

Catholic Approaches to Mining: Cases of Impact

The Belo Sun Gold Mine Project

Diocese of Xingu, Brazil

Municipality of Altamira, State of Pará, Brazilian Amazon

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Summary

Spurred by the Second Vatican Council and liberation theology, the Catholic Church in Brazil developed tools for grassroots pastoral action and strengthened processes of community organization and critical interpretation of social realities. These processes laid the foundations for the Church's current actions in a region where the Belo Monte hydroelectric dam has already caused significant biodiversity loss and severely undermined the lives of local communities. When Canadian mining company Belo Sun received authorization by the Brazilian government to build a large open-pit gold mine in the area, a broad mobilization emerged, bringing together local communities, Indigenous and riverine organizations, social movements, and the Catholic Church through its diocesan structures, Pastoral Land Commission and Indigenous Missionary Council. Thanks to this mobilization, the project was suspended by court order in December 2024. The decision was later overturned, and the company's environmental license was reinstated in February 2026. Currently, opposition to the project has intensified, and legal proceedings remain ongoing. This case study examines five types of actions: 1) walking alongside those whose rights have been violated; 2) documenting human rights violations and critically analyzing social realities; 3) communicating and narrating what is happening and why; 4) building and strengthening the organization of local communities; and 5) pursuing structural change.

1. Background

The Catholic Church has been present in Brazil since the beginning of colonial times. The Portuguese expedition led by Pedro Álvares Cabral in 1500 was accompanied by clerics under the leadership of Dom Henrique Soares de Coimbra, who celebrated that year the first mass on the Indigenous land of Coroa Vermelha. Since the sixteenth century, the relationship between the Catholic Church and Indigenous peoples has been core to the formation of the Brazilian social fabric (IHU, 2014). Over the centuries, Catholicism left a deep mark on the social, cultural, and political constitution of Brazilian society. This resulted in Brazil being today the country with the largest Catholic population in the world, with approximately 126.8 million Catholics or about 61% of the Brazilian population (IBGE, 2010). Historically, however, the Brazilian Catholic Church has often aligned itself with economic elites and a Eurocentric model of family and society. This position only began to be questioned from the 1960s onwards (IHU 2014; Souza, 2020).

The Second Vatican Council (1962–1965), convened by Pope John XXIII, inaugurated a process of pastoral, theological, and political openness. This led to significant impacts on liturgy, missiology, ecumenical relations, and the understanding of the Church's role in the world. In Latin America, the implementation of the Second Vatican Council led to the creation of Base Ecclesial Communities (*Comunidades Eclesiais de Base*, CEBs), and to liberation theology as a methodology to interpret the continent's reality of poverty, inequality, and human rights violations, and to offer responses to these from the perspective of the Gospel (Souza, 2020).

This process gained momentum with the second conference of the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM), held in Medellín in 1968. The conference redefined the role of the Church on the continent, promoted a preferential option for the poor, and emphasised the role of the laity in social transformation. In Brazil, this ecclesial shift occurred in parallel with the establishment of the military dictatorship in 1964. Faced with this, the suppression of rights and the intensification of state repression, sectors of the Church, especially through the CEBs, took on a central role in the defence of human rights and democracy. The National Conference of Bishops of Brazil (*Conferência Nacional dos Bispos do Brasil*, CNBB), established in 1952 under the leadership

of Dom Hélder Câmara, became the Church's main institutional voice in the defence of social justice, in particular through its works in supporting agrarian reforms and democratisation (Souza, 2020).

In this context, popular education, developed by Paulo Freire in his *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1968), became a fundamental tool for grassroots pastoral action. It aimed at raising critical awareness of injustices among urban and rural populations. This strengthened processes of community organisation and critical interpretation of social realities. Based on these experiences, the Brazilian Catholic Church began to assume a more explicit commitment to Indigenous peoples, black populations, and marginalised economic sectors. This materialised in the creation of pastoral organisations such as the Pastoral Obrero (pastoral action among industrial workers) in 1970, the Indigenous Missionary Council (*Conselho Indigenista Missionário*, CIMI) in 1972, the Pastoral Land Commission (*Comissão Pastoral da Terra*, CPT) in 1975, and the Afro-Brazilian Pastoral in 1988 (Murad, 2016; Souza, 2020).

Since the 1990s, following the liberalisation of its economy, Brazil has become more deeply integrated into global capitalism, a process that has driven agricultural expansion and a significant increase in mining concessions. The mining sector is dominated by large national and transnational corporations, alongside local subsidiaries, investment funds, and share-holders connected to global financial markets (Milanez et al., 2021). According to the Brazilian Mining Institute (IBRAM, 2025), the value of mineral production reached approximately R\$ 270.8 billion in 2024 (about US\$ 51.3 billion), while exports totalled around US\$ 43.4 billion, equivalent to roughly 47% of Brazil's trade balance. In the same year, mining generated more than 220,000 direct jobs and accounted for about 4% of the national Gross Domestic Product. Most of Brazil's mineral output is export-oriented, with China among its principal destinations. Iron, bauxite, and gold lead the country's mineral exports. Several of the largest mining operations are concentrated in the Brazilian Amazon, notably in the Serra dos Carajás region, in the state of Pará, where Vale S.A. operates the world's largest open-pit iron mine.

Mining has generated significant socio-environmental impacts in the country, including deforestation, river contamination, irreversible ecosystem degradation, and threats to the livelihoods of Indigenous peoples and riverine communities. According to the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT, 2023), 932 mining-related conflicts were recorded in the country in 2022. These conflicts reflect the structural tensions between extractive activities, the protection of Amazonian biodiversity, and the territorial and collective rights of affected populations. In many cases, the absence or manipulation of processes of free, prior, and informed consent has further intensified these conflicts. Major disasters have also exposed the human and environmental costs of mining. The collapses of the tailings dams in Mariana in November 2015 and Brumadinho in January 2019, both in the state of Minas Gerais, resulted in the deaths of more than 290 people and became tragic symbols of the risks associated with large-scale mining. In addition, between 2005 and 2015, mining is estimated to have contributed to the deforestation of approximately 12,000 sq. km of the Brazilian Amazon, with 8% directly linked to mining concessions and the remainder associated with indirect impacts (Forest and Finance, 2022).¹

The expansion of legal and illegal mining has had a profound impact on vulnerable territories, especially in the Legal Amazon.² The Church, through the CNBB, CIMI, CPT, REPAM (*Red Eclesial PanAmazonica*),³ and other

¹ According to Giljum et al. (2025, p. 445), indirect effects of mining lead to 40 times more deforestation than the one caused by the mine itself, with Brazil clearing 77,000 square km. of vegetation to make space for mining between 1985 and 2022 – this data excludes deforestation due to timber logging and agricultural expansion facilitated by mining-related road infrastructure.

² The Legal Amazon is a political-administrative region established by the Brazilian government in 1953. It covers the states of Acre, Amapá, Amazonas, Pará, Rondônia, Roraima, Tocantins, Mato Grosso and part of Maranhão, corresponding to about 59% of the national territory. Its boundaries do not coincide with the Amazon biome which also includes areas of Cerrado and Pantanal.

³ Created in 2014, the Pan-Amazonian Ecclesial Network (REPAM) is an articulation of the Catholic Church across the nine countries that span the Amazon biome to coordinate action to protect it (Bolivia, Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador, French Guyana, Guyana, Peru, Suriname and Venezuela).



organisations linked to religious congregations, has denounced human and environmental rights violations associated with mining. Emblematic cases, such as the territories of the Yanomami (Roraima and Pará), Mundurucu (Pará), and Kayapó (Pará and Mato Grosso), highlight the relationship between mining, mercury pollution, armed violence, disease, and the destruction of traditional ways of life (CPT, 2023; CNBB, 2014). Since the 2010s, the CNBB has treated mining as a structuring pastoral issue. In 2017, it created the Special Commission for Mining and Integral Ecology, to accompany communities affected by mining and engaging in policy advocacy, including in international forums such as United Nations bodies (CNBB, 2014; n.d). In the Amazon, Church leaders such as Dom Roque Paloschi, in coordination with CIMI, have denounced the impacts of mining on Indigenous peoples, as evidenced in publications systematising experiences of resistance in the region and in official statements opposing mineral extraction on Indigenous lands (CNBB, 2014, 2022). In 2014, the Latin American ecumenical network Iglesia y Minería held a meeting in Brasília to strengthen continental coordination among Catholic organisations, in partnership with social movements, civil society organisations, and affected communities, in response to the growing socio-environmental impacts of mining. In 2020, a meeting between the CNBB and REPAM consolidated joint pastoral and advocacy strategies addressing mining in the Amazon. As an expression of this territorialisation of institutional action, a meeting organised by the CNBB in Açailândia (state of Maranhão) in 2018 also stands out. It brought together dioceses, social pastoral groups, and affected communities, and analysed the situation in Maranhão in light of *Laudato Si'* and the CELAM document *Missionary Disciples, Guardians of Our Common Home* (CELAM, 2018).

Overall, the institutional response of the Catholic Church in Latin America, and particularly in Brazil since the 1960s, to socio-environmental conflicts, including mining, has been rooted in an eco-spirituality that integrates social justice, human rights, environmental care, and intercultural dialogue, especially with Indigenous cosmovisions (Murad, 2016; Wanderley, 2012). This represents a historical and theological trajectory that articulates faith with the defence of life in the concrete territories where conflicts unfold. This process gained renewed momentum with the publication of *Laudato Si'* in 2015. It found particular expression with the Synod for the Amazon, held in October 2019 in Rome, and the publication of *Querida Amazonia* (Francis, 2020). These milestones consolidated the proposal of a Church with an “Amazonian face,” that is, a Church listening to the peoples of the region and committed to integral ecology. They reactivated the Church’s historic charism of being close to people who suffer, of listening and walking alongside them in the defence of life and territories. This process of learning and commitment has been nourished by the witness of numerous martyrs who gave their lives defending human rights and Indigenous and rural communities. In this way, a spirituality embodied in the Risen Christ, present alongside the suffering people, takes shape as an expression of the Catholic Church’s charism in the Amazon in the face of assaults on our common home.

2. The Belo Sun project

The proposed Belo Sun mining project is set to become the largest open-pit gold mine in Brazil. It is located in the territory of the Volta Grande do Xingu (“the Great Bend of the Xingu River”), in the heart of the Amazon, less than 10 kilometres from the Belo Monte dam, in the state of Pará. Belo Monte is the fourth largest hydroelectric dam in the world and has already generated profound conflicts and immeasurable social and ecological impacts in the region. During its construction phase, more than 96,000 people migrated to the city of Altamira, doubling its population in less than five years and deepening urban poverty. In 2015, Altamira became the most violent city in Brazil (IPEA, 2017). It is estimated that around 40,000 families were displaced by the dam, including small farmers, riverine communities, and fishers, many of whom are still awaiting adequate resettlement conditions (AIDA, 2024; Taylor, 2022).

The Volta Grande do Xingu territory, which encompasses both the dam and the mining project, is the ancestral homeland of several Indigenous peoples. It is also home to endangered wildlife species and harbours a high level of biodiversity (Amazon Watch, 2022). Therefore, the mining project would be situated in an area of high ecological significance and within a complex network of river tributaries, waterfalls, and aquatic ecosystems. Its potential consequences in terms of water contamination and heavy metal pollution would extend far beyond its immediate footprint, compounding the social and ecological devastation already caused by the dam.

The company behind the project, Belo Sun, is headquartered in Vancouver, Canada, and operates in Brazil through its subsidiary Belo Sun Mineração Ltda. Like other mining ventures, the project is in great part associated with foreign capital. Its largest shareholders are Luxembourg-based La Mancha Resource Fund and Switzerland-based Sun Valley Investment (AIDA, 2024; Belo Sun Mining Corp, n.d.). According to technical studies presented by the company, the project would extract approximately 4.4 million ounces of gold over 20 years, with an estimated annual production of 205,000 ounces. The proposed method is open-pit mining, with intensive use of explosives, crushing of large volumes of rock, and use of potentially polluting chemicals such as cyanide, generating millions of tonnes of mining waste that would be stored in waste rock piles and tailings deposits. The company promises job creation and regional economic revitalisation (Belo Sun Mining Corp, n.d.).

To date, the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office (*Ministério Público Federal*, MPF) has filed more than 10 lawsuits in relation to the Belo Sun project, as well as other lawsuits in connection with its cumulative impacts with the Belo Monte dam. Studies point to high risks of heavy metal contamination, damage to fish and fauna, reduced water quality, and the worsening of existing health problems, such as malaria, gastrointestinal diseases, and psychosocial suffering in displaced communities (AIDA, 2024; MXVS, 2021).

The case has become emblematic of socio-environmental resistance, bringing together local communities, Indigenous organisations, social movements, and the Catholic Church (through the Diocese of Xingu, the Pastoral Land Commission and the Indigenous Missionary Council), all united under the Alliance for the Volta Grande do Xingu (*Aliança pela Volta Grande do Xingu*),⁴ as well as Brazil’s federal justice system. It demonstrates how civil society actions and the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office seek to challenge and halt a large-scale mining project with significant socio-environmental impacts (MXVS, 2025a).

⁴ The Alliance brings together activists, researchers, and national and international organisations working in the fields of environmental protection, Indigenous rights and human rights, united by the shared goal of protecting the Volta Grande do Xingu. Its members include the Movimento Xingu Vivo, Justiça Global, the Interamerican Association for Environmental Defense (AIDA), Amazon Watch, the Articulation of Indigenous Peoples of Brazil (APIB), Amnesty International, the Coordination of Indigenous Organisations of the Brazilian Amazon (COIAB), International Rivers, and the Socioenvironmental Institute (ISA); see *Aliança pela Volta Grande do Xingu* (n.d.).

At the end of January 2026, social movements, socio-environmental organisations, researchers, and religious leaders gathered at the headquarters of the Xingu Vivo movement in Altamira to assess the political, social, and environmental situation and the challenges facing territorial struggles in the region. The meeting was also attended by the Bishop Emeritus of Xingu, Erwin Kräutler. The persistent impacts of the Belo Monte dam and the foreseen impacts of the proposed Belo Sun mining project were the main concerns discussed. Participants warned that the project could cause severe socio-environmental impacts in a region already weakened by the transformations brought about by Belo Monte, affecting Indigenous peoples, riverine communities, and family farmers who depend directly on the river and the forest.



Although the mining project has faced several legal obstacles, including the suspension of its installation license for nearly nine years and multiple judicial actions, local leaders anticipated that the scenario might soon change due to strong pressure exerted by the mining company on national and regional political actors, as well as changes in key judicial leadership in the region. The meeting resulted in a statement that denounced the licensing process and criticised the way the company has operated in the region since 2014. The statement asserted that the license was granted without adequate studies on Indigenous impacts and without the prior consent required under international law, which led the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office to challenge the process in court and obtain the suspension of the installation license. It also denounced episodes of intimidation, the presence of armed security, and attempts to divide local communities. It is signed by a broad network of organisations, including the Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre, the Instituto Socioambiental, the Comissão Pastoral da Terra (CPT Anapu), the Conselho Indigenista Missionário (CIMI Altamira), the Fórum da Amazônia Oriental, and the Sindicato dos Trabalhadores Rurais de Altamira (MXVS, 2026).

These predictions proved correct. Until February 2026, the coalition succeeded in suspending the project through several legal battles (Amazon Watch, 2025). However, following the appointment of Federal Appeal Judge Flávio Jardim to the 6th Panel of the Federal Regional Court of the 1st Region (TRF1), an interlocutory decision was granted in mid-February 2026 to suspend the lower court's ruling and fully reinstate the validity of the installation license. The decision authorised the resumption of the project's regular installation activities, estimated at approximately US\$300 million, with an average annual production of 205,155 ounces of gold over a 17.5-year lifespan (BN Americas, 2026).

In response, the Federal Public Prosecutor's Office (MPF) filed an interlocutory appeal to seek the immediate suspension of the license on the grounds that the authorisation was based on erroneous assumptions, since the judicial conditions related to the protection of affected communities had not been fully met (MPF, 2026). In its appeal, the MPF argues that allowing the project to proceed may generate permanent socio-environmental and cultural impacts even before a final judgment on the legality of the licensing process, creating a risk of irreversible harm. The MPF also claims that the company failed to adequately comply with the requirement to conduct the Indigenous Component Study (*Estudo do Componente Indígena*, ECI) and the Free, Prior and Informed Consent (FPIC) established under ILO Convention No. 169. According to the MPF, the consultative process was carried out by a private firm hired by the mining company itself, amounting to an improper "privatisation" of a procedure that is a state prerogative, and it excluded "non-village-based" Indigenous

groups from the process. The appeal further highlights the technical complexity arising from the relationship with the Belo Monte dam, arguing that a fully informed consultative process is impossible without a final definition of the dam's water flow hydrograph. Given that the region already suffers from reduced river flow due to water diversion, the cumulative impacts of a large-scale gold mine cannot be properly assessed without reliable data on water availability. Moreover, the MPF contends that the ECI remains technically insufficient, with serious pending issues, including those related to the relocation of São Francisco village, and that neither the National Foundation for Indigenous Peoples (Fundação Nacional dos Povos Indígenas, FUNAI)⁵ nor the Secretariat for Environment, Climate and Sustainability of the state of Pará (Secretaria de Estado de Meio Ambiente, Clima e Sustentabilidade do Estado do Pará, Semas) has certified full compliance with the conditions required for continuing the licensing process (MPF, 2026).

The appeal also stresses the risk of irreversible damage arising from the large-scale construction works, which will involve explosives and permanent soil alteration in an environmentally sensitive area already under pressure from the cumulative impacts of the Belo Monte dam. What Belo Sun promotes as the largest open-pit gold mine in Brazil will include: a tailings dam with a capacity of 35 million cubic meters which would contain arsenic, antimony, lead, copper, and sulphur; the use of toxic substances such as cyanide; the deposition of tailings along the banks of the Xingu River; the construction of a workers' village; the resettlement of affected populations; and a new road infrastructure.

As mentioned above, the Volta Grande do Xingu is inhabited by fishers, riverine communities, Indigenous peoples, and agrarian reform settlers, and includes Indigenous lands and protected areas whose inhabitants depend on biodiversity and the seasonal cycles of the Xingu River. The Federal Prosecutor (Felicio Pontes Jr.) emphasises that the first-instance decision had been cautious and protective, whereas the single-judge ruling, in reversing that precaution, assumes that the risk of allowing the project to go ahead may be socio-environmentally unviable, and violates international human rights standards. The MPF therefore requests reconsideration of the injunction or, alternatively, referral of the case to the full panel of the Sixth Chamber of TRF1, seeking suspension of installation activities until the Indigenous Component Study and the prior consultation processes are deemed technically and legally satisfactory by the competent authorities (MPF, 2026). In sum, the case illustrates the legal complexities, as well as the critical importance of legal procedures, in defending life and territories, but it also demonstrates the need for a sustained process of social mobilisation to see through those legal challenges in the long term.

One of the most significant actions of the Alliance took place within the framework of the UN Universal Periodic Review (UPR), a mechanism that periodically assesses the human rights situation in the UN 193 member states (AIDA, 2024; MXVS, 2025a). In August 2023, during Canada's fourth UPR cycle in Geneva, more than 50 communities affected by Canadian companies presented a report denouncing violations associated with 37 projects in nine countries in Latin America and the Caribbean. The situation in the Volta Grande do Xingu was presented to more than 20 countries, as well as to permanent missions and UN agencies. As a result, Canada incorporated 34 recommendations directly linked to the report prepared by the Alliance. In addition, the Alliance submitted reports to UN Special Rapporteurs, including the Rapporteur on Human Rights Defenders, warning of the risks, criminalisation, and threats faced by local leaders. It also submitted a report to the UN Committee on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights, pointing out human rights violations in the Belo Monte and Belo Sun cases and the lack of effective measures to ensure corporate due diligence. The next section analyses the actions of the leading member of the Alliance, the movement Xingu Vivo, to protect the territory and the lives of its inhabitants in the light of the analytical framework detailed in Deneulin and Montevecchio (2025) – namely

⁵ FUNAI is Brazil's government department in charge of protecting the rights of Indigenous Peoples.

accompaniment, mediation of experience, documenting, education and training, and advocacy for policy and institutional change – and which was jointly developed with different actors and Catholic organisations in Latin America and the Caribbean.

3. The actions of the Volta Grande do Xingu Alliance and Xingu Vivo in the face of Belo Sun threat

When the Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre (hereafter MXVS or Xingu Vivo) emerged with the aim of mobilising local communities in the Xingu region against the Belo Monte dam, it received significant support from the Catholic Church, which had been working alongside rural communities in defence of land and life in the area since the 1970s. From its inception, the movement coordinated with the local Indigenous movement, also supported by the Church, which collaborated in several mobilisations, including the First Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu, held in 1989 in response to the announcement of the dam project. A broad grassroots coalition thus took shape, bringing together Indigenous, rural, riverine, and urban populations, along with social movements, faith-based organisations, and civil society entities. In that context, a letter entitled “SOS Xingu” was written as if the river itself were denouncing the threats it faced and calling for help. The aim of the letter was to raise awareness among communities and authorities of the negative impacts of the dam. In this sense, MXVS had its roots from the community organising work of the Catholic Church, especially through its Base Ecclesial Communities (Deneulin, Lacerda et al., 2024).

It was consolidated as a social movement in 2008, following the Second Meeting of the Indigenous Peoples of the Xingu (MXVS, 2025a). Since then, it has acted as a space for political, ethical, and territorial coordination in response to the advance of infrastructure and mining projects in the Xingu basin, especially the Belo Monte dam and, more recently, the Belo Sun mining project. However, Xingu Vivo is more than a resistance movement opposing specific projects. It is a broader socio-environmental justice movement that articulates the defence of territorial rights, the protection of biodiversity, and the affirmation of alternative conceptions of development or “buen vivir” (Francis, 2020, §71). It is deeply rooted in the experiences and knowledge of Indigenous, riverine, and peasant populations who inhabit the region and promotes large-scale alliances, such as in the case of the Alliance for the Volta Grande (Deneulin, Lacerda et al., 2024).

Its approach is based on the understanding that addressing the social and ecological impacts of mining cannot be reduced to technical or administrative disputes over environmental licences. It fundamentally involves raising ethical and political questions about development trajectories and modes of being, producing, and consuming. This approach is also echoed in the message that the Catholic bishops of the Global South issued in July 2025 for COP30 in Belém, which denounced mining for the energy transition as a false solution to climate change, and which urged a structural transformation of modes of consumption and production (CELAM, SECAM and FABC, 2025; Deneulin, Barrera and Lacerda, 2026).

In what follows, we analyse the actions carried out by the MXVS, as well as its alliances, in the light of broader studies on mining in the Brazilian Amazon and the ways in which communities, organisations, and movements linked to the Catholic Church have come together to confront initiatives that threaten the socio-environmental balance and the reproduction of life in their territories.

Walking alongside those whose rights have been violated

For Xingu Vivo, accompaniment takes the form of an ethical and political stance that recognises communities as historical subjects of rights and protagonists of their own destiny. This translates to building relationships of trust sustained by a daily presence in the territories, supporting local forms of organisation, and valuing traditional ways of life as legitimate and valuable expressions of social and ecological relations.

In this journey, or walking with, communities whose rights have been violated, Catholic practices and rituals, especially around the figure of Jesus who is suffering with his people, and of those who have followed in his footsteps at the risk of their lives, play a unifying and mobilising role. They unite people around shared collective goals, and link faith, hope and resistance. Emblematic figures such as Dorothy Stang and Vicente Cañas continue to be references for the movement.⁶ Remembering their lives nurtures a spirituality that sustains hope in the face of destruction. It is a spirituality that affirms that, even in the face of death, those who struggle with and for those who suffer injustices already participate in the Kingdom and the triumph of life over death. This remembering of the martyrs strengthens collective resilience and affirms that present communities are not alone in their struggles. Spirituality also permeates processes of community formation, with biblical passages, the social teachings of the Church, and the lives of martyrs used to shed light on local realities. This spills over into human rights formation and legal action to protect territorial, social, and cultural rights. Thus, in Xingu Vivo, spirituality and social and legal actions are deeply intertwined.⁷

Making sense of the pain of what is being experienced

Although the MXVS is not formally an ecclesial entity, it maintains organic links with the Catholic Church. It collaborates with pastoral groups, the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), as well as regional ecclesial networks such as REPAM. It trains, for example, the technical staff of these organisations in the Altamira region, ensuring outreach and grassroots penetration of national campaigns of the Church in Brazil, such as the bishops' conference message on mining (CNBB, 2022), and contributes directly to leadership formation processes linked to religious organisations. These links allow the experiences of suffering, resistance, and hope of affected populations to be reinterpreted in the light of the social teachings of the Church, the theology of creation, and the integral ecology paradigm. This theological mediation does not operate as an abstract superimposition of religious discourses on social realities. It is rather a process of ethical and political translation that gives spiritual depth to the movement's actions. Its documents offer a critical framework that integrates faith, human rights, and structural analysis of the extractivist model, and situate the Belo Sun conflict within a broader framework of socio-environmental injustice and economic colonialism. By adopting this framework, Xingu Vivo contributes to the construction of a narrative that denaturalises mining as an inevitable destiny and affirms the legitimacy of resistance in the name of life and the dignity of peoples (CNBB, 2022; CELAM, SECAM, FABC, 2025; MXVS, 2025a).

The formal structures of the Catholic Church, such as dioceses and pastoral ministries, as well as specific actors—including bishops, priests, religious men and women, and laypeople—also mobilise their institutional

⁶ Dorothy Stang was an American-born religious who was murdered in 2005 for her work with rural communities (Gandolfo-O'Donnell, 2023). Vicente Cañas was a Spanish-born religious brother who was murdered in 1987 for his work with Indigenous communities (Martin, 2014).

⁷ For a more detailed analysis of how this spiritual dimension unfolds in the Xingu Vivo movement and wider movements that resist infrastructure and mining projects in Latin America, see Deneulin, Lacerda et al. (2024).

legitimacy to mediate complaints of rights violations brought by communities before international bodies. Such mediation is particularly relevant in light of the growing capture of Latin American states by national and international economic elites and the consequent expansion of socio-environmental corruption (Lacerda et al., 2024).

In turn, international instruments such as the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples, ILO Convention No. 169, which enshrines the right to Free, Prior and Informed Consent, the Escazú Agreement,⁸ the decisions of the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and international debates on the Rights of Nature are especially relevant to these processes of meaning-making, as they situate local experiences within a broader international context of climate emergency. This was the case, for example, in 2010 when the Bishops of the Amazon, representing a regional branch of the CNBB, publicly stood alongside local communities against Belo Monte, granting broader political significance and, above all, prophetic and institutional legitimacy to their denunciations (CMC, 2010).

Knowing how to tell the story

Communities often face significant challenges in producing and maintaining records of rights violations, which are required by technical and institutional bodies as a condition for the formal submission of complaints. For this reason, the systematic documentation of human rights violations constitutes a central focus of the movement's action. In collaboration with national and international organisations, MXVS participates in the preparation of reports analysing the impacts of the Belo Sun project. These documents serve multiple functions: making violations visible, substantiating claims and complaints before institutional bodies, and strengthening policy advocacy at different levels (AIDA, 2024; Amazon Watch, 2022, 2025). They also challenge corporate narratives regarding socio-environmental responsibility and the alleged contributions of mining to the sustainable development of the region. By documenting the risks of pollution, failures in environmental licensing, and the absence of free, prior, and informed consent from Indigenous peoples, the movement helps expose the limits and contradictions of the current regulatory model in the face of economic pressure from states and corporations.

An example of this is the joint report on human rights submitted to the Inter-American Commission on Human Rights (IACHR), in which the Alliance for the Volta Grande do Xingu, together with allied networks, contributed information and complaints. This formed part of the IACHR's 2024 Annual Report. The document examines the status of implementation of more than 250 recommendations made in previous years on human rights



situations in Brazil and pays special attention to the impacts of the Belo Monte dam and the threats associated with the Belo Sun mining project. One of its central criticisms is the failure of the Brazilian state to guarantee the right to free, prior, and informed consent of the Indigenous communities affected, as well as the lack of alignment of the national environmental licensing process with international human rights standards (IACHR, 2025).

⁸ The “Regional Agreement on Access to Information, Public Participation and Justice in Environmental Matters”, signed in 2018 in the Costa Rican city of Escazú. The agreement makes access to information a precondition for being able to provide consent, and guarantees the right to a safe environment for environmental defenders.

The IACHR report not only identifies failures in state procedures but also incorporates complaints submitted by civil society organisations regarding territorial conflicts, violence, and administrative omissions. Among the complaints is the threat of passing laws that allow environmental licences to be granted without adequate consultation. This increases the risk of violations, and maintains policies that incentivise projects that have significant negative impacts. The report urges the Brazilian state to explain how its environmental licensing regulation complies with the standards of consultation and participation set out in international instruments. The report has also been used as a reference in international and regional mobilisations. During COP30 in Belém, for example, the Belo Sun case was placed at the centre of debates on climate change and socio-environmental rights. It has been used in forums such as the International Tribunal for the Rights of Nature and sessions of the UN Human Rights Council, where MXVS representatives denounced violations before the international community.

Laying the foundations: Forming and strengthening communities

Education and training are another important strategic element in the actions of Xingu Vivo. Through workshops, community assemblies, communication materials, and training processes, the movement seeks to broaden the understanding among communities of the structural causes of socio-environmental harms they are experiencing, particularly by connecting the local territory with national and global dynamics of mineral extraction. This pedagogical dimension strengthens the political autonomy of affected populations and contributes to the construction of a critical consciousness capable of sustaining long-term resistance processes (MXVS, 2025a).

In Brazil, the creation of education programmes in local communities to strengthen cohesion and build strategies to address various injustices is a living legacy of the Popular Education movement inspired by Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. As mentioned earlier, this methodology served as one of the main foundations of liberation theology and Base Ecclesial Communities. Developing an education that broadens people's critical awareness based on an understanding of their own reality, and how it is intertwined with the power relations that structure society, was and continues to be a powerful way of educating and training historical subjects committed to social transformation (Costa et al., 2010).

In this formative process, spirituality, understood as a connection with nature, with others, and with God, plays a central role. The key documents of the social teachings of the Church, such as *Laudato Si'*, become essential study resources in dialogue with legal frameworks and academic research. It is also noteworthy that the Catholic Church, especially in Brazil, plays an important role in the field of higher education. This facilitates collaboration among people from different territories and academic institutions in the technical and theoretical dimensions of training, significantly strengthening teaching and learning processes through meaningful exchanges.

These initiatives are part of what may be called an “ecology of knowledge,” in which academic knowledge encounters popular and community knowledge, producing relevant understandings to address socio-environmental challenges. This perspective is directly linked to the concept of integral ecology and finds strong support in the guidance of Pope Francis, especially in his call to learn from the peoples of the Amazon and to listen to their ancestral knowledge (Contreras and Lacerda, 2021; Francis, 2020).

It is through this grassroots formation that popular and collective resistance to the Belo Sun mining project has been coordinated. Xingu Vivo, together with the Alliance and other organisations, has been organising community meetings and training processes in the territories directly affected. It is also strengthening and

preparing local leaders with the skills needed to engage with the Public Prosecutor's Office, the Inter-American Court of Human Rights, and other national and international political and legal bodies (MXVS, 2025a).

In addition, the movement has coordinated exchanges between communities affected by large projects, produced informational brochures on the risks of mining in the region, and collaborated with partner organisations in the preparation of technical and human rights reports. These educational actions raise awareness that mining is part of a history of projects that sacrifice territories for the sake of external interests. By strengthening critical awareness and community organisation, the MXVS reaffirms the centrality of socio-environmental justice as a political horizon and expands local capacity for resistance and the proposal of alternatives for the region.

Strengthening community cohesion and forming local, national, and international alliances are fundamental conditions for addressing the threats and impacts associated with the different phases of the design, licensing, and implementation of a mining project. In this regard, the role of women must be duly emphasised. Previous research on Xingu Vivo (Deneulin, Lacerda et al., 2024) identified women as those who most consistently participated in spaces of formation and community building. They were less susceptible to corruption and co-optation, and they broadened the movement's agenda by making the defence of the territory inseparable from wider demands for health, education, and care for future generations. Through women's leadership and engagement, the movement goes beyond mere resistance and assumes a more existential and deeply collective character concerning issues of family, social, and ecological sustainability.

Seeking structural change: Another world is possible

All the categories of action mentioned above converge toward advocacy. The ultimate goal is to raise awareness and mobilise political, legal, academic, and ecclesial actors, as well as public opinion more broadly. Once informed about human rights violations and ecological damage, these actors can exert pressure on companies and governments to prevent the expansion of extractive megaprojects in these biodiverse territories and hold corporations accountable for human rights violations and ecological devastation. Ultimately, this is a defence of life against a logic of death: the preservation of ancestral ways of life, grounded in reciprocal relationships with nature, in the face of an economic logic that places profit above people and ecosystems.

Overall, advocacy actions seek to counteract power inequality and the fact that local government authorities, as well as a significant part of regional media, are captured by economic elites and the interests of multinational corporations. Redressing this power imbalance involves mobilising national and international alliances in order to make human and environmental rights violations more visible. Advocacy takes various forms, such as lawsuits, legislative reforms, divestment campaigns, and pressure for greater regulation of companies. Acting from the local to the international level, it uses the law as a strategic tool to transform complaints into structural changes, facing the challenge of balancing prophetic denunciation of injustices with constructive political dialogue, while also promoting solidarity between the Global North and South (Deneulin, Montevicchio, 2025). A striking example of this is the Alliance for the Volta Grande do Xingu mentioned earlier. It produces reports, makes public denunciations, and engages in national and international advocacy through its partnerships, such as with Amnesty International and International Rivers (Aliança pela Volta Grande do Xingu, n.d.).

The Alliance's leading member organisation, Xingu Vivo, works constantly in national and international legal spheres, with the support of organisations linked to the Church, such as the Pastoral Land Commission (CPT), the Indigenous Missionary Council (CIMI), as well as regional ecclesial networks, and environmental and human rights entities. Coordination with the Federal Prosecutor's Office, contributions to public civil actions,

and social mobilisation around the environmental licensing process were decisive factors in the suspension of the Belo Sun project's installation licence, until its revocation in February 2026. As noted earlier, the action taken by the Aliança pela Volta Grande do Xingu in the UN Universal Periodic Review during Canada's evaluation in 2023 is an exemplary illustration of multi-level mediation based on local experience. By denouncing human rights violations by Canadian companies in the Amazon, the movement significantly increased the visibility of the Belo Sun case and strengthened mechanisms to protect community leaders from criminalisation. This internationalisation of the struggle does not replace territorial action, but rather complements it, creating networks of solidarity and political pressure capable of stressing the global power structures that sustain an extractive-based model of economic and social development.

A decisive factor in strengthening these strategies was the public position taken by the National Conference of Bishops of Brazil in 2022 in its message on mining on Indigenous lands (CNBB 2022). By denouncing legislative proposals such as PL 490/2007 and PL 191/2020,⁹ the CNBB reaffirmed the Church's commitment to defend the constitutional rights of Indigenous peoples and the primacy of life over economic interests. This statement brought ethical and political legitimacy to the social movement and its alliance with Church organisations and renewed their capacity for coordination and strengthened their advocacy. In the territory of the Volta Grande do Xingu, the CNBB message contributed to strengthening Indigenous participation in the opposition against Belo Sun, especially through the work of female leaders. The decision by the Juruna and Arara Indigenous associations to declare the consultation presented by the company in December 2025 invalid, as well as the occupation of FUNAI offices in Altamira by some 200 Indigenous people, demonstrates the centrality of self-determination. Indigenous peoples are not passive actors in technocratic licensing processes, but political subjects capable of redefining the terms of the mining project. Since February 23, 2026, when the legal threat resurfaced following the latest decisions authorising the construction of the gold mine, more than 100 Indigenous people have been camping at the regional headquarters of FUNAI in Altamira to protest the advance of the Belo Sun project and demand its suspension (MXVS, 2026). The mobilisation is led by the Indigenous Women's Movement of the Middle Xingu.

The entire process of formation, accompaniment, and advocacy revolves around a prophetic perspective of hope, pointing to the collective and popular conviction that the construction of another world, with the protagonism of local communities and the consolidation of more harmonious and less predatory relationships with Nature, is possible. Examples that another world is possible do not emerge spontaneously from global arenas of legal debate; rather, they grow from the ground. One such example is the first Production Festival of the Francisco Piauí Encampment, held on September 27–28, 2025, in the Volta Grande do Xingu, which is linked to the resistance of peasant families against the Belo Sun project. The resistance dates back to 2011 when Belo Sun began the illegal purchase of lots in the Ressaca Settlement Project, a situation later denounced by the State Public Defender's Office. In 2022, landless farmers, together with Munduruku Indigenous peoples, occupied the territory bought illegally by Belo Sun, forming the Francisco Piauí Encampment, which subsequently faced lawsuits, threats, and violence from the company. Even under pressure, between 2024 and 2025, the families

⁹ PL 490/2007 is a Brazilian legislative proposal that seeks to modify the legal framework governing Indigenous lands, most notably by incorporating the so-called "*time frame thesis*" (*marco temporal*), according to which Indigenous peoples would only be entitled to land demarcation if they were in possession of the territory on 5 October 1988, the date of the promulgation of the Federal Constitution. The bill also transfers to the National Congress the authority to approve demarcations and opens the possibility of reviewing lands that have already been recognised. PL 191/2020 aims to regulate the exploitation of mineral resources, water resources, and hydrocarbons within Indigenous territories, allowing mining and energy generation projects subject to congressional authorisation. The proposal has been widely criticised by Indigenous and socio-environmental organisations for posing risks to self-determination, territorial rights, and environmental protection.

produced more than 40 tons of food and cultivated more than 40 different plant species. They celebrated this resistance through a “Production Festival” organised with the support of Xingu Vivo and the Pastoral Land Commission. The festival was marked by harvests, circles of dialogue, the sharing of food, and reflections on faith, struggle, and the defence of the territory (MXVS, 2025b).

4. Concluding reflections

The analysis of the actions carried out by the Xingu Vivo movement and its allies to resist the mining project proposed by the corporation Belo Sun demonstrates how the coordination between social movements, affected communities, and organisations linked to the Catholic Church has fostered strategies grounded in socio-environmental justice, the defence of human rights, the protection of territories and nature, and the centrality of life as an ethical and political principle. Through the continuous accompaniment of local populations in their territories, ethical mediation of conflicts, systematic documentation of human rights violations, critical training of community leaders, and advocacy across multiple institutional levels, the movement does not merely confront a specific company but also challenges the foundations of a development model that has historically generated social inequality and environmental destruction in the Amazon. In this sense, resistance to the mining project goes beyond the denunciation of local impacts and becomes part of a broader critique of the extractivist logic that has guided development policies in the region.

This process of resistance also reveals the capacity of communities and their organisations to articulate alternative visions of development. The mobilisation expresses not only opposition to a specific project but also the affirmation of other ways of existing, producing, and caring for our “common home”, deeply rooted in territorial experiences and in the cosmologies of local populations. It represents a political and cultural horizon that values the dignity of the peoples who inhabit these territories and recognises the interdependence between society and nature as a foundation for social and ecological sustainability.

Within this framework, the objectives of this research become clearer when examining how organisations connected to the Catholic Church operate in situations of socio-environmental conflicts. In the case analysed here, the principles of Catholic social teaching, developed and deepened over recent decades in Latin America, constitute a key axis that shapes the actions of many actors engaged in territorial defence. This intellectual and pastoral legacy was strongly influenced by processes of ecclesial renewal initiated by the Second Vatican Council and further developed through the Latin American and Caribbean Episcopal Council (CELAM), which has consolidated a vision of Christian faith intrinsically connected to the promotion of social justice and the defence of marginalised populations.

These theological and pastoral orientations generated concrete forms of convergence in the Volta Grande do Xingu territory, particularly when articulated through three central dimensions that have shaped the Church’s social engagement in Latin America, namely liberation theology, popular education inspired by critical pedagogies, and the historical experience of the Base Ecclesial Communities. These allowed the Christian faith to be lived in a deeply



contextualised manner, embedded in local realities and expressed through collective practices that integrate spirituality, community organisation, and socio-political action. They continue to exert significant influence on social mobilisation in defence of the Amazon. It is therefore difficult to understand the breadth and persistence of these resistance movements without recognising the central role played, directly or indirectly, by the Catholic Church in community organising, training, and building networks of solidarity and collective action.

Another important aspect concerns the historical continuity of the mobilisations led by Xingu Vivo. The populations who are confronting the threats associated with the Belo Sun project are largely the same as those who previously experienced intense political and social conflicts during the construction of the Belo Monte dam. A comparison between these two cases reveals significant similarities in the strategies of resistance adopted. Among the most notable elements are the centrality of local leadership and community protagonism, systematic practices of territorial accompaniment, detailed documentation of rights violations, and advocacy strategies operating across multiple institutional scales. Both cases also reveal the prominent role played by women in community organising and in broadening the agendas of resistance, as well as the consistent support of local church organisations such as social pastoral ministries, parishes, and diocesan offices. These elements suggest that the effectiveness of the Church's action is deeply connected to its organic integration into the daily lives of affected populations and to a conception of faith embodied in the territory and expressed through commitments to social justice, ecological protection, resistance, and hope. They also point out the importance of wider alliances between institutions that share a broader vision centred on the defence of life, territories, and the rights of Amazonian peoples, aligned with the principles of Catholic social teaching. Such convergence reinforces the moral and political legitimacy of social mobilisations and expands the movement's ability to articulate alliances within national and international socio-environmental advocacy networks.

Despite these similarities and continuities, it remains uncertain whether the outcomes of the Belo Sun case will differ from those observed in Belo Monte. Thus far, the trajectory of the mining project has displayed dynamics similar to those seen during the dam's construction process, marked by cycles of progress and suspension resulting from pressure exerted by civil society, judicial decisions, and community mobilisation. These dynamics stand in contrast to the developmentalist discourse promoted by large corporations and frequently supported by sectors of the state apparatus, which portray such projects as inevitable drivers of economic growth and local development.

Given this scenario, the case raises several questions that may guide future research agendas. One key question is whether local social movements have politically matured over the past decade to the point of achieving greater effectiveness in their strategies of resistance. Another hypothesis relates to whether projects led directly by the Brazilian state, such as Belo Monte, possess a greater capacity for institutional imposition than those driven primarily by foreign capital, as in the case of Belo Sun. A further line of inquiry concerns whether political actors and institutions have learned from the controversies surrounding Belo Monte, whose operation continues to generate debate regarding its capacity to deliver the energy production and development benefits originally promised.

In this sense, the case study demonstrates that resistance to the Belo Sun project cannot be understood merely as a localised reaction to a specific company, but rather as an expression of a broader historical process of confrontation with the extractivist logic that structures relations between state, capital, and territory in the Amazon. Within this context, the Movimento Xingu Vivo para Sempre emerges as a collective actor capable of linking territorial memory, traditional knowledge, social mobilisation, and legal advocacy within a multi-scalar strategy of territorial defence.

Finally, the case reveals both the potential and the contradictions of contemporary forms of socio-environmental resistance. On the one hand, it highlights the capacity of communities and their networks of allies to generate alternative narratives and practices that challenge the dominant development paradigm. On the other hand, it exposes the structural limitations of an economic model that continues to operate through territorial sacrifice and the systematic violation of rights in favour of corporate interests. In this context, the dispute over mining ultimately represents a civilisational conflict: between a paradigm based on the exploitation and commodification of nature and, alternatively, visions that defend the self-determination of peoples and the integrity of ecosystems as the foundations of a sustainable future. By illuminating these tensions, the case contributes to academic and political debates on socio-environmental justice in the Amazon and beyond, reaffirming that the defence of life is not only an ethical imperative but also a political project constructed daily from within the territories themselves.

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