

## River & Rio+20 Dispatch: Brazil Energy

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By: Jason Rainey



Today the UN Conference on Sustainable Development formally opens, yet the preliminary dialogue process, side events, and People's Summit that are all part of Rio+20 have been underway for days.

Thousands of indigenous people from Amazonia are assembled here at the People's

Summit and side events, including those recently arrived after the [Xingu+23](#) gathering that culminated in the "Stop Belo Monte" resistance action and [aerial photograph](#) that's gone viral here in Brazil.

One indigenous leader, Sheyla Juruna, was on hand at the Symposium on Clean Energy Solutions for Brazil that took place two days ago. A full house turned up at the Planetarium, a fitting venue to discuss 21st century opportunities and challenges to transitioning Brazil away from its hydro-dependent energy portfolio and tapping into the country's truly sustainable energy sources such as wind and solar. The event also marked the launch of a new [compendium report](#) prepared by the Brazilian office of International Rivers in partnership with [Greenpeace-Brazil](#), [Amazon Watch](#), [Friends of the Earth-Brazilian Amazon](#), and the [Socio-Environmental Institute \(ISA\)](#) of Brazil.



### Jason Rainey

*Executive Director*

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The first panel included two government officials, Altino Ventura, the Secretary of Planning and Development for the Ministry of Mining and Energy and Felicio Pontes, from the Public Prosecutors office in the State of Pará. They were joined by Marcelo Furtado, Director of Greenpeace-Brazil and Celio Bermann of the University of São Paulo. I learned that it's rare (some said "historic") for a high level government official to engage in such a public exchange, and I soon learned why.



*The Symposium on Clean Energy Solutions for Brazil panel discussion*

Dr. Bermann laid out the present electricity consumption rates in Brazil, noting that 60% of all electricity goes to six industrial sectors, four of which manufacture for export (aluminum, steel, iron and paper). Government policy is projecting several-fold increases in production and it is this demand, argued Dr. Bermann, that is driving the push for scores of large hydropower dams in the Amazon.

Mr. Ventura questioned the figures presented, and responded with arguments that sounded more like an elementary logic exercise (and here I draw from my handwritten notes based on simultaneous translation): Per capita electricity usage is less in Brazil than other countries, so we have room to increase our demand; While electricity does go to industrial purposes, it also has a social value – take street lights as an example; hydropower is a priority for Brazil... because all other major countries have developed their hydroelectric potential. Later in the session, Venturi drew gasps when he declared that [Belo Monte](#), which would rank 3rd in the world for installed hydropower capacity, is a "small hydropower plant" by Brazilian standards. He then reminisced about his time working and living at the Itaipu Dam and reservoir site (which was the world's largest dam project until China's [Three Gorges Dam](#) was completed), stating that the dam project "is not negative, it's like the Brazilian California."

As these justifications for past and current destructive dams – and the displacement and loss of livelihoods that they bring to rural and indigenous peoples – were being articulated by a representative of the Dilma administration, I'd glance at Sheyla Juruna, to see her reaction. A woman who's defending the rights of her people on the Xingu River and who have everything to lose from the Belo Monte Dam, she sat stoically and politely waiting for her turn.

## Related Information

### Program or Campaign (1)

- [Amazônia Viva](#)

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- [The Brazilian Electricity Sector and Sustainability in the 21st Century: Opportunities and Challenges](#)
- [Highlighting Rivers at Rio+20](#)



**Shayla Juruna put a face and a voice to suffering that accompanies dam projects like Belo Monte**

The symposium continued with a host of other experts from within and outside of Brazil, who shared their research and perspectives on climate risks associated with renewed dam building in the Amazon, industrial-scale energy efficiency, the current and projected wind generation potential in Brazil (Brazil has 1.56GW installed, and potential for 300GW), the extraordinary acceleration of solar generation and job creation in Germany due to public policy reform (yes, Stefan Schurig, one of the architects of "feed-in-tariffs" was a

panelist), and many other examples of how governments and enterprising businesses have made solar the largest energy sector investment globally in 2011 (\$93B, according to Jigar Shaw of the Carbon War Room).

The event reached its peak in the final panel, as Sheyla Juruna put a face and a voice to suffering that accompanies dam projects like Belo Monte. Flanked by Brazilian actor Sergio Marone, Sheyla gave fiery testimonial to the property that's been seized, the homes that have been razed, and the violence and intimidation that confronts those who speak out in defense of the river and their homelands. At one point, as Sheyla paused to gain her composure from the flood of emotions, the audience began to chant, "*Water for life! Not for death!*"

This is the mantra that I've now heard echoing from many forums here at Rio+20.

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### More information:

- ▶ [Download the report "The Brazilian Energy Sector and Sustainability in the 21st Century."](#) (Portuguese)
  - ▶ [Press Release from June 15: Amazonian Communities Occupy the Belo Monte Dam Site](#)
  - ▶ [See photos from Rio+20 and the Xingu+23 encounter](#)
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### Video



Lori Pottinger interviewed about Ethiopian dam building



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International Rivers, 2150 Allston Way, Suite 300, Berkeley, CA 94704-1378, USA

Tel: +1 510 848 1155 | Fax: +1 510 848 1008 | E-mail: [info@internationalrivers.org](mailto:info@internationalrivers.org)

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