

The Diplomacy of Development: Negotiating effective networks for social change in Amazonian Brazil



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Project Overview

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About the McBurney Fellowship Program

Through McGill's Institute for Health and Social Policy, the McBurney Fellowship Program supports students in international service programs related to health and social policy in Latin America. McBurney Fellows serve abroad in organizations working to meet the basic needs of local populations. One key aspect of this fellowship is its mandate to make a significant contribution to improving the health and social conditions of poor and marginalized populations through the delivery of concrete and measurable interventions. Students and their mentors identify issues, make connections with local organizations, and develop a strategy for the fellowship. The views expressed in this document are the opinions of the fellow, and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the IHSP.

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Fellowship Overview

Imazon, or Instituto do Homem e Meio Ambiente, is an NGO based in Belem, in the North of Brazil, which focuses on conservation, and sustainable development projects throughout Brazil's Amazon region. The NGO first came to fame for developing a satellite imaging technology which monitored patterns of deforestation in the Amazon and reported these threats to government authorities. Since then, over more than two decades, the organization has grown into one of the leaders in forest preservation efforts in Brazil's Amazon. The work of Imazon fits into various projects in different regions and with different aims. In the Politica and Economia office, where I interned, we focused on the human aspects of conservation policies. Specifically, the team operates in a region called the Plateau of the Guianas -- an incredibly vast area which covers most of the Brazilian territory in the states of Para and Amapá, to the south of French Guiana, Suriname and British Guyana and to the north of the Amazon River. The Plateau of the Guianas contains the largest block of protected areas in the world and houses a staggering richness of bio and cultural diversity, which must be protected. Indigenous, maroon (afrodescendent), and ribeirinho communities dot the many waterways, and often subsist in relative isolation, days travel from the nearest city and hospital.

My principal task for Imazon was to gather the data necessary to launch a database/ website for the Plateau of the Guianas region. In creating the database, I expanded my own knowledge of the area and worked hard to develop a platform that will make relevant information accessible to interested parties, including researchers, potential tourists, NGO and government workers. I also worked alongside Imazon as an assistant in a new project which seeks to recruit and train residents of communities located within the boundaries of protected areas to become volunteer "park rangers" (herein referred to as the Agentes Ambientais project), fulfilling either a monitoring, organizational or commercializing role. The goals of this project included:

- Assisting the community in promoting sustainable sources of alternative income such as ecotourism or meliponicultura (the cultivation of honey-producing bees).
- Engaging community-level monitoring and reporting of encroachments such commercial deforestation, mining, commercial hunting, etc, within the boundaries of protected areas, or which threaten the community's livelihood.
- Cultivating a greater awareness among community members of the importance of protecting biodiversity and preserving finite resources in the threatened Amazonian region.

By collaborating with Imazon I learned what it means to work in ‘development’. Throughout this report I will generally refer to my work with Imazon as ‘development’ work since the underlying objective was to improve the livelihoods of impoverished and disadvantaged communities in the region, while prioritizing environmental protection. In my role as an intern, I experienced some of the bureaucratic tedium of information gathering, and began to understand how crucial this is for the effective execution of projects, both current and future. I also learned about some of the complexities of fieldwork, what it is like to work alongside the communities themselves and to engage in the difficult diplomacy of gaining trust, understanding the needs and demands of the community members, and negotiating outcomes based on external and internal pressures.

Objectives

My proposal to the IHSP had been to investigate the role of foreign volunteers in a variety of NGOs in Belem. Once on the ground, I found I had to narrow the scope of the project for two reasons:

1. My definition of “foreign volunteer” at the beginning was “white western voluntourist”, such as young gap year or early university career students working in local NGOs for a short-term period. However in this part of Brazil, I was one of the very few I encountered. Instead, I saw first-hand how the urban Brazilian can, in fact, be the “foreigner” or outsider to those living in very rural communities in the Amazon. As a result, my project became about understanding how various parties engaged in the development process – the communities, the NGO workers (foreign and local), government officials, and private interest – all interact with each other. In this way, the scope of my project has broadened and there are even more far reaching consequences of my work.
2. I had initially thought I would work with multiple NGOs, but realized that with just three months in the field, I myself would be more effective if I worked with just one on a deeper basis. For a volunteer to be trusted with some of the mission of the organization there is time needed on both sides to build knowledge of the organization and trust on both sides.

As a result, my original project underwent a radical change and I would reframe the central issue I was looking to address:

Exploring the optimum relationships within development work, between the NGO and their local development peers and partners. I was especially fascinated by the triangular relations between NGOs, the Government (at the state level and the federal level) and the target communities. I also reflected a great deal as to how, once in the field, the bureaucratic work of the NGO was applied to best effect. Of course, in relation to my earlier proposition, it remained a priority to cultivate a critical perspective by constantly reverting to reflection on my own positionality as a foreigner observing these dynamics and participating in them.

On the level of my practical work with Imazon the two issues I set out to address through my assigned tasks were:

- 1) To gather and organize the necessary data to create an internet platform which makes publicly available and accessible information on the Plateau of the Guianas region, in order to facilitate both public awareness of conservation work done in the area, and ease of access to the region for researchers and government/NGO workers. With the hope that this would, in turn, promote the development and consolidation of disparate sources of knowledge on the region and improve communication and information networks between diverse actors. This was the practical aspect of what was needed by Imazon and the tactical work they requested me to do.
- 2) To act in a supporting role in the implementation of a pilot project which seeks to recruit volunteer park rangers (agentes ambientais) from communities residing within the boundaries of government protected areas in order to: encourage a greater understanding of why protected areas exist and what they seek to protect; to engage the communities that depend upon the resources in the protected areas in their defense and to educate community members on sustainable income alternatives; and why sustainability can and should be a priority.

Background/Context

Communities which reside within government protected areas, which are principally the ones that Imazon works with, face a number of difficulties. First and foremost, they struggle to find alternative sources of income. Since within most of the protected areas they are forbidden from commercially exploiting forestry products such as wood, game, and other natural resources, most of the communities simply subsist on fish, forest game and basic crops. Due to their subsistence lifestyle, they are very limited in their ability to trade for other essential goods including soaps, cooking materials, medicines, tools, etc.

Imazon seeks to find the tender balance between protecting the environment in these areas where conservation of the biodiversity is a priority, and protecting the livelihoods of the people that have lived in these territories for generations. This includes the delicate work of trying to encourage communities to adopt sustainable alternatives to their traditional habits of hunting and exploiting the resources immediately available to them. Allow me to note that the exploitation of resources by small rural communities is, of course, not the largest threat to Amazonian ecosystems. Much more significant threats are posed by commercial fishing, deforestation, mining, and hydroelectric projects. The reason Imazon emphasizes changes to traditional lifestyles is because they target communities that live within the boundaries of protected areas where these activities are prohibited by law. Thus, offering alternatives to these communities is a social imperative for maintaining the integrity of protected areas.

I could see that there was enormous value in the creation of an information platform which can better prepare community workers for their arrival in the communities and protected areas of the region. It will be an important tool for sensitizing outsiders to the particularities and

diversities between each protected area, and its mosaic of inhabitants. Also, developing projects which attempt to assist communities in seeking alternative sources of income, and in understanding why these alternatives are necessary in the region where they reside, is essential in developing the often complicated relationships between the conservation goals of powerful NGOs and government bodies, and the fragile and vulnerable subsistence lifestyles of the communities who inhabit these equally vulnerable ecosystems.

Activities

The vast majority of my time in Belem was spent working on the Calha Norte database/website from the Imazon office. I also sat in on and occasionally participated in many meetings with government officials, often brokered by Imazon, on the management and governance of the protected areas in the region. There were also numerous panels and conferences, hosted by the state-level Ministry of Environment on a number of diverse topics, including the development of ecotourism potential in the region, conservation goals for the future, as well as community outreach initiatives and events which Imazon actively participated in, along with other conservation NGOs from around the city. I was also able to involve myself a little bit with a social movement which rejected the folding of Brazil's ministry of culture into the ministry of education under the then-interim president Michel Temer, a personal decision which allowed me to become more intimately acquainted with the timely political reality of the country over the summer. A small contextual note: the political climate in Brazil during my McBurney Fellowship was quite historic. I arrived in Belem just two weeks after then-President Dilma



Rousseff was impeached and her position assumed by the Vice-President Michel Temer. I was also in the country for the duration of the Olympic Games, albeit quite withdrawn from the action in Rio, nevertheless I felt the political tension generated by the event, and the difficult economic situation of a country deep in recession.

While in Belem, in my free time, I did also contact and visit a few other NGOs or research institutions involved in the field of conservation and/or management of the region, as well as a number of officials within the Ministry of the Environment. Furthermore, I travelled many times

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to the Ilha do Combu, a protected area on an island across the river Guama from Belem, where a pilot project of the Agentes Ambientais initiative is being launched. Also, in the second week of August I was able to travel deep into the interior of the state of Para to the municipality of Faro, where the Floresta Estadual de Faro is located, to work on the implementation of the Agentes Ambientais project there as well.

Challenges and Successes

My goal was to understand how the work of an established NGO can be effectively taken to the field for the benefit of the communities it purports to serve.

My accomplishment of the creation of a centralized database was highly valued by Imazon as it was something they had identified as needing for a long time, but not having the resources to achieve. The value of my work was in creating the structure of the database, populating it with base information on each of the protected areas and municipalities in the region.

The database captured the following information for each protected area in the Plateau of the Guianas region (including indigenous territories, afrodescendent communities, and government-sanctioned protected areas):

- History of creation
- Officials charged with its management and their contact information
- Resident population and cultural characteristics of its resident communities
- Economic activity in the area
- Environmental threats and pressures
- Biodiversity
- Access to protected areas and accommodation resources
- Links to all available publications and information resources on the area
- Calendar of events and meetings drawing together representatives of the areas
- Lists of all the actors, projects and activities in each of the protected areas along with contact information for the project managers

Furthermore, I also gathered information on each of the municipalities in the region, including their:

- History
- Political authorities and their contact information
- Population and demographic statistics
- The protected areas within them, including the percentages of the municipality covered by protected areas
- Development indexes including the Social Progress Index, Human Development Index, and the GDP per municipality
- Data on principal exports and economic activity
- The most recent deforestation figures as a percentage of the area

The sources of this data were quite dispersed, and required that I dig for the information in various existing platforms, academic publications, and occasionally conduct interviews in order to draw out some of the information from the officials in charge of the areas.

With regards to the database, my principal disappointment was not being able to see it through to complete fruition. Partly due to the limited timeframe of my internship, and partly due to some organizational factors, the database was not fully complete by the time I left Belem, and is being continued by some colleagues. At the beginning of the project it was extremely difficult to get consensus on the structure of the database, let alone the boundaries of data gathering and several times I found that the structure of the project would be modified in ways sometimes uncoordinated with my earlier work, resulting in the inefficient task of having to reorganize and restructure the information to fit with altered plans.

In relation to my overarching goal of understanding how the bureaucratic work of the NGO relates to the practical 'in the field' work of helping communities, the experience was crucial. Seeing the database take shape, learning about the communities and protected areas



that Imazon works with by compiling information about them from various sources, I understood the importance of information in development work. The tremendous potential of this database as a resource for increasing transparency, raising awareness and making easily accessible information on the region makes it a project that I'm very proud to have contributed to. In turn, I learned how information is fundamental to effective development initiatives and how the bureaucratic side of collecting information and communicating with other parties, partners and peers makes up the bulk of the work that NGOs must do in order to ensure that current projects are implemented effectively and future projects are possible.

Questions Raised

What worked during my fellowship was my integration into Imazon and my contribution to the database project, and to other initiatives such as the Agentes Ambientais program. Through these activities I was able to fulfill my goal of better understanding what it means to do

'development work' and to see how the NGO operates. I also saw how the database would assist in coordinating projects and initiatives and improving communication between different actors in the region.

One of the principal difficulties that I observed was achieving consensus on how to transform creative ideas into real results. This occurred both in the office as well as in the field. In the case of the database, ideas and suggestions were often brought up in later meetings and then would have to be incorporated into the existing framework of the project, with varying degrees of success. In the field, this often entailed difficulties in getting community members to see projects through beyond the early commitment phase. For example, with the Agentes Ambientais program, community members would often sign up for a particular role and then when the time came for training sessions, absenteeism would run high, thus requiring a redoubling of efforts to reengage community members and encourage participation in the next session. I learned that development work often entails a see-sawing between idealism's high expectations and reality's disappointments and that effectiveness results from a concerted negotiation between the two.

This realization did raise significant questions as to how communication might be improved between and within all parties to more effectively implement well-defined projects. Of course there are no easy answers to these questions but thinking and working through them in practice could contribute to a greater rate of success in transforming ideas into results, and I believe that effective use of the database and other communication platforms might help with this.

Training and Mentoring

My training at Imazon was a constant process. I was mostly learning-by-doing in researching data for the website independently and thus, developing my own knowledge of the region. However, I was also invited by the team to attend many meetings, conferences and panels on various relevant topics. In this way I was able to observe the diversity of activities that occupy NGO workers in this field and participate actively in certain elements of their work.

My coworkers and mentors at Imazon became a sort of family to me. They supported me in all aspects of my life in Belem and did everything in their power to make me feel safe, happy and productive in my role. Due to the reorientation of my project to focus more wholeheartedly on my position in Imazon, my contact and interaction with Dr. Carmem Rodrigues of the Universidade Federal de Para (UFPA) was quite limited. Nevertheless, she remained on hand, as did my McGill supervisor, Dr. Samuel Veissière, in case of any questions or issues. I will be forever grateful for the support and mentorship I received from both professors and especially from Imazon. I will also never be able to thank the IHSP enough for their generous support and encouragement, which made this whole experience possible.

My McGill supervisor and mentor, Dr. Samuel Veissière, remained in contact with me throughout my time away. We discussed certain aspects of my work with Imazon and he was understanding and encouraging of me branching out from my original research topic to utilize the unique work experience at hand, and thus to broaden my topic of research. I thank him wholeheartedly for his tremendous moral and intellectual support.

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What did you learn?

Through my experience in Belem and the wider Calha Norte region with Imazon I learned some important lessons about what it means to actually practice environmentally motivated development on the ground. I learned a great deal about the politics of NGOs in Brazil and the difficulty of negotiation between different NGOs in seeking to strike the elusive equilibrium between competition for limited resources and cooperation to more efficiently utilize these resources. Also, NGOs in Brazil occupy an important but fluid space in civil society. In many cases they fill the void between the government and difficult to reach or neglected populations in the impoverished interior or inner city. In some senses they may appear to be organs of the government, working closely with political representatives, brokering negotiations between governors of the various protected areas in a mosaic, for example. Yet, they always tread the fine line of attempting to remain outside political games, and in some cases are less weighed down by bureaucracy or delays to release funds for various projects, a true plague of government agents. Nevertheless, this also puts NGOs in an unusual position vis-à-vis the communities they service, for the community often sees them as an arm of the government and this perception does prove to be a hurdle sometimes in building the trust relationships necessary for effective, long-term development and conservation partnerships.

I also reflected a great deal throughout the summer on my own positioning as a foreigner both in Belem and in some of the more remote regions of the Plateau of the Guianas.

Movement and migration are human constants and yet, the accessibility of safe movement and migration are markers of privilege. I also

learned, however, that being an outsider is not solely defined by nationality or citizenship, but also by class. In this way I witnessed how the authority of urban Brazilians, in positions of power in NGOs or government bodies, contributes to an outsider status in relation to the poor communities in the interior that they are working to help. In this sense, the power dynamics inherent to development work and the insider/outsider roles occupied by the various parties, in my view, do require deeper analysis in order to improve communication and negotiation between them and to strengthen relationships for more effective and long-lasting results.

Would you do anything differently next time?



In the future, I might try and take on a more authoritative role in building my own projects. I deeply value the fact that during my internship with Imazon I played a supporting role, learning from my coworkers and mentors. However, now that this groundwork has been laid, and I am more knowledgeable on the region and the field of work, I would like to develop more independently by testing out some of my own project ideas according to some opportunities that I identified.

Community Implications and Further Work

Imazon contributes to the delivery of health and social services to poor and marginalized communities in many ways. During the fieldwork trip to the municipality of Faro on the border between the state of Amazonas and Para, Imazon was working with the government to build a community center for the small towns of Portugues and Monte Sion. This community centre will provide the infrastructure to comfortably host visitors, including politicians, researchers, health care workers and other development agents. Furthermore, Imazon spearheads various alternative income programs (including the Agentes Ambientais

program that I was involved with), and encourages the valuation of traditional Amazonian plant medicines through various professional and academic publications which detail the flora of the region and its various uses, both medicinal and nutritional. By contributing my time and services to Imazon's perpetual efforts to maintain



their existing projects and implement new ones, I was able to contribute as part of larger and longer-lasting efforts that Imazon has maintained since 1991.

As far as longer term impact, I hope to return to the region after I graduate from McGill to work for a longer period of time with Imazon or a similar organization. I am interested in developing alternative income projects through sustainable tourism initiatives and commercialization networks for traditional resources. I believe that developing a base for community-led ecotourism could be a sustainable and low-impact method of improving the livelihoods of communities living within the boundaries of state-governed protected areas,

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and I also see tremendous potential for a fair-trade based commercialization of traditional medicines and foods to reach foreign markets, and provide significant revenue for impoverished communities.

How might your fellowship make a difference for the people you worked with?

The principal effects of my fellowship work will come from the benefits of the database that I contributed to. For Imazon and other NGOs and government organizations working in the Plateau of the Guianas region, this database will offer a platform where all relevant information on the region is readily available and accessible, as well as links to other publications and sources of information such as maps and other visual resources. This will facilitate in the coordination of current and future projects in the region and communication between agents and actors. It will also help in raising awareness on active projects in the region, increase transparency by making communication with the responsible authorities easier and thus facilitating in monitoring the progress of active projects.

I might also take some credit in having supported the Agentes Ambientais project which has enormous potential for more effective monitoring of environmental threats and for improving the livelihoods of affected communities through the cultivation of deeper environmental awareness among community members, and the possibility of adopting more sustainable, alternative sources of income.

For the community members, the value of the database will arise from its secondary effects. If it is successful in increasing coordination between authorities, and improving access to valuable information, the resulting efforts and projects from external parties may contribute to improving the living conditions of the communities I was able to visit during my fellowship. Aside from the community itself, the stakeholders in the database project are any organizations, public or private, with an interest in working in the Plateau of the Guianas region. In this sense, the potential effects of the database to increase accessibility and interest in the region are far-reaching.

The Brazilian Amazon is a complex environment for policy action. In my experience and to my understanding, a great deal of admirable legislation protects threatened territories and enshrines the sustainable management of their resources in law. The problem is that the law is not always (rarely) respected in many of the most isolated areas of the region, due to a total absence of state authority to enforce it. For this reason, I believe that in this regional context, what is needed is action to uphold existing policy, and perhaps not necessarily a change to the policy itself.

In terms of development work, and development theory, I believe that there must be a meeting of the two in praxis, the combination of critical theory and practice. In order to bridge the gap between what the state legislates and what it actually has the resources to implement, actors such as Imazon and other NGOs must step in and create a sustained involvement with the communities. I also believe that there is a space here for ethical business engagement. Private sector development is often seen as exploitative and immoral,

but I think that there might be a place for social entrepreneurship which opens up access to foreign markets for local producers and creates a supply chain founded on ethical free trade principles. The example of the Satare-Mawe indigenous community in Parintins, Amazonas, demonstrates that this has already been done successfully in the region, and so the potential for this model to be replicated in other communities is something worth exploring.



Still, these activities which fall under the umbrella of development and make up for the shortfalls of the state must be grounded in critical reflection in order to be adapted and be implemented in the most ethical manner possible. Herein lies the role of academic development theory which emphasizes factors of community involvement. These contributions are valuable and necessary so that in turn practice can be informed and improved by reflection. Praxis is not necessarily policy, but I believe that it is key in ensuring that policy achieves its intended effect.

Program Evaluation

I see that this fellowship is the first step on a long career path that I hope to pursue. In the near future, I hope to graduate from McGill with a Joint Honours in Political Science and

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Anthropology and apply immediately for the Fulbright Brazil program. If I am successful in my application, I will return to the Amazon region to develop a project which would seek to replicate the Satare-Mawe's success in commercializing traditional plants and medicinal products for European markets. If successful, this project could open up supply chains between local producers and foreign consumers in a fair trade scheme that would return profits directly to the producer and thereby provide a much needed source of guaranteed income to impoverished Amazonian communities.

Beyond this project, I also hope to pursue a Master's degree in the Anthropology of Development at the London School of Economics and Political Science in the UK, where I hope to continue studying and contributing to development theory which has the potential to improve the on-the-ground practice. The McBurney Fellowship has been fundamental in crystallizing these goals and I know, with great certainty, that none of these plans would be possible without this experience.

What did you value most about the fellowship?

I valued this fellowship for its real practical experience. I learned what it's like to be part of the tedium, the day-to-day work of "development", both in an office as well as some of the challenges and rewards of fieldwork. This experience was invaluable to my understanding of what "development" means.

Any advice for future fellows?

I would advise future fellows to take care to learn the language of their destination in order to be able to fully participate in the dynamics of their work and to network extensively as they do so. I would also suggest that future fellows, especially in NGOs and other organizations directly involved in what would fall under the wide umbrella of "development" should always be critical in thinking about who is producing the development initiative, is it imposed or forced, who it benefits in real terms, and to observe the delicate dynamics of negotiating change. It is important to always keep in mind your own positionality, how people react to you, whether or not they trust you, and how to build this trust over time. From a practical standpoint, I think it would also be valuable for interns to try to clearly define objectives and expectations of the host institution from the outset, in order to maximize their effectiveness and the efficient completion of projects.

Was your project part of a larger/ongoing program?

This fellowship will be the launching pad to future personal projects and career goals. However, the projects themselves that I assisted Imazon with, such as the Agentes Ambientais program and the database, are ongoing. The database has an anticipated launch date for November, until that time I continue to keep regular contact with my team members from Imazon, assisting as I can in continuing to develop and build on the data which will make up the platform. The Agentes Ambientais project is in its early phases and will continue to grow over the years if the two pilot initiatives, in Combu and in Faro, prove to be successful.

I would highly recommend a fellowship with Imazon for future students. It is an exemplary organization with an established presence and reputation in the field of environmental protection, and sustainable development. It has teams working in a number of different areas, including environmental law, geosatellite monitoring of deforestation, sustainable municipality projects, and is constantly producing and publishing research on the region and conservation efforts within it. Any future fellows partnering with Imazon MUST have a good command of Portuguese and be comfortable reading, writing and communicating in the language. They should also be willing to commit themselves to an internship for a minimum period of 3 months.