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Opinion – Sou Ciência: Science and universities with the Yanomami

By Michael

A few years ago, when we were at Unifesp's rectory, we had an experience that was not new at our university, but which was transformative for that group that was in management: using the science developed at our university and by experienced researchers, in favor of communities indigenous.

Incredibly resilient, Unifesp, even though it was already suffering from budget cuts, which in total lasted six long years and which intensified in the Bolsonaro era, acted diligently. The request came from indigenous communities in the Xingu and other regions of the Amazon and that our management sought to trigger researchers from the university to work and analyze the water in the indigenous lands. And that was how a group of colleagues from the Institute of Environmental, Chemical and Pharmaceutical Sciences, Diadema campus, with its little more than 10 years of existence, would start a work of monitoring water pollution, caused by mining and by plantations with irregular use of the ground. This work resulted in theses and knowledge about the degree of contamination of the headwaters of rivers, especially by the dumping of pesticides.

Unifesp's connection with indigenous lands was not new, as the Escola Paulista de Medicina had already carried out work related to Indigenous Health for many decades, initiated by Dr. Roberto Baruzzi, public health doctor and professor, in collaboration with the Villas Boas brothers. There were many works carried out in Xingu over the course of 60 years, where numerous medical and nursing students were present, who experienced professional training and the accurate and dedicated work continued by Dr. Douglas Rodrigues and the entire team that coordinates Unifesp's Xingu Project. Thus, as Douglas can attest, Baruzzi's work influenced generations of professors and researchers at EPM and Hospital São Paulo.

It was this work that made it possible to carry out many pioneering indigenous health programs with the Ministry of Health. Also as part of this history, Unifesp keeps a collection that is part of the Xingu Museum. Regrettably, both the Indigenous Health programs in partnership with the Ministry of Health and the Xingu Museum suffered heavily from the cut in funds and attempts to destroy our universities, perpetrated in the Bolsonaro years. Without resources for the projects and for setting up and preserving the museum, we worked to resist.

Baruzzi's legacy went beyond health and certainly influenced the Education actions that also began during our presidency. In addition to working with water and indigenous health, Unifesp also dedicated itself to creating Indigenous Education, with extension programs, with the recognition of knowledge and more recently with the indigenous degree, given by indigenous peoples.

Like Unifesp, several federal universities acted and act in support and assistance, especially in areas that were devastated or exploited by the so-called "civilization". As we already know, the crisis with the Yanomami, which we are now watching in horror, did not start today. It stems from exploratory and predatory action, which has occurred especially in the last four years. The Bolsonaro government opened the crisis that deepened and made it impossible for many university actions, which were in progress, to continue. The destruction perpetrated by Bolsonaro and illegal mining is at all levels, which makes it difficult today, including the work and performance of the health and education sectors. It will take years before we can resume and heal this immense pain.

The North Region of Brazil currently has 11 federal universities, including the Federal University of Roraima (UFRR), which has several actions with the Yanomami region, as well as to guarantee access to higher education for indigenous peoples in the region. The Indigenous Higher Education programs stand out, as well as the activities of researchers in the field of Anthropology.

Likewise, other federal universities in other regions carry out actions and research to combat devastation and preserve indigenous peoples. The University of Brasília (UnB) has researchers who have contributed to the Pro-Yanomami and Y'ecuana network, including forwarding complaints by leaders to the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office of the genocidal action that was underway against these peoples. During the pandemic, he carried out studies and published articles in Brazil and abroad on the serious health situation of the Yanomami.

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At the Federal University of Minas Gerais (UFMG), work with the Yanomami, among others, began in 2013, the year Davi Kopenawa Yanomami was at UFMG as a professor at the Institute for Advanced Transdisciplinary Studies (IEAT). Since then, there have been many Hutukara Associação Yanomami (HAY) collaborations, in partnership with the Instituto Socioambiental (ISA). However, everything was interrupted between 2019 and 2022, when the resources from the Ministry of Education (MEC) that were intended for these projects were discontinued.

Since then, Davi Kopenawa has denounced on several occasions the neglect, lack of structure and the seriousness of the health situation in Yanomami villages, as occurred at the ceremony celebrating the 95th anniversary of UFMG, when he also requested protection and training for young people indigenous peoples to face the violence and social disorganization that had been installed with the invasion of miners. Recognition of Kopenawa and his important writings comes from several universities, such as Unifesp, which recently awarded him the title of Doctor Honoris Causa.

There are many federal universities, with their professors and students from the Faculties of Education and from the areas of Anthropology, who now seek to structure new actions in order to resume the training of young people, as well as support for health care through the local DSEI in articulation with the Indigenous Health Secretariat, for the training of indigenous health agents (AIS). These will be actions that will need time, structure and a lot of dedication, in addition to a great national effort so that assistance and living conditions actually reach the Yanomamis.

Together, the universities and our students and researchers will certainly grow and learn from the knowledge of the original peoples, who know and know the land and the knowledge they deduce from it for a sustainable life, less predatory and in harmony with nature. And we return to the pioneering teachings of Baruzzi, who also learned from the original peoples and who made the experience of indigenous health also an experience of life and training that was marked in the lives and trajectories of those who were there and are still there.

Thus, universities will continue their work in combating hunger and disease, as well as education. But, most importantly, they will be the meeting place for original experiences and knowledge that will finally form part of the formation of new generations, inserted in their context and in search of a reality of more hope.

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