

CONECTAS
Human Rights

20 profiles of activists celebrating two decades of the pioneering international organisation from the Global South



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Conectas commemorates its 20th year at the most challenging time for rule of law since the return of democracy in Brazil. In this context, the organisation is being called upon to act courageously, resolutely and decisively in defending democratic institutions and vulnerable people.

This publication demonstrates how prepared Conectas is for this role thanks to the consistency of its values, the efficacy of its strategies and the integrity of its partnerships.

We are launching this publication to celebrate 20 years of the organisation, to honour all those who have helped it reach this point and to share this story with future generations

Theo Dias, president of the Board of Trustees



COLOMBIA

134 / César Rodríguez Garavito

SÃO PAULO

30 / Oscar Vilhena Vieira
56 / Lucía Nader
64 / Eloísa Machado de Almeida
114 / Thiago Amparo
48 / Sandra Carvalho
122 / Douglas Belchior

MINAS GERAIS

140 / Jorge Ferreira dos Santos

BAHIA

164 / Samara Pataxó

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92 / Débora Maria da Silva

RIO DE JANEIRO

156 / Shyrlei Rosendo

RIO GRANDE DO SUL

40 / Denise Dora

TOGO

100 / Clément Ny



laletsossi Voule

20 PROFILES FOR 20 YEARS

The 20 profiles that make up this book give a full account of the work of Conectas over the last 20 years. Through the words of our founders, collaborators and partners, an organisation unfolds that is undergoing constant change.

It tells the story of the human rights movement and its changes, as well as the challenging times we are experiencing in Brazil. It would be difficult to offer a more complete picture than the one contained here.

As the current directors, reading the texts and looking over the photos and memories of the struggle - with its victories and defeats - produces a feeling of enormous responsibility. The stories told here show how Conectas has occupied a highly relevant position in constructing a more diverse human rights movement, in which the voices of the Global South must also be heard.

They also reflect an organisation that is a cornerstone in constructing an innovative human rights movement and one which is capable of constantly reconsidering challenges creatively. **Finally, the stories show the challenges that the human rights movement in Brazil deals with, on a daily basis.**

This publication bears witness to Conectas' role in defending democracy in Brazil and defending vulnerable groups of people: rural workers, migrants and refugees, people deprived of liberty, victims of police violence, among others. In their kind words, our partners highlight how the organisation works towards building respectful relationships - this is our most valuable treasure.

Reading the profiles also sparks an enormous admiration for the finely-tuned vision of the people who founded the organisation and also for

our colleagues' day-to-day work. After almost two years of the pandemic and three years of an anti-democratic government, it is impossible not to admire the tenacity of the people who make up the Conectas team. .

The team, who appear in this book, have persisted bravely in the struggle, now in a much more threatening environment than that of 2001, when the organisation was created. They work unwaveringly, prioritising caring for each other and for our the partners. We know that our work is only possible when approached in this way.

The 20 stories remind us that in these 20 years we have made so many friends. The Conectas hallmark that unfolds in these stories is of an organisation that creates space for exchange in order to amplify the voices of the organisations that are in closest

proximity to human rights violations. Spaces like the International Human Rights Colloquium; spaces for investigation and reflection, like the Sur Journal; and spaces in the hearts and minds of those who have in some way found themselves on this journey with us. Fortunately, these exchanges start with Conectas and continue for a lifetime.

We would like to thank the journalist Fernanda Mena, who is a human rights and international relations researcher, and who coordinated a team of professionals in telling this story. They have told our story so much better than we could have dreamed.

Enjoy!

By *Juana Kweitel, Camila Asano*
and *Marcos Fuchs*

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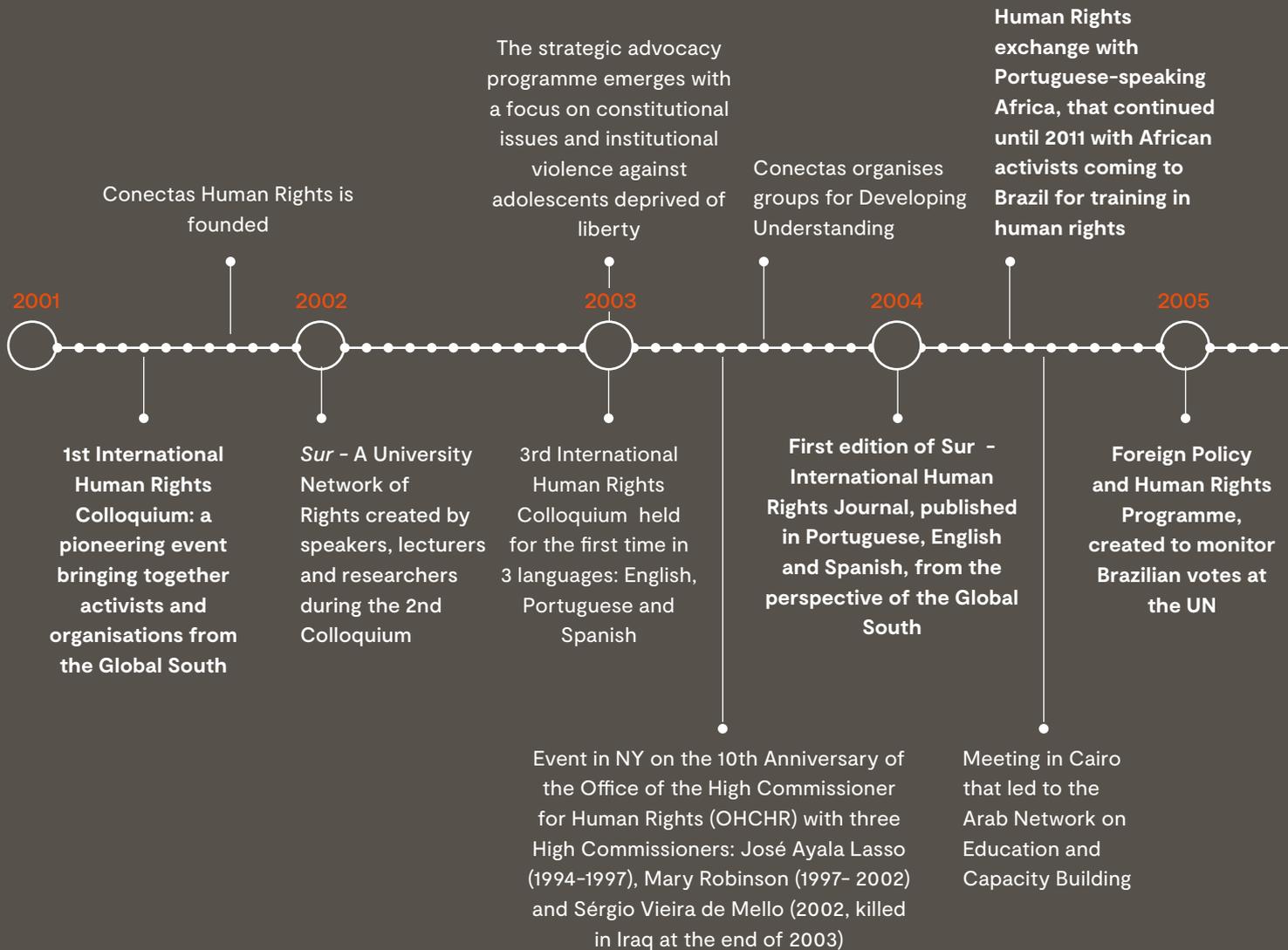
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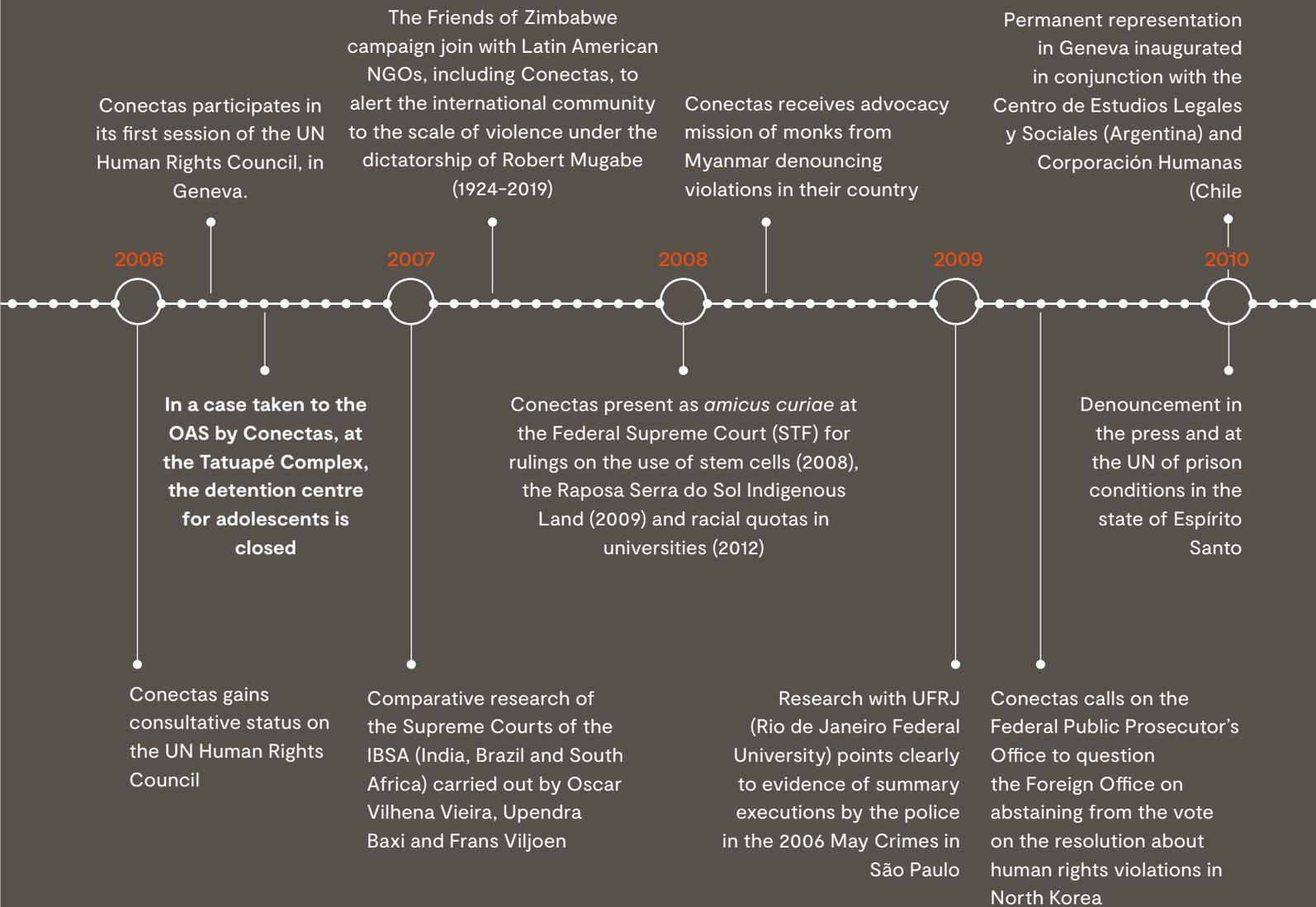
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2001



2010



2011

Creation of the Criminal Justice Network (Rede Justiça Criminal), a coalition of NGOs working for a fairer and more humane criminal justice system

STF rules for the constitutionality of racial quotas in Brazilian universities

10 young people wounded and arrested in the June Journey protests tell Conectas about the strategy adopted by the São Paulo police of surrounding and attacking protestors

To commemorate International Human Rights Day, 10 December, Conectas opens the doors of its head office in São Paulo for the 1st Ideas Fair, displaying projects by collectives and NGOs in the defence of human rights

2011

2012

2013

2014

2015

2016

A fourth language is added to the Colloquium: French

The organisation questions limit on issue of humanitarian visas to Haitians by the Brazilian government. The quota was retracted

Crisis in the Pedrinhas prison complex (Maranhão), which left 60 prisoners dead, is denounced at the OAS. Precautionary measure by the Court forces Brazil to protect the lives of prisoners

Commemorative Issue for 10 years of Sur sees launch of new graphic and editorial project making it more accessible to activists

Instigated by Conectas and partners, the UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, calls the proposed constitutional amendment regarding the Expenditure Ceiling, "radical and uncompassionate"

Inauguration of permanent representation of Conectas in Brasília

Publication of a special edition of Sur in Arabic

First edition of the Course in Journalism and Human Rights, in a partnership with Oboré and Abrají

2021

NGOs, collectives and social movements in favelas take part in ADPF 635 (the ADPF of the Favelas: claim of non-compliance with a fundamental precept). Conectas was a judicial participant in the case and the STF suspended police operations in the Rio de Janeiro communities during the pandemic

Rights in the Pandemic Bulletin, result of research by Conectas and Cepedisa/ USP, analyses official response to the Covid-19 pandemic and shows that the federal government acted in contravention of measures to contain the virus

Conectas and partners work towards approval of the new Migration Act (13.445/2017), overriding the Foreigners' Statute, a legacy of the military dictatorship

Conectas participates in public hearing on the decriminalisation of abortion at the STF

Conectas and partners defeat Bolsonaro government's attempt, via provisional measure, to control NGOs

2017

2018

2019

2020

2021

Realidade Visceral campaign, by Rede Justiça Criminal, employs virtual reality to expose overcrowding in prisons

Conectas and ADERE take the report on rural work being analogous to slavery in Minas Gerais, to the OECD

16th International Human Rights Colloquium includes activities in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro, Pernambuco and Brasília

Conectas and the newspaper, Folha de São Paulo launch podcast Cara Pessoa

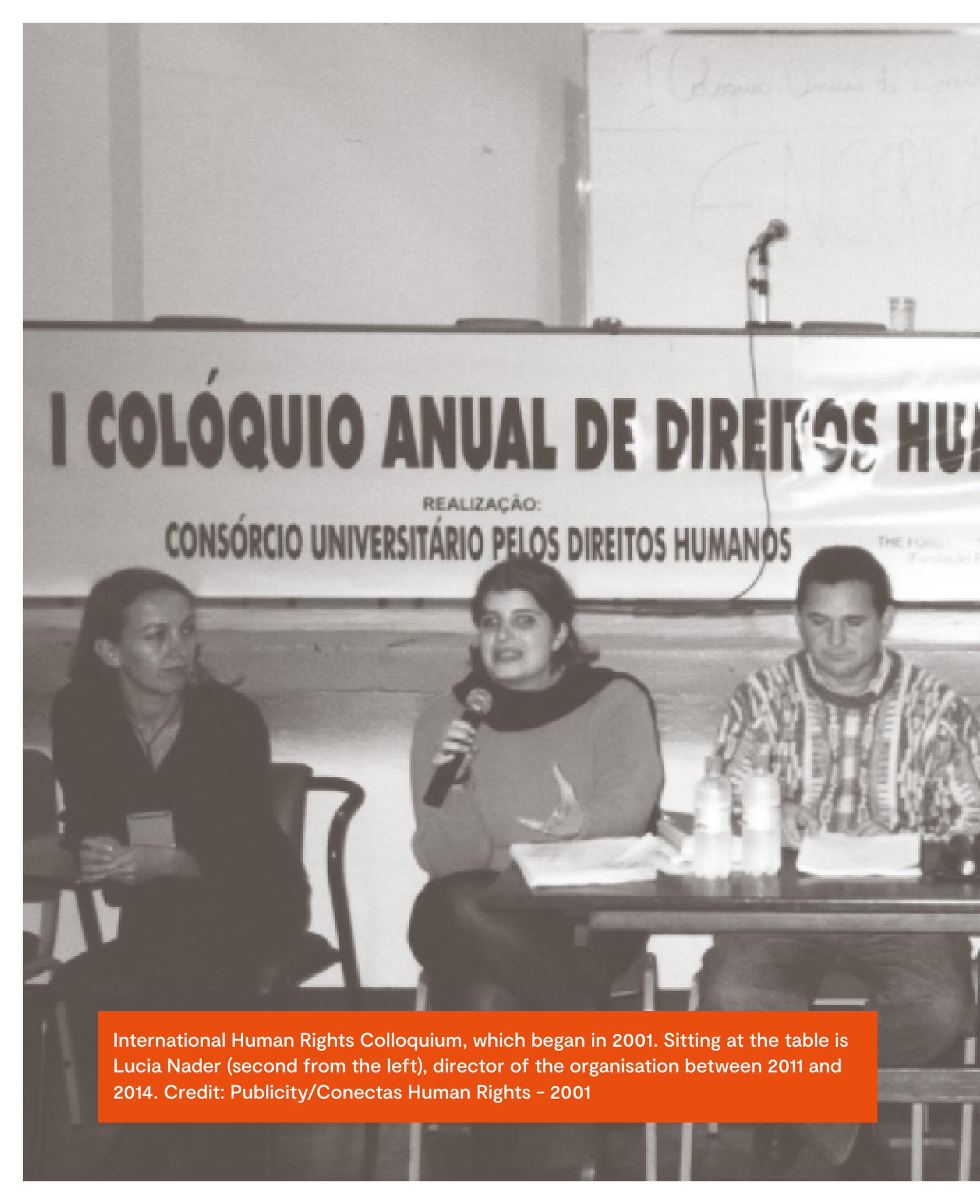
Conectas and partners achieve revocation of National Security Act, a law from the time of the military dictatorship, used by the Bolsonaro government to persecute critics

Conectas and Missão Paz go to Roraima to denounce lack of action by the Brazilian government in receiving Venezuelan refugees. In 2017, the country created Operação Acolhida

Sueli Carneiro is guest editor of issue of Sur on race which places combatting racism at the centre of the human rights debate

Conectas joins emergency mission of the National Human Rights Council in Brumadinho (Minas Gerais) following the collapse of a Vale mining dam

Campaign by NGOs leads the UN Human Rights Council to pass unprecedented resolution on racism and police violence following the murder of George Floyd in the USA



I COLOQUIO ANUAL DE DIREITOS HUMANOS

REALIZAÇÃO:
CONSÓRCIO UNIVERSITÁRIO PELOS DIREITOS HUMANOS

International Human Rights Colloquium, which began in 2001. Sitting at the table is Lucia Nader (second from the left), director of the organisation between 2011 and 2014. Credit: Publicity/Conectas Human Rights - 2001



“I never wanted to be a politician, but I did want to change realities.”

Malak El-Chichini Poppovic

Malak El-Chichini Poppovic

EGYPT

ECONOMIST

CO-FOUNDER OF CONECTAS, WORKED AT THE OFFICE OF THE UNITED NATIONS HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGES (UNHCR), CENTRE FOR STUDES INTO VIOLENCE AT USP AND FOR THE COMUNIDADE SOLIDÁRIA

THE CHALLENGE OF CREATING AN INTERNATIONAL NGO IN BRAZIL IS THE ORIGIN OF CONECTAS

A senior UN official who envisioned the opening up of Brazil's third sector to the world as well as partnerships between the nations of the Global South

There were many connections that led the Egyptian economist Malak El Chichini to be in the right place and with the key people which enabled the first international Brazilian non-governmental organisation to be founded.

Her trajectory crosses three continents and involves diplomats and academics, lawyers and activists in Cairo (Egypt), Geneva (Switzerland), Dakar (Senegal) and New York (USA), before she finally settled in Brazil, thanks to the 1985 Carnival.

It was with the backdrop of the revelry in Rio that she met the editor, Pedro Paulo Poppovic, who has been her life partner ever since.

Their meeting was a twist of fate that brought a United Nations (UN) senior official

to Brazil in the midst of the process of re-democratisation and of reinstating civil and political rights.

Malak had been working for a decade at the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), which she joined after finishing her Master's degree at the Graduate Institute for International Studies in Geneva.

Working at the UNHCR simultaneously provided a stimulating community of peers, among them the Brazilian diplomat, Sérgio Vieira de Mello (1948-2003) and the opportunity to dive deeper into the challenges posed in the humanitarian field. She had intense and enlightening experiences of different realities, through which she came to know over 30 countries in Africa, the Middle East and Latin America.

For two years, Malak lived in Senegal where the UNHCR regional office covered thirteen countries. There, she coordinated programmes, like the repatriation and re-settlement of refugees from decolonisation wars from several different countries in the region. Later, she was transferred to New York where she spent four years working at the North American headquarters of the UN, before returning to Geneva.

Malak says that in the West African country of Senegal she learned more than she taught about wars, colonisation and how to protect people. However, these matters were not entirely new to her. On the contrary, they had been the basis of her dream, back in her home country, of being able to change realities and give people a better life.

Malak was born in Cairo in 1943. She was the third of five children in an upper-class family. She went to the same school of French Catholic nuns that her mother had attended decades earlier when it was still a girls' boarding school. At home she spoke Arabic with her father and French with her mother.

Malak left school infected with the humanistic vision of the French nuns. "I wanted to be a missionary when I was young, but I didn't know it was impossible because I wasn't a Christian," She laughs.

When she was still a child, Malak witnessed the 1952 socialist revolution of Gamal Abdel Nasser (1918-1970). She saw areas of

the Egyptian capital set alight during the uprising that led to both the end of the power of the royal family and also of the British occupation of the Suez Canal. She watched members of foreign minority groups being expelled from the country, some of whom were her and her mother's schoolfriends, after Egypt was attacked by the United Kingdom, Israel and France in the 1956 war.

"They were turbulent times and I was torn. On the one hand, my family belonged to a privileged group against which the Nasser regime had turned, on the other, I believed that more equality was needed in Egypt," she explains.

Later, the regime became high-handed and started to violate human rights. "This was when I realised that reform is not possible without democracy and that human rights are always paramount."

Young Malak, who wanted to study literature, decided "to become an economist because I believed it was important for the development of Egypt and Africa." After she graduated she won a study grant for a post-graduate course in Geneva.

"It was my dream to spend some time living alone in Europe. French was my first language and I considered myself to be practically European. But as soon as I arrived in Switzerland I discovered I was an Arab and African," she jokes. "You have to leave your country to truly see yourself."

In the 1970s, in Geneva, Malak met a

group of foreign women who did not identify with the European feminist debate. They would meet and talk into the night on gender issues in the context of peripheral, under-developed countries.

Among them was the Brazilian writer Rosiska Darcy de Oliveira, who was in exile in the diplomatic capital of Europe, following her condemnation of violations during the 1964 Brazilian military dictatorship.

In February 1985, Malak telephoned Rosiska when the large exhibition on refugees that she was organising in Saudi Arabia was suddenly cancelled. After sharing her frustrations about the cancellation, Malak was invited to spend Carnival at Rosiska's house. Another friend of the Rosika's was already there. It was Pedro Paulo.

This was the fourth time that Malak had been on holiday to Brazil, to visit her friend and one of her sisters, Nayla, who also lived in Rio and worked with political refugees, some of whom even hid in her home.

One new element of this trip was to prove crucial though. Malak came away from Brazil with plans to see Pedro Paulo again and she returned for a long-term visit. In just a few months, she had already moved to São Paulo. She had only been there once before in her life and even then, for little more than 24 hours.

"When I arrived in Brazil, when it was just opening up, I found it very promising compared with what was happening in other

countries," she says. "It was a vibrant country, with a very interesting civil society, that was seen as an example in Africa, where the third sector had been colonised by organisations from developed countries."

Her first great challenge was to learn the language, both at home and outside. The second one was finding her way professionally in her new country.

Malak was introduced to the political scientist Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro by a mutual friend and former colleague at UNHCR, Guilherme Lustosa da Cunha (1942-2010). And she started work at the Centre for Studies into Violence at the University of São Paulo (NEV-USP), founded by Pinheiro and the sociologist, Sérgio Adorno.

It was there that she met a number of young researchers and activists, including the lawyer, **Oscar Vilhena Vieira**, who had recently graduated from the university and was working in a voluntary capacity at the Teotônio Vilela Commission. Thirteen years later they were to set up Conectas together. "We immediately hit it off and became great friends." — p.30

Malak and Oscar shared ideas, diagnoses and aspirations about the judiciary, human rights and the role of organised civil society.

The pair also charted greater openness for Brazil in a world that was becoming increasingly connected and interdependent. "I was greatly influenced by the Egyptian

Boutros Boutros-Ghali, the UN Secretary General, who said we have to democratise globalisation,” she explains.

Malak is from the generation of UN senior officials who ran the series of great conferences organised by Boutros-Ghali in the 1990s. These meetings, that dealt with important overarching themes that have been on the agenda of public debate ever since, brought together activists and civil society organisations from periphery countries to discuss the environment (Rio de Janeiro, 1992), human rights (Vienna, 1993) and gender (Beijing, 1995).

“The internationalisation of these important issues gave a voice to many new actors. It was a moment when civil society was greatly strengthened,” she says. With regards to building international networks, Malak saw Brazil as being isolated from its Latin American neighbours, not to mention other developing economies in Africa and Asia.

She recognised the importance of strengthening the solidarity between activists and third sector organisations on the global periphery. “The fact that I am displaced has meant the idea of solidarity has become significant to me. Here in Brazil, I am displaced. When I return to Egypt, I am also displaced because I have changed and so has the country.”

The strategic importance of strengthening the third sector took shape even more

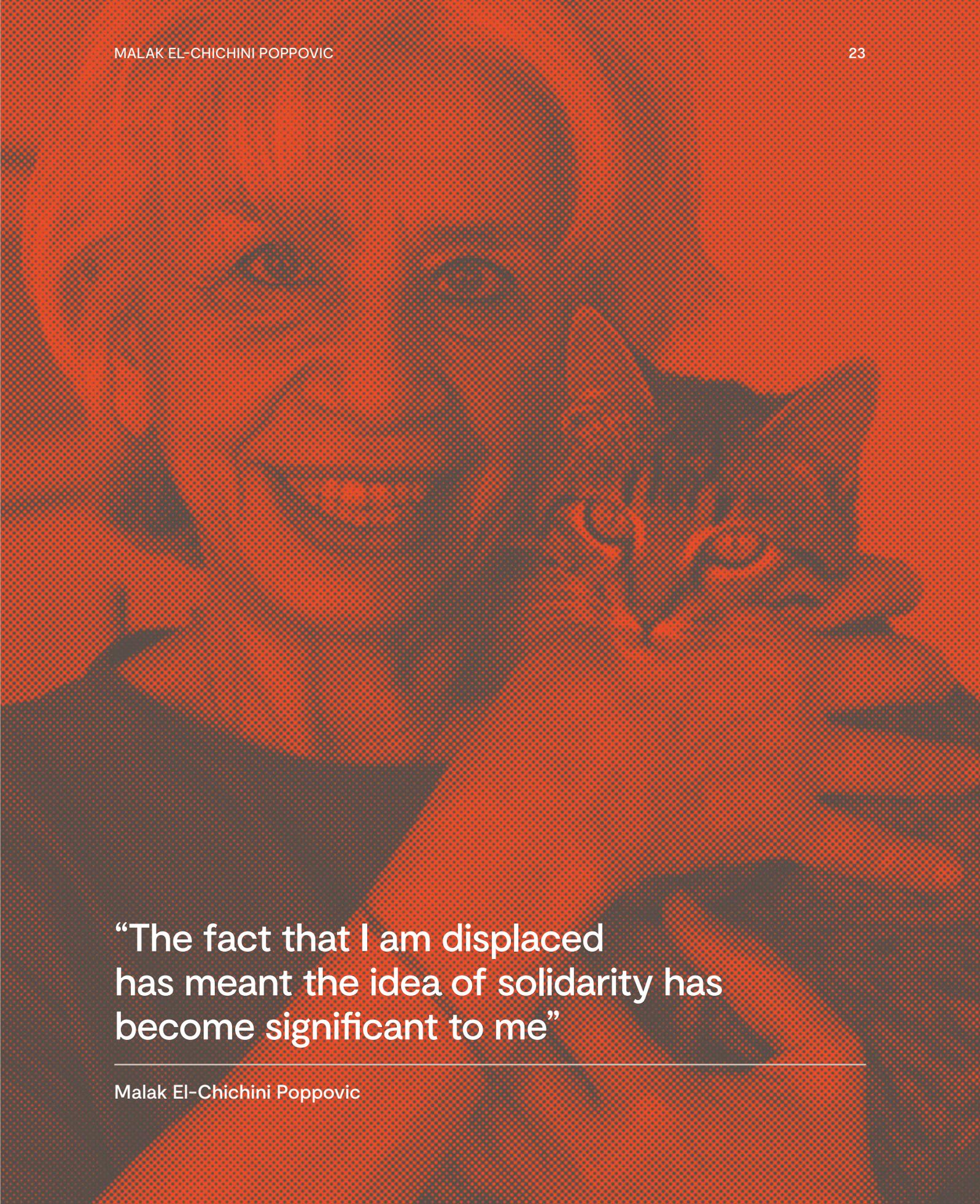
when Malak joined the team at Comunidade Solidária, created in 1995 by the First Lady at the time, Ruth Cardoso (1930–2008), an anthropologist who was married to President Fernando Henrique Cardoso.

“Ruth Cardoso was a very inspiring person and she was innovative in terms of the relationship between civil society and public policy. She had the idea that the third sector had to be strengthened because it would be very important in the social sector,” she says. “All the work at Comunidade Solidária was very useful in verifying the impact that an NGO can have at the individual personal level.”

As a special advisor in the international department of Comunidade Solidária, Malak built bridges with the recently formed United Nations Foundation (UNF), to which she transferred and brought Ruth Cardoso onto the board.

The foundation had adopted the proposal of stimulating cooperation for development between the countries of the so-called Global South, created by the head of the UNDP at that time, Mark Malloch-Brown (currently president of the Open Society Foundations).

Malak, who had been a proponent of this idea for some time, put this type of cooperation to the test in a pilot project between Brazil and Botswana, in Africa, in the field of prevention of the HIV virus. In 1999, when the programme started, the African



“The fact that I am displaced
has meant the idea of solidarity has
become significant to me”

Malak El-Chichini Poppovic

country had the highest contamination rate for the Aids virus of the whole continent.

The programme, that was funded by the UN Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, was highly successful.

“It became clear that the exchange between these two countries, that did not share a language, but did share other characteristics, such as precarious infrastructure and technical difficulties, was very positive,” she says.

This was her ticket to a more ambitious project, one that would join the dots of her path so far, aligning her expertise with that of a group of lawyers and activists to create a new model for non-governmental organisations in Brazil.

“I talked to Oscar who had the idea of a network of activists and of strengthening the judiciary systems, whilst I wanted to open Brazil up to the region, but also to Africa and if possible Asia, in South-South connections,” she recounts. “It was also important to me to create an organisation with greater international representation: other cultures, points of view and accents,” she explains. “I was very lucky to meet people who thought like I did.”

Opting for a policy of South-South cooperation and for promoting new voices in global debates, strengthening human rights defenders and the dialogue between social leaders, academics and specialists, culminated in the creation of Conectas: to

connect activists and promote their access to human rights protection systems; to connect disciplines and academics; to build bridges between organisations and links between networks.

Its first action was the first International Human Rights Colloquium in May 2001. This one-week long meeting in São Paulo, thought of as the start of the organisation, put young activists from Portuguese-speaking countries in touch with each other, uniting Africa and Brazil.

This experience was repeated over the years, with academics and defenders, lawyers and researchers articulating their ideas in talks, workshops, working groups and networking activities.

The NGO came together with initial funding from the UN Foundation, focused on the Global South Programme and the **Justice Programme** which years later turned — p.64 into the monitoring project, Foreign Policy and Human Rights, and the publication, **Sur - International Journal on Human Rights.** — p.114

“When we started, civil society was very fragmented: anti-racism groups; women’s groups; LGBTQIA+ groups; groups focused on violence and groups focused on land. We realised that there was a need to connect these groups up. This was the dream,” says Malak, who now believes she overestimated the process of redemocratisation in Brazil.

“We underestimated the difficulties

of the time because when there is democratisation of rights without economic democratisation, inequality continues to be so great that it is impossible to say that everyone has the same rights,” she ponders. “We learned that this is not automatic and we learned it in the hard way.”

p.122 — An example? **“We learned that just because there is no official racism that does not mean black people will not be discriminated against, because society is still racist.”**

From the outset, the NGO worked on

p.48 — cases of human rights violations in prison systems in Brazil. But the one that had the greatest impact on the organisation was when, in 2009, Espírito Santo became centre stage for wars between factions in overcrowded prison cells.

Incidents of people being dismembered were frequent. And some cells housed as many as eight times more prisoners than their maximum capacity. To accommodate the extra people, the government created cells in containers, which reached temperatures of up to 50°C.

“This was the first case in which we really used all possible resources and instruments,” Malak recalls. First of all, Conectas formed local partnerships with NGOs and Human Rights committees. Then, we sent a letter to the President of the Republic but received no response. Finally, we produced a dossier which was sent to the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights, in

Geneva, where a parallel event on the matter was organised.

“No-one answered us, neither internationally nor locally,” Malak recounts. “And we noticed that without a great deal of visibility, it would be impossible to change anything.”

So, Conectas sent a dossier to the journalist, Elio Gaspari, who showed an interest in the matter and published a column in a number of newspapers around the country entitled “Hartung’s dungeons will be shown at the UN.”

Repercussions were so great that the event in Geneva was a success and changes started to happen in the Espírito Santo prisons. Overcrowding dropped to four times lower and the cells in containers were closed down.

“We discovered the importance of strategy. And that we had to use all means possible to defend people who cannot defend themselves. Our work had changed the lives of many people for the better,” Malak, who was executive director at Conectas from 2005 to 2011, recalls.

Malak believes that the great challenge in this field today is to expand the dialogue on human rights. “We have been speaking to a closed audience, and many people have not yet been reached by the human rights discourse, both on the right and on the left. It is necessary to open doors, see where communication does not go and why, and rethink it,” explains.

“I never wanted to be a politician, but I did want to change realities,” she admits. “My dream for activism has always been to be able to give people better lives, with more justice. A dream for development that continued even after I left Conectas, and it continued and improved,” she says. “I can’t say that I got it right. I can only say that we got it right.”

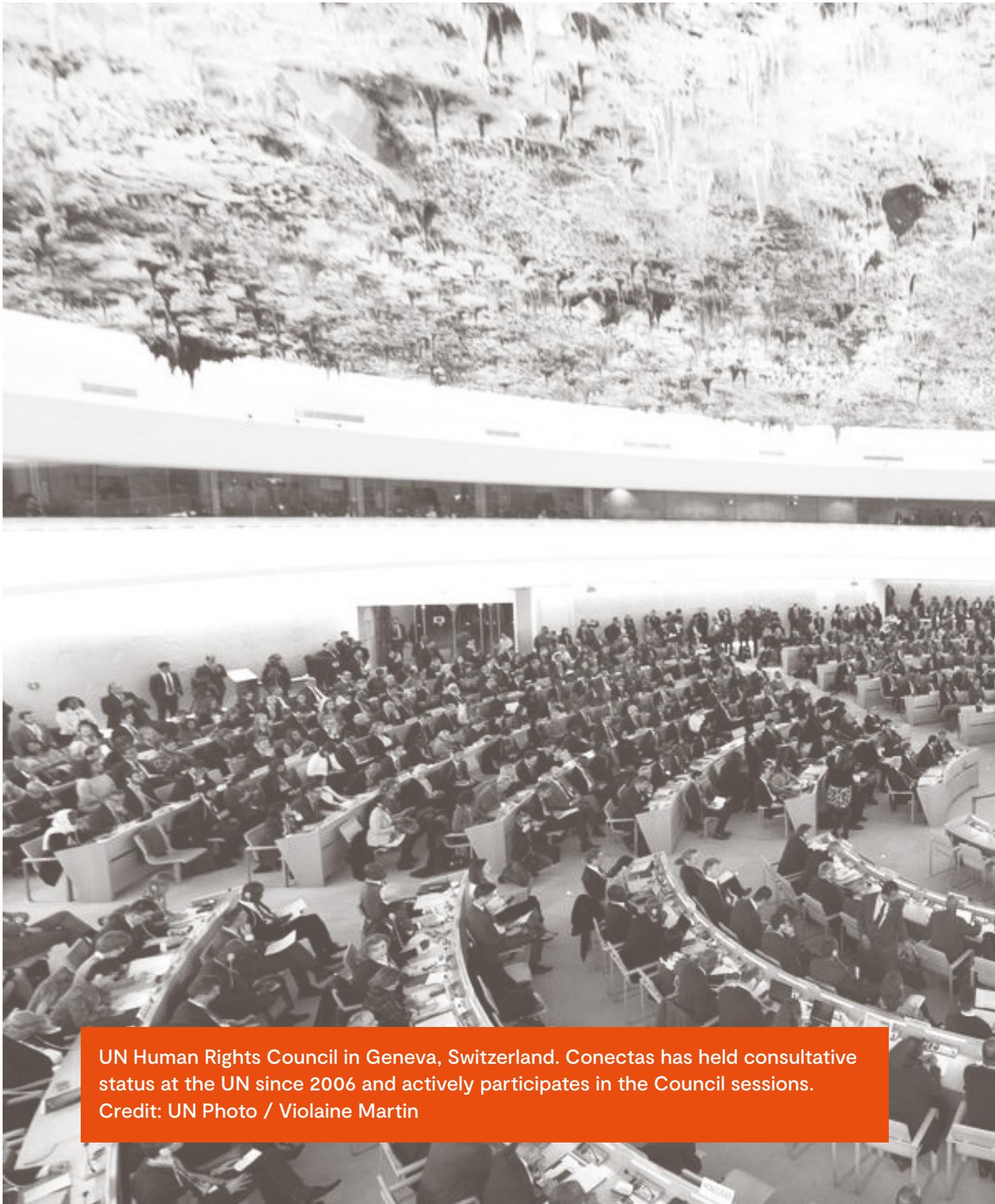
p.86 — According to her, **the transformations experienced by the NGO** since its foundation are a way of adapting to the challenges of each moment in time. “At my time, for example, Conectas was really much more international than it is now and for good reasons. Brazil was exporting good ideas and now, Brazil needs help,” she comments. “Renewal means living in the present.”

By *Fernanda Mena*

READ MORE

+ The Making of an International Organization from/in the South, by Malak El-Chichini Poppovic and Lucia Nader - SUR 15 (2011)

+ Reflections on the International Human Rights Movement in the 21st Century, by Malak El-Chichini Poppovic and Oscar Vilhena Vieira - SUR 20 (2014)



UN Human Rights Council in Geneva, Switzerland. Conectas has held consultative status at the UN since 2006 and actively participates in the Council sessions.
Credit: UN Photo / Violaine Martin





“It was our perception that we needed stronger organisations in the Southern Hemisphere, to voice our views on what was happening here, that led us to create Conectas”

Oscar Vilhena Vieira

Oscar Vilhena Vieira

BRAZIL SÃO PAULO

LAWYER

DIRECTOR AT THE GETÚLIO VARGAS
FOUNDATION LAW SCHOOL, IN SÃO PAULO.
HE IS THE CO-FOUNDER OF CONECTAS

AN AMBITIOUS PROJECT CHANGED THE MINDSET REGARDING INTERNATIONAL FUNDING FOR THE GLOBAL SOUTH

Co-founder of Conectas talks about how he sketched a counter-hegemonic constellation of activists on a pizza box

On a cold night in 1998, on the back of a delivery pizza box, the lawyer Oscar Vilhena Vieira sketched out part of his ambitious plan for the creation of Conectas. He was involved in an animated discussion with the journalist, Gilberto Dimenstein (1956–2020) and Paul Martin, director of the Centre for Human Rights at Columbia University, where Oscar had been a visiting researcher in 1991, when he turned to this makeshift sketch pad.

He mapped out numerous connections between people in Angola, Colombia, India, Brazil, Indonesia, Argentina and South Africa creating a constellation of human rights leaders in the Southern Hemisphere.

“We set about mapping these leaders very carefully, asking them to recommend

young activists in their areas,” he recalls. “Rather than a move to reassert those with authority, it was one to create new authorities.”

His intention in connecting activists in the Global South around the world was to create a network **underpinned by intellectual standards** so that this new counter-hegemonic militancy would be able to develop its own ideas and share them, without intermediaries. — p.72

The project took shape following the event that marked the very origin of Conectas, the 1st International Human Rights Colloquium held in São Paulo in 2001. The idea of establishing a South–South network was so innovative at that time that a number of Brazilian and overseas activists

had their first ever email accounts created by the event organisers.

The perception that there was a huge
p.56 — imbalance between the North and the South
 and that there was little space for organisations from countries like Brazil was familiar to Oscar, but it had become even more apparent during his second period of research in New York.

In addition to his studies at the faculty of public and international relations at Columbia University, he did internships at Human Rights Watch and other organisations and got to know the workings of the large international human rights organisations around the world. The contrast between that model and his experience with the young Brazilian organisations that were emerging in the process of re-democratisation triggered an insight.

“The type of relationship we had with international organisations was sending a fax with information about something that had happened in Brazil. They packaged the information in a polished report about the human rights scene in Brazil, based on which they would receive funding from various foundations,” he says.

“I twigged that there was something odd about this relationship. International organisations were occupying a space, they were training up and receiving funds, whereas Brazilian organisations were just supplying information which meant they

did not have the internal mastery, skills or training to enter into dialogue with Brazilian authorities.”

The driving force behind the creation of Conectas was his understanding that this relationship had to change and that the countries of the South had more to gain from an exchange of information amongst themselves than with organisations in the nations of the North.

This vision was developed and shared by Oscar and **the economist, Malak El-Chichini Poppovic**, his main partner in this journey. They met at the Centre for the Study of Violence at the University of São Paulo (NEV-USP). **— p.18**

“It was our perception that we needed stronger organisations in the Southern Hemisphere, to voice our views on what was happening here, that led us to create Conectas,” he recounts. “And this would not be done in a self-centred way. We did not want to be a new centre that would galvanize all the attention and resources. The objective was to build a poly-centric structure of militants around the world.”

They both reached the same conclusion from complementary perspectives. Malak from the outside to the inside, moving to Brazil after a solid international career at the United Nations. And Oscar from the inside to the outside, as he had become very familiar with the workings of one of the international organisations that

received information that he himself delivered, via fax, during the time he was executive secretary of the Teotônio Vilela Human Rights Commission.

After working at the Commission, Oscar started his activities in the field of human rights and developed a sophisticated approach to the principal obstacles in moving forward with this agenda in Brazil.

The Commission was created in 1983 to investigate and combat human rights violations committed by public officials within detention centres. It was founded by a renowned group of people that included Fernando Gabeira, Eduardo Suplicy, Margarida Genevois, Emir Sader, Marilena Chauí, José Gregori, Maria Helena Gregori, Severo Gomes and Father Agostinho de Duarte de Oliveira, headed up by Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro.

“It was a group of exceptional people. They had realised that the end of the military regime did not necessarily mean the start of a democratic state based on the rule of law and that the authoritarianism that had been socially embedded in Brazil would not be overcome just because we now had elections,” Oscar explains.

“I joke that my job was to arrange grand pianos,” he laughs, “because they all had big ideas and I was the young person who was attempting to organise everything. I visited prisons, asked the police for information and put together reports. It was a baptism of fire.”

At the Commission, Oscar participated in handling some emblematic cases, like the discovery in 1990 of the bones of people killed by the dictatorship in the Perus cemetery as well as the Carandiru massacre, in 1992.

The circumstances that led Oscar, as a young man, to this circle of renowned people was coherent with the values of his family upbringing. However, a tragic incident involving one of his brothers could have changed the course of events. On the contrary though he became even more involved in this field and in developing a more complex vision of the importance of these ideas and their social function in an unequal country like Brazil.

Oscar was born in 1966 in the region the Serra do Mar, in the countryside of São Paulo. He grew up in an environment that he defines as “slightly left-wing Christian democratic.” He is the son of a police chief and a university lecturer and is the youngest of four brothers. They were all brought up on a farm just outside Paraibuna.

While his father was the chief police officer in São Paulo, during the government of Franco Montoro (1916–1999), he created the Women’s Police Stations. He, together with the lawyer, José Carlos Dias, participated in the group that sought the reform of the police forces and the penitentiary system following the end of the military dictatorship.

While reading law at PUC (Catholic University), Oscar became involved in the student movement, one of the principal platforms of which was human rights. He took part in the large protests calling for direct elections that marked the end of the military dictatorship in the country.

One year before Oscar graduated, in 1987, the enthusiasm with which he accompanied the political easing and debates in the Constitutional Assembly was shattered by shock and pain when his eldest brother was murdered while breaking up a disturbance in the street.

Like his father, his brother was a police chief. When he saw a group of boys attacking a popcorn seller he intervened. One of them was armed and shot him.

“This is the only very sad side of my life and it created a paradox in the eyes of others. How could I become a human rights lawyer after this?” says Oscar, who years later directed the Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Misdemeanour and Treatment of Offenders (Ilanud), where he designed projects in the area of defending adolescents in conflict with the law. “At Ilanud, I tried to associate the defence of human rights with public security policies, like community policing, the control of firearms and alternative sentencing.”

Montoro was touched by the tragic death of his chief of police and former student’s son and transferred Oscar’s father

to the role of special government adviser at the Bandeirantes Palace (the seat of the São Paulo state government), where he shared an office with the international adviser of the same administration.

“The international adviser was Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro, a sophisticated intellectual who started working with him and they became friends,” Oscar recounts.

“When I told my father that I wanted to study political science he must have thought it was a disaster, but he said he thought it was a very good idea and organised for me to have lunch with Paulo Sérgio so I could discuss it with him.”

Oscar went on to do his Master’s and Doctoral degrees under the supervision of his father’s colleague.

“During my Master’s degree I analysed the decisions of the Supreme Court, post-Constitution and to see how conservative judges, who had been appointed by the military regime, were implementing the highly progressive Constitution,” he explains. “I saw that the Supreme Court was responding better than I had expected.” Oscar’s connection with the Supreme Court stems from this time and years later this **would form the basis of Conectas’ justice programme** and their strategic litigation actions and *amicus curiae* (friends of the court) in important causes on the human rights agenda.

“At a certain point, Conectas became

the organisation with the highest number of *amicus curiae* in the Supreme Court. In a way, this meant the organisation had paved the way for what has now become common practice for any organisation,” he says.

It was also through Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro that Oscar would become involved in activism in this field, through his work as executive secretary at the Teotônio Vilela Commission.

“It was my experience at the Commission, what I had learned about large organisations and the trust I received from Malak that made it possible for me to think about an ambitious project,” he acknowledges.

In order to strengthen South–South relationships and increase their international representation on this axis, however, it was not only necessary to build networks of human rights activists but also to access funding sources. This would allow the countries of the South to handle their issues more efficiently and to share solutions.

Oscar and Malak went to speak to **p.40 – Denise Dora, who worked at the Ford Foundation at the time.** In addition to her essential contribution to forming the idea of what was to become Conectas, she also arranged for the pair to meet the director general of the foundation in New York. “Malak and I went to New York and enthusiastically described our project. The director told us we had to look for funding

in Brazil because we were a Brazilian organisation,” he recalls.

A series of explanations ensued as they persuaded him that Conectas was an international organisation based in Brazil and that there was a need to democratise the funding needed by organisations outside the USA and Europe.

Oscar set out a defining argument: “I asked the then director, Anthony Romero, if the concept of an international organisation was defined by its zip code.” The question had an immediate impact and helped redefine the idea of an international organisation as being one that is anywhere in the world.

“Conectas was very forceful in this discussion about funding and organisations and it was a game changer not only for us but for many others too,” he says. “So, we got together with other organisations in Colombia and Argentina and transformed this action into a political movement which is at the heart of Conectas.”

The celebration of Conectas’ many victories over these 20 years does not eclipse recognition of the challenges that the organisation faces going forward, both on its own path and also in the field of human rights. In the case of Brazil, as Oscar says, some of these challenges have existed “since the 18th century” and need to be articulated along with issues and visions for the future.

The clash between these two agendas comes down to issues of funding, once again. “In Brazil we have had a big problem with funding. A large part of civil society was formed with public funding which led to the importance of its role in implementing human rights services, but not in questioning,” he says.

In addition, he says, the country has companies that finance their own social projects. **“It is very hard to imagine the corporate sector concerning itself with Brazilian problems dating back to the 18th or being bold enough to fund organised civil society.”**

In his view another challenge is emerging from the activities of some companies and this is linked to the **growing role of corporations in people’s lives; business conduct that causes human rights violations and to legislation that makes it possible for companies to dodge accountability.**

“Each type of industry has an associated human rights problem. This is the case of mining, technology... for example,” says Oscar who nowadays heads up the Getúlio Vargas Foundation Law School in São Paulo, where he created a Centre for Human Rights and Businesses. “There have been discussions on a treaty of general accountability for the multinational business sector since the 1980s. Nothing has happened and this is an illustration of the inability of states to impose

limits,” he explains.

He believes that one of the crucial themes of this debate is a third challenge in this field – **the climate issue which not only requires corporate regulations but also an inter-generational pact.** “The human rights community has to be able to consider the socioenvironmental issue broadly while looking to the impact on the young generations.”

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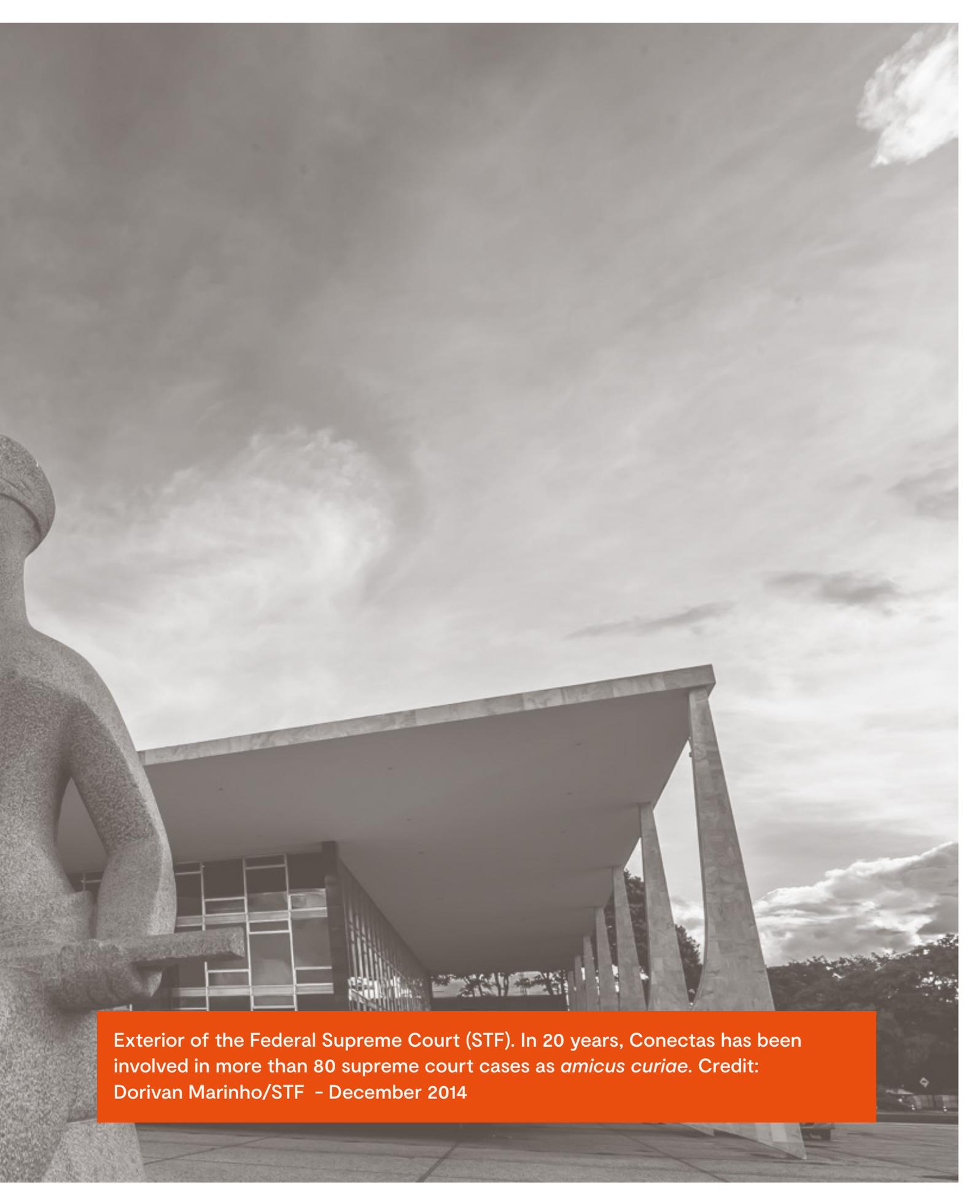
+ Reflections on civil society and human rights, by Oscar Vilhena Vieira and A. Scott Dupree – Sur 1 (2004)

+ Inequality and the subversion of the rule of law, by Oscar Vilhena Vieira – Sur 6 (2007)

+ Strategic advocacy in Human Rights, by Oscar Vilhena Vieira and Eloísa Machado de Almeida – Sur 15 (2011)

+ Reflections on the international human rights movement in the 21st century, by Malak El-Chichini Poppovic and Oscar Vilhena Vieira – Sur 20 (2014)





Exterior of the Federal Supreme Court (STF). In 20 years, Conectas has been involved in more than 80 supreme court cases as *amicus curiae*. Credit: Dorivan Marinho/STF - December 2014



“We, in the South, could no longer be dependent on occasionally having our articles accepted by journals in the North. We wanted to promote and formulate our own debate”

Denise Dora

Denise Dora

BRAZIL,
RIO GRANDE DO SUL

LAWYER

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT ARTIGO 19 AND
TRUSTEE OF CONECTAS, FORMER HUMAN RIGHTS
COORDINATOR AT THE FORD FOUNDATION

THE ORGANISATION CHANGED THE GLOBAL HUMAN RIGHTS ECOSYSTEM

The lawyer believes Conectas brought together different elements that already existed but had not previously been working together

To a great extent the lawyer Denise Dora's story in human rights runs parallel to that of Conectas.

In the 1980s, having been involved in the feminist student movement and after some years working on advocacy in the trade union movement, Denise started to perceive severe limitations in labour rights. "I remember assisting many women and children who worked in the clothing and footwear industry in Rio Grande do Sul. Children were dragged by the ear to receive punishment, women were only allowed to go to the toilet once a day and the hierarchy was very strict," she recounts. "Although labour law included the defence of rights, it was limited to relations at work and did not cover this type of situation. I

think that was when I started to understand that the human rights agenda was more extensive."

At that time, she says, there were very few training courses in human rights in Brazil, so at the beginning of the 1990s, she signed up for a course at the Inter-American Institute of Human Rights in Costa Rica. There were five Brazilians on the course, among them the lawyer **Oscar Vilhena — p.30 Vieira, one of the founders of Conectas.** "We immediately hit it off," she recalls.

Denise's return to Brazil coincided with a wave of non-governmental organisations being set up in the country and the lawyer saw this type of activity as a chance to combine her involvement with feminism and her understanding of human rights

instruments. In 1993, she set up Themis – Gender, Justice and Human Rights together with some friends. She was executive director of the organisation until the end of the decade and helped to set up the first programme for community paralegals in Brazil, for example. The programme runs training courses on the basics of law, women’s human rights and related matters, for community leaders, so they can work on promoting and protecting rights in their neighbourhoods.

At that time, however, the combination of judicial gender issues and human rights was unprecedented. “Violence against women was seen as isolated cases of bodily injury and threats, in other words, a matter for criminal justice,” Denise explains. “But they told us: ‘That’s not what this is. This is about power relations,’ and States are responsible for protecting women’s rights.”

These circumstances started to change at precisely the same time that Themis was founded. At the 2nd World Conference on Human Rights, in Vienna, in 1993, often referred to as the Vienna Conference, which Denise participated in, the international community stated for the first time, that the rights of women and girls were an integral and inseparable part of universal human rights and that violence against women constituted a violation of human rights. Although the resolution was passed, it met with considerable resistance.

Two years later, history was made at the Beijing Conference, in China when more women’s human rights, like, for example reproductive rights, were recognised and consolidated on the Platform for Action. The lawyer was engaged in political advocacy there. The existence of these more extensive rights was acknowledged and steps that countries would have to take to promote them were listed.

She finished a Master’s degree in human rights at the University of Essex in the United Kingdom and went on to take charge of coordination in the area of human rights at the Ford Foundation at the end of 2000, a few months before Conectas was officially founded. The lawyer recalls that the programme officer who preceded her in the position had pledged a donation to hold the first International Human Rights Colloquium, at PUC-SP.

“In the beginning, it was unclear what the scope of Conectas would be. Was it going to be a Brazilian organisation that worked at the international level? Or would it be an international organisation based in Brazil?” she recalls. “Whichever was the case, the big ambition was that international organisations would no longer be solely responsible for human rights reports, denouncements to the OAS and actions at the UN.”

According to Denise, the organisation spent time thinking about what its role

would be and the Colloquium provided the opportunity for this type of reflection. “Traditionally, the approach of Brazilian organisations was: ‘We have so many problems of our own to solve, **how can we get involved with Zimbabwe’s problems?’**” She believes Conectas created a “**new pattern of solidarity.**”

The underlying idea at Conectas **was that organisations based in the South not only had the same skill set as those in the North in terms of their capacity to participate on international platforms, but that they actually had additional skills,** such as knowledge about the local conditions, involvement in and commitment to agendas, as well as the potential to produce a new type of inter-cultural dialogue.

“The premise was that an organisation that lives with the same type of difficulties and has experience of inequality and violence in a weak unstable State would be better equipped to communicate with the organisations of the Global South, to translate the abstract, sterile environment of the UN for organisations in the South and to identify how best to apply the mechanisms of global governance she explains.

According to Denise, Conectas fulfilled this role very well, not only equipping organisations of the Global South to work in Geneva but also putting pressure on the Brazilian government to adopt a pro human rights stance in its international dealings.

“No other organisation had ever done this before Conectas and this way of working made a huge difference,” she states. **“It — p.86 made a difference for many organisations but it also made a difference to the global ecosystem of human rights.”**

Other organisations in the Global South, says Denise, like CELS (Argentina), DeJusticia (Colombia), Kenya Human Rights Commission (Kenya), Legal Resource Center (South Africa) Asean Foundation (Indonesia), who were working on international advocacy in their own regions, started to transform into global players like Conectas had so quickly done.

In addition, Sur was created, based on a series of debates among human rights centres in universities in the Global South. “The idea was that there was a need to create a forum to circulate thinking on human rights in the South and see if it differed from the classic, traditional approach,” she says. “How is the issue of HIV-AIDS seen in Brazil, for example? And in South Africa? We, in the South, could no longer be dependent on occasionally having our articles accepted for journals in the North. We wanted to promote and formulate our own debate.” The Journal initially had a more academic profile but over the years it was to carve out a different place for itself until becoming what it is today – an important space for reflection on the practice of human rights, she says.

“When Conectas held the Colloquium, and then published *Sur* thus creating a way of working in Geneva, it brought together different elements that already existed but had not previously been working together. It also brought the desire to participate in the global agenda she says. “When Conectas stood up for this, other organisations followed suit. So, we then had a group of well known, well equipped organisations that changed the international landscape of the human rights movement,” she says. “It was as though the potential already existed and Conectas had taken on the role of fostering it.”

While she was at the Ford Foundation, Denise helped to bolster the movement. The foundation created a fund called Global Initiative to leverage organisations in the South that were working internationally, both through financial support and by promoting exchanges among the organisations. “Conectas’ insistence in developing this type of work helped to reframe philanthropy. If there had not been organisations in the Global South with this skill set it would have been more difficult.”

Denise has been on the organisation’s Board of Trustees since 2018. In the past four years she has seen Conectas turn increasingly to the national scenario. “The national situation has turned into a tragedy and there is a need for the capacity to respond. It was an important change in

focus in terms of creating roots,” she says. “However, there is a crisis in global governance, a human rights crisis – not within the human rights organisations and not in the struggle for human rights but rather a crisis in the legitimacy and credibility of the systems. It is essential that we have a strategy to tackle this.”

She believes the recent wave of right wing populism, the failure of the UN to respond to the principle challenges faced by humanity, whether it be the pandemic, hunger or the climate crisis, and the growing concentration of power and resources in the hands of a few private players have all created an urgent need to reflect on matters like, for example, **how to stand up to the extreme right, how to rethink the system of global governance and what the role of the state actually is given the dominance of businesses in areas that are vital to survival.**

She says that Conectas has an important role in building this strategy, because of the position it has gained internationally and because of its 20 years of dedication to reflecting innovatively and independently on existential issues. **“The question is no longer ‘how can we participate in the human rights ecosystem?’ but rather ‘what do we want the ecosystem to be?’”**

By Maria Brant

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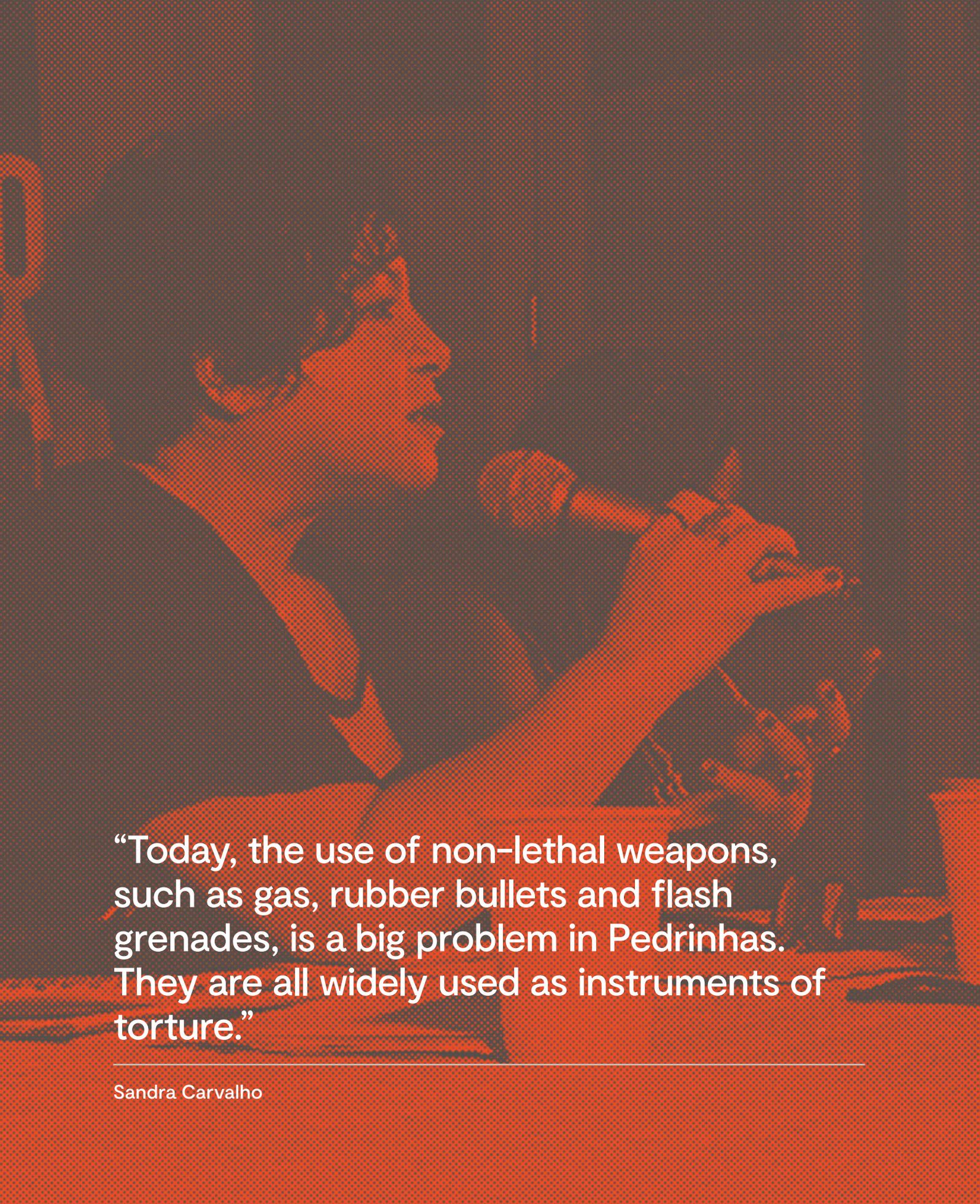
+ Interview with Denise Dora, SUR 15 (2011)

+ The South in transition, by Denise Dora, Ravindran Daniel and Barbara Klugman - SUR 26 (2017)

Ideas Fair organised by the participants of the XIV International Human Rights Colloquium at the Praça das Artes in São Paulo. Credit: Thais Silvestre/Conectas - May 2015







“Today, the use of non-lethal weapons, such as gas, rubber bullets and flash grenades, is a big problem in Pedrinhas. They are all widely used as instruments of torture.”

Sandra Carvalho

Sandra Carvalho

BRAZIL, SÃO PAULO

LAWYER

COORDINATOR AT GLOBAL JUSTICE, PREVIOUSLY
A TRUSTEE AT CONECTAS

DENOUNCING VIOLATIONS AGAINST PEOPLE IN PRISON REQUIRES A TASK FORCE

The director at Global Justice, which has been a partner of Conectas for 15 years, recalls the articulation that took the Pedrinhas massacre to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights

In 2009, the lawyer, Sandra Carvalho was the first Brazilian to win the Human Rights First (HRF) Annual Award. She is a central figure in the discussion on human rights in Brazil. She has worked at the Centre for Studies into Violence at the University of São Paulo (NEV-USP), was the executive secretary of the Teotônio Vilela Commission on Human Rights and also coordinated the Commission on Human Rights at the Legislative Assembly of São Paulo before founding the NGO, Global Justice in 1999.

Her path has been crossed by dramatic moments in Brazil's recent history, the Carandiru (1992), Corumbiara (1995) and Eldorado dos Carajás (1996) massacres, and the Castelinho Operation (2002), as well as a number of mass murders perpetrated by

the São Paulo military police.

“I was around for the mega riots led by the PCC, the Urso Branco massacre [in the Porto Velho prison, in 2004] and **the violent riots in the former Febem in São Paulo**. Experience of the prison system leaves a permanent mark on a person's life. This degrading, inhuman environment feeds a spirit of indignation in us and pushes us to search for rights,” she says.

Sandra has had a key role in the two-decade long history of Conectas. Her activism started in the 1990s when she was in the first year at the Faculty of Philosophy, Arts and Human Sciences (FFLCH/USP).

She recounts that she convinced the lecturer, Paulo Sérgio Pinheiro to let her participate in the Centre for Research into

Violence (NEV) with an undergraduate research grant. At NEV, she came across the

p.64 — Teotônio Vilela Human Rights Commission, run by Oscar Vilhena, who was also supervised by Paulo Sérgio and was a co-founder of Conectas. She started to work there as an intern. “Paulo Sérgio and Oscar were extremely important in my choice of path.”

These years of work experience equipped Sandra to face incredibly dehumanising situations. The fact is, however, that even though the beginning of her academic career was immersed in the massacres that took place in the first half of the 1990s, she would go on to encounter situations that had a profound effect on her.

The massacre at the Pedrinhas complex (Maranhão), in 2013, was one such situation. “I arrived immediately after the massacre, accompanied by a delegation from Council for the Protection of Human Rights (CDDPH) and the Chamber of Deputies,” she recalls. “Like all scenes in the wake of a massacre, the mood was very tense and there was despair on the part of the families and the prisoners. We saw the prisoners crowded together and the ground covered in water. A revolting smell. This image stayed with me.”

Pedrinhas was also the Global Justice coordinator’s first experience with a team of prison officers made up of private security guards. “Straightaway, I noticed the blatant use of the so-called less lethal weapons.”

It was not only Conectas and Global Justice that came together in a partnership on this case, but also the Maranhão Human Rights Society (SMDH) and the Maranhão Bar Association (OAB-MA).

A task force was needed to cope with the events that occurred in November and December of 2013, when a series of riots left 22 prisoners dead, some of them decapitated. Initially, OAB-MA and SMDH actioned the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), linked to the Organisation of American States (OAS). On 16 December 2013, the Commission passed Resolution 11. By means of a precautionary measure, Brazil was forced to take immediate action to contain further violations at the Pedrinhas complex and failure to comply meant the possibility of international condemnation.

One of the immediate measures was the obligation to reduce overcrowding at the location and to carry out immediate investigations into the denouncements. A further decision was that periodic, unannounced visits would be made to the location.

Global Justice and Conectas, co-petitioners on the case, started to participate in these interventions. In January 2014, the Ministry for Justice and the Maranhão government presented an Action Plan for the Pacification of the São Luis Prisons, in response to human rights organisations’ articulations.

It was stipulated in the plan that members of criminal factions would be confined in specific prisons, national forces would occupy the units of the complex and prisoners would be transferred to federal penitentiaries. In 2016, the four organisations published the report “Continuous Violation: Two Years of the Crisis in Pedrinhas.”

“Conectas had an important role in the international visibility of the violations that took place in Brazil and in mobilisations at the UN says Sandra, who also sees the colloquia hosted by the organisation as a driving force in the training and mobilisation of young activists and in articulation on networks beyond national borders.

p.92 — But the partnership among the organisations, she recalls, started a long time before. Both Global Justice and Conectas worked together after the so-called May Crises, a wave of attacks by the **PCC in São Paulo in 2006, followed by massacres in the São Paulo periphery and in the Baixada Santista**. In order to scrutinize the case and hold public authorities accountable, the organisations joined forces.

Sandra, born in Taubaté, in the interior of São Paulo, remembers this partnership between the organisations as being one of the most important ones both on her own personal path and on that of the organisation she runs.

Now, when the head of the federal executive himself courts the rational of “a

good criminal is a dead one,” debates are again being held on the country’s prisons. “The excessive use of non-lethal weapons as an instrument of torture is gaining ground and is emerging as an urgent matter. We have been working effectively on this litigation,” she says.

“It is a big challenge because we live in a very punitive society. We are going against history. Pedrinhas, Carandiru, Complexo do Curado (Pernambuco), the youth correction centres, all of these reinforce that our struggle has the aim of de-incarceration. Institutional imprisonment is incompatible with human rights.”

The activist believes that one very positive point in Brazil in recent years has been the spread of the debate on race, which is going to hit traditional outdated human rights organisations with delay. **“We were born as white organisations and we still are white organisations**. Without a doubt there has been a significant leap in the debate on race with **the emergence of the Black Coalition for Rights**, for example, and also in the LGBT struggle.”

Sandra has noticed that organisations like Global Justice and Conectas **have been invoked and summoned to increasingly include race issues in the human rights debate**. This movement is happening from the outside to the inside and it is changing the axes of several approaches.

“If you go back to 20 years ago, we

— p.122

— p.114

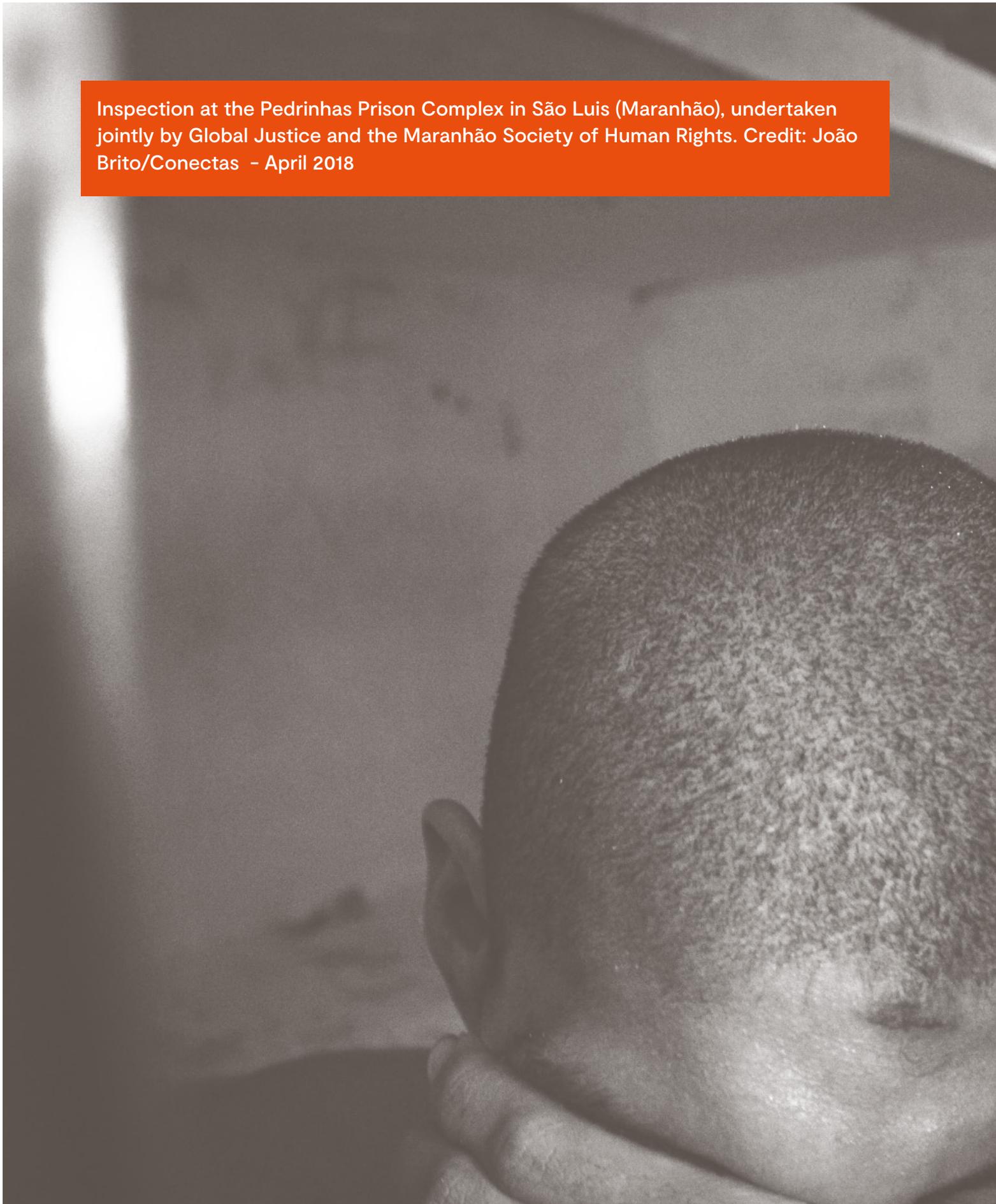
were not discussing this matter. Very little was said about this and the growth of these movements has imposed a new agenda on organisations so that in the future we will be able to see the effects in a downturn in violence against these groups.”

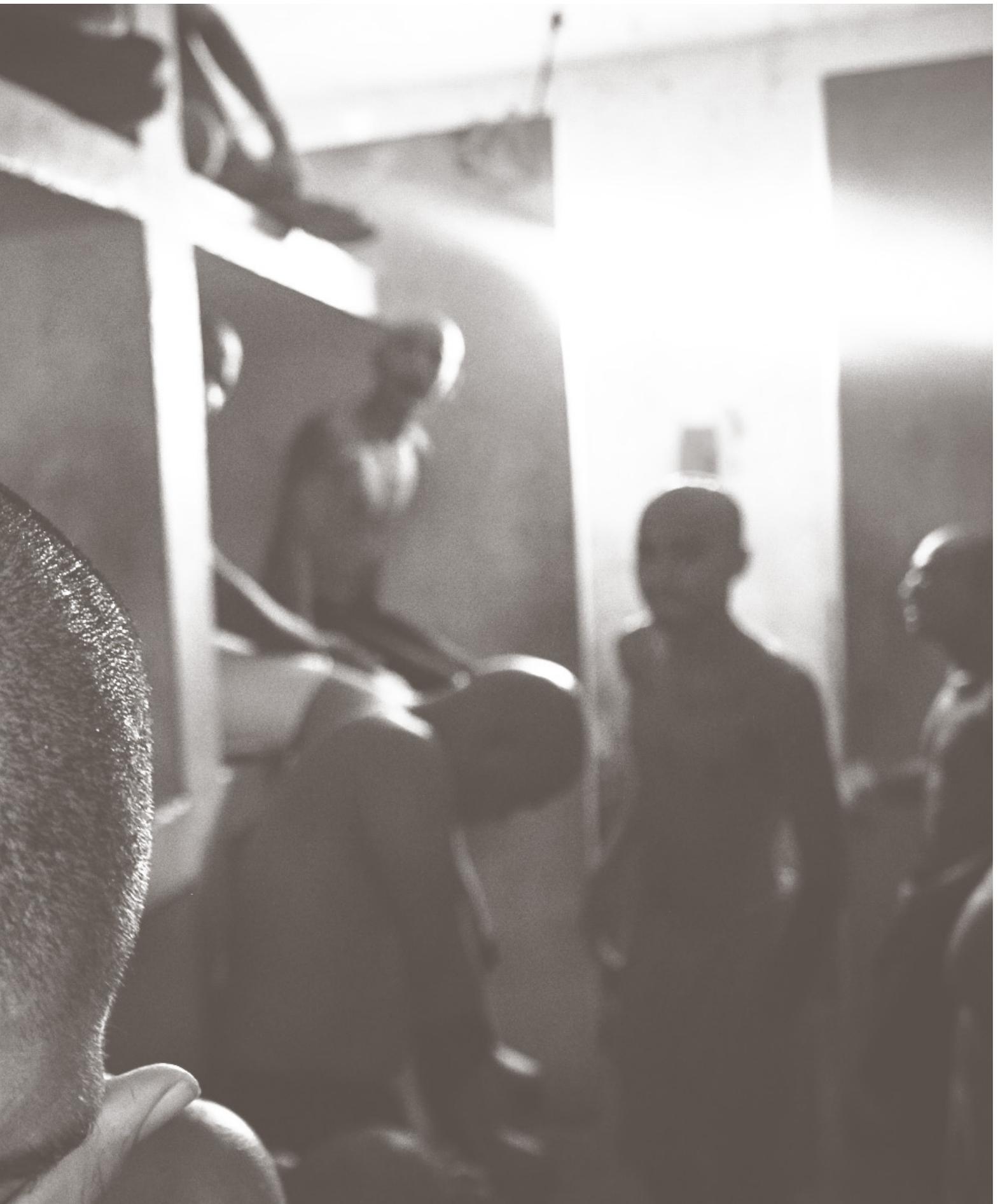
By *Fabiana Moraes*

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Inspection at the Pedrinhas Prison Complex in São Luís (Maranhão), undertaken jointly by Global Justice and the Maranhão Society of Human Rights. Credit: João Brito/Conectas - April 2018







“To be a revolutionary today is to fight for the 1988 Constitution, known as the Citizens’ Constitution because of the huge leap it represented in terms of human rights”

Lucia Nader

Lucia Nader

BRAZIL, SÃO PAULO

POLITICAL SCIENTIST

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR AT CONECTAS (2011-2014))

RESISTING AND REINVENTING TO TACKLE THE CHALLENGES IN THE FIELD OF HUMAN RIGHTS

The political scientist, Lucia Nader, a key name in the institutional development of Conectas, fostered partnerships between Brazilian and overseas activists

A political scientist, Lucia Nader's story is intertwined with that of the organisation that is commemorating its two-decade anniversary in 2021. She was the Conectas network coordinator from 2003 to 2005 and went on to become the international relations coordinator from 2006 to 2011, when she took on the role of executive director at the NGO and remained in this position until the end of 2014.

Since she set out on the path of human rights, a volunteer at the Sou da Paz Institute, at the end of the 1990s, this field has seen several ruptures in Brazil, principally with the unprecedented arrival of a politician from the extreme right in the presidency. Lucia has witnessed the already difficult struggle become even more challenging.

“It had never been easy to work on or discuss human rights in Brazil, as this area has always been erroneously linked to the defence of impunity,” she says. “However, attacks on activists, both physical and on their narratives, have increased. Conectas is now facing this enormous challenge. **It — p.18 has now become even more important to resist and to work on human rights.**”

She believes the topics she worked on when she joined Conectas in 2003 are still relevant in Brazil. “For example, **violations in — p.48 the prison system** and by the Brazilian police continue, as do the challenges regarding women's rights and economic, social and cultural rights she says. “All this now plays out in a complex scenario of an attack on democracy and on the institutions.”

Indeed, Brazil's history of violence has reached new heights. In 2021, President Jair Bolsonaro was reported to the International Criminal Court (ICC) in The Hague, which rules on crimes against humanity. The country is also experiencing an escalation in the sale of firearms, **attacks on indigenous peoples and on the Amazonian ecosystem**, the spread of discourses of hatred, misogyny and racism as well as neo-Nazi groups.

p.164 —

“To be a revolutionary today is to fight for the 1988 Constitution, known as the Citizens’ Constitution because of the huge leap it represented in terms of human rights,” Lucia says. “We are seeing a new kind of authoritarianism coming out of the closet, among both elected politicians and the Brazilian population. This has led to the need to defend everything that we had believed was safeguarded.”

These new circumstances, she says, call for the adoption of new practices and tactics on the part of activists and human rights organisations, including communication as a fundamental strategy. According to Lucia, Conectas has always been concerned with communicating in a technical yet uncomplicated way. “Human rights have often been seen as belonging to the legal and academic worlds and to an elite that speaks these languages,” she points out. “We defend minorities – those whose rights are not protected. And these people are not necessarily held in high regard by the general

public. Therefore, when working with rights the wide support of the population cannot be counted on.”

While at Conectas, Lucia went to Geneva to do a training course at the **International Service for Human Rights**, in 2005 [link with the profile of Clément Voule]. On her return, she created the Foreign Policy and Human Rights Project, bringing together civil and governmental institutions to defend and monitor Brazilian foreign policy involving human rights. The project emerged from a need to strengthen both the participation of the general public and democratic control over Brazilian foreign policy involving human rights. It gave rise to the Brazilian Committee for Human Rights and Foreign Policy, made up of a number of organisations, among them Conectas.

The Committee originated in a public hearing in Brasília, held by the Commission for Human Rights and Minorities at the Chamber of Deputies in the same year. A piece of research by Conectas was presented on the lack of transparency in procedures for developing and implementing foreign policy involving human rights in Brazil. The study showed that the principle of prevalence was not always being adhered to. Article 4, item II of the Federal Constitution states that human rights must take precedence over all other interests in Brazilian international relations.

Throughout her time at Conectas,

Lucia played a fundamental role in restructuring the organisation and making it more professional, by strengthening internal matters to allow for more effective, safe and technical activities. As well as her important institutional work, the political scientist also recalls certain events that stand out in her story at Conectas and her approach to human rights.

One of these episodes was meeting a man who was waiting to cross the border between Mexico and the United States during the Barack Obama administration (2009–2015), a period when 2.5 million people were deported, the highest number in the history of North America.

“During my visit, together with several other organisations, a man who was in the queue to cross the border came over to show me a cheque for 20 dollars he had received in prison. He had been arrested while crossing the border to visit his children in the United States and had received one dollar a day, for work in the prison kitchen, before being sent back to Mexico,” she recalls.

Lucia remembers the man asking her to cash the cheque for him as he could not do so himself, because all his documents had been confiscated by the border police when he was arrested and had never been returned. “This example demonstrates just how tangible the violation of a human right can be as well as its many facets. He was an elderly man, separated from his family by

a border, who had probably been arrested without the correct legal procedures. He had worked in a private profit-driven prison and had received a cheque, but was unable to cash it because he did not have his documents. In a way, they had taken his very identity from him,” she recalls.

Lucia is currently undertaking a doctorate at the University of Sussex in the UK, where she is involved in what is called regenerative activism. The concept of regeneration, which is common in biology, is related to the ability to recuperate and renew badly damaged tissues, organs and organisms. “For some years now, this concept has been used in the socio-environmental field, in an attempt to overcome and go beyond the logic of sustainability,” she explains. “I want to better understand how we can **re-** — p.148 **ersist, revitalise and strengthen activism and human rights organisations.** Perhaps this can help us in tackling some of the challenges that are currently facing those who work for these rights.”

Lucia believes that the “current, here and now” challenges are going to permeate the future of human rights in Brazil and around the world. **“One of these challenges is continued resistance to head-on attacks on democracy and on the basic agreements for living in society, such as human rights.** This is being carried out by both elected governments and others and who are supported by part of society,” she says.

“Another challenge is the diversification of strategies to promote human rights and strengthen alliances between different progressive agendas. It is difficult to resist and reinvent at the same time. These seem like contradictory movements, but I believe they are complementary ones and that they are essential in continuing to tackle the huge challenges we are facing.”

Despite the persistent racism and sexism in the country which lead to very serious human rights violations, Lucia also sees signs of important victories in Brazilian society. Among them, the progress and visibility gained by the black movements and by women’s movements. “These are historical struggles, but new voices are now being heard and a new way of communicating and mutually empowering relationships among these movements are emerging.”

p.122 — She believes this change is also taking place within the organisations and institutions of Brazilian civil society. **“All Conectas’ current efforts towards having a team that is less white,** that is more diverse and that can bring the reality of the world and of Brazil into the organisation is fundamental.”

By *Fabiana Moraes*

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With support from Conectas, representatives of IBMO (International Organization of Burmese Monks) met with the Brazilian government to ask for support from Brazil to the embargo on the sale of arms to Myanmar and the request for the release of the 2,000 Burmese political prisoners. To the left of the monks is Camila Asano and, on the right, Lucia Nader. Photo: Conectas - August 2008.





“It is rather naive to work with human rights and believe that you are going to wave a magic wand and change the situation quickly. It calls for a great deal of persistence”

Eloísa Machado de Almeida

Eloísa Machado de Almeida

BRAZIL, SÃO PAULO

LAWYER

PROFESSOR OF CONSTITUTIONAL LAW AND
COORDINATOR OF THE SUPREMO EM PAUTO PROJECT
AT THE FGV LAW SCHOOL IN SÃO PAULO, FORMER
COORDINATOR OF STRATEGIC LITIGATION AT CONECTAS

PERSISTENT STRATEGIC LITIGATION LED TO A NEW ORGANISATIONAL MODEL FOR CIVIL SOCIETY

The lawyer, who set up Conectas' strategic litigation department, redirected her career when she discovered cases of torture in a detention centre for teenagers

In 2003, the young lawyer, Eloísa Machado de Almeida, who was 24 at the time, was asked to implement a justice and strategic advocacy programme at Conectas Human Rights. She ended up helping to design Artigo 1º, a programme that is dedicated to combatting institutional violence, in particular in prisons and youth detention centres for teenagers deprived of liberty, as well as cases of torture and summary execution.

The action by Conectas and the focus of the programme were fully aligned with the path Eloisa had already started to build, which involved the defence of the human rights of teenagers deprived of liberty.

She started out on this path when she was still a law student. Eloisa had lost interest in the internship she was doing at a legal

firm in São Paulo and decided to compete for another internship on a project called Olha o Menino (Watch the Child), focused on improving the technical defence of teenagers accused of infractions or carrying out sentences in the youth detention system.

The project brought together the former Febem (State Foundation for the Well-Being of Minors, nowadays renamed “Fundação Casa”), the Attorney for Legal Assistance in the State of São Paulo and the United Nations Latin American Institute for the Prevention of Crime and the Treatment of Offenders (Ilanud), at that time run by her Human Rights professor at PUC-SP, **Oscar — p.30 Vilhena Vieira.**

“At that time, I was also studying Social Sciences, which meant I was tackling the

issues of inequality and violence. These matters were bubbling around in my head,” she recalls when she talks about her reasons for the change of direction.

Eloísa was allocated to a Febem admissions unit located in the infamous (and some years later abolished) Tatuapé Complex. The unit was considered to be problematic and housed young reoffenders and those who had been found guilty of violent crimes. So, her first day working there was already rather tense, but she had not realised just how tense it would turn out to be.

“It was the first time I had ever been in a detention centre. I gathered up the personal files and started to call each of the boys in alphabetical order, to avoid confusion.” As soon as she had finished explaining her work to the first youth, he said “You’re a good person. If I was you, I would get out of here right now.” What do you mean? “I would leave now, right now.”

Just in case, Eloisa gathered up her things and went straight to the court where she told the attorney in charge what had happened. In a telephone call, she learned a riot had broken out at the centre. “It was chaos.” I was really shocked by the whole situation, by what a horrible place the Tatuapé Complex was and by the consequences of the riot. Two days later, when I was able to go back to the centre, the boys were in a sorry state.”

The young people she saw were injured.

They had bruises, cuts to their heads and wore bandages. “I wrote everything down and took my notes to the attorney. This was my first case of torture.” She recalls. “On that day, I thought: I’m never going to stop doing this. I couldn’t stop. I couldn’t get it out of my head that if I hadn’t been there, nobody would have ever known about it. That’s why I have thrown myself, body and soul, into this work.”

When she started at Conectas her previous link with the Association for Mothers and Friends of Children and Teenagers at Risk (AMAR), that brought together relatives of young people in the Febem correction centre, led to a continuous flow of reports of violations by the State. There were cases of torture, murder and suicide. “We were a lightning rod for the families who sought help. There were almost 30 cases of deaths of young people inside the Febem centres. In addition to individual actions of accountability and compensation, we started to carry out collective actions to close down the centres.” She recounts.

The increased number of requests to close the centres, particularly in relation to the Tatuapé Complex which was the largest and oldest Febem centre, found its way to the OAS (Organisation of American States). In 2005, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights ruled on the adoption of measures to guarantee the physical safety of the adolescents at the Tatuapé Complex

and the decommissioning of 18 units got underway. They were substituted by other smaller units which had a maximum capacity of 56 young people.

Many of these actions involved what is called strategic litigation in human rights. “This is when the building of a case that is taken to the courts is aimed not only at a resolution but also at a wider objective which may be a variety of different types.” The lawyer explains. Nowadays, she is a Professor of Constitutional Law at the FGV Law School in São Paulo. “The objective could be the creation of a new legal instrument or of jurisprudence. It might be changing a compensation standard or ending systemic violence.”

“It is exhausting work and usually takes a long time to bear fruit. It is rather naive to work on human rights and believe that you will wave a magic wand and change the situation quickly. You have to produce proof, statements and go back and forth to the court and the Medico-Legal Institute. It calls for a great deal of persistence,” she says. “And her persistence led to an avalanche of litigation cases. We didn’t let up on the institutions and I believe we even helped developments in the child detention system through the large quantity of lawsuits we levelled at it.”

According to her, Conectas made a difference by promoting consistent, high-quality strategic litigation over a long

period of time. This is how it created a model of civil society that is dedicated to this type of activity.

Eloísa remembers several cases that became significant. As well as the litigation involving the Tatuapé Complex, there was the case to close the Guarujá prison which was overcrowded and where adults and teenagers were held together. There were also the actions that ensued around the **May Crimes of 2006**, when more than 500 people were murdered by death squads following PCC attacks on the police force. — p.92

The Conectas legal team ensured that the Regional Medical Board supervised the issuing of reports on the post-mortem examinations of the dead and to ensure standards. The team also organised an event to denounce the deaths which was attended by police officers, some of whom wore t-shirts bearing a skull, the symbol of the death squads. “There was quite a disturbance,” she recalls “I was really scared,” she admits.

In order to underpin the accusations, Conectas also formed a partnership with the researcher, Ignácio Cano, at the Rio de Janeiro Federal University, who produced a study about summary executions perpetrated by the police and death squads. “The study underpinned the actions and meant the cases were escalated to the federal level and they were also presented to the Inter-American Human Rights System.”

The lawyer confesses that working on

this type of case “involves a whirlwind of emotions” and that after the May Crimes she realised she had become worn out through dealing with so many types of violence for so long. Eloísa started to focus more on the work that Conectas had already been doing to supervise actions that were being handled by the Supreme Federal Court (STF).

“For someone who was used to the kind of litigation we had been doing, working on Constitutional Law and comparative theory, on the Supreme Court project, was a doddle. It was like the playground, downtime,” she jokes. It was against this backdrop that Oscar Vilhena Vieira had the idea of seeking out human rights related cases on which Conectas could act within the court itself, as *amicus curiae* (a Latin expression meaning “friend of the court” allowing an organisation to participate in a legal case in order to provide legal arguments or technical information to assist judges in their decision making).

So, the organisation started to act on a variety of matters, like rulings on the Disarmament Statute, the introduction of racial quotas in public universities, the use of stem cells in scientific research, the abortion

p.164 — of anencephalic foetuses and the demarcation of indigenous land.

“Making statements at the STF was a high point,” she recalls. “It always gave me butterflies.”

Her work in proximity with the Supreme

Court became the object of her research and both her Master’s and her doctoral thesis focused on civil society participation at the STF, by means of the *amicus curiae* instrument. “During this research, I was able to confirm that Conectas is one of the most relevant organisations in the Supreme Court because of its work as *amicus curiae*.” She currently runs the Supremo em Pauta project, a group at the FGV Law School in São Paulo that analyses the court.

According to Eloísa, it has become clear that one of the fundamental factors in the success of litigation cases and the work of the organisation as *amicus curiae* is the affinity built up among members of the team of Conectas’ Justice Programme.

With regards to the challenges currently faced in Brazil, the lawyer believes that human rights organisations must evolve in order to keep up with the complexity of the new demands. “The Inter-American Human Rights System, the UN and the International Criminal Court have their limitations and will have to improve because they are not equipped for what is happening now. We have to be able to hone these institutions.”

By *Fernanda Mena*

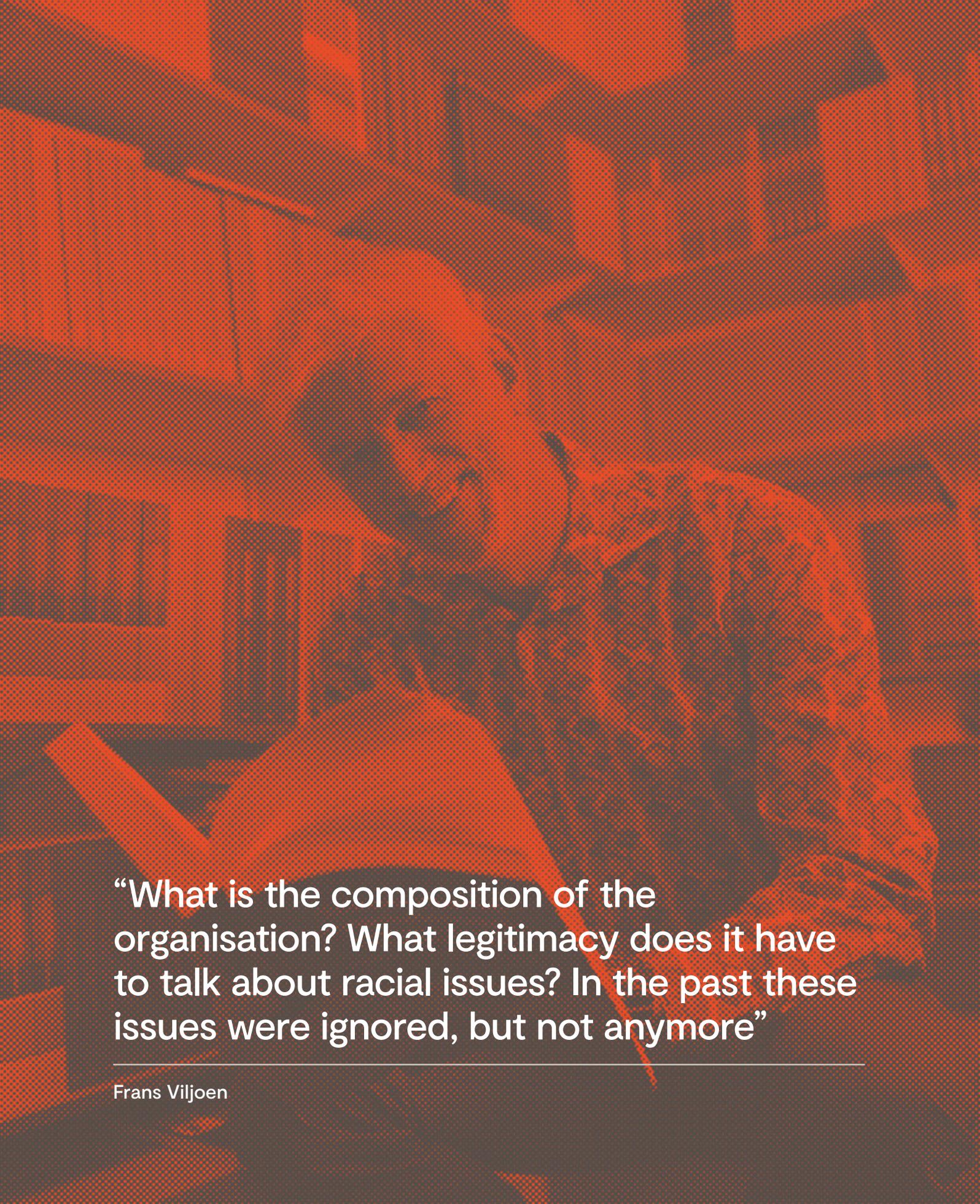
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+ Strategic Advocacy
in Human Rights, by Oscar Vilhena
Vieira and Eloísa Machado de
Almeida, SUR 15 (2011)



The session of the Supreme Federal Court which decided the case ADI 3330 about the constitutionality of affirmative action within the University Programme For All (ProUni). Conectas participated in the case as an *amicus curiae* and defended racial quotas. Credit: Carlos Humberto/STF - May 2012





“What is the composition of the organisation? What legitimacy does it have to talk about racial issues? In the past these issues were ignored, but not anymore”

Frans Viljoen

Frans Viljoen

SOUTH AFRICA

LAWYER

DIRECTOR AT THE CENTRE FOR HUMAN RIGHTS
AT THE UNIVERSITY OF PRETORIA. PARTNER OF
CONECTAS IN A PROJECT ABOUT SUPREME COURTS

THE ENVIRONMENTAL CRISIS WILL AFFECT THE MOST VULNERABLE AND ALSO HOW WE THINK ABOUT HUMAN RIGHTS

The South African professor believes Conectas has been a pioneer in promoting partnerships among researchers in Brazil, South Africa and India

Frans Viljoen grew up in a small town in the South African countryside. He always felt deeply uncomfortable about the material and racial inequality he witnessed as a privileged white man during the apartheid regime. It was only at university, in the mid-1980s, that he truly understood the meaning of the segregation of the black population in his country.

One of Frans's tasks within the student movement was to teach young people in the shanty towns. "These interactions came at the height of the states of emergency in South Africa and it was an opportunity for me to understand what my fellow countrymen and women were experiencing and the impact the segregation policies had on a number of aspects of the lives of

those people."

After finishing university, Frans became a public prosecutor. "In the department where I worked, it was seen to be a great achievement when we managed to have someone sentenced to death," he recalls. "But, I found it deeply distressing to see the dehumanising effect of the death penalty on everyone involved in it."

The lawyer believes his experience with this was a determining factor in his involvement with human rights. "Immediately after I left the public prosecutor's office I went to work as a pro bono lawyer, defending people who had been sentenced to death," he told us. "My concerns over race, inequality and dehumanisation came together around this theme and this became the main focus

of my studies and is what I have most dedicated myself to.”

Nowadays, Frans is the director of the Centre for Human Rights at the University of Pretoria. His first contact with Conectas **p.30 —** was through **Oscar Vilhena Vieira, one of the co-founders of the organisation** who was coordinating comparative research on the apex courts of Brazil, South Africa and India. “It was a transformative experience and led to many researchers opening their eyes to the Global South and embarking on other comparative studies” he says.

The existence of a voice for the Global South and its perspective was the driving force behind a project with another lawyer, Upendra Baxi which led to the publication of “Transformative constitutionalism: comparing the apex courts of Brazil, India and South Africa,” in 2013. “But it was Conectas that pulled this collaboration together, brought this vision to life and forged relationships among the different researchers and institutions.”

p.18 — Frans believes that **Conectas has transformed into something of a model for other organisations in the Global South**, including the Centre for Human Rights that he runs in Pretoria. “For example, the NGO initiated a piece of work in the area of foreign policy and human rights, comparing universal periodic reviews, which became very useful with the emergence of the UN Human Rights Council,” he says. “At the

Centre for Human Rights we are trying to emulate their work and use their methodology. This was very useful in constructing a critical voice when South Africa ceased to be a country focused on human rights in the arena of its overseas relations.”

He goes on to say that **Sur – International Journal on Human Rights** — **p.114**, published by Conectas since 2004, has become the gold standard for academic journals on human rights. Viljoen is the editor of the periodical, African Human Rights Law Journal, which in his words is “terribly boring in comparison with Sur.”

Frans believes Sur caused a seismic shift in terms of what it is possible to do in an academic journal on human rights, for example the publication of all articles in three languages, editing the texts to be pertinent and succinct, graphs, photos and the beautiful layout. “Sur is unique in that it is indexed, but still manages to communicate in an innovate way and challenges us all to question whether we can make our articles more accessible and more useful. I am delighted every time I receive a copy, not just aesthetically but also in that Conectas tries, and succeeds, to reach out and have an impact on our field of work.”

Even so, the lawyer believes, Conectas and all the other human rights organisations in the Global South will have to face a lot of challenges in the coming decades. The first of these is to give the importance

and urgency to the climate issue that it deserves, while still upholding integrity. “The integrity of an organisation stems from its history of working on particular themes and human rights organisations have not traditionally worked in this field,” he says.

But, according to him, the response to this dilemma may well be in continuing to focus on the work that has always been done. “While we do not want to appear to be jumping on the band wagon and starting to work on themes just because they are currently receiving financial support, **we cannot turn our backs on the changes that have been happening and continue to happen on our planet. As always, they are going to affect principally the most vulnerable marginalised individuals and communities** and the rights of these groups have always been the focus of our work.”

p.134 — Human rights organisations will have to make an effort to construct a genuine multidisciplinary, in order to work on new themes like this one. **“We will have to merge our traditionally legal focus with other areas to create new approaches.** We have to think about merging networks that include global players working in the areas of sociology, anthropology, economics and biomedicine and from this create new ways of thinking about the issues of our time.” He says.

Another challenge that Frans foresees will be integrating the international perspective, that has always been the principal

characteristic of organisations like Conectas, with the work of condemning and reverting rights violations at the local level. According to him, after Trump and the populism that was voted in in his wake, among others, the current Brazilian president, Jair Bolsonaro, “multilateralism is not what it was.” The Covid-19 pandemic has also meant our attention has turned to concerns that are closer to home. It exacerbated problems like unemployment and hunger that demand immediate local attention.

“The growing indifference that is happening beyond the national sphere will get worse and there is legitimacy in our concern over urgent local issues. **It will be increasingly difficult to coherently and convincingly defend the international multilateral perspective of human rights, on which we have based so much of our work,**” he says. He believes the challenge will be in finding balance. “We are not suggesting abandoning our international work, but we do need to merge this with our national work, so it can also be useful locally and can converse with people’s everyday concerns.” **— p.40**

Frans believes that to find this balance it is not only crucial to participate in international networks of human rights organisations but also to strengthen relationships with grassroots organisations. He says that this will lead to a further challenge for human rights organisations like Conectas and his own Centre for Human

Rights in Pretoria, namely the need to find a position and a place, in a world that increasingly questions the legitimacy of traditionally “elitist” people and organisations speaking on behalf of the groups most affected by human rights violations.

“South Africa and Brazil are among the most unequal countries in the world,” he says. “How can we handle this level of inequality and the racism and injustice that stem from it? What is the place of an international human rights organisation in an issue of this nature?”

He believes, the new generations are much more critical than previous ones in terms of issues such as the composition of the organisation, the way in which it operates and who its partners are. “For example, what legitimacy does it have to talk about racial issues? In the past these issues were ignored, but not anymore. A discussion needs to be had about this and you need to decide who you want to be and find a place and a position as an organisation,” the lawyer says.

By *Maria Brant*

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COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE

English

COMMEMORATIVE ISSUE
HUMAN RIGHTS IN MOTION

sur

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international journal on human rights



Left, cover of the 20th edition of Sur. Right, cover of the 28th edition of the journal. Credit: reproduction



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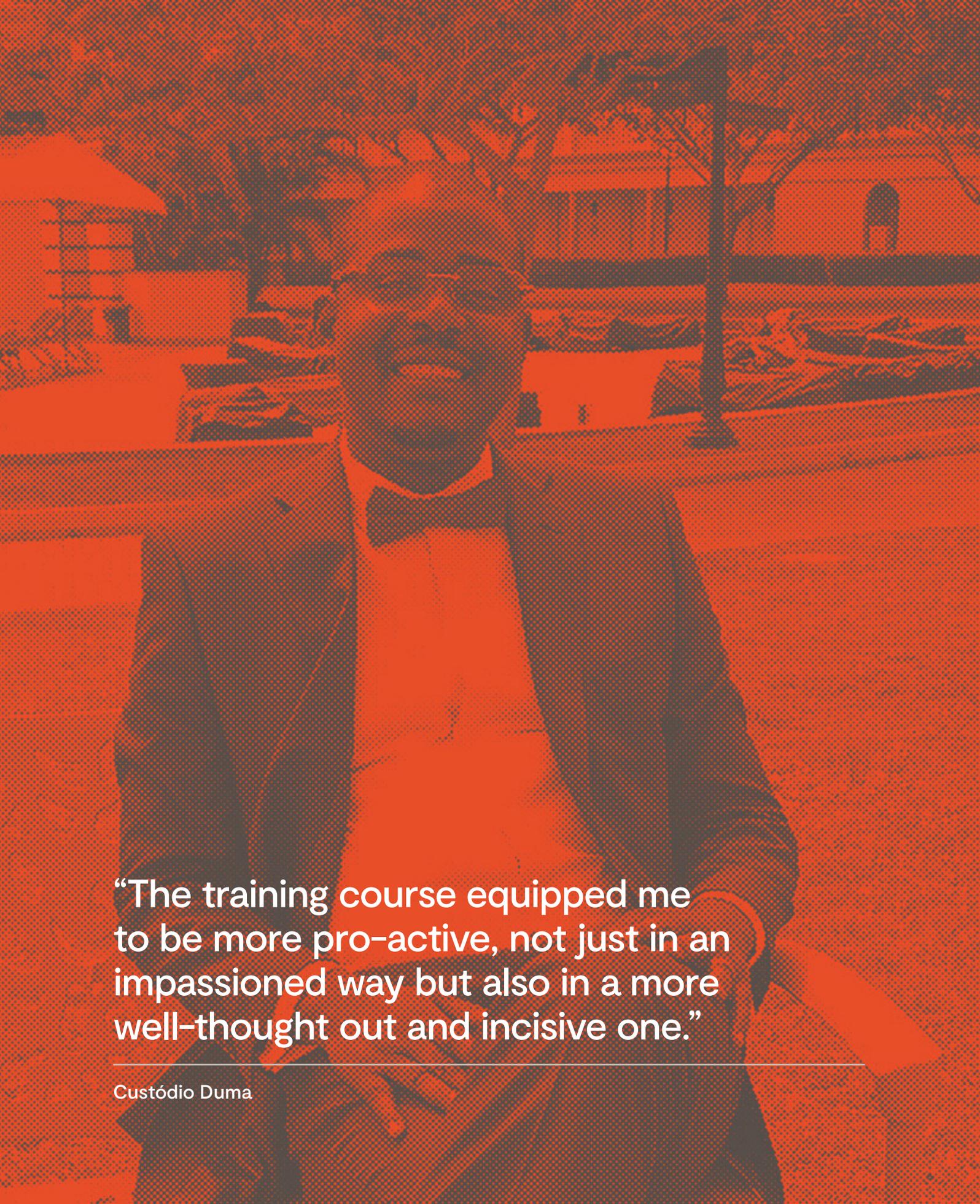
international journal
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A man with a beard and mustache, wearing a dark suit jacket, a white shirt, and a dark bow tie, is sitting on a wooden bench outdoors. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. The background shows a paved area, a black metal railing, and some buildings in the distance. The entire image has a halftone or dot-matrix texture.

“The training course equipped me to be more pro-active, not just in an impassioned way but also in a more well-thought out and incisive one.”

Custódio Duma

Custódio Duma

MOZAMBIQUE

LAWYER

/ FORMER PRESIDENT OF THE NATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION

A COURSE IN BRAZIL CHANGED THE REALITY OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN MOZAMBIQUE

The lawyer founded the most important LGBTQIA+ organisation in the country after taking in part in a human rights course at Conectas

When Custódio Duma returned to Brazil after participating in a human rights training course run by Conectas in São Paulo, in 2005, he was a different person than when he had left Mozambique. He had been deeply moved by an idea of human rights that grew into so much more than he had learned in Brazil.

For example, one of these changes was his understanding that it was not possible to guarantee people's dignity while certain matters and discussions were being silenced. "For us it was a taboo to talk about gays and lesbians, for example. When I set off for Brazil I had a particular way of thinking about this and when I returned home my understanding of the subject had transformed."

In 2004, Custódio had already

experienced his first human rights discussions when he participated in an **exercise — p.72 carried out at the University of Pretoria in South Africa** – a fictitious trial. And that was where he discovered that there was a training course in Brazil for activists from African countries the official language of which was Portuguese.

In the same year, the Human Rights Programme for Portuguese-Speaking Africa was launched. It was a partnership between Conectas and the Catholic University of São Paulo (PUC-SP) with funding from the Open Society Foundations (OSF). Activists were selected for the programme based on projects to be developed throughout the year and offered a combination of academic learning – in undergraduate and

postgraduate university courses – and work experience at organisations connected with human rights.

The lawyer had been planning to study in Pretoria, but the opportunity to study in Portuguese in Brazil caught his attention. He registered on the programme and was selected along with four other colleagues from Mozambique. In Brazil, Custódio took part in classes at PUC, visited organisations and did work experience at the Centre for the Defence of Children and Adolescents (Cedeca), in Salvador (Bahia).

“The course made us into one of the first generations of young lawyers in Mozambique with specific training in human rights,” he explains. “When we came back from Brazil we created the biggest LGBTQIA+ organisation in the country, LAMBDA. And this was as a result of the experience and knowledge we gained in Brazil, with teachers like Flávia Piovesan.”

He believes his training as a journalist greatly contributed to shaping his work as a human rights lawyer, but the opportunity he had in Brazil was fundamental. Custódio says the programme gave his actions and words consistency and made his work more incisive, well-thought out and, as a consequence, more pro-active. In addition, his experience in the country included participation in the now traditional International Human Rights Colloquium, hosted by Conectas since 2001 bringing

together activists and organisations from the Global South.

This experience placed Duma within an **international network of Global South activists**, the same one he is still surrounded by today. “A lot of these contacts were made at the international colloquium that year,” he recalls. — p.108

Throughout the duration of the programme, Custódio and his African colleagues, all of whom are black, lived in Jardins, a high-class neighbourhood in the city of São Paulo. They were noticed wherever they went which meant they had contradictory experiences on the streets and in social spaces in Brazil. While Custódio noticed looks of admiration towards the group, he also noted persecution and prejudice, particularly in the attitudes of security guards in the shopping centres they used to go to. “It was a bit embarrassing. We weren’t used to it. **That was the first time I had ever experienced racism in my life.**” — p.122

When he returned home, Custódio was met by a very different Mozambique than we see in 2021. In 2005, the country had around 600 lawyers for a population of 30 million people and the combination of poverty and extreme vulnerability and the lack of human rights literacy of that small group of Mozambican lawyers was dramatic. Nowadays, Mozambique has 2,200 registered lawyers.

Since then, Custódio has joined the

Mozambican Human Rights League. The organisation was created in 1995 and focuses on reporting violations and other arbitrariness. The headquarters of the League are in the capital Maputo and it is present in all the provinces of the country. It was the basis of Custódio's project to defend human rights.

In 2012, the first National Human Rights Commission was created in the country and Custódio was nominated by the president of Mozambique at that time to lead the group of eleven lawyers and activists. He headed up the commission until November 2017.

"We saw an increase in the number of law schools and in understanding about what human rights are," he says. "Nowadays, the Mozambican bar association has a commission focused on this theme, the result of intense activism." Custódio believes the language of human rights had come into everyday use before the country had even put them into practice.

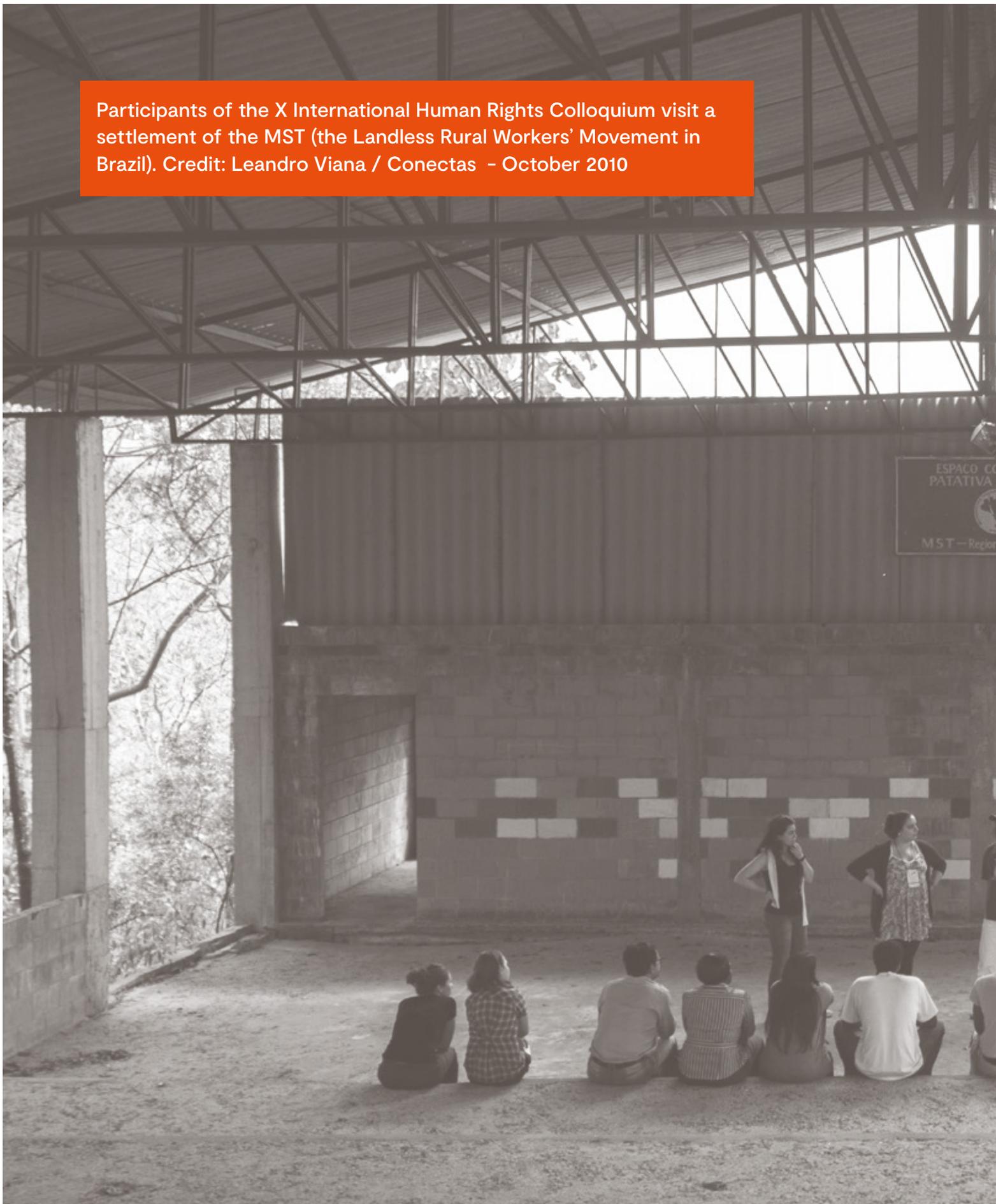
In Mozambique, the 2019 UN Human Development Index indicated that the country is in one of the last positions on the global ranking for development. It is in 181st place on a list of 189 nations.

Custódio believes that acting as a collective is the basis for the changes needed in Mozambique. **"We must wake up to a new fight, not to depose our governments, but to draw the attention of society to the fact that being more radicalised and less humanistic, can only lead us to collapse,"**

he believes. "Today, we think about fulfilment in our own lives without thinking about the fulfilment of others. We used to have an African ideal known as ubuntu, of the collective. This is gradually giving way to superficial individualism. We must awaken to a new kind of involvement and freedom."

By *Fabiana Moraes*

Participants of the X International Human Rights Colloquium visit a settlement of the MST (the Landless Rural Workers' Movement in Brazil). Credit: Leandro Viana / Conectas - October 2010

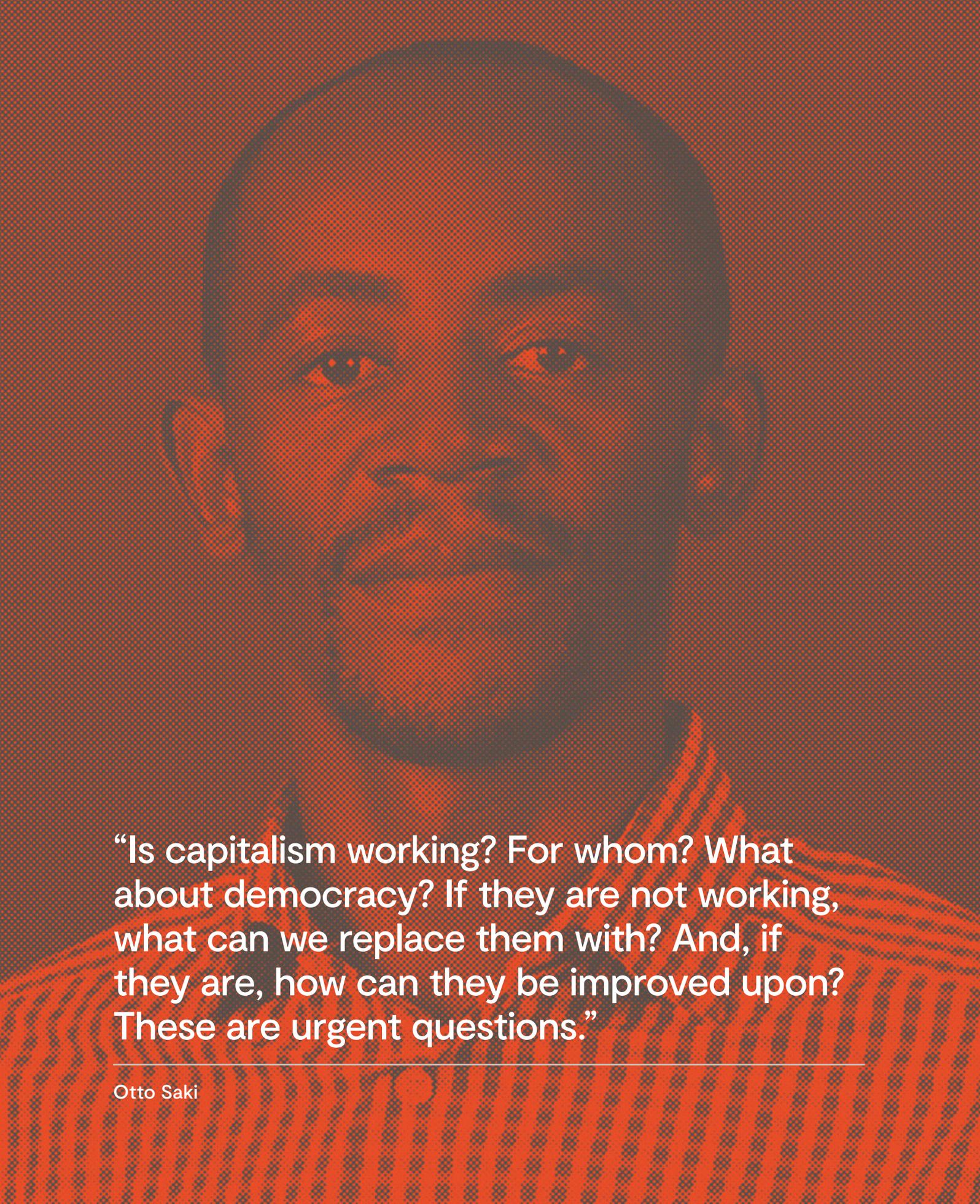


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“Is capitalism working? For whom? What about democracy? If they are not working, what can we replace them with? And, if they are, how can they be improved upon? These are urgent questions.”

Otto Saki

Otto Saki

ZIMBABWE

LAWYER

GLOBAL PROGRAMME OFFICER FOR CIVIC
ENGAGEMENT AND GOVERNMENT AT THE FORD
FOUNDATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

THE ORGANISATION'S WORK GAVE CREDIBILITY TO THE VOICES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

With work equal to or better than the NGOs of the North, Conectas obliged governments to listen to the activists without intermediaries

“Conectas is bold,” says Otto Saki. “It is a relatively new organisation and comes from the Global South, but works like Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch or the International Federation for Human Rights, which are enormous and have been in existence since the sixties and seventies.”

p.40 — The lawyer, born in Zimbabwe, believes that it was because of this boldness that partnering up with Conectas contributed to giving **credibility to the work of organisations operating in the Global South**. For example, it helped to force the government of the former revolutionary dictator, Robert Mugabe to respond to denouncements of human rights violations, at the UN.

“If Human Rights Watch publishes a report of human rights violations in Zimbabwe,

the government will not bother to speak about the actual content. It will simply say that it is just another white organisation from the North, blah, blah, blah says Saki. However, if the denouncement comes from a Brazilian organisation, the government will have to work harder in order to discredit it. “They cannot say that it is an organisation from the North, so they look at the backers and when they see that the American government does not figure among them, they find themselves in the position of having to comment on the content of the denouncement,” he says.

Otto’s involvement with human rights started at the University of Zimbabwe, where he studied law and participated in the student movement. “At that time – and

still today – you risked being expelled or suspended if you opposed the university authorities. Indeed, I was suspended for six months he told us. “And this is why some of the lecturers put me in touch with human rights organisations.”

He explains that in the beginning he became involved with organisations as a way of providing support and solidarity to other students who suffered penalisation for their work in the movement. Later, he also worked with people from rural areas who had been expelled from their land because of the Mugabe government’s land reform programme. “This gave me direction and purpose he states.

According to him, the option to work with human rights was not received with much enthusiasm by his family and some of his friends. “They had expected me to work as a lawyer in some private firm, doing something that was financially rewarding,” he recalls. This was not the case, but Otto has no regrets. “I know I don’t have the life of a celebrity or a big shot lawyer, but I know I have helped to transform peoples’ lives and that I have contributed to something positive. This is very rewarding and I would not have chosen a different path.”

Nowadays, Otto works in the South African office of the Ford Foundation as the programme officer on the civic engagement and government team. He came across Conectas years before when he

was running the organisation, Lawyers for Human Rights, in Zimbabwe. “We were trying to identify platforms where we could find a voice for dialogue about government accountability for the human rights violations that were happening in Zimbabwe at that time. And Brazil was, on the one hand, becoming an important player on various international platforms, including the UN. On the other hand, it was taking decisions on investment in agriculture, technology and other industries in a number of African countries, including Zimbabwe.” he says.

Saki recounts that at the same time, the conversation about South-South cooperation was gaining force. Brazil, India and South Africa, under the BRICS initiative, were leading the discussion of ideas and policies to resolve political and economic problems that some of the countries were facing in their respective regions and in regions under their influence.

Lawyers for Human Rights set up a partnership with Conectas and also started to attend the International Human Rights Colloquium. They noticed the event had become an **important space for exchange and dialogue with organisations in Portuguese and French-speaking Africa**. Finally, the two organisations worked together on actions at the UN, like condemnations of violations by the Mugabe government that Conectas “was brave enough” to lead.

According to Otto, the fact that

Conectas had an office in Geneva for many years was crucial to the organisation gaining the credibility it has. The involvement of human rights organisations, despite the discourse and efforts towards the autonomy of the Global South, he says, is still geared to just a few institutions, where just a few big players are active. “It’s an occupied space he says. “It is sad that the Conectas office closed because it had been difficult to achieve and its closure also affected other players.”

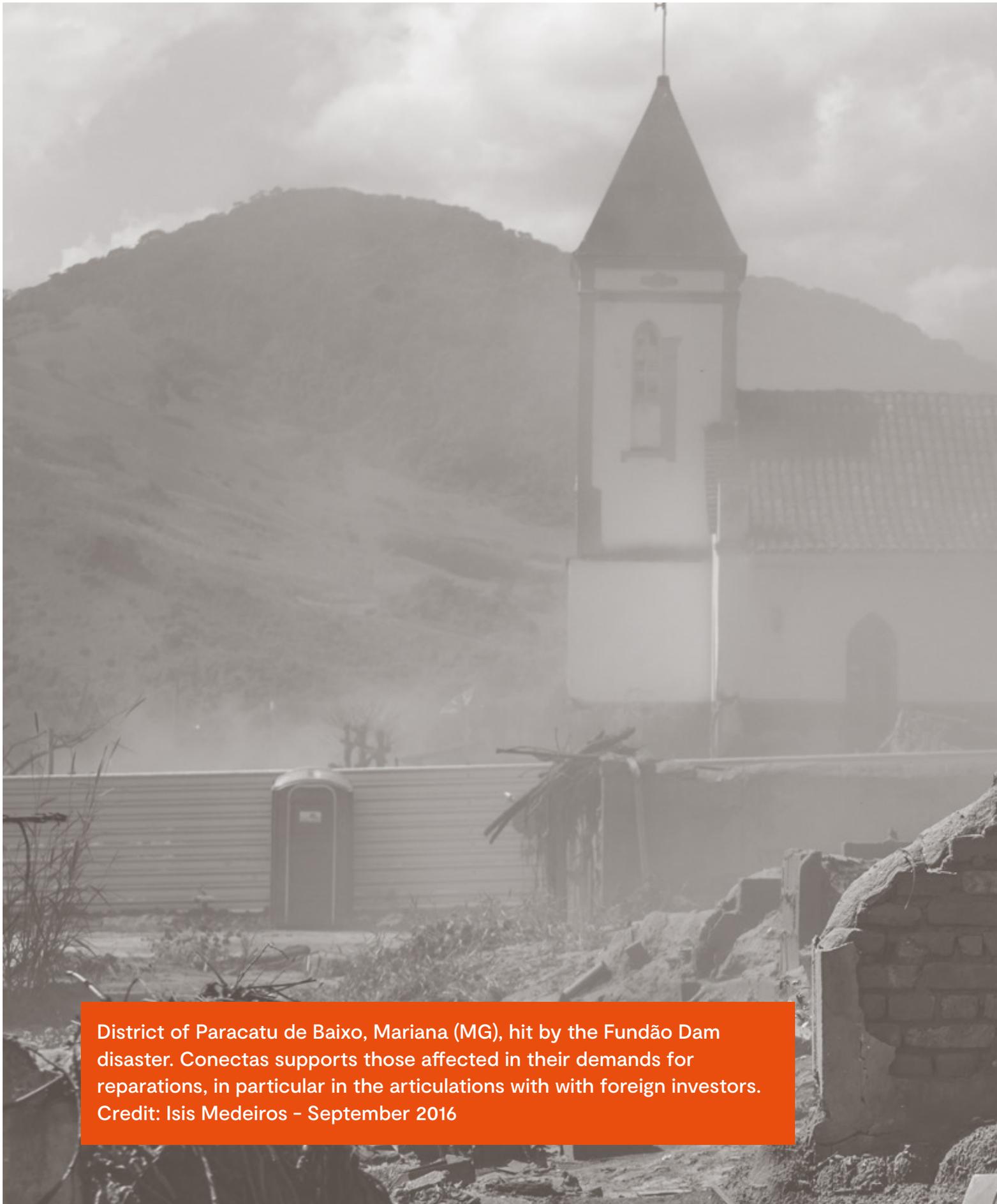
p.114 — Another important space opened by Conectas, Otto says, was the space for reflection about human rights that is **Sur – International Journal on Human Rights**. “Sur contributes to activists also being critics and thinking about what they are doing,” he says. **“Yes, we know that human rights are for everyone, but we also know that there are very practical obstacles faced by States, for political, economic and other reasons. We have to document them and take an analytical stance, and not merely repeat slogans.”**

Otto believes one of the principal challenges to be tackled by the human rights movement in the coming decade will be reflecting about political models. He asks, “Is capitalism working? For whom? What about democracy? If they are not working, what can we replace them with? And, if they are, how can they be improved upon? These are urgent questions and we must try to

answer them, but without falling into the trap of the extreme right, who are answering them, but in a way that is very different from our approach.”

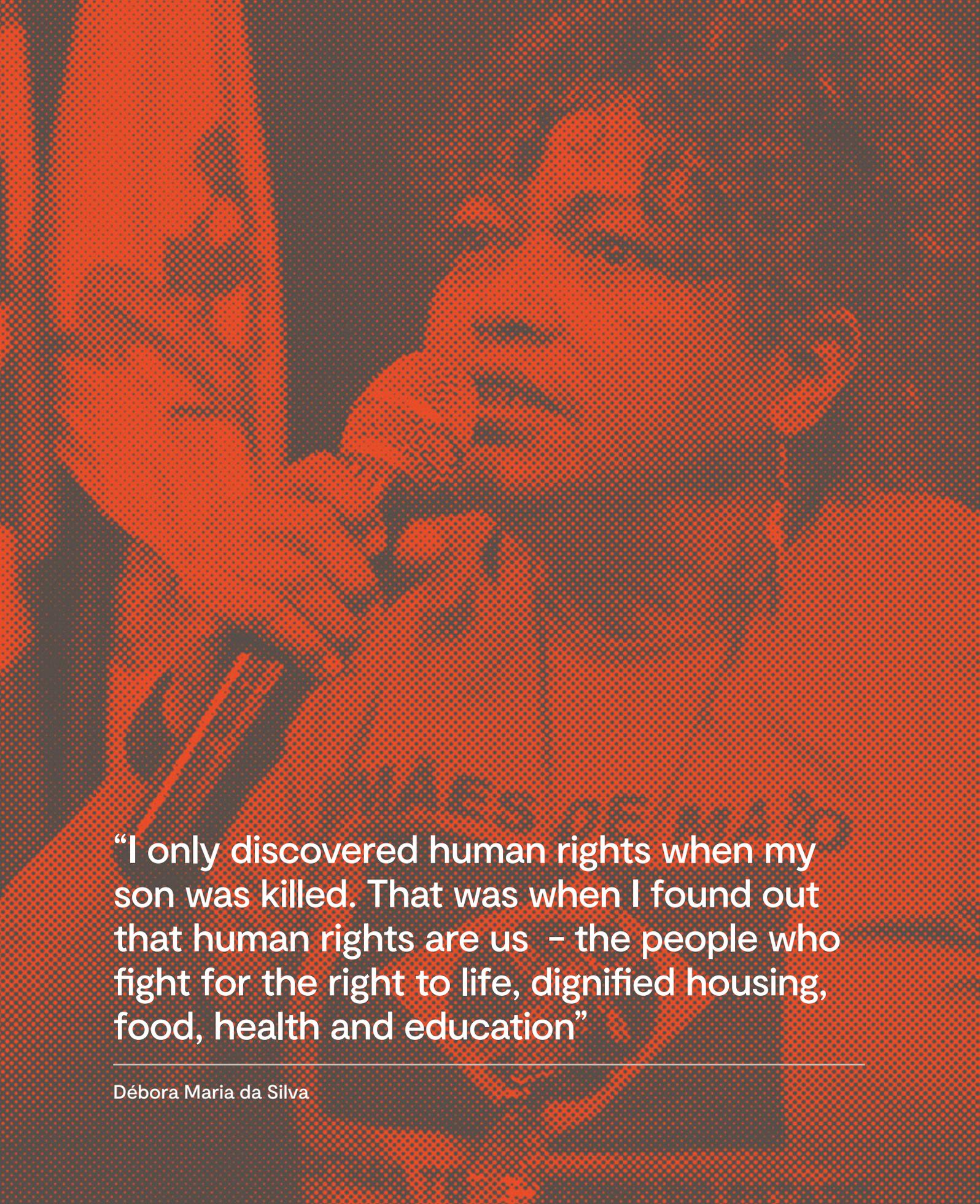
By *Maria Brant*

1. From 2010 to 2017 Conectas had permanent representation in Geneva together with Cels (Argentina) and Corporación Humanas (Chile), in an innovative format of partnership and cost and strategy sharing. The project ended in December 2017 due to high costs.



District of Paracatu de Baixo, Mariana (MG), hit by the Fundão Dam disaster. Conectas supports those affected in their demands for reparations, in particular in the articulations with with foreign investors. Credit: Isis Medeiros - September 2016





“I only discovered human rights when my son was killed. That was when I found out that human rights are us – the people who fight for the right to life, dignified housing, food, health and education”

Débora Maria da Silva

Débora Maria da Silva

BRAZIL, PERNAMBUCO

ACTIVIST

CO-FOUNDER OF THE MAY MOTHERS' MOVEMENT

A PATH PAVED WITH GRIEF THAT BROUGHT MOTHERS TOGETHER FROM ALL OVER BRAZIL

Débora Maria da Silva explains how, following her son's murder during the May Crimes in 2006, she transformed her pain into a movement to demanding accountability

In March 2005, in São Paulo, a former civil police officer kidnapped the stepson of the man appointed to be the leader of the PCC, The First Capital Command, in an attempt to extort the drug trafficker. This crime, on top of other disputes between the State and the traffickers, led to a tragic domino effect that was to stain Brazilian history forever.

Just over a year later, on 12 May 2006, a spate of killings ensued. In two weeks, the number of murders had reached a total of 59 police officers and over 500 civilians. This came to be known as the May Crimes and in just a few weeks it had exceeded the official number of people killed by the State in 21 years of military dictatorship in Brazil.

This revealed a long-standing

relationship between public authorities and criminal organisations: a network made up of police officers, police clerks, chiefs of police and death squads was involved in the massacre which led to the murder of hundreds of civilians, among them the 29-year old street cleaner, Edson Rogério Silva dos Santos.

Edson Rogério was the son of 62-year old, Débora Maria da Silva. She is the founder of the May Mothers Independent Movement, that arose from the grief of the mothers whose sons were murdered during that terrible month in 2006. Débora found out about her son's death on a radio programme, when the announcer read out the names of the victims and remarked: "They've killed a bunch of black guys."

The people murdered during this period were mainly young black men on the peripheries of São Paulo and in the Baixada Santista, an area between Santos and São Vicente, where Débora raised her three children.

Most of the deaths had the same characteristics of summary execution and happened under circumstances that are typical of the actions of death squads. These are groups of police officers that emerged in Brazil during the dictatorship to avenge the deaths of colleagues and that later took to executing anyone they deemed suspicious or inconvenient.

And there are those who believe this situation explains the sluggishness and negligence of the investigations into the murders. “The investigations were not progressing,” recounts Dona Débora, as she came to be known. “We pointed to the evidence and they didn’t take any notice at all. We went to the Public Prosecutor’s Office and that was even worse. There was lot of rubber stamping, but nothing actually happened.”

Maybe a further explanation is the fact that 79 São Paulo state prosecutors had expressed their support for the “efficient response of the Military Police, who demonstrated their concern over restoring public order, which had been violated,” in an official letter released one week after the attacks. Years later, only two of the prosecutors have expressed any regrets.

Débora says that images from the security cameras surrounding the petrol station where Rogério was last seen were not retrieved. Police officers approached him there as he was putting fuel in his motorbike. He had just left his mother’s house.

“When they went to get the images, they had been deleted. We had thought we would be able to do something, to get justice, but we were really badly treated and I got very very depressed. I fell out of bed and had to go to hospital.”

On her fifth day in hospital, the path from grief to hard work started to make sense. Débora attributes the transformation of her pain into movement to a supernatural encounter.

“I had a vision. I was still too weak to get out of bed and my son appeared to me,” she says. “It was very strange. He pulled me out of bed angrily, looking very cross. He sat me down and said ‘I don’t want you to be here. I’m not coming back, so there’s no point being like this. Get to work.’”

Débora says she was afraid, but she tried to convince herself that it had been a medication-related hallucination. “The next day, in the shower I noticed my arm was aching and I realised it was bruised. The other arm too. I was so shocked.”

Two days later, when Débora was let out of hospital, she started to look for the mothers of other victims that she had seen on TV or had read about in the newspaper. First

of all, she knocked on the door of Ednalva Santos, the mother of Marcos Rebello Filho, who was killed on Mother's Day. Together they went to see Vera Freitas, the mother of Matheus de Andrade Freitas, whose father was a well-known community leader.

"We went into the favela. Nobody wanted to talk, but in the end we found Vera who told us the whole story. She told us she knew the mother of Ana Paula Santos, who had been murdered when she was nine months pregnant," she recalls. "The next day, we went to see her, Vera Gonzaga. She was sceptical and said to us: 'Don't you know about the Acari mothers? We'll get killed.'"

Vera Gonzaga was referring to the mothers movement that came about in Rio in 1990 following the disappearance of 11 youths after they were stopped by the police in Magé, in the Baixada Fluminense. They mobilised in order to investigate the cases and to demand police accountability. One of their leaders was murdered in 1993 under circumstances that were never explained.

Débora managed to overcome her own fears, and those of the other mothers, to form a group. She discovered that there was a support centre in the city of São Paulo for victims of violence, a police ombudsman and a state committee for the Defence of the Rights of Human People (Condepe). She organised a trip into São Paulo for the mothers of the Baixada. I had never been to São Paulo, but I got the mothers together

and said: 'Come on, let's go!'"

She was born into a family of evangelical churchgoers who had migrated from Pernambuco to São Vicente when she was only 3 years old. She grew up wearing skirts and her hair long, afraid of everything, even the city of São Paulo. Her father was religious and conservative and he reprimanded her when she cut her hair short. When she plucked her eyebrows, he hit her. He often told a story in which, according to him, people get lost in São Paulo and never find their way home.

"We got the metro and I was so afraid we would get lost that I made the mothers get off at every single station," she recalls. After they had made statements at the ombudsman, they went to Condepe, where they met the journalist Rose Nogueira, president of the committee and a member of the group Tortura Nunca Mais (Torture Never Again).

"That was when we first discovered what human rights are. We were clueless until our worlds came crashing down," she says. "Rose told us about the Mothers of the Plaza de Mayo, in Argentina and we started to put ourselves in the shoes of other mothers."

On that day, Rose had copies of the book "May Crimes" piled up on her desk. It had been published by Condepe a few weeks earlier and contained texts by experts and reports by the independent commission that was investigating the deaths. "Rose gave me

a copy of the book. She signed it and wrote: ‘Débora, an exemplary Brazilian mother.’”

In the book, Débora and her colleagues from the Baixada discovered that the deaths were far more widespread than their own children. A new phase of the May Mothers Movement had begun. Débora and her comrades testified at the Justice and Peace Commission, participated in a protest at the Regional Board of Medicine (Cremesp) and organised a march from a church to the Santos cemetery to mark the first year after the murders. Débora recalls that she put in a request to city hall for there to be no police presence at the event, but remembers that police car tyres could be heard squealing in front of the church.

“They tried to intimidate us, to make us afraid, but that just fuelled our courage,” she says. “I was firing on all cylinders. I was full of energy and I said: ‘no-one intimidates the May Mothers because to fight for rights is not a crime. We are true human rights defenders because we are mothers.’”

p.156 — By this time, **the group had their own ideas**, such as stitching the names of police officers onto their uniforms (so they would not be able to remove them, as they could with identity badges, when they were committing wrongdoings) and the abolition of strip searches in prisons, which includes making people crouch down while naked.

“I didn’t even know how to talk on a microphone. I was embarrassed. But my pain

taught me to speak and to make people consider that yesterday it had been my son, but tomorrow it could be any of us,” she says.

In the midst of her fight, replete with difficulties, but also with great progress and partnerships, Débora found Conectas. During an event to mark the third year of the May Crimes, the organisation published a report on all the executions that took place between 12 and 21 May 2006.

“The report was shocking. We found out about other mothers of victims of the crimes,” she recalls. The cases of the murders in the Baixada Santista were represented by the Public Defender’s Office, while Conectas represented the case of the massacre at Parque Bristol. In 2009, the organisation requested investigations of the case that took place in the southern periphery of São Paulo be transferred to the federal level.

Although initially suspicious, Débora and the May Mothers got closer to Conectas. “We were really stubborn and argumentative. We are argumentative. But there came a time when we realised we had to walk side by side, collectively, and that Conectas could help us as we are not an organisation but a movement,” she says. “Nowadays, May Mothers and Conectas are comrades.”

In 2010, the May Mothers movement requested that investigations into the deaths of their children in the Baixada Santista be moved to the federal level. In 2011, **Global — p.48**

Justice and Harvard Law School published a report, São Paulo Sob Achaque, exposing corruption schemes, kidnapping, extortion and murder by the State and organised crime.

Two years later, Débora was presented with the National Human Rights Award by President Dilma Rousseff (PT). In 2015, she travelled to the United States with Amnesty International to denounce the crimes and in 2016, she launched the National Network of Mothers and Families, development of which was supported by Conectas.

“Conectas is like a godmother to May Mothers. Human rights are maternal,” she says. In 2018, she travelled to Bogota, Colombia to participate in a public hearing of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights.

p.140 – “Conectas registered and gave its allocated time slot to May Mothers. We gained a lot of mutual trust there because of the chance to speak,” she explains. **“We have always insisted that we speak for ourselves, no matter what partnerships we may have. At the same time, we know that we only manage to progress and multiply our struggle collectively. There is no important struggle that can be won alone.”**

In 2021, 15 years after the May Crimes, the authorities have still not explained the deaths that occurred in 2006. Débora sees this as 15 years of human rights. I only discovered human rights when my son was killed. That was when I found out that human

rights are us – the people who fight for the right to life, dignified housing, food, health and education,” she explains. “The mothers are determined to give birth to a new society.”

By *Fernanda Mena and Fabiana Moraes*



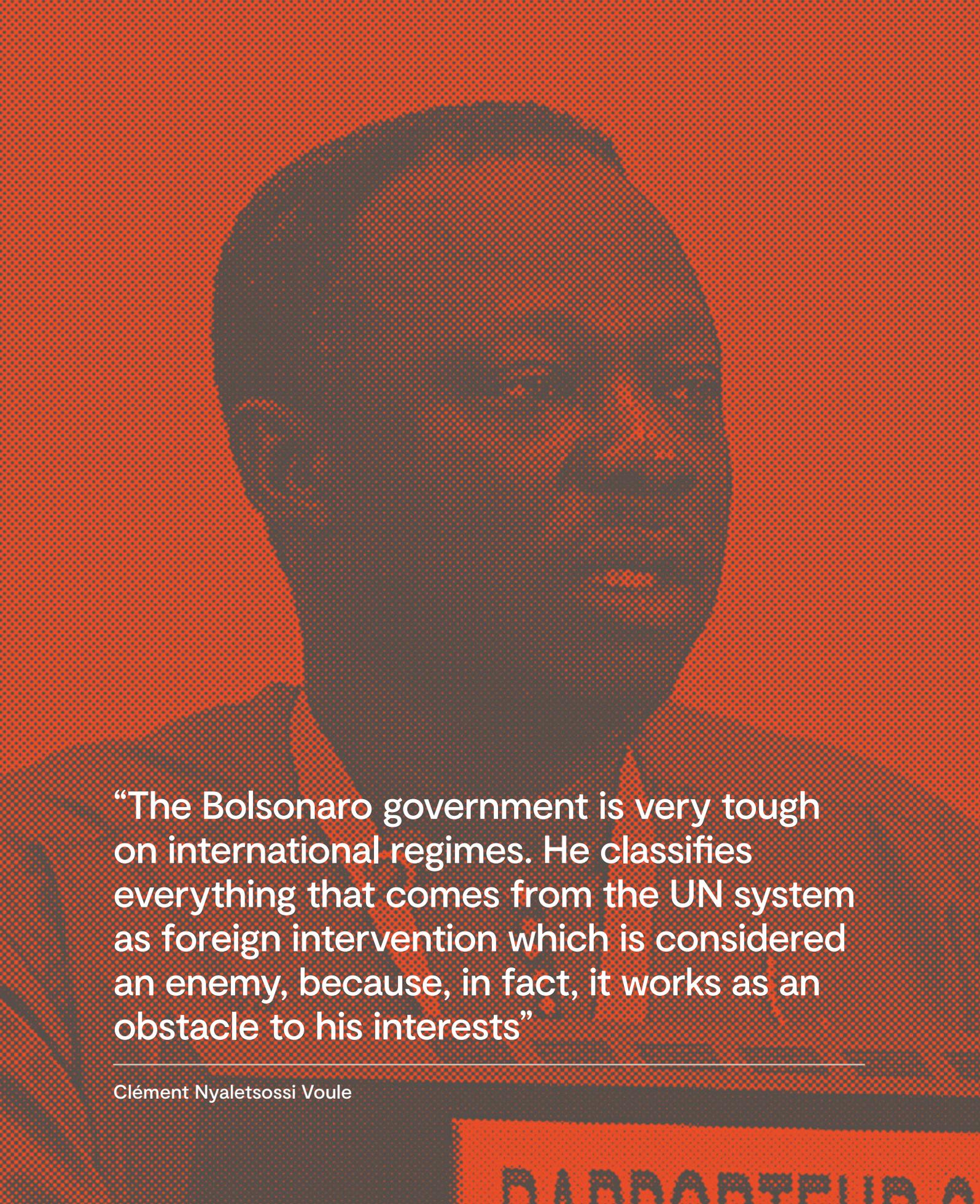
Déborah Silva (with the microphone), representing the May Mothers collective and the Network of Protection and Resistance to Genocide during the seminar “The Right to Combat State Violence” at the University of São Paulo Law School. Credit: Bianca Moreira/Conectas Human Rights - May 2019



MÃES DE MAIO



CONTRA O TERRORISMO DO ESTADO



“The Bolsonaro government is very tough on international regimes. He classifies everything that comes from the UN system as foreign intervention which is considered an enemy, because, in fact, it works as an obstacle to his interests”

Clément Nyaletsossi Voule

DADDARTTEUR A

Clément Nyaletsossi Voule

TOGO

LAWYER

UNITED NATIONS SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON
FREEDOM OF ASSEMBLY AND ASSOCIATION

THE GLOBAL SOUTH HAS BECOME IMPORTANT WITHIN THE UN SYSTEM OF HUMAN RIGHTS PROTECTION

According to the United Nations Special Rapporteur who has accompanied Conectas for 15 years, the Brazilian NGO provided greater scope for the limited debates held in Geneva

Clément Nyaletsossi Voule grew up and lived without rights or freedom under an authoritarian regime without realising it. He was born in Togo, West Africa, during the military dictatorship of Gnassingbé Eyadéma, a military man who assassinated the country's independence and decolonisation leader in the 1960s. This was normal to him.

Clément, while studying, had plans to become an airline pilot one day or a military commander. During his last years of school a sequence of events changed his perspective on life.

The suspension of regular payment of teachers' salaries resulted in a strike. Having had no classes for two weeks, the students organised a march from the college

to Lomé City Hall, where they would ask the mayor to resume classes.

"We were unable to reach our destination because the police intercepted us, beat us up and arrested us," he recalls.

His memory of those days includes surprise and indignation. "At the police station, I was beaten up and then released, like so many other colleagues. We didn't understand what was happening because we weren't asking the government to leave power, we just wanted to go back to school," he explains. "This was the first time I had experienced violence. And I kept asking myself: 'Why? Why?'"

The questioning that arose from that injustice has guided Clément's political trajectory ever since. He currently holds

the prestigious position of United Nations Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, to which he was appointed in 2018.

Shortly after first beginning to question things, Clément was to find some of the answers he was looking for when he secretly received a publication from a classmate. It was an Amnesty International report from the mid-1980s that provided information on human rights across the planet, including Togo. “I discovered something that was being hidden from me. There was information about my country that I had never had access to, issues about political life and denunciations of torture committed during the dictatorship.”

As it was a high-risk activity to circulate a report on human rights in a country where these rights did not exist, a group of young people quickly came together to contact the international organisation. They wrote letters to political prisoners in countries like Serbia and Uzbekistan. “It was an interesting experience because I didn’t know about the existence of these places before, or their contexts, and writing to activists in such far away countries created the sensation that I wasn’t alone in my fight for the defence of human rights,” he says.

Clément studied law and continued to work closely with Amnesty, the organisation of which he was Secretary General for Togo. During this time he acquired an

international outlook which in 2005 led him to create the West Africa Human Rights Defenders Network (WAHRDN). “I soon understood the relationship between the efforts of each country and international networks and started to work with the African Commission on Human and Peoples’ Rights,” he explains.

In the same year, Clément went to Geneva to take a course at the International Service for Human Rights (ISHR) organisation aimed at supporting and training activists and facilitating access to the UN system for the protection of human rights. It was there that he met the Brazilian **political scientist Lucia Nader, then coordinator of networks for Conectas**. They immediately felt a close affinity with each other. — p.56

Invited by Conectas to participate in one of the colloquia promoted by the organisation, Clément found a network of defenders of the South like he had never seen before. “The Conectas colloquium brought together a large diversity of people and was really connecting people from across the Global South. They are very good at bringing people together and fostering solidarity among activists,” he says. “It was a key moment for a lot of people. I myself met people through Conectas, who I still work with today.”

In Clément’s opinion one of Conectas’ greatest achievements was its **success in engaging activists and organisations with** — p.108

the concept of the Global South. “Coming from a country in the Global South, where human rights were not even discussed, and working internationally, I knew that the activism in the countries of the South was not properly recognised,” he says. “There was a preconceived idea about who could represent human rights at the UN, and organisations from the South weren’t considered as representatives.”

According to him, the situation was absurd. “Conversely there was the rich, well connected and organised European civil society on one side, but the great human rights challenges were in the Global South, where **civil society faced difficulties in financing and in accessing the mechanisms of struggle** concentrated in the USA and Europe,” he reports.

The Togolese lawyer hired by ISHR in 2006, increasingly integrated more and more defenders and NGOs from South America, Africa and Asia into the UN system, and every time he was consulted about Brazil, he knew he could count on Conectas as well as recommend them.

“Nowadays, the big European NGOs are still there but organisations from the South can no longer be ignored, and this enriches the idea of human rights,” he says. “One of the things I’m most proud of is having brought activists and members of organisations from the Global South to be trained. They returned to their

countries knowing more about how things work at the UN.”

Clément says that he gave advice to Conectas and supported the organisation when it was searching for a representative in Geneva. “We discussed strategies and I shared my knowledge about how the system works and what avenues facilitated access.” Thus, he says, Conectas built bridges between Brazilian civil society and the UN system and brought important content to the debates in Geneva. “The space was there, but it needed to be occupied.”

As the United Nations Special Rapporteur for the Freedom of Peaceful Assembly and Association, Clément has paid special attention to the Brazilian political context. “The Bolsonaro government is very tough on international regimes. He classifies everything that comes from the UN system as foreign intervention which is considered to be an enemy, because, in fact, it works as an obstacle to his interests.”

Clément points out another challenge in the area of fundamental rights, which is digital transformation, capable of creating many opportunities as well as causing harm. “We are entering a terrain where fundamental rights and freedoms are not being respected, especially the rights to privacy,” he points out. “There are surveillance systems everywhere, and a single person with a computer is capable of monitoring millions of people.”

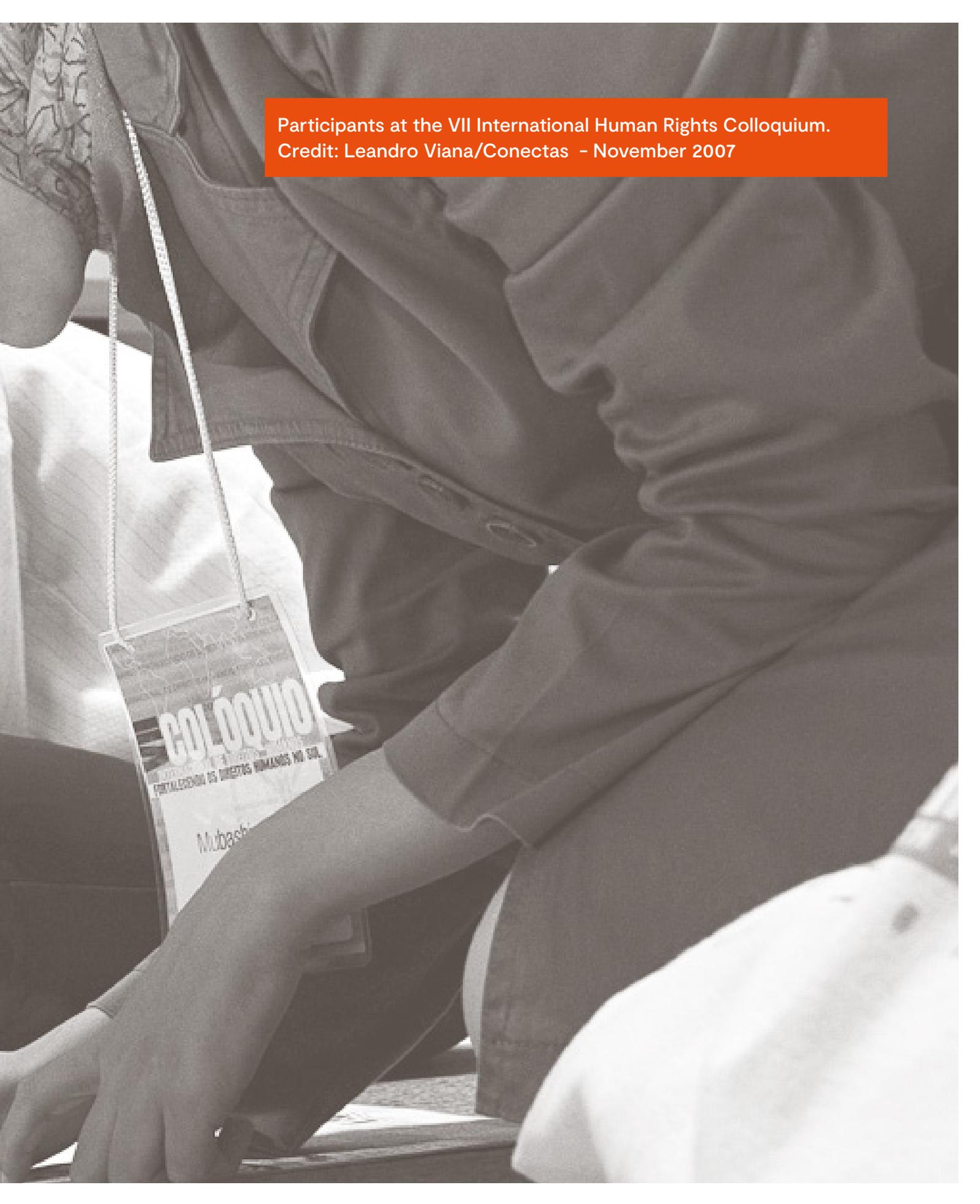
According to the rapporteur, **the same technology used to mobilise activists is also used to monitor, demobilise or even arrest them.** “There are companies that are not concerned about protecting rights, because they prefer to guarantee their profits. Technology is so advanced and governments are so well-equipped that we’ve lost this battle, but we have to win the war.”

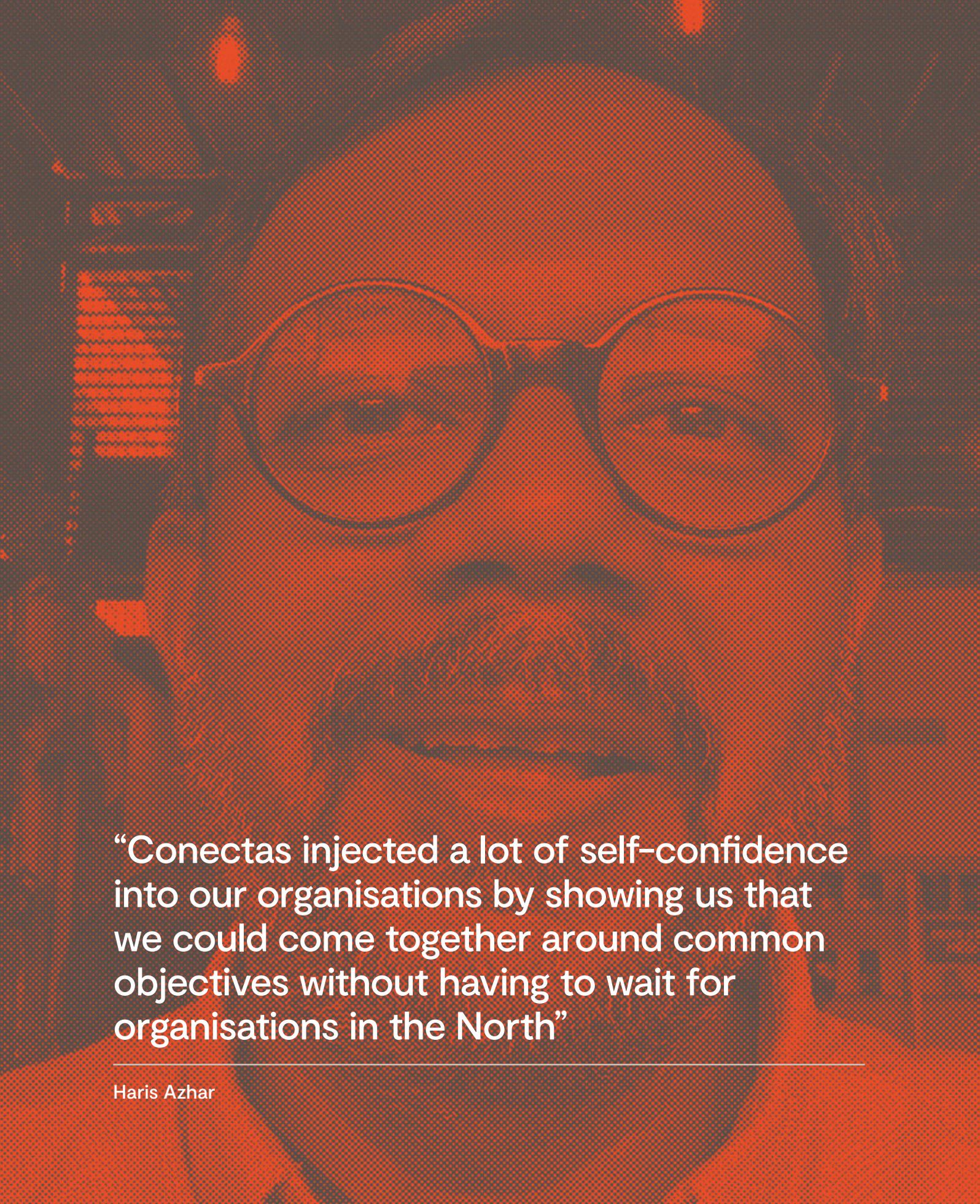
In his opinion, the area of fundamental freedoms is under attack in a number of ways, especially following the September 11 attack in 2001 and the anti-terrorism laws that have emerged since then. “If the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were written today, it would be much less advanced because of this.”

By *Fernanda Mena*



Participants at the VII International Human Rights Colloquium.
Credit: Leandro Viana/Conectas - November 2007





“Conectas injected a lot of self-confidence into our organisations by showing us that we could come together around common objectives without having to wait for organisations in the North”

Haris Azhar

Haris Azhar

INDONESIA

LAWYER

DIRECTOR OF THE LAW FIRM LOKATARU AND
FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE NGO KONTRAS

EXCHANGE AMONG THE VOICES OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH HAS LED TO THE REFRAMING OF METHODOLOGY AND PARADIGMS OF ACTIVISM

The network of friendships created during events organised by Conectas has stimulated joint action on global themes

When Osama bin Laden's body was thrown into the sea in 2006, a group of human rights organisations sent a letter to the United States government demanding an explanation. Among the signatories was the organisation, KontraS (Commission for Disappeared People and Victims of Violence), which was led by the lawyer and activist Haris Azhar from 2010 to 2016.

It was an unprecedented initiative. The letter classified the North American army's action as a "forced disappearance," a term traditionally used by large human rights organisations in the Global North, to refer to human rights violations committed by governments in the countries of the Global South.

"But this time, organisations in the

South were condemning a country in the North in harsh terms, for the disappearance of none other than the most wanted terrorist in the world," Haris told us. "And Conectas was behind it all."

He does not see the importance of cooperation between the organisations of the South as a rejection of the work of activists in the developed world. "It is not a question of building a wall between the North and South," he says. He believes **the issue — p.18 is to gain autonomy for the South to decide which causes are important and how to work on them.**

"It is very different when the call to action comes from the grassroots level," he says. "If you are in the middle of the forest, you can smell the trees but also

the cockroaches; if you are in the middle of the city, you can sense the texture of the hands of the people who are sleeping on the streets.”

Haris started working on human rights in 1999, as a volunteer in the advocacy department at KontraS, and soon after, he graduated in law. The organisation consists of a network of organisations that fight to make the State accountable for human rights violations and disappearances in Indonesia.

Between 1999 and 2010 the lawyer worked in a number of different roles at the network, until he became its director, a position he held for seven years. In 2017, he set up an advocacy firm, specialising in human rights, with three partners, of which he is the executive director. Irrespective of the official position he holds, the motivation for his work comes directly from his “proximity with the forest” and his constant contact with survivors and the families of victims who, despite numerous hardships, never give up the search for truth and justice.

However, direct experience with victims does not always guarantee that their voices will be heard on the international platforms that defend human rights. That is why Conectas’ leadership has made a huge difference to this work and to **cooperation among activists in the Global South, not just in Latin America, but also in Africa and Asia**, he says. “Conectas injected a lot of

self-confidence into our organisations by showing us that we could come together around common objectives without having to wait for organisations in the North,” he says. “We started working together, on both wider initiatives we had in common, writing letters, denouncements etc and also on bilateral actions.”

For example, in 2015, when the Brazilian, Marcos Archer Cardoso was arrested and sentenced to death for drug trafficking, in Indonesia, KontraS came out in his defence, in response to a request by Conectas. In the following year, Azhar himself was threatened with prison for reporting a corruption scheme involving Indonesian police officers to the newspapers and the Brazilian organisation mobilised to put pressure on the Indonesian government to drop the charges.

The Indonesian activist believes the leadership of Conectas has played out in different ways. The first is through initiatives like the International Human Rights Colloquium that has been bringing Global South activists together in Brazil, since 2001. Azhar has been to the country four times, always as a guest of Conectas, and it was here that he met and built relationships with Argentinian, Guatemalan, South African and Indian colleagues. “But this is not just an event: what Conectas does differently is to create a permanent space for exchange, that is under constant construction,” he says. “After

p.80 — difference to this work and to cooperation among activists in the Global South, not just in Latin America, but also in Africa and Asia, he says. “Conectas injected a lot of

these meetings, people from the organisation write to us, asking us what we are doing and encouraging us to act together.”

p.100 — In addition, Conectas **provides tools for the work of other organisations.** “When we started to do joint international advocacy, writing letters and making denouncements even when the matter was something that had happened in North Korea or Myanmar, most of the information and the line of argument came from Conectas.”

The activist also recounts that when his NGO decided to work on international human rights advocacy he asked colleagues at the Brazilian organisation for advice on how to act. “They responded with a ready-made booklet. Conectas is always two steps ahead.”

However, Haris believes that no organisation can settle on one particular methodology, even if it has been very successful. In order to stay relevant, human rights organisations have to re-think methods and paradigms constantly. **“The themes are always changing. It is fundamental to always develop, build and hone methodology.”** In this sense, Sur plays an important role, according to him. “It is a space where we can examine and reflect on the paradigms that are guiding our work.”

The third, and perhaps the most important way Conectas exercises leadership is by **fostering friendships, says Haris. The**

activist believes it is this that underpins — p.148 joint actions. “I always say to young activists that come to me looking for advocacy work, this is about building friendships. It’s not bureaucratic work.”

He believes the organisation fosters friendships by bringing together open-hearted people who are ready to share their experiences and try to understand different realities which encourages the same openness in those they come into contact with: “They have shrewd minds and warm hearts.”

By *Maria Brant*

READ MORE

+ **The human rights struggle in Indonesia, by Haris Azhar – SUR 20 (2014)**



Participants at the X International Human Rights Colloquium.
Credit: Leandro Viana - October 2010





“We cannot claim to be a true democracy without taking racial issues and historic wrongdoings into consideration”

Thiago Amparo

Thiago Amparo

BRAZIL SÃO PAULO

LAWYER

PROFESSOR AT THE GETÚLIO VARGAS FOUNDATION (FGV-SP); FORMER EDITOR OF THE SUR JOURNAL

SUR JOURNAL HAS UNITED THE HUMAN RIGHTS ACTIVISTS AND ACADEMICS OF THE GLOBAL SOUTH

According to the lawyer, who has edited Sur, the journal has demonstrated the diversity of critical thought in human rights in the South

Thiago Amparo's activism emerged at a time when an important contribution to increased visibility for human rights was coming to life. The young student had only been at Conectas for one year when the first issue of Sur – International Journal on Human Rights was published in 2004.

Sur was created to contribute to the critical debate on human rights matters from the perspective of the Global South and to juxtapose academic publications on human rights in Europe and the United States. The journal, which is published in three languages, Portuguese, English and Spanish, has undergone a number of changes throughout its history. Texts have become gradually less theoretical and more succinct, opening up dialogue not only among those who

think about human rights but **also among — p.108 those who are facing practical challenges in defending them.** “Sur plays a fundamental role in illustrating that in fact a lot of diverse critical work is produced on human rights in the Global South and as a tri-lingual journal it also plays a fundamental role in allowing dialogue across different locations and backgrounds,” says Thiago.

During his six years at Conectas, the lawyer worked in several different areas of the organisation, ranging from the Justice programme to running colloquiums. In 2009 he started to contribute regularly to the editing of Sur and took part in the first important landmark in the history of the journal whose birth he had witnessed. He was the editor of the 20th issue of Sur commemorating 10

years of Conectas, alongside Maria Brant, Luz Gonzalez and Tânia Rodrigues.

“It was a very special issue because it carried a wide range of activists and academics in a single edition on rethinking human rights in the 21st century,” he recalls. There is, for example, an article by the senior analyst on public policy at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Sara Burke, about the effectiveness of language in human rights in achieving social change. And another by the South African, Janet Love, director of the Centre for Legal Resources, on how defenders generally respond bureaucratically and ineffectively to the deliberate irresponsible behaviour of economic authorities.

The first time Thiago thought about human rights was in 2003 when he gained access to lawsuits on torture and ill-treatment towards teenagers inside the former Febem. He was an intern at Conectas and was studying law. “I wasn’t really sure what human rights were, but when I saw those photos at the Franco da Rocha Courthouse, I realised I wanted to use the law to fight atrocities,” he says. Today, at 35 years of age, he is a lawyer, he has a doctorate in human rights and teaches at the Getúlio Vargas Foundation (FGV).

It all started when he was an undergraduate at the São Paulo Catholic University (PUC) when he says he became passionate about the lectures of Professor **Oscar Vilhena Vieira, founder of Conectas and the**

incumbent director of the FGV Law School. — p.30

“Oscar spoke of law as a means of fighting injustice and that was enlightening.” He was 17 and was one of the only black people in a lecture hall of 50 students. There he came into contact with human rights, but he also came into contact with the loneliness of racism, a theme that has been part of his activism ever since.

The paths of Conectas and Thiago crossed at a time of profound changes, sparked by new cultural and social patterns, like the increased popularity of social media, the increased presence of black people in the universities and as a result the spread of debates on race, class and gender. This meant that human rights also had to adapt, says Thiago.

He recalls that ten years ago, there was a consensus about what was considered to be a human rights organisation, with a rigid hierarchy between institutions. “It was a sector that was monopolised by organisations that circulated at the UN and the Organisation of American States (OAS), with the institutional capacity to write in English and to network. They were predominantly white.”

Outside these groups there were associations, NGOs and movements focused on combatting racism, police violence and mass incarceration and other struggles. The Geledés – Black Women’s Institute, created and run by the philosopher Sueli Carneiro

was one example. “Brazilian activists were at the Durban conference, but were seen as representatives of antiracism collectives and not as human rights organisations,” he says, referring to a meeting organised by the UN in South Africa in 2001, the theme of which was racism, racial discrimination, xenophobia and intolerance.

Although it was Sueli Carneiro who formulated the request to the Study Centre on Violence (NEV-USP) for data on race to be considered in reports about people killed by the police, Thiago points out.

He says that advances in the fight against racism are perceptible, twenty years after the historic Durban Conference, for example, the introduction of racial quotas in 2012, which has led to structural changes in Brazilian society. But racism persists, as was clear when George Floyd, a black man, was suffocated and killed by the white police officer, Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis (USA, 2020) and which caused an outcry among the antiracism movement in the United States and around the world. In 2020, almost 80% of people killed by the police in Brazil were black. This figure is disproportionate given that only 56% of the population identify as black in the country.

According to Thiago, there is no turning back on changes that have followed since the acknowledgement of structural racism. This was paved by the work of the black movement, which has been behind

many of the landmarks in the defence of human rights. “Nowadays, the conversation has changed: there can be no real change in human rights and the fight against the crisis in democracy without including the discourse on racism, which directly affects the majority of Brazilians. The debate has to include this sector of the population,” he says. “We cannot claim to be a true democracy without taking racial issues and historic wrongdoings into consideration.”

According to Thiago, the fact that organisations like Black Lives Matter have gained worldwide significance whilst Brazil is experiencing the undermining of its democracy, is strategic for the Brazilian antiracism movement. “We tend to benefit in terms of communications, access to resources and the sharing of ideas. This combination of strengths, with regards to differences and similarities, is driving our agenda, whether at a local or international level,” he says. “The human rights organisations have noticed that they need to participate in the struggle against racism, partly to uphold social legitimacy.”

The lawyer participated in the process of **Conectas becoming involved in the anti-racism struggle**. Together with the theologian, Maryuri Mora Grisales, he edited the 28th issue of *Sur*, a dossier on race and human rights. The guest editor was Sueli Carneiro.

“It was a huge pleasure to edit the journal with Sueli. Firstly, it was a historical

reparation for the journal because few articles had previously touched on the issue of race in human rights. This was clearly acknowledged in the presentation of the journal,” he says. “In the 28th issue we also started a scholarship programme for black people to write in the publication, fulfilling the mission of promoting the diversity of activists in the Global South and not just the same Brazilian global elite who are not very different from those of the Global North.”

Thiago recounts how the scholarship received 803 applications. Three activists were selected: Megg Rayara Gomes de Oliveira, Aline Maia Nascimento and Rosane Viana Jovelino. This meant these black intellectual women received financial support for three months as well as writing mentorship to enable them to bridge the gap between practice and theory in this area. Issue 28 of Sur was released in the iconic space of new generations of the Black Brazilian movement, Aparelha Luiza, in the centre of São Paulo and included a debate with authors on writing as a form of activism.

He sees **establishing uncomplicated communication that recognises the day to day demands of people working in the areas of health, education, security and housing, as an important challenge for future movements**. This is both a way of de-bureaucratising human rights and of strengthening them, he argues. “It will be

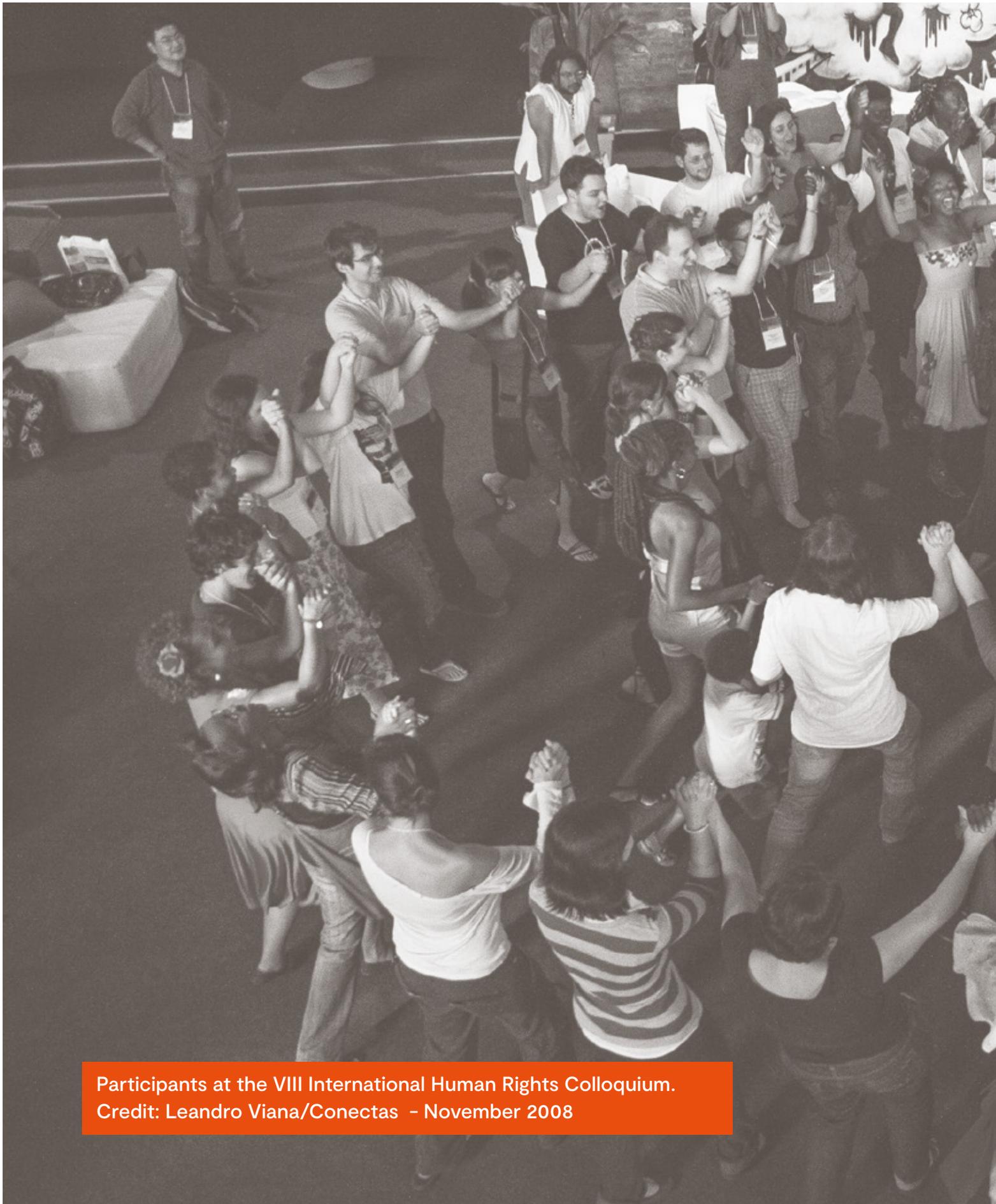
difficult, unless we can reframe the idea of human rights as being a bit more important than other interests of society. We have to create empathic links, otherwise we won’t escape this characteristic. When I talk about making things uncomplicated, I mean getting closer to people’s realities.”

He believes that even with the conservative aspect in Brazil, it is possible to build this path. “It is fundamental to break down opposition.”

By Fabiana Moraes and Maria Carolina Trevisan

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+ [Diversifying Knowledge, by Thiago Amparo - SUR 28 \(2018\)](#)



Participants at the VIII International Human Rights Colloquium.
Credit: Leandro Viana/Conectas - November 2008





“By reclaiming the humanity of a segment of society that was violently dehumanised, as black Brazilians were, we are fighting for the humanity of all”

Douglas Belchior

Douglas Belchior

BRAZIL, SÃO PAULO

ACTIVIST, HISTORIAN
AND EDUCATOR

CO-FOUNDER OF UNEAFRO BRASIL, ARTICULATOR
AT THE BLACK COALITION FOR RIGHTS AND
TRUSTEE OF CONECTAS

RACISM IN BRAZIL IS AN AFRONT TO DEMOCRACY AND CHANGES THE MEANING OF HUMAN RIGHTS IN THE COUNTRY

For Douglas Belchior, the Brazilian black movement has forced the area of human rights to deal with the complexity of race relations in the country

The field of human rights has matured and is finally recognising the path of the black movement as fundamental in the fight for rights. This is how Douglas Belchior, educator, historian and leader in the Brazilian black movement views the connections made in recent years among human rights organisations and black activism.

“The humanity of black people has been historically denied. So, the premise of working for the lives of these people is a revindication of their right as humans, denied by society,” Douglas says. “By reclaiming the humanity of a segment of society that was violently dehumanised, as we were, we are fighting for the humanity of all. And society as a whole stands to gain something,” he believes. In 2008,

Douglas founded Uneafro Brasil, a chain of low-cost short courses for young black people living in the periphery.

“Until recently, the premise in the field of human rights was the fight against the military dictatorship. That was a moment in history when bodies that had historically had rights were violated on a large scale,” Douglas says.

“This was an experience that a certain sector of society had never had. They were the children of white workers, middle and high class and they too were tortured and killed. This led to an increase in society’s repulsion of this sort of practice by the State.”

But State violence continued after the end of the dictatorship. In 2006, the May Mothers movement emerged and exposed

police violence towards the black community following a massacre. The São Paulo

p.92 — Military Police killed 564 people, the majority of whom were young black youths

under the guise of fighting criminal factions.

“It was no longer possible for the field of human rights to ignore the daily systemic violence being levelled against the black community, either through State repression or through the denial of rights,” Douglas says.

The spread of this new understanding was quickly perceived by Conectas who set about implementing a huge structural change in the organisation to allow for widespread activities in the promotion of human rights in Brazil, a country that carries the marks of the longest and most intense period of slavery on the planet.

Douglas’ first contact with Conectas was when he participated in a meeting of the board of Brazil Human Rights Fund, in 2016. A dialogue ensued on the importance of the debate on race within the field of human rights.

“Conectas is one of the organisations that comprehends change over time and the need for self-evaluation and internal changes,” he believes. “It was only in recent years that important transformation

p.114 — has occurred. Today, **it is impossible to talk about human rights in Brazil without discussing racism** and state violence against black people, but five years ago

things were very different.”

According to Douglas, sectors that were traditionally linked to human rights have been forced to change, “if they are not to lose sight of the generic idea of human rights as respect for the humanity of all people,” he points out. “There was a sense that the people who were the targets of the violence should be able to speak for themselves and there was pressure on organisations to bring these voices forward, rather than speaking on their behalf,” he explains.

In 2018, through an articulation by human rights organisations, in which Conectas played an important role, Douglas represented the Brazilian black movement at an ordinary session of the OAS Inter-American Commission on Human Rights in Washington. “This collaborative practice advanced and strengthened black grassroots organisations. This is a very important contribution of our time,” he says.

Douglas believes Conectas is an organisation that visibly promotes and practices change. “It is impossible to ignore the internal change in direction, in the composition of the teams, lines of action and in the fulfilment and perception of human rights,” he points out. “Conectas has been courageous, committed and consistent. It has upheld the integrity that the field of human rights has to show.”

Two factors drove organisations that

p.80 — work in the field of human rights to accelerate their **understanding of how racism works** and to find the best actions to tackle it: the murder of the black councilwoman, Marielle Franco, in March 2018 and the death of the black man George Floyd in 2020, who was suffocated by white police officer Derek Chauvin in Minneapolis, in the USA.

“These events led to fundamental shifts in the structures that shore up society and they fell on fertile land, prepared by the black movement, when sensitivity to the subject was heightened,” Douglas says. “Marielle’s blood was shed on land that was ploughed by the black movement. It did not fall on dry land. For 500 years the movement has been saying precisely the same as the white sector of society, including about human rights – this is only being admitted now,” he concludes. He believes the debate on racism also gained new vision and perspective, driven by the antiracism movement that took hold in the United States.

In Brazil, we are living in the political scenario imposed by Jair Bolsonaro’s rise to the presidency and an agenda of denial of racism, disrespect for human rights, praise of torturers and defence of police violence.

This context has led to black movement organisations joining forces and the Black Coalition for Rights emerged from this moment of unity, along with hundreds

of other black organisations and collectives and some allied white institutions. Douglas is one of the great articulators at the Coalition, an important landmark in the defence of human rights, democracy and tackling racism.

In its manifesto, the Coalition states that “while there is still racism, there will be no democracy,” a slogan that Douglas helped to create based on his day-to-day observations of the police in this country. **“Racism is the principal element in the boycott and undermining of democracy. Democracy does not exist alongside racism”**, he concludes.

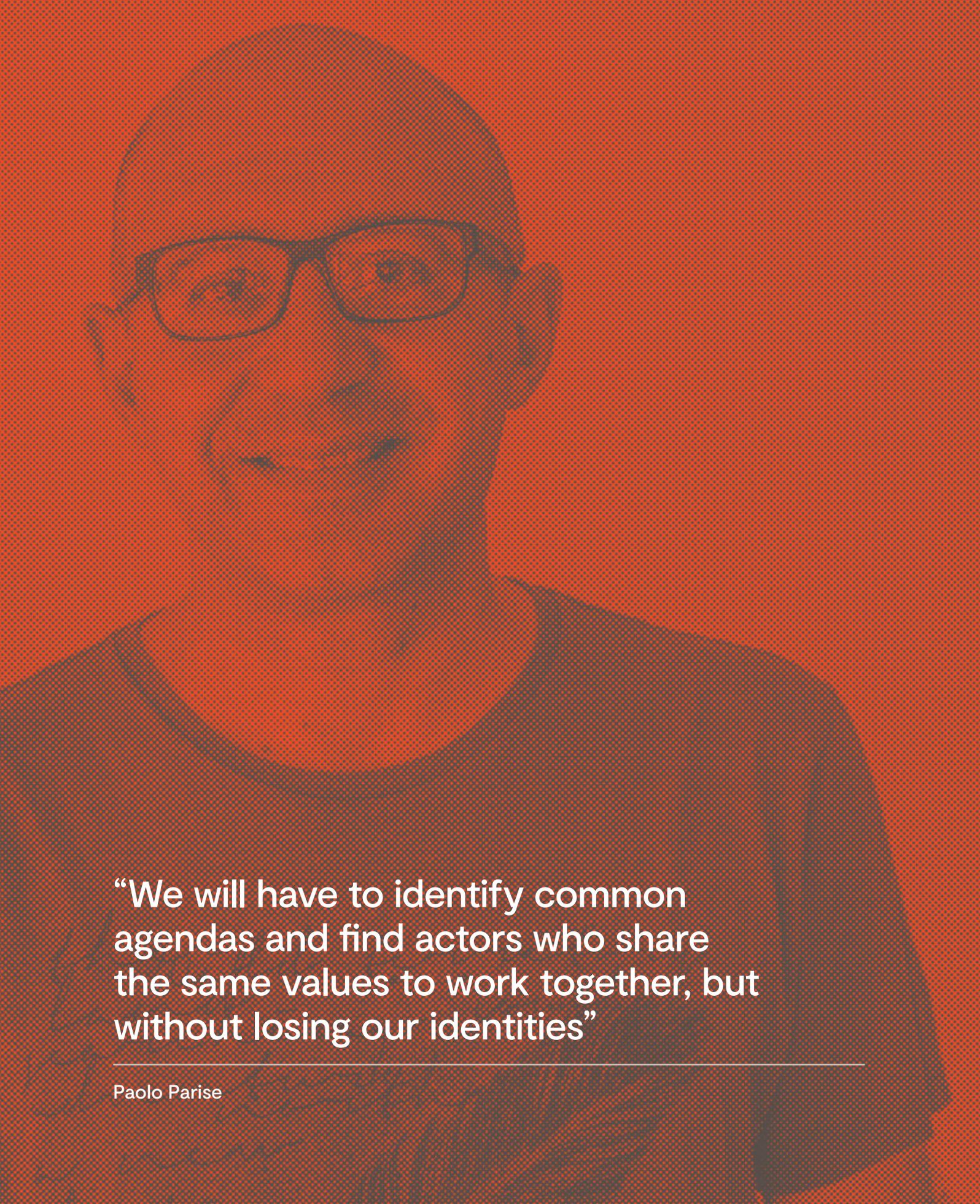
By *Maria Carolina Trevisan*

“VOCÊ TEM QUE PARAR DE ACHAR
QUE ESTÁ NO LUGAR ERRADO.”

SPARK
LUIZA

VERRILHEIRA





“We will have to identify common agendas and find actors who share the same values to work together, but without losing our identities”

Paolo Parise

Paolo Parise

ITALY

PRIEST OF THE SCALABRINIAN ORDER

DIRECTOR OF THE SÃO PAULO PEACE MISSION

FOSTERING PARTNERSHIPS DEMANDS TRANSPARENCY AND RESPECT FOR THE DIFFERENT IDENTITIES INVOLVED

The Italian priest, who shelters immigrants, believes the current wave of setbacks requires a model of teamwork which Conectas exemplifies

At the beginning of 2017, Paolo Parise was in the Chamber of Deputies, accompanying voting on the new Migration Act, when a congressman took the microphone and started to “talk nonsense.” “I asked the people who were with me who that character was and they told me it was a guy from Rio who was doing his best to prevent the law being passed, and that he was even mobilising parliamentarians who support gun rights,” he told us.

That “guy from Rio” was Jair Bolsonaro, elected as the president of Brazil the following year. On that day, Paolo, a priest in the Scalabrinian congregation, was with Camila Asano and Raísa Ortiz Cetra who were working on the issue of migration at Conectas. Despite Bolsonaro’s opposition,

the Chamber passed the bill of law and it was sanctioned by the then president, Michel Temer in May of the same year, after also being passed by the Senate.

The new law, that substituted the Foreigners’ Statute that had been in force since the time of the military dictatorship in the country, increased the rights of immigrants. For example, it created the category “humanitarian visa” which speeds up the concession of refugee status to victims of environmental disasters, armed conflict and human rights violations.

“It was a great victory. Afterwards we went out to celebrate. I still have photos of that day,” the priest recalls. “But it was the finishing line after a long journey of joint actions of advocacy.”

Before working together on the federal migration act, Paolo says, the Peace Mission, an institution that takes care of immigrants that he has been running since 2010, and Conectas had already worked together. In 2016, the two organisations collaborated in São Paulo on passing the municipal migration act and, before that, on a series of small advocacy initiatives to defend migrants' rights.

But, according to Paolo, the Peace Mission's advocacy was not well-structured until they discovered the work of Conectas. "It was through contact with them that we realised the need to have someone working specifically on this, in order to consolidate activities to help the immigrant agenda."

The organisation, run by the priest, was founded in the 1930s in a region known as Baixada do Glicério, in the centre of São Paulo. It was created to receive Italian immigrants who came to Brazil following the end of the First World War and was set up principally in the neighbourhoods of Mooca and Bela Vista. It was a shelter for the Italian community and had a school, a creche, music lessons and other cultural activities.

In time, Paolo says, the institution also started to work with migrants coming from other regions of Brazil. "There was a bus station next to the Peace Mission, so the congregation started to provide shelter to the migrants who arrived there too and they offered training courses and other types of assistance."

In the 1970s, he says, the profile of the immigrants changed again. "First there was a wave of Vietnamese immigrants, then Chilean and Korean," he says. "In the past 15 years, we have received a lot of Bolivians because of the Bolivia-Brazil agreement in 2005 and later Haitians. Then there was a not particularly big, but significant influx of people from Syria and finally from Venezuela."

Over time, the Peace Mission widened the scope of its activities until reaching its current structure which has a reception centre with 110 places, offering a range of services, including Portuguese classes, medical, psychological and legal assistance, work placements, training courses and migratory documentation. "Since 2009 a quarter of the migratory documentation cases, around 12 thousand, have been handled here," the priest told us with pride.

Padre Paolo, as he is known here, was born in Marostica, a small town in the north of Italy, and is an immigrant himself. But before becoming the director of the Peace Mission, the priest had already lived in Brazil during other periods. His first stay in the country was to study theology in São Paulo, at the beginning of the 1990s. Later, he spent two years in Guarujá where he developed a project to assist vulnerable people. At the end of the decade he returned to São Paulo, more specifically to the neighbourhood of Grajaú, in the south of the state capital where he lived for nine

years. Following a further period in Italy dedicated to his doctoral research, the priest returned in 2010 to take up the position of director at the Centre for Migrant Studies, which became the Peace Mission, under his management, in 2012.

In 2014, when the Acre government chartered a bus to send Haitian immigrants to São Paulo, Paolo started to have more contact with Conectas. “Between 400 and 450 immigrants arrived every day,” he recalls. “We realised we had an agenda in common with Conectas, which was to demand that the government take swift measures to guarantee the rights of these immigrants.” So, the two organisations started a partnership, carrying out joint missions, putting pressure on the authorities and going to the press to report violations and demand measures.

p.64 — “That was when we saw that it made sense to not only have a structure in the reception area of the Peace Mission but **also for advocacy,**” he says.

p.140 — Conectas also served as an example to the Peace Mission in how it worked in partnerships. “There is respect for the identity of the organisation with which they are working and the relationship they establish is transparent and one of mutual trust,” he says. **“There is an ethical approach to work in partnership that is not obvious.”**

The priest believes this characteristic of the organisation will be essential in the near future. “We are experiencing numerous

setbacks, in **terms of the indigenous issue,** — **p.164** migration, the environment and workers’ rights,” Parise says. “And I believe that this is not only a characteristic of this government but a constant threat that we will have to face in the coming decades.” According to him those who want to face up to this threat will have to build partnerships, “to work in strong structured networks.”

“We will have to identify common agendas and find actors who share the same values to work together, but without losing our identities,” he believes. “And Conectas does this very well.”

By *Maria Brant*

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+ **“Everything that values life brings us closer,” profile of Padre Paolo Parise – SUR 29 (2019)**





Venezuelan migrants crossing the Brazilian border in Pacaraima (Roraima). Conectas worked to stop the border from being closed and to guarantee the migrants' and refugees' access to their rights, including employment, healthcare and education. Credit: Leonardo Medeiros/Conectas - January 2018



“We see that democracy is in fact incomplete, unless there is social equality”

César Rodríguez-Garavito

César Rodríguez-Garavito

COLOMBIA

LAWYER

PRESIDENT AND DIRECTOR OF THE CENTER FOR HUMAN RIGHTS AND GLOBAL JUSTICE AT THE NYU LAW SCHOOL, FORMER DIRECTOR OF THE NGO DEJUSTICIA

HUMAN RIGHTS MUST UNDERPIN THE LINK BETWEEN UNIVERSITIES AND ACTIVISM

César Rodríguez-Garavito believes Conectas brings together researchers and grassroots movements

One of Conectas' most ambitious objectives has always been to reduce inequality between human rights organisations in the Global South and North. This inequality has historically been seen both in terms of the voices that take the lead in exposing violations and claiming rights and in the flow of funding to tackle violations and seek to guarantee rights.

“This relationship is still unequal, but not to the same degree as 10 years ago. There has been headway in how civil society organisations, like Conectas, carry out their work in conversation with other organisations of the Global South,” says César Rodríguez-Garavito, professor and director of the Center for Human Rights and Global Justice at New York University (NYU).

César highlights examples of Conectas' pioneering spirit, the intern and exchange programme with other Portuguese-speaking countries and the advocacy programme in foreign policy on human rights in Brazil, as well as stressing the decisive impact of the International Human Rights Colloquium in creating solidarity across the Southern Hemisphere. “Conectas has been at the cutting edge of this type of programme,” says César, who is currently a member of the External Monitoring Committee for Strategic Litigation at Conectas..

The exchange of learning and the circulation of ideas on case law in human rights among countries like South Africa, Brazil, India and Colombia led to increased presence and visibility of the

Global South in legal reform proceedings in these countries. “Furthermore, Conectas has a particular mechanism that deserves mention: the Sur Journal, a unique space that has no equivalent in the Global North,” he points out. “Because there is no other journal like this one. It is published in Portuguese, English and Spanish, with authors from the Global South. Only Sur does this,” says César, who is also the editorial director of the platform Open Global Rights. “Nowadays, ideas produced in Latin America, Asia and Africa circulate more, are more visible and not only reach other countries in the South more quickly but also those in the North.”

César taught at the Universidade de los Andes, in Bogota, in Colombia, where he created the Global Justice and Human Rights Programme. In 2008, he had his first contact with Conectas, when he was doing research on innovative ways of teaching law in Latin America.

p.114 — “The Sur Journal caught my attention as being an example of innovation in communication in the area of human rights,” says César, who has contributed to Sur on a number of occasions and co-founded the NGO DeJusticia – Centre for Research in Law, Justice and Society, in Bogota.

The intersection between universities and civil society is at the centre of César’s work and is also part of the genesis of Conectas, which has worked with

this convergence since its foundation, in 2001. “Like Conectas, I **have always tried to cultivate this hybrid space in human rights**,” he says. — p.72

He believes those who work with human rights have to be aware of geopolitical changes and adapt to new situations. In 2017, the 15th International Human Rights Colloquium highlighted the shrinking State as a factor in the weakening of access to human rights around the world.

This global configuration, which is quite evident in Latin America, imposes on human rights organisations the need to occupy spaces that were previously filled by the State. According to César, the way to carry out advocacy in this context and to avoid setbacks is by strengthening collaboration between institutions.

In 2018, he moved to New York and increased his links with Conectas. He collaborates with the institution in the area of strategic litigation and on themes related to climate change. “I greatly admire how Conectas has evolved. It has progressed as an organisation with international visibility for being particularly innovative and creative.”

He believes this characteristic of the organisation is becoming increasingly important. “In the last 10 years, the conditions and tools have changed in the area of human rights. In the beginning of the 2000s, there was a period of expansion

and optimism regarding the mechanisms and norms of human rights as a universal language,” he says.

International norms were created to underpin denouncements and democracy seemed to be destiny. Later, with the advance of liberal democracies and populist authoritarianism that favour polarisation, this process slowed down. Democracy no longer looks as certain. “We see that democracy is in fact incomplete, unless there is social inequality. Civil rights have to be accompanied by economic and social rights,” he says.

“We are experiencing a time of confrontation with reality which has led to human rights activists reaching out to other social movements, such as those of indigenous peoples and climate change,” he says. “These movements have shown us new forms of mobilisation and these need to be incorporated into human rights.”

- p.64** — “I believe that **Conectas was a pioneer in focusing on legal tools** in a hybrid model of activism, underpinned by solid work in communications. More recently, it has **p.156** — **incorporated articulation with grassroots movements** and has placed itself ahead of other human rights organisations.”

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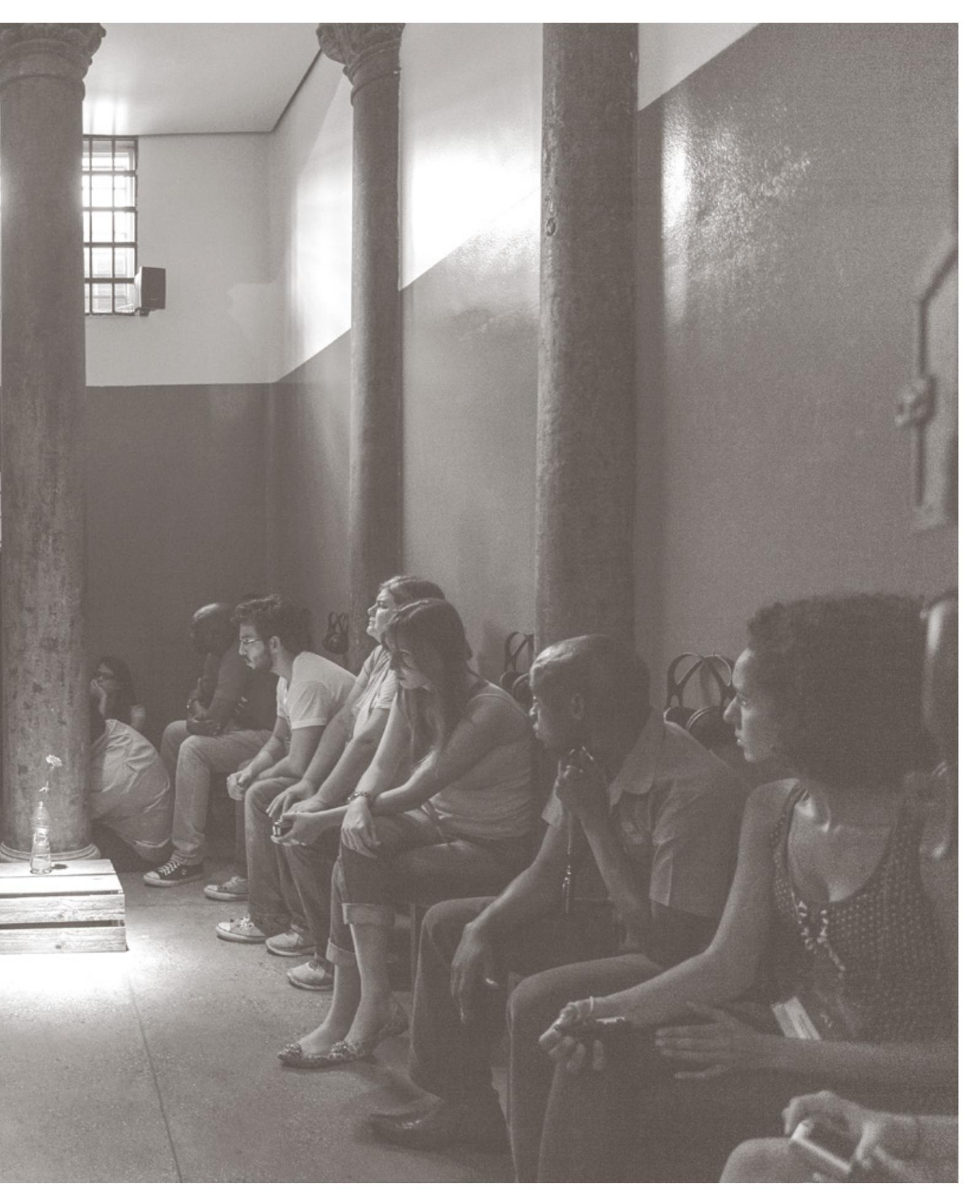
+ **Development and human rights**, by Juana Kweitel, César Rodríguez-Garavito and Laura Trajber Waisbich – SUR 17 (2012)

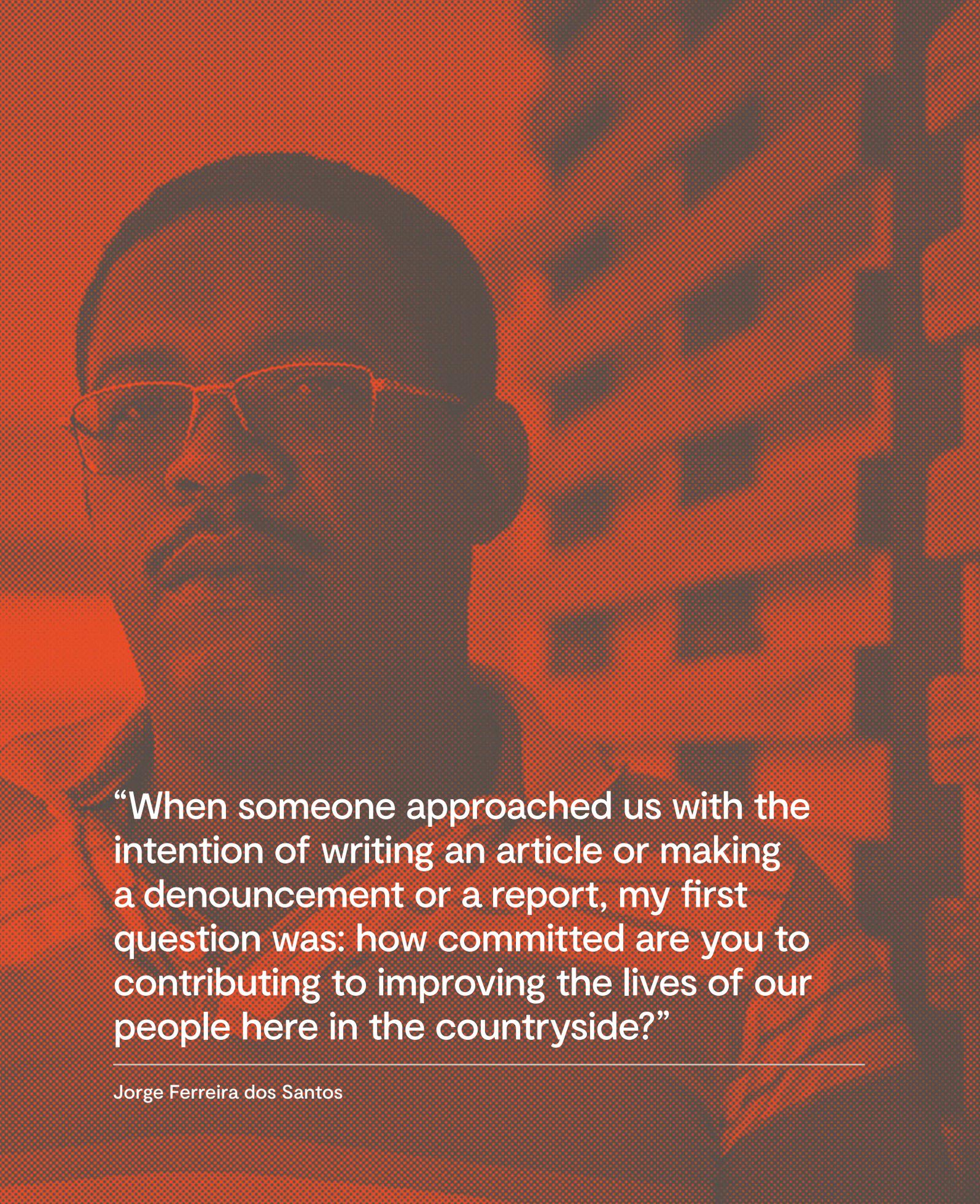
+ **The future of human rights**, by César Rodríguez-Garavito – SUR 20 (2014)

By *Maria Carolina Trevisan*

Participants at the XI International Human Rights Colloquium visit the Memorial to the Resistance, formerly DOPS (The Department for Political and Social Order), one of the symbols of political repression during the military dictatorship in São Paulo. Credit: Leandro Viana/Conectas - November 2011







“When someone approached us with the intention of writing an article or making a denouncement or a report, my first question was: how committed are you to contributing to improving the lives of our people here in the countryside?”

Jorge Ferreira dos Santos

Jorge Ferreira dos Santos

BRAZIL, MINAS GERAIS

RURAL WORKER AND
ACTIVIST

LEADER OF THE ARTICULATION OF RURAL
WORKERS OF THE STATE OF MINAS GERAIS
(ADERE-MG)

SUPPORT ENABLED GRASSROOTS ORGANISATIONS TO ACCESS INTERNATIONAL PROTECTION MECHANISMS

In partnership with Conectas, the activist from Minas Gerais denounced work analogous with slave labour on the coffee farms in the South of Minas Gerais, to the UN

In 2000, when he left Pirapora in the north of Minas Gerais to look for work in the south of the state, Jorge Ferreira dos Santos could not have imagined the journey he was embarking on and which would take him to far off places, like Geneva, in Switzerland.

In 2019, almost twenty years after that move, Jorge took part in a round table discussion, organised by Conectas during an event at the UN to denounce the government of Jair Bolsonaro for closing the Ministry of Labour and for demobilising its monitoring and control bodies, despite the criminal exploitation of labour in the coffee fields of the south of his state, Minas Gerais, the biggest coffee producer in Brazil.

With Conectas' support, Jorge and his companions in the struggle wrote a condemnation about work analogous to slave labour on the coffee farms in the south of Minas, which was filed in 2018 at the OECD (Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development) National Contact Point (NCP) in Brazil.

The NCP is a mechanism dedicated to implementing and providing information about OECD norms for more responsible business conduct. It receives and verifies reports of violations made against multinational companies who usually evade responsibility on the basis of production chains being outsourced.

“We had never thought of making a condemnation of this sort,” the activist

admits “because we had imagined that reaching the UN and making a denouncement was something only really big organisations could do. And here we are, in a small region, speaking with our local accents, Minas Gerais Portuguese, we didn’t imagine we could get that far,” he recalls.

This journey started on that trip from Pirapora to the south of Minas in the year 2000. Jorge was 24 and was bursting with energy to get to work, but even he found conditions in the charcoal factories in the region “heavy and violent.”

In the year 2000, Jorge managed to move from the charcoal factory to a coffee farm where circumstances were not much better. “I didn’t have any rights or respect there either. Nowadays, I know that I was subjected to working conditions analogous to slave labour, for example exhausting working hours and debt bondage,” he recounts.

Although Jorge would not fully comprehend the violations for some time, he did realise that something was wrong with those working conditions.

Three years later, he joined the local trade union for rural workers. His baptism came about at an action on a coffee farm where he saw men in degrading working conditions. It was like looking back at himself three years before, from a different point of view. And that became his fight.

“We discovered degrading working

conditions, negotiated with the farmer, who would give some kind of severance pay to the workers and then the following year we would find them all there again, in the same conditions, on the same farm,” he recounts. He perceived risks and limitations in their strategy.

“They tried to kill me. And when I left the region on a break, they broke into my house twice while it was empty,” he recalls. “They wrote on my children’s bedroom wall: ‘You are going to die.’”

Brazil is one of the countries in the world with the highest number of killings of human rights defenders. Between 2015 and 2019, every eight days an activist, environmentalist or community leader was murdered in Brazil, according to a study by the UN High Commissioner for Human Rights. 174 defenders were murdered in Brazil in this period, topped only by Colombia (397 cases) and slightly worse than the Philippines (173 cases).

“We reached the conclusion that we couldn’t keep going into the farms without the Ministry for Labour, without the authorities to rescue workers, because the obligation was not ours and we didn’t have the money, infrastructure or salary to take that risk. It was the responsibility of the state who should have been protecting workers and unionists, but they weren’t,” he says. He helped to create the Articulation of Rural Workers

in the State of Minas Gerais (Adere-MG), members of which have taken training sessions in human rights and work analogous to slave labour.

Three years later, in 2011, he and more than 800 comrades occupied the Regional Superintendency of Labour. They left only once they had met with the then Minister of Agriculture, Carlos Lupi and had secured the commitment of the federal governor to carry out operations and monitor labour on 537 farms in the region. “The agenda was always slave labour,” Jorge told us. He then went on to follow a trail that led him to an epiphany.

“We discovered that, as well as grooming workers they were also trafficking people. This transformed an issue that had been seen as solely concerning labour into a political and criminal matter,” the activist explains.

He came across article 149 of the Brazilian Penal Code, that defines as a crime “reducing someone to conditions analogous of slave labour, either by submitting them to forced labour or to exhausting working hours, by subjecting them to degrading working conditions or by restricting, by any means, their movements for reasons of debts incurred with the employer or an agent.”

Jorge met people working at Repórter Brasil who were seeking information about exploitation among coffee workers in the

region. This piece of research turned into a report, in conjunction with the Danish NGO Danwatch. It was called “Bitter Coffee” and it identified the existence of work analogous to slave labour in the supply chains of two of the largest global coffee enterprises: the Swiss company Nestlé and the Dutch company Jacobs Douwe Egberts. It was an international scandal.

The positive impact of this action led Jorge to strategically assess Adere’s contacts and partnerships. “When anyone or any organisation approached us with the intention of writing an article of making a denouncement or report, my first question is: **how committed are you to contributing — p.156 to improving the lives of our people here in the countryside?**”

This bond of trust with Conectas was forged in the drafting and **joint sub- — p.92 mission of the complaint to the OECD**, which is still in progress. “Today, we have a huge level of trust in our comrades at Conectas and we believe in the seriousness of their work and in their commitment to defending rural coffee workers,” says Jorge. “I mention coffee because it is the area I work in on a daily basis, but I know that Conectas is a tool for defending the people, whether they are salaried rural workers or urban workers.”

Jorge sees Conectas as always “helping to fortify these actions” on a **journey of — p.80 mutual support and gaining knowledge**. “To

be frank, I think we have learned that sticking your foot in the door is not the only way to solve problems. We have learned with Conectas that we have to create unity and build bridges that link both sides.”

According to the activist, **one of the greatest human rights challenges for the future is to work on people’s conscience.**

“Anywhere you go among the people, you will speak about human rights, and [people] already come with the narrative that human rights are only good for defending criminals,” Jorge points out. “It seems that people still don’t understand what human rights imply in defending imprisonment for aggressors of women, for example, or even the fight against fascism,” he says.

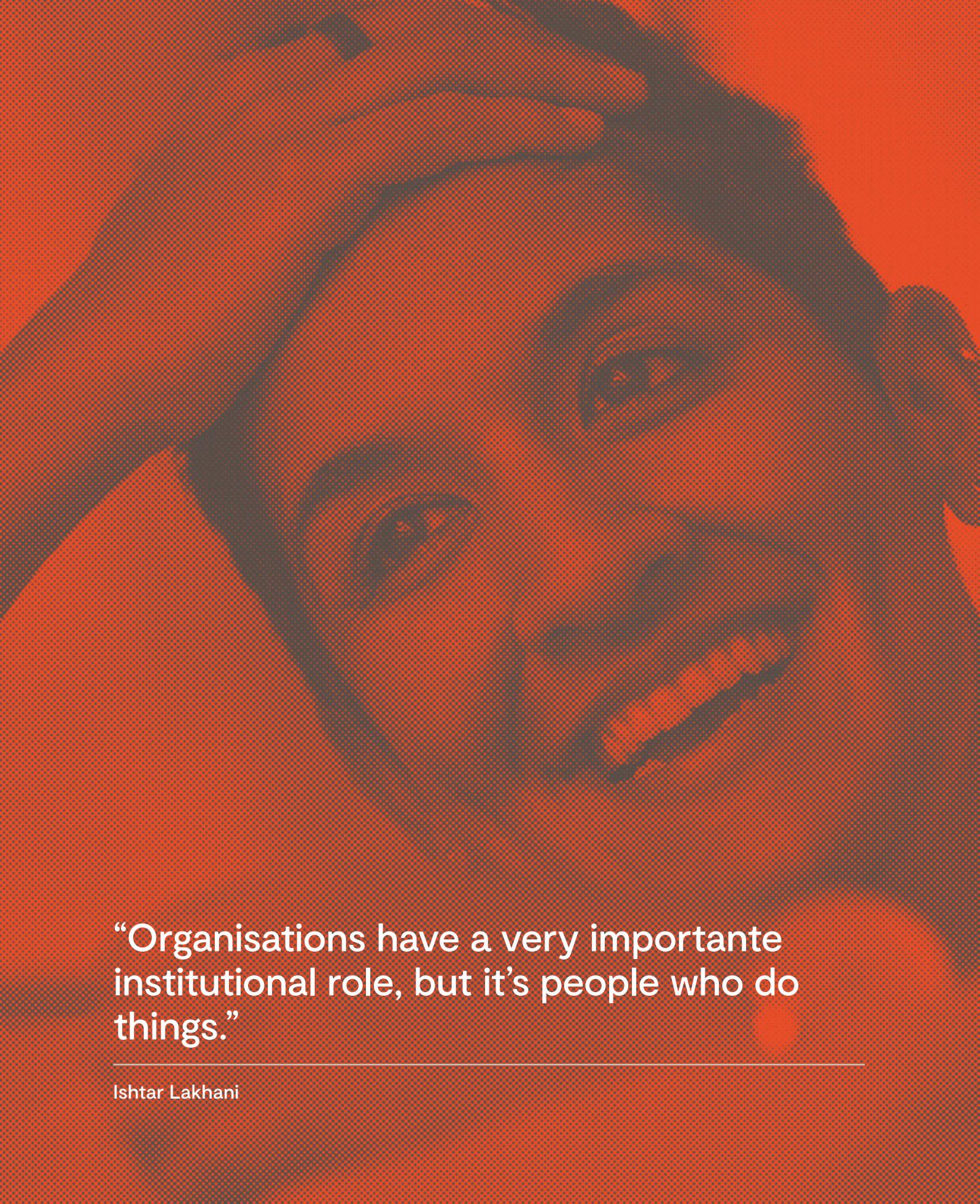
For him, the case of coffee production illustrates the importance of human rights. “It makes no sense for the coffee sector, a product that is so consumed, that generates profits for companies and that contributes to Brazil’s trade balance, to have workers without the minimum of dignity on the farms,” he says. “We fight for basic rights: freedom, a decent place to sleep and eat, time to rest and a salary to feed you and your children.”

By *Fernanda Mena*

Workers wait for transport to coffee farms in Minas Gerais, where they work under degrading conditions analagous to slavery. Credit: João Paulo Brito/Conectas - September 2016







“Organisations have a very important
institutional role, but it’s people who do
things.”

Ishtar Lakhani

Ishtar Lakhani

SOUTH AFRICA

ANTHROPOLOGIST

CREATIVE ACTIVISM CONSULTANT

NURTURING RELATIONSHIPS IS ESSENTIAL FOR ANYONE WHO WANTS TO REALLY CHANGE THE WORLD

For the activist, the main role of human rights organisations is to foster ties between people, something Conectas does very well

After 20 years of activism, Ishtar Lakhani has come to the conclusion that the main job human rights organisations can do is to connect and foster relationships between people. “Organisations have an important institutional role, but it is people who do things.” This is how Conectas plays a very important role in the Global South, she says.

In 2017 Ishtar was invited to facilitate some workshops at the International Human Rights Colloquium when she got to know Conectas’ work in depth. She is South African with Indian parents and is known for her work with creative activism, which she **started doing during her fight for p.40 — the rights of sex workers and in combating gender-based violence** in South Africa.

The activist attributes her unconventional approach to the struggle for social justice to her “ungovernable” family. The daughter of a Muslim art historian and a Hindu actor and journalist, Ishtar says she learned early on that activism can take on many different forms such as going on a march, having friends over for dinner or loving someone you want to love. However, it was during college that she became more personally involved in the fight for human rights.

It was during the time that the former South African President Jacob Zuma was on trial for rape when Ishtar joined a feminist network called the 1 in 9 Campaign that fought for the rights of survivors of sexual violence. It was through this network

that she learned about the work of SWEAT (Sex Workers Education and Advocacy Taskforce), an organisation that defends the rights of sex workers.

p.164 — “I have always admired and respected their work, especially with regard to how they ran the organisation, on the principle of ‘nothing about us without us’, to ensure that sex workers participate in all organisational and decision-making processes,” she says. When she moved from Durban, where she was born in 1985, to Cape Town in 2014, Ishtar went to work with them.

Whilst working with SWEAT, Ishtar set up a cell in the middle of a UN conference and “arrested” participants so they could go through and feel the experience of sex workers. She also invented a non-existent award just for the British singer-songwriter Elton John in order to involve the musician in her campaign. Today, the activist is a consultant for organisations around the world that want to find creative ways to fight for human rights: “a free(lance) radical advocacy strategist” is what she calls herself.

To stimulate the activists’ creativity, Ishtar often invites people from outside the human rights area to participate in her workshops – artists, psychologists, fashion professionals and even children. “If a child does not understand what we are doing, we don’t know how to communicate properly.”

She admits that upon receiving a description of the event that she would facilitate for Conectas – a workshop aimed at lawyers – she had doubts about how much creativity she would be able to get from the group. “But it actually turned out to be one of the best workshops I’ve ever given in my life. It completely changed what I thought about human rights lawyers.” She attributes this to the way Conectas organised the colloquium during which the workshop took place. “Conectas did everything possible and imaginable to make people feel that they could participate,” she says. “Every detail was considered so that everyone felt included.”

The event had, for example, simultaneous translation for all the languages of the participants, something the activist had never seen at civil society events. “This was fantastic because every single person felt they could genuinely participate in the conversation – I had never had such an experience – it showed me what a real global colloquium should be like.”

Another innovative feature, she says, was that the event took into account the North-South dynamic in a concrete way. “From the beginning it was very clear that the entire event had been designed as a space for exchange between organisations from the Global South and **gave — p.108 space mainly to voices of the South** that have always been marginalised,” she says.

Unlike what usually happens at events of this type, explains Ishtar, the space was given to themes considered important by activists rather than for example, to the funders or organisations in the North.

The activist returned to Brazil in 2019 for another workshop, this time focusing on Brazil. “The mood was different. Bolsonaro had already been elected and Conectas rightly took the atmosphere into account while organising the activities.” The organisation, says Ishtar, realised that the event could not be “business as usual,” that the activists were scared and traumatised, and that it would not be possible to simply hold the usual colloquium, with panels and debate tables. “They could see that what human rights activists needed at that time was a space where they could talk, to connect with each other and share their fears and plans,” she comments.

“Again, a lot of attention and care was given to each of the spaces created for the activists,” she adds. “Although organising it, from a logistical point of view, must have been a nightmare,” she jokes. She explains that the participants were divided into groups and that each group went to visit grassroots organisations in different parts of Brazil. “My group went to Rio and there we had a very in-depth experience with the work of a local organisation.”

In addition to the very moving experience, says Ishtar, it demonstrated how

Conectas really is connected to what is happening with activists in their context, and how it reacts sensitively in the moment. The organisation feels **responsible — p.56 for the participants and for safeguarding the space it has created for the activists.** “This is very beautiful” she reckons.

The activist believes that it is exactly this type of work that will be most crucial in the coming decades. “In my advocacy work, I sometimes get the impression that organisations are a graveyard of innovative ideas,” she laughs. “As time goes by, I think that it’s passionate and ardent people who are not necessarily linked to human rights organisations that are creating the more sustainable and lasting changes in the world.” In her opinion, the future of human rights lies much more in nurturing relationships that cross themes, sectors and countries as well as in the creation of more spaces where people can work together, grow and flourish, rather than in the strengthening of institutions.

“We human rights activists are very good at describing what we are fighting against, for example, we are against torture, hate speech, violence against women, but we’re very bad at describing what we’re fighting for. **We have difficulty in communicating how we want the world to be, in transmitting an image of that world in a way that people can visualise,**” she says. “What’s more, if we can describe it in detail,

it will be much easier to take the required steps to transform each aspect to get to the world we want,” she asserts. “If people can visualise this other more egalitarian and just world they’ll want to live in it.”

By *Maria Brant*

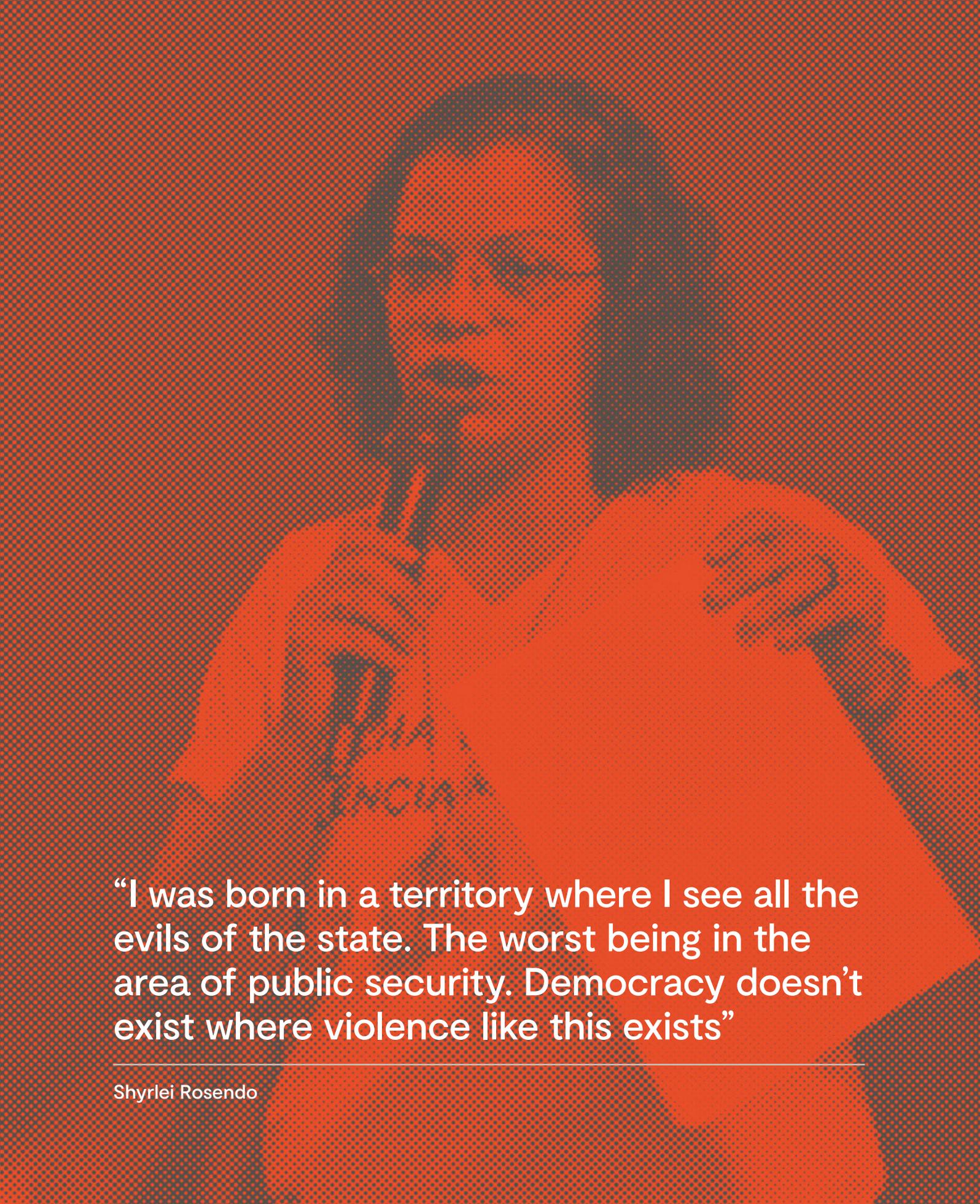
READ MORE

+ I am a human rights defender,
by Ishtar Lakani - SUR 30 (2020)



Participants at the VII International Human Rights Colloquium.
Credit: Leandro Viana/Conectas - November 2007





“I was born in a territory where I see all the evils of the state. The worst being in the area of public security. Democracy doesn’t exist where violence like this exists”

Shyrlei Rosendo

Shyrlei Rosendo

BRAZIL, RIO DE JANEIRO

MASTER IN EDUCATION
AND PUBLIC POLICY

COORDINATOR AT MARÉ NETWORKS

PROFESSIONAL AND GRASSROOTS NGOS HAVE BEEN UNITED IN A STRATEGIC AND EFFECTIVE WAY

Shyrlei Rosendo believes scenarios involving the court system and police violence should be tackled collectively

“When I was a child in Maré, I never saw a person carrying a gun,” says the pedagogue Shyrlei Rosendo, 38, coordinator of mobilisation in the Centre for Public Security and Access to Justice of the Maré Networks NGO, located in one of the biggest conglomerates of favelas in Rio de Janeiro, the Maré Complex. “Later, in my adolescence and youth I was increasingly exposed to weapons.”

Shyrlei holds a Master’s degree in education and public policy. Throughout her life, she has witnessed the changes in her territory that came with the escalation in public security policies in Rio, as part of the so-called War on Drugs. Public security policies should protect citizens from violence, but in this case, they **expose people living**

in the favelas, the majority of whom are — p.92 black, to police violence.

In Maré, Shyrlei accompanied the implementation of Police Pacification Units (UPPs), a federal intervention that saw the army and their tanks on the streets in the communities, the “slaughter police” of the former governor, Wilson Witzel and the expansion of the action of factions and militias. In 2021, over 140 thousand people live in Maré, which is a collection of 16 favelas. It is larger than 9 out of 10 Brazilian municipalities.

Violent intervention by the police in favelas and Brazilian peripheries is inefficient and lethal. It does not combat crime and exposes the population to violence and death, resulting in rights violations and mental health problems. In 2020 the Institute for

Public Security (ISP) showed that in Rio de Janeiro, one in every four violent deaths was the result of police actions.

In response to this unacceptable situation, civil society organisations, like Conectas and Maré Networks, entered discussions with social movements and the Rio de Janeiro Public Defender's Office to construct the ADPF 635 (claim of non-compliance with a fundamental precept), known as the ADPF of the favelas.

The action, presented by the PSB (Brazilian Socialist Party), brought together human rights activists from different fields, particularly grassroots movements. It was the first time that organisations and collectives of people living in the favelas, who had been directly affected by violent police operations, were able to speak directly to ministers at the Supreme Federal Court (STF). They participated in the ruling on the action as *amicus curiae*.

"Initially, the Court refused the admission of grassroots organisations as *amicus curiae* at the ADPF. Conectas appealed and secured their participation," Shyrlei recounts. Insistence paid off and they were heard.

In August 2020, the STF imposed restrictions on police operations in favelas during the pandemic, as a way of tackling the institutional racism explicit in the brutality and abuse of the police force during interventions into the vulnerable territories, populated largely by black people.

This was an historic ruling. It means: the prohibition of the use of schools and hospitals as bases for police operations; the obligation to preserve scenes where people have been killed and vetoes the improper removal of the wounded and dead bodies. The ruling also prohibits the use of bullet-proof helicopters, known as "flying skulls" and regulates criminal analysis and forensics to ensure independent, impartial, transparent assessments when people have died.

By means of an injunction, the Court prohibited police operations during the pandemic which reduced deaths resulting from police intervention by 78%, according to a study by the Study Group on New Illegalities (GENI), at the Federal Fluminense University. The study also indicated a reduction in crimes against life (47.7%) and against property (39%) in the same period, contradicting the premise of combatting crime that underpins public support for this type of police operation.

"There are two approaches to human rights activism: grassroots movements and professional NGOs," Shyrlei says. **"Grassroots movements, in general, feel they are overridden and that the NGOs take away their leadership. Conectas has a principle of allowing organisations to speak for themselves"**, she says. Her first contact with the organisation was in 2017, when she participated in the 15th International Human Rights Colloquium, organised by Conectas. — p.140

Despite the Supreme Court ruling, later confirmed by other ministers of the court, the ADPF was not complied with. The most tragic and emblematic case was when the Civil Police carried out the biggest massacre in the history of the state of Rio de Janeiro, during an operation in the Jacarezinho favela in May 2021 which left 24 civilians and one civil policeman dead.

“We need to overcome this policy of death, of massacres that do not happen by chance, and human rights need to be integrated with other struggles, such as that for the right to education. How do we ensure the right to education for our poor, black populations living in the favelas and outskirts of large cities?”

Shyrlei believes the problem of public security has increased because of a lack of dialogue with the Rio government which suspended the Public Security Council in January 2019, thus impeding society’s participation in debates in this area. In this context, she says, the presence of Conectas helps to reverberate reports of violations and prevent violence.

“Democracy cannot exist in violent conditions like this,” she says. “Democracy is the possibility for groups to compete for election and whoever wins has to listen to society. Conectas has helped us to understand how the judicial system works and has created a real chance for us to be heard.”

Members of Maré Networks underwent

a training course with Conectas which has led to the political arguments that they provide to Conectas, with practical understanding of the context of human rights violations, being deeper and technically supported. This relationship of trust and exchange between a grassroots organisation like Maré Networks and Conectas makes work between the two approaches stronger and more effective.

“I was born in a territory where I see all the evils of the State. **The worst being in the area of public security because when someone is killed, that’s it,**” says Shyrlei. “The state has always been in the favelas, but it is working on socially controlling these people, maintaining the precariousness in which they live. The favelas are not needy. They are made up of citizens whose rights are being disrespected.”

Human rights violations in Brazil occur in complex conditions within which there are layers of prejudice, social inequality and violence. In order to tackle these violations, we need to form structures between different players in society, with different ways of working and diverse knowledge and history, like a big mosaic. This was the type of collective construction that led to the ADPF of the Favelas. “We have a relationship of trust.

Conectas embraced the demand for the ADPF, collaborated with the grassroots organisations and helped them to be heard

as *'amicus curiae'* at the STF, a space these organisations do not usually occupy. So, the work of Conectas was fundamental for us to understand the judicial system and to have access to it," Shyrlei concluded.

"Today we are still struggling to survive, but my greatest wish is that one day we can come together to think about the best policy, the best programme and the best action to enable people to live in a dignified and compassionate way."

By *Maria Carolina Trevisan*



Participant of the XV International Human Rights Colloquium, Clara Alves, from the Brazilian Interdisciplinary Association of Aids, visiting the Museum of Immigration in São Paulo. Credit: Eduardo Fujise/Conectas - October 2017





“I had to be creative in applying white euro-centric rights to the reality of my own people”

Samara Pataxó

Samara Pataxó

BRAZIL, BAHIA

LAWYER

LEGAL ASSISTANT AT THE ARTICULATION OF THE
INDIGENOUS PEOPLES OF BRAZIL (APIB)

THE SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL AGENDA IMPACTS ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND REQUIRES URGENT JOINT ACTION

Closer relations between Conectas and the indigenous movement have led to increased legal activity to support the rights of the first peoples in Brazil

Samara Pataxó was only 10 years old at the time but she has clear memories of the ‘celebrations’ for the 500-year anniversary of the discovery of Brazil, in 2000. She was brought up in the Coroa Vermelha village, between Porto Seguro and Santa Cruz Cabrália, in Bahia. Until then she had had little contact with indigenous people from other groups, other than the Pataxó HãHãHãe and the Tupinambá, who also live in the south of Bahia.

“In parallel with the official festivities, a conference called ‘Brasil, Outros 500’ (Brazil, Another 500) was organised, instigated by the indigenous movement and other social movements,” says Samara, who had never before seen so many indigenous people from other groups. “Even though I was a child, I

remember leaders saying they were against everything that was happening around the 500-year celebrations. And I also remember the confrontation between police and indigenous protestors, who were being prevented from participating in the ‘festivities.’”

This period is also engraved on the 31-year old lawyer’s memory because of the conflicts that had been taking place, even before the 500-year anniversary. “The Bahia state government and the federal government wanted to create a ‘Museum of the Discovery’ and to denominate the entire area of my village as a historic heritage site. This meant removing the indigenous people from their traditional territory, as well as the non-indigenous people who lived there.”

Because of this, the demarcation of

the Coroa Vermelha indigenous land was rushed through in 1998, Samara recounts, which meant some important areas traditionally occupied by the Pataxó people were left out.

“There were many physical transformations in the village during this process. I remember houses being knocked down and people being removed, but I also remember the struggle of the leaders: trips to Brasília and Salvador and a lot of negotiations,” she says. “I grew up like this, seeing all this.”

She had already learned from her family the importance of the fight for her people’s territory and she believes the demarcation process made it more concrete. “My grandfather, Manuel Siriri is still remembered today as someone who was fundamental in the process of the social organisation of the Coroa Vermelha indigenous community,” she explains. Samara went to school in the village. “To have studied in an indigenous school is crucial because as well as learning to read and write, I learned a lot about the culture and language of our people and also about the fight for our territory, better education and healthcare.”

During sixth form Samara decided she wanted to become a teacher. However, in her final year she participated in a work experience programme for young people at the local Funai office (National Indian Foundation). “That was when I realised that to solve our problems we needed

other professional people, like doctors and lawyers. I did not have a vocation for health-care, but I saw law as a chance to really help our struggle.”

Even before she graduated in law at the Federal University of Bahia (UFBA), Samara was already providing legal assistance to the indigenous movement. “When I returned to the community in the holidays, I used to participate in local discussions and meetings,” she says.

Today, over 20 years after the first demarcation that made such a big impression on Samara, she is one of the leaders who work on attempting to regularise the areas that were left out of the first plan of the Pataxó territory in the village of Coroa Vermelha. She and a generation of young indigenous people, who have also taken courses in law, have had to be pioneers on this journey.

Samara felt her university course was missing subjects focused on the indigenous issue. “But my presence and that of my relatives, who also took law, prompted some of the lecturers to touch on this subject matter in their classes” she says. “At that time, I had to be creative in applying white euro-centric rights to the reality of my own people.”

As soon as she graduated, Samara entered the legal aid programme of Mupoiba (United Movement of the Indigenous Peoples and Organisations of Bahia), a regional branch

of the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples and Organisations of the North-East, Minas Gerais and Espírito Santo (Apoime). While Apib (Articulation of the Indigenous Peoples of Brazil) brings together different regional organisations.

Samara recounts that from 2019, the increased threat to indigenous rights, following the Bolsonaro's election, meant lawyers from different movements started to become better connected. "A national network of indigenous lawyers emerged. With this we have particular areas of interest and know which lawyer to go to when a particular need arises in one of the regions."

In the middle of 2020, when the indigenous movement decided to file a lawsuit for Non-Compliance with a Fundamental Precept (ADPF) for the appalling way in which the government handled measures to contain the pandemic, Samara went to work at the legal advice department at Apib, where she joined other lawyers who had mobilised to put the suit together.

"We considered the ADPF to be a piece of strategic litigation. In other words, in addition to the lawsuit itself we considered the political, social, economic and cultural repercussions," she explains. In ADPF 709, the indigenous movement demands that the government implement a plan to contain Covid on indigenous territories. "Although the focus of the lawsuit is indigenous healthcare during the pandemic, it

has several permutations, such as the matter of the need for territorial safeguarding and for the removal of invaders from these territories, primarily Munduruku and Yanomami ones, which are occupied by prospectors."

Apib brought other actors onto the lawsuit, like political parties and civil society organisations to illustrate that the indigenous peoples were not alone in their demand. **Conectas participated as *amicus curiae*** — p.64, and provided statements and declarations that showed the importance of guaranteeing indigenous rights. "Their participation was fundamental," says Samara.

The budding relationship between Apib and Conectas then grew stronger, principally in terms of the indigenous movement's international activities. The two organisations have taken denouncements of violations of indigenous rights to several different courts, to both the Inter-American Human Rights system and to the UN.

In 2021, Conectas helped Apib record and translate videos denouncing attempts by the federal government to ease socio-environmental safeguarding measures. The videos were screened during sessions of the United Nations Human Rights Council, in Geneva.

"Apib is trying to strengthen international advocacy and in this sense has been learning a lot with Conectas, who **have more — p.100 expertise in communications with international safeguarding mechanisms,**" she

says. “We see this convergence as being very positive.”

Samara believes this type of joint action will be fundamental in moving forward.

“The impact of climate and environmental issues on human rights is becoming increasingly urgent. Furthermore, we are

witnessing governments that show increasingly less commitment to this agenda,” she

p.134 — says. **“Guaranteeing the safeguarding of these rights is going to require working in conjunction with civil society** on both legal action in Brazil and denunciations of violations at the international level.”

By *Maria Brant*

**VALUES UNITE
THE TEAMS
OF THE PAST,
PRESENT AND
FUTURE**

At a deep level all the different phases of Conectas are underpinned by the values that unite the team. The team has changed over the last 20 years but determination, energy and perseverance have been the anchors of our work.

Understanding that a better world is not just necessary, it is essential: this is our ideal.

Believing that a better world is not just necessary, it is also possible: this is our commitment to making an impact.

Daring to challenge and re-think ourselves whenever necessary: this is our capacity for innovation.

Focusing on the struggle at the root of all struggles: the antiracism struggle.

Having the conviction that our actions only make sense if they are part of a bigger movement: this is our commitment to the value of partnerships.

Understanding that the way we treat each other defines us: this is a caring culture.

Finding the strength not to give up and to keep going in the face of adversity: this is our persistence.

Conectas has 20 years of history and is, above all else, a human adventure. It is the story of people who got on board - and are still on board - with a courageous belief in building a fair, free and democratic society for everyone.

In the following pages, each member of our team will talk about what they are proud of, what they value, what inspires them and how they are connected to the organisation.

The story of Conectas, the victories won and the challenges overcome, is the story of our past, present and future teams.

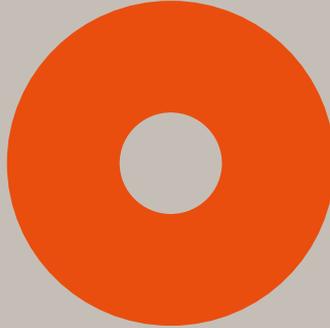
By *Muriel Asseraf*



RODRIGO DORNELLES

LAWYER, LITIGATION

The transformations and changes that Conectas constantly undergoes in order to fulfil its role in the best way possible. Engagement with the struggle for a much fairer world means looking at one's own faults, as a matter of consistency.



The reasons I feel proud of Conectas are...



ELIANA PERUCCI

ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

Its work with dedicated, intelligent, experienced people who are united in the same objective.



THAYNÁ YAREDY

FIGHTING INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Its pro-active work on litigation in human rights and the interface between political work and the collective construction of the organisation's actions.



JULIA NEIVA

COORDINATOR

Our indignation at the injustice in our country and the rest of the world. The causes we work on, bravely and with respect. That we act to change reality.



MURIEL ASSERAF

INSTITUTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The decision and the ability of the organisation to develop its own management model, based on its values.



GABRIEL GUERRA

INTERN, COMMUNICATIONS

Something that warms my heart and makes me proud is the solidarity between people from different places and social backgrounds and of different ages, uniting around a single cause: the defence of human rights in Brazil.



PEDRO GOMES DA SILVA

NATIONAL ADVOCACY

That it is an organisation that is always seeking improvements. Its power to fearlessly make changes.



JUANA KWEITEL

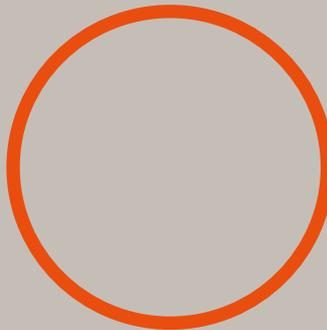
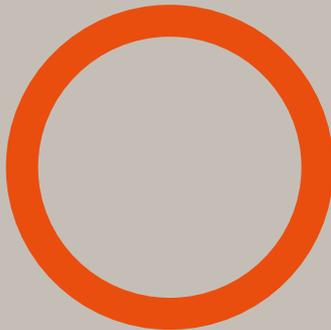
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

The decision to place tackling racism at the centre of its agenda and organisational values, transforming the composition of the team and the board.



GISELE MARIA DOS SANTOS
FINANCE OFFICER

The humility to always be prepared to share what we know and to learn what we do not yet know.



MARYURI MORA GRISALES
EDITOR, SUR JOURNAL

The team work stemming from the commitment of highly competent people who respect democratic values and believe in the importance of human rights in the world.



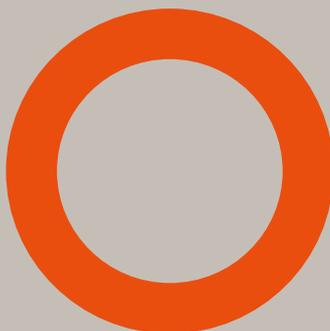
JOÃO PAULO DE GODOY
LAWYER, LITIGATION

Our internal organisation, the solid consistent functioning of which allows us to work under the best possible material conditions.



GABRIEL MANTELLI
DEFENSE OF SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

That Conectas provides a bridge for accessing decision-making institutions.



ROBERTA MARINA DOS SANTOS
FIGHTING INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

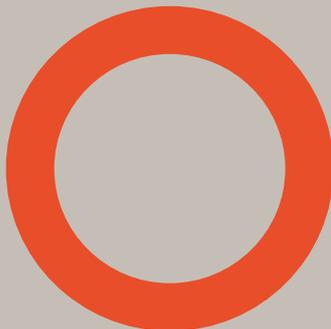
Taking care of people during the atypical time of the pandemic. This was essential in keeping the dream alive that work can really be an extension of who we are. And being able to say that the care we receive is given back to everyone around us.



CAMILA ASANO
PROGRAMME DIRECTOR

The fact that it is very confrontational and never fails to denounce violations, while also being highly technical and purposeful

What I most value in the organisation is...





SHEILA PARIZOTTO POLETO

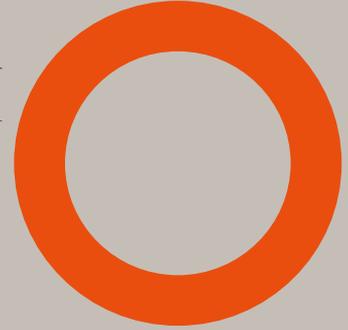
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER

The transparency, culture and values.

BARBARA MARTINS
ALVES DOS SANTOS

INTERN, LITIGATION

The organisation's work at the UN and the OAS Inter-American Court of Human Rights. I have known about Conectas for years, since before I started law school, and I have always been inspired by this.



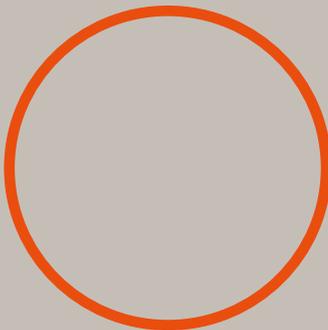
What I find most inspiring at Conectas is...



MARCOS FUCHS

LEGAL AND FINANCE DIRECTOR

The chance to confront injustice and rights violations by means of denouncements, petitions, interviews and opinions.



RENATO BARRETO

CONSULTANT, SUR JOURNAL

The resilience in the face of adversity that is inherent in the work of defending human rights and creativity in internal and external communications.



GUSTAVO HUPPÉS

INTERNATIONAL ADVOCACY

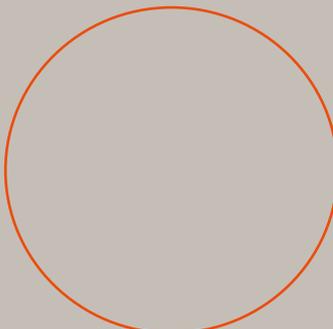
The solid partnerships that are built and maintained. That Conectas is built on the foundation of these partnerships and is always working in conjunction with others towards different causes.



MARINA RONGO BARBOSA

STRENGTHENING DEMOCRATIC SPACE

Its capacity for articulation, working in networks, sharing spaces and exchanging knowledge with diverse representative organisations and social movements.



ARQUIAS CRUZ

ADVOCACY

Our commitment to the international struggle to apply and broaden human rights and to combat inequality and social injustice





FERNANDA MIOTO

COORDINATOR

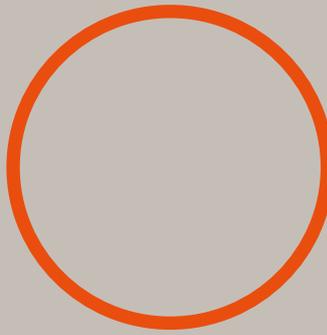
The respect received by everyone involved. We are unique beings and are respected as such.



CELSO MURILO

IT OFFICER

Even though I am not on the front line I identify with the struggles and victories of Conectas. It is like my second home.



JEFERSON BATISTA

CONTENT EDITOR

Hope in the midst of the chaos - not naive hope but rather fierce, well-informed hope, rooted in reality.



TAINARA NAGOT

SOCIAL MEDIA OFFICER

Definitely the work with social causes. I decided to apply for the post because I wanted to work in this area.

CAROLINA DINIZ

FIGHTING INSTITUTIONAL VIOLENCE

Its capacity to attract committed, competent and kind people..



FLAVIA SOUZA

FUNDRAISING OFFICER

The humane work that we do. This humanity starts with the working groups, who are always prepared to work collaboratively and to listen to suggestions and it extends to the top, when we make space for important voices and causes.



FERNANDA DRUMMOND PINHEIRO

DEFENSE OF SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

The desire to make a difference and to present that which is different, showing the point of view of the South, that is so often forgotten, even within the field of human rights itself.



THAYNAH GUTIERREZ GOMES

DEFENSE OF SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

A non-compartmentalised and non-superficial approach to all that involves combatting racism. This is a challenging choice and one I had expected from a human rights organisation. I found it here.

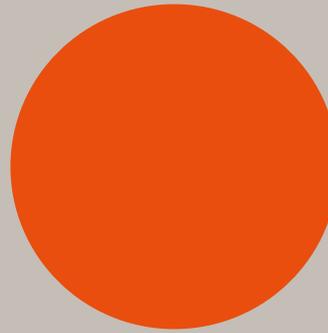
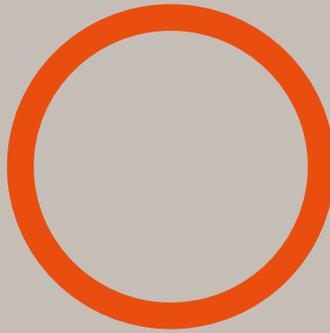
What links you to Conectas is...



GABRIEL SAMPAIO

COORDINATOR

Summed up in 3 essential verbs: that it will exist, resist and build the struggle for a united world, free of injustice.



My dream for the next 20 years of Conectas is...



LUIZA BUCHAUL

OFFICER, COMMUNICATIONS

That the organisation will grow plurally and diversely, extending access to spaces for the defence of democracy and human rights to voices that have not fully conquered their space and power.



LEONARDO MEDEIROS

COORDINATOR

That Conectas will be able to influence national opinion on human rights and on the need for the fight for equality to include strengthening democracy as well as respect for fundamental rights.



SUSANA BARBERY

FUNDRAISING OFFICER

That it achieves greater national reach in its action, that it becomes better known among the general public and that it inspires other organisations whose objectives are related to diversity



CAMILA MIKIE

DEFENSE OF SOCIOENVIRONMENTAL RIGHTS

That we never stop dreaming. That we look at the past 20 years and ask: "How was this possible? How come we had to fight for such basic rights?"



GISELE CAMPOS BATISTA

FUNDRAISING OFFICER

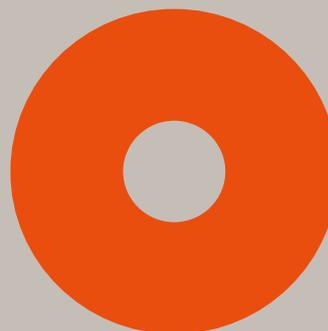
Idealistically, I dream that Conectas' work may become less necessary in a world in which human rights are better protected. Realistically, I hope that Conectas, alongside other actors, manages to contribute to institutional changes which have a structural impact.



RAISSA BELINTANI

COORDINATOR

That we are able to contribute to Brazil and the world being ruled by solid, transparent and participative democracies that value the rights of all people.



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20 profiles of activists to commemorate two decades of this international organisation, a pioneer in the Global South

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