

# The construction of the Sobradinho Dam and the relocation of the residents of Velha Sento-Sé to Nova Sento-Sé/Bahia

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**Abstract** — The riverside communities of the municipalities of Sobradinho, Casa Nova, Pilão Arcado, Remanso and Sento-Sé in the State of Bahia have suffered socio-environmental and cultural impacts because of construction of hydroelectric dams on the São Francisco River, causing psychosocial damage to people, in addition to some environmental degradation. The main goal of this paper is to describe from memory the process of relocation of the residents of the old Sento-Sé village to the new city after the construction of the Sobradinho dam (1973). This way, it is intended to recount a historical reminiscence, recalling a socio-environmental and cultural context of the time of the flooding of this city that no longer exists tangibly. In the preparation of this article, semi-structured interviews have been conducted, based on reconstructed memories and reminiscences of the residents of that city, periodicals, documents from institutional sources and photographic images of the flood period. This research also produced a memorial record, a video-documentary called “Ecologia e Memória de Sento-Sé”, recorded in 2019 and available on YouTube, referring to a period in the history of the São Francisco Valley.

**Keywords** - Socio-environmental Impacts, Hydroelectric, Memory, Ecology, São Francisco River.

## I. INTRODUCTION

The construction of the dams was originated in Mesopotamia, Egypt, and China, thousands of years ago when men were building barriers and waterways to control floods and provide water for irrigation of plantation (CULLEN, 1964). Nowadays, hydroelectric plants are used to produce electricity to supply populated cities around the world. In recent decades, the ecosystem and the world population have been significantly affected by the construction of dams and is estimated that approximately 45,000 dams have been built, compromising more than 60% of all rivers on the planet (GIONGO; MENDES; SANTOS, 2015).

The construction of hydroelectric dams has also caused the involuntary relocation of communities around the world, resulting in large, multifaceted and complex phenomena for a single approach, already recorded in various research on dams that have generated numerous impacts both in the region where they are located and at

the inter-regional, national and global levels (SILVA, 2010).

The process of implementation of dams and hydroelectric dams, in addition to large structures built by man, represents the symbolism of a particular developmental ideology and an attitude taken towards nature, which is to treat it merely as a concrete structure generating energy, trade, water, flooding and dispersion of communities (SILVA; SANTOS; OLIVEIRA, 2017).

When it comes to Brazil, it is seen that the construction of hydroelectric dams has provided the formation of extensive reservoirs flooding considerable areas of rural and urban spaces. Starting in the second half of the 20th century, the Brazilian government decided to orient energy policy towards hydroelectricity production, using the country's potential of water resources as its main argument. With respectable technical choices and investments, they have built hydroelectric power plants and dams throughout the territory, facilitating specific areas such as the Southeast,

Northeast and South regions, where the potential for energy generation was higher, according to national and international economic contexts (LETURCO, 2016).

In the 1970s, the conception of energy policy was based on the construction and implementation of large hydroelectric projects, with the justification of being the primary source for the supply and energy sufficiency of the country. In this sense, the Brazilian territory is considered privileged, considering the extension of freshwater reserves and river flows, sufficient for the electric power generation (DERROSSO; ICHIKAWA, 2014).

Menezes and Marques (2018) state in their researches that, in Brazil, more than one million people have been expelled from their lands as a result of the construction of hydroelectric plants. It is estimated, therefore, that these enterprises have been directly responsible for the displacement of 40 to 80 million people in recent years around the world.

These authors (2018) consider that the problems faced by populations affected by dams are numerous and emblematic. However, the eyes are more frequently directed to the most visible factors, i.e., the commodification of natural assets and violent degradation of the environment, resulting in significant social and ecological vulnerability.

Faced by the problem, the objective of this article is to describe from memory the process of relocation of residents of the old city of Sento-Sé to the new one, which occurred after the construction of the Sobradinho dam in 1973. Therefore, it is intended to narrate historical reminiscence, remembering the socio-environmental and cultural context of the time of the flooding of the city. In the preparation of this paper, semi-structured interviews were conducted, which were based on reconstructed memories and memories of the dwellers, in addition to periodicals, documents from institutional sources and photographic images of the flood period. This research also produced a memorial record, the video-documentary called "Ecologia e Memória de Sento-Sé", recorded in 2019 and available on YouTube, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Rp4ImFPughU>.

## II. MATERIALS AND METHODS

This research has been conducted in the municipality of Nova Sento-Sé, located in northern Bahia, on the banks of the Sobradinho Lake, in the São Francisco region. The data have been collected through semi-structured interviews with 12 interviewees, who reconstructed by heart the memory of the construction of the Sobradinho dam and the relocation of the residents of the old Sento-Sé to the new Sento-Sé, based on the memories they have experienced. In this study, data and information were

collected in newspapers of the time, documents from institutional sources and photographs of the flood period.

Subsequently, the interviews were transcribed with the utmost attention to choose with essential details that would recall the city and its residents with data that will be considered necessary for new generations.

After the data collection through semi-structured interviews, the information obtained was analyzed using Bardin's Content Analysis (CA) (2016), originating this article as a final product.

## III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### 3.1 THE HISTORY OF DAMS ON THE SÃO FRANCISCO RIVER

At the beginning of the 20th century, by the year 1913, the first hydroelectric plant of the Northeast – Angiquinho – was inaugurated on the side of the São Francisco river in the State of Alagoas, by the industrialist Delmiro Gouveia, which supplied a factory of lines and wires and supplied energy to the former city of Pedra (today, Delmiro Gouveia). The hydroelectric plant was deactivated in 1960 by the Companhia Hidroelétrica do São Francisco (CHESF), because of a flood (MENEZES; MARQUES, 2018).

In the early 1920s, the Ministry of Agriculture, through the Geological and Mineralogical Service, carried out studies on the use of the São Francisco River in the stretches between Juazeiro-BA and Paulo Afonso-BA. The conclusion of the study indicated feasibility for the installation of hydroelectric power plants, enabling the industrialization of the Northeast and the irrigation of riverine areas (SILVA, 2002).

On October 3, 1945, Pres. Getúlio Vargas signed Decree-Law No. 8031, authorizing the creation of CHESF by the Ministry of Agriculture. On the same date, Decree-Law No. 8032 was signed, allowing the Ministry of Finance to launch credit of 200 million cruzeiros for the subscription of company shares, and Decree-Law No. 19706, which granted the license to CHESF for 50 years (SILVA, 2002). This company made continuous use of the hydroelectric power of the São Francisco River between Juazeiro, in the State of Bahia, and Piranhas, in the State of Alagoas to supply power to public service concessionaires and thus distribute it in no small part of the Northeast.

In 1946, the Constituent Representatives decided to solve the problems of the São Francisco Valley, planning long-term agricultural projects to develop the region and regularize the waterways. It has used the water potential of the São Francisco River and thus promoting industry and irrigated agriculture in the area (CULLEN, 1964).

According to Cullen (1964), the São Francisco River originates in the Canastra ridge, in the State of Minas Gerais, with an average altitude of 1,400.0 meters, running 2,200 km to the parallel of Remanso-BA. The navigable stretch extended for 1,300 km between Pirapora-MG and Juazeiro-BA, totaling 300 km within a total water basin of 640,000 km.

Menezes and Marques (2018) explain that the interest in the inhabitable places of the Franciscan regions was due to very particular characteristics: it is the only natural perennial watercourse to cut part of the semiarid areas of Northeast Brazil (70% of its sub-basins and tributaries), being characterized as the main route of attraction of the different social groups that have settled or passed by its margins.

According to Silva, Marques, Wagner, and Menezes (2018), the construction of the Sobradinho dam in the sub-medium part of São Francisco region was a process of exchange in an attempt to compensate them for the recognized losses or onus of the progress, causing a re-territorialization of several communities in its surroundings.

In addition to the Sobradinho dam, other projects such as the Itaparica Dam, which began being constructed in 1979 and completed in 1988, also emerged. The barrier has caused profound changes and reformulations in the ways of life and the cultural traditions acquired in the coexistence with the river. The economy was organized through watering and irrigated agriculture (MENEZES; MARQUES, 2018).

According to the studies of Araújo, Aguiar Netto and Salles (2016), the Xingó Hydroelectric Power Plant, managed by CHESF, began its construction in 1987 and its operation in 1994, although the full service was to occur in 1997.

Besides of the dams and hydroelectric dam' projects, the Brazilian government initiated the task of transposing the waters of the São Francisco River, which destroyed environments favorable to health and life in the semiarid region. The project caused environmental transformations, changes in socio-cultural relations, and directly affected the traditional means of life and work (GONÇALVES; SILVA; SCOTT; GURGEL; COSTA, 2018). With the transposition of the São Francisco River, the Pedra Branca and Riacho Seco dams were being planned, which will have consequences for the sub-medium cities of the São Francisco Valley, the municipality of Orocó and will directly affect the Trukás people in Cabrobó-PE and the Tumbalalá in the Bahian cities of Abaré and Curaçá (MENEZES; MARQUES, 2018).

Melo (2016) points out that the riverside dwellers of the cities of Santa Maria da Boa Vista, in the State of Pernambuco, and Curaçá, in the State of Bahia, are resistant to the installation of the dam of Riacho Seco, once the environmental and social costs are very high. Additionally, the displacement of riverside families, modification of the fertilization of the banks, damaging floodplain agriculture, a decline in the biodiversity of flora and fauna and drastic change in the river water regime, among others.

### 3.2 A HISTORY OF THE SOBRADINHO DAM

The construction of the Sobradinho dam began in September 1971 by the Companhia Hidrelétrica do Vale do São Francisco (CHESF). In February 1977, there was a partial damming of the São Francisco River, which was completed in January 1978. The construction area of the Sobradinho dam covered an area of 4,214.0 km<sup>2</sup>, with the expropriation of thousands of rural and urban properties (SILVA; MARQUES; WAGNER; MENEZES, 2018).

The news concerning the construction of the Sobradinho dam has spread and called the attention to the relocation of the riverside people living in that region. According to a report in the newspaper "A Tarde", published on October 20, 1971, the Brazilian government has chosen the area of Sobradinho because it considered that the lands in that region were arid and had a weak and underdeveloped population.

The CHESF has promised to develop the region and explore the waters of the São Francisco River. In the cities affected by the Sobradinho Dam, where "the urban" has echoed "the rural" par excellence. And, in this unusual way, one of the most genuine characteristics of the riverside dwellers stands out, that is, the particular combination between the rural and the urban, between the river and the city, a way of being, living and thinking the world, whose principles and determinations are specific, that is to say, traditional (MAGALHÃES; CUNHA, 2017).

The creation of the Sobradinho Lake cannot be summarized to a merely technical question. It is necessary to consider the socio-environmental and cultural issues and seek to understand the environment as physical nature since man appropriates natural resources to perform its social reproduction. According to the researcher of Human Ecology, Begossi (1993, p. 2), to study the "[...] relationship of man with the environment includes other factors (such as economic, social and psychological) leading human ecology to transcend the ecology of nature". After 40 years of the construction of the dam, the development project was implemented, and it should be measured the impacts of the work to identify ecologically, the subjects, men and women, who developed modes of

production and had their practices modified and transformed with the relocation (AMARAL, 2012).

Table 1: Families Affected by the Sobradinho Dam

ORIGIN	FAMILIES AFFECTED	PERCENTAGE
<b>RURAL AREA</b>		
Juazeiro	223	2.8
<b>Sento-Sé</b>	<b>3,597</b>	<b>45.2</b>
Xique-Xique	86	1
Casa Nova	2,847	
Remanso	1,983	61.3
Pilão Arcado	326	10.3
Total	3,234	

Source: Marques (2018).

The construction of the Sobradinho dam was aligned with the plan for internationalization of the Brazilian economy proposed by the military government to create infrastructure works in the context of the "Brazil, a Great Power" project and meet the policy of expansion of the electric sector in the Northeast Brazil, planned since the mid-1940s by CHESF (ESTRELA, 2004).

According to Assy (2014), the State was only present in the region of those who dominated the locality, that is to say, the mayors in the affected cities who used to extort and oppress the dwellers. The power relationship was executed daily without any mediation, ignoring both territory and people that initiated different forms of violence over the centuries.

Silva (2010) enlightens that the Brazilian dictatorial government, at the time of the construction of the Sobradinho dam, exercised centralized and unquestionable power, arriving in the region as a stranger and presenting a model of development for those communities that could make only disbelief in silence. The energy of economic capital was also involved in the process, offering great possibilities for transformation. The power was demonstrated by the portentous logistical apparatus placed in the field through the executing company, which often provided the dwellers a monologue in which the interlocutor was given a choice to accept the terms immediately or later, with evident significant losses.

#### IV. THE IMPACT OF DISPLACEMENT OF THE PEOPLE OF SENTO-SÉ > HISTORY OF THE SOBRADINHO DAM

The research on the human impacts of damming processes in some communities and cities along the São Francisco River valley has populations as main characters in these developmental narratives. Compensatory measures such as the release of funds, payment of compensation for land and other assets, allocation of populations in rural resettlement projects, construction of new cities, such as Remanso, Casa Nova, Sento-Sé, Pilão Arcado, Glória, Petrolândia, after the construction of the Sobradinho and Itaparica dams, were not sufficient to generate quality of life for these populations (MENEZES; MARQUES, 2018).



Fig.1: The town of Sento-Sé demolished to wait for the waters of Sobradinho Dam.

Source: Private Archive Family Sento-Sé

The relocation of riverside communities presumes other economic and socio-cultural transformations. In the affected families, it used to emerge feelings of rootlessness and de-territorialization. Close relatives that were buried in that place, the house that once belonged to their ascendants, the navel of the eldest son that was buried in their home backyard, memories submerged in the water and the construction of a new scenario in the name of progress (CLEMENT; LONGHI, 2016).

Those affected by the Sobradinho dam evoke memories of the day when the old Sento-Sé was transferred to the new municipal headquarters. In an interview recorded on April 13, 2019, Jackson Coelho, a former member of the city council, recalls that the last day of transference occurred on October 10, 1976. On that day, he witnessed the last blue Chevrolet truck leaving the city transporting the furniture of the municipal government, documents from the court of law, notary and the post office. The population has left deceased relatives, destroyed houses and their history. By then, it was over the old Sento-Sé,



immersed in the waters of the Sobradinho Lake. During the outlet of the truck through the dusty roads of old Tombador, the city officers have displayed fireworks to celebrate the changing.



*Fig.2: Aerial view of Old Sento Sé*

Source: Private Archive Family Sento-Sé

The memorable narratives, as points Halbwachs (2004), are produced from the social frameworks of relations constructed in social groups and have a relationship with what one wants to keep in his mind.

The past comes out and intertwines with immediate perceptions, displacing them and therefore occupying the space of consciousness. The nature of reminiscence is social, and for this reason, it appears by the effect of any entangled collective thoughts. If we are unable to attribute them an exclusiveness, it tends to become independent, and this way it demands support to validate a fundamental question about the collective memory, as a social fact that would be the anchorage for individuals (HALBWACHS, 2004, p. 57).

The context of that time concerning human rights displays necessarily a (re)constitution of what would be real social justice, and how it should be conceived differently from those now established as modern western-centric paradigms. In this sense, to think about the possibility of a “humanized development” firstly requires (r)establishing the narratives on this issue and not from the expansionist center (ALBANO, 2018).

According to Estrela (2004, p. 52), the interventions in the middle basin of the São Francisco River, precisely in its portion in the State of Bahia, has resulted in a profound transformation in its space as “(...) the secular rupture of the isolation of the region and the connection to the most dynamic centers of the country, with urbanization and the formation of a middle class linked to service sectors and a state bureaucracy”.

The State intended to develop the region and a breach the isolation. However, the work has caused significant

changes in the dwellers’ lives, most of whom lived in rural areas, depending on the rain-fed agriculture and the outflowing ones, cultivating the fertile lands bathed by the São Francisco River (ESTRELA, 2004).

José dos Santos, a former chairperson of the Union of Rural Workers in Sento-Sé at the time of the displacement, in an interview granted on April 16, 2019, recalls that on June 18, 1975, Hermógenes Campos sent a letter to the coordinator of the Sobradinho Reservoir Implementation Center (SRIC), Norman Barbosa Costa. He questioned the ownership of the land – once it was an object of purchase and sale – and the amount of compensation of the dwellers of that area.

According to CHESF’s reply sent to the Union, landowners without public securitization would be compensated for their cultivation, accessions, and improvements. The possessors would also have an alternative of relocation, transference to Bom Jesus da Lapa Settlement Project or stay on the edge of the lake. Landowners with public securitization would get compensation based on the value of the “bare land” (referring to the value of the land), as well as crops and improvements.

In 1975 the bishop of the city of Juazeiro-BA, D. José Rodrigues, launched a campaign against the Sobradinho Project, encouraging the refusal to the agro-villages of Lapa (Serra do Ramalho). In radio programs, in the pulpits and various interviews, the bishop has boasted that CHESF triggered compatriots’ diaspora, displacing thousands of affected families to areas in São Paulo, Rio de Janeiro and Brasília (CIRES, 1974).

The “flood” in the riverside villages of Pilão Arcado, Remanso, Casa Nova and Sento-Sé has caused the expropriation of more than a thousand dwellers to the Serra do Ramalho. Other residents have left when they have gotten the first signs that the waters would rise and that “the lake would drown the river”. This relocation would only have a guiding force if the interested parties approved a schedule and conditions plan, which never happened in the process of construction of the Sobradinho dam (ESTRELA, 2004).

Professor Veraldo Nunes, in an interview granted on April 13, 2019, recalls that there was a farewell party on the day the old Sento-Sé would be abandoned, a celebration allusive to the feast of St. Joseph’s Day, whose procession ran through the main streets of the city. Soon after the mass, an auction was held to raise funds for the church’s charitable works and the construction of a church in the new town.

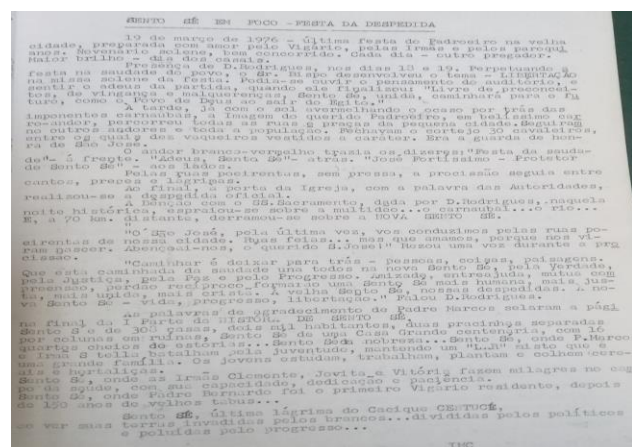


Fig.3: Issue of the newspaper "Caminhar Juntos"

Source: Acquis of Bishop D. José Rodrigues, State University of Bahia

Braga (2014) elucidates that the oral account allows us to understand the upsurge of social relations formed and re-signified after the construction of the Sobradinho dam. This construction has affected the mentality of those who experienced the trauma of being relocated. Accordingly, this paper has intended to understand, far beyond the social conflicts that involved the occupation of the territory, the memory mechanisms that reveal the requisites to preserve the place of residence of the historical subject for the reconstitution of its social trajectory. Thus, this article sought to understand, in addition to the social conflicts that involved the occupation of the territory, the memory mechanisms that reveal the necessity to preserve the place of origin of the historical subject for the reconstitution of its social trajectory.

Interviewed on April 14, 2019, the retired teacher, Marlene Cruz do Nascimento, remembered the day the old Sento-Sé moved to the new municipal headquarters. The farewell has brought tears, pain, suffering, and traumatic memories to the dwellers of the city. By then, there were people who, as soon as they arrived at the new dwelling space, died or went mad as a result of the homesickness they felt for their native land, as well as showing opposition when they received a compensation paid by CHESF, a derisory amount released to families affected by the construction of the Sobradinho dam. Since it was considered below market value, many families were unable to reestablish their real estate assets in the new city.

Pollak (1989) expounds that studying collective memories firmly constituted, such as a national memory, preliminarily implies the analysis of its function. A memory, this selective operation of events and interpretations of the past one wishes to safeguard, becomes part of a somewhat conscious attempt to delimit

and emphasize feeling of belonging and social boundaries among collectivities of dissimilar sizes, such as political parties, unions, churches, villages, regions, clans, families, nations, and so forth.

The allocation of land has come to be one of the most aggravating factors that those relocated from Sento-Sé has experienced. According to the newspaper "Caminhar Juntos" (1978), the division of the land on the edge of the Sobradinho Lake has caused the questioning by many families that, even after four decades, still seek justice to compensate the loss of their properties submerged by the water of the dam.

The Sobradinho dam was one of the most significant cases in Brazil, in terms of the flooded area and the displaced population. In contrast to other cases, it was intended to demonstrate the relative nature of the effects and the mediations that constitute them. Thus, neither the technological options embedded in large projects contain in themselves the determination of events, nor the populations directly affected, given the same technological options, will tend to proceed in a similar way (SIGAUD, 1992).

## V. CONCLUSIONS

The construction of the Sobradinho dam is a subject that, until now, is permeated with many controversies and countless questions. In both parts of relocated cities and riverside communities that have been flooded, causing socio-environmental impacts, damage and trauma to those affected, as has been the subject of many socio-environmental and cultural research on the hydroelectric station and damming.

Nowadays, the riverside dwellers relocated by the construction of the Sobradinho dam query why some communities near the shores of the Sobradinho Lake have never been benefited from electric power since other distant cities are reached by the production of energy produced by the plant. Some families also claim compensation from the CHESF.

Those relocated from Sento-Sé and other communities affected by the construction of the Sobradinho dam still experience the trauma mainly caused to older people, who, because of the homesickness they felt for the place they used to live, became depressed and died. In addition to the socio-environmental impacts caused to the ecosystem by the degradation of fauna and flora, the residents felt the changes in daily life such as the reduction of fish in the São Francisco River, the routine of working with agriculture and dealing with the herds of goats, sheep and cattle, which has been harmed.

During the research through oral tradition and memory, it

has been noticed that the relocated dwellers often recognize that there were social and environmental impacts that caused sanitation problems, fish reduction, lack or poor quality of water that interfere directly in their lives. In this community, it was observed that the storytellers are agents of local knowledge, constituting as references for local identity, to explain a present and project a future.

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