cholesterol level has gone down 20% than the minimum of 40%. To manage this diagnosis, I have to take **Perst**, to boost my cholesterol level as it's a good medication for Omega3. One snag here is that it costs 150 Reais and this is a huge amount for someone with my predicaments. Weakened and low cholesterol has also triggered triglycerides and I am now diabetic too which is as a result of the dammed mud. I have enough evidence to back up these claims.

My case is one out of many, every one of us here has a story to tell. Take for example the boys who survive on money made as laborer's on the farms by harvesting of lime, mangoes, beans, loading and offloading trucks etc., I mean the people hired for casual labour. How do you think they are coping now? Most of them have ended up in prison and others dead because they left for Santa Rita; the closest neighborhood to Valadares and turned into drug addicts, drug pushers and thieves. As they say; an idle hand is the devil's workshop, these are youths in their prime who don't have the patience to seat things through. They went into streets and cities looking for something engaging and fell into the wrong hands there is nothing left for them here; to the point of no return. I am grateful to God my son who has to leave too to make ends meet; as he is the only male among my 3 children, he did not fall into wrong hands. I can only imagine how the family of those who did feel and cope with the loss of their sons. This is my story.

3. Do you feel repaired for the damage you have suffered?

[...] We see the Renova as a way of hiding the hen that lays the golden eggs in Minas Gerais particularly in Rio Doce: Vale. If no one talks about Vale, the company shares go up. That's why they created Renova... and Renova is not guaranteeing reparation for the victims. On the contrary... [...]

I forgot to mention that people have to buy water in Governador Valadares because we have no confidence in the water that is being provided by SAAE. Many people buy water, while others have to go far away from their city in order to get drinkable water or from other sources like mines, rocks, among others, even though untreated, they still prefer these sources to the ones that were supplied by SAAE. This further complicates our predicament. No action has been taken and this has been going on for some years now. People do drink contaminated water in Governador Valadares.