

When Sustainability initiatives and Indigenous Realities meet: Ontological Violence in the case of the ‘Paiter Suruí Carbon Credit REDD+ Project’

“As Indigenous peoples, we need to consider very carefully. To live two realities. Without diving totally into the other, without losing our own. We have to join the two [ways of life] always prioritizing the being Paiter [o ser Paiter]” (Interview with a community member in the Paiter territory, 2023).

The Paiter Suruí Carbon Credit REDD+ Project

Amidst global concern over climate change, carbon credit mechanisms have been promoted as a strategy for offsetting CO₂ emissions. The Kyoto Protocol’s Clean Development Mechanism allowed such offsets to be traded internationally, with the Amazon rainforest becoming a central site through REDD+ initiatives (“Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation”). These programs reward communities for conserving forests, yet their benefits remain contested, often shifting responsibility for preservation onto vulnerable groups while exposing them to external pressures such as mining and logging.

In this context, the Paiter Suruí launched the world’s first Indigenous-led carbon credit project in 2009. Their territory, the Sete de Setembro Indigenous Land in Rondônia and Mato Grosso, spans nearly 250,000 hectares and is home to about 1,500 people organised into patrilineal clans. Known as “the real people,” the Paiter’s lifeways are grounded in Ser Paiter, a cosmology emphasising reciprocity with nature. Since their first sustained contact with Brazil’s National Indigenous Foundation (FUNAI) in 1969, they have defended their territory while facing waves of extractive exploitation.

The Suruí Carbon Project aimed to generate income through forest preservation, based on a 2005 Management Plan that emphasised four key pillars: territorial monitoring, food security, institutional strengthening, and financial oversight. Early results included sales of carbon credits to companies such as Natura (2013) and FIFA (2014), alongside measurable reductions in deforestation. However, internal governance challenges, unequal benefit distribution, and renewed external invasions undermined the project, which was suspended in 2017.

Research summary

Our study examines the encounters between Indigenous realities and sustainability initiatives through the case of the Paiter Suruí Carbon Credit REDD+ Project (PSCC Project) in Brazil, the first forest carbon project led by an Indigenous community. Indigenous groups are increasingly engaged in global environmental governance, yet these collaborations often reflect power asymmetries, colonial legacies, and conflicting worldviews. We situate our work within critical sustainability scholarship and Indigenous business research, foregrounding political ontology as a framework to understand how divergent realities interact and how tensions are negotiated.

While sustainability initiatives often claim to preserve ecosystems and cultural practices, many continue to reproduce Western models of progress and development, privileging corporate interests while sidelining Indigenous alternatives. Because much of the world’s biodiversity lies within Indigenous territories, these initiatives frequently intersect with Indigenous communities, yet their actual benefits remain uncertain. Projects that disregard Indigenous worldviews risk reinforcing historical injustices and deepening marginalisation. Such dynamics have been described as forms of contemporary colonialism, where engagement mechanisms—such as deliberation or legal contracts—reflect Euro-American assumptions about reality, relegating Indigenous lifeways to cultural variations rather than recognising them as distinct.

To move beyond these limitations, we adopt political ontology as our conceptual lens. Political ontology shifts the focus from differences of perception within a shared reality to the

coexistence of multiple realities. It emphasises how realities are enacted through relations among humans, non-humans, and more-than-human beings, and how encounters across worlds generate both imposition and transformation. Within this framework, Amerindian perspectivism offers a particularly relevant perspective: it shows how entities experience distinct realities according to their embodied and relational capacities, making difference itself a condition of connection. This perspective reframes sustainability engagements as struggles over world-making, rather than as debates within a single dominant ontology.

Methodologically, this study is based on long-term, collaborative fieldwork with the Paiter Suruí community. We combined participant observation, interviews, and archival research to capture both Indigenous and non-Indigenous perspectives. Importantly, one of the co-authors is a Paiter Suruí member who was directly involved in the carbon project. His insider knowledge of governance systems, cultural practices, and political struggles was crucial in ensuring that the research reflects Indigenous realities and priorities. This collaboration grounded the study in Indigenous concepts of land, sovereignty, and knowledge, while also drawing on perspectives from activists and academics. Our qualitative research design employs a political ontology lens, with a particular focus on Indigenous relationality and perspectivism. Data collection included 30 days of participant observation, 32 interviews with community members, leaders, and external actors, as well as the review of extensive archival materials. The analysis followed three steps. First, we conducted thematic coding of fieldnotes, interviews, and documents to identify recurring patterns. Second, we created a timeline to track key moments of engagement between the Paiter Suruí and external organisations. Third, we compared these phases to understand how encounters with outsiders reshaped community life.

From this process, we identified three major transformations: community fragmentation, which weakened social cohesion; cultural deterioration, marked by the erosion of traditional practices and values; and governance changes, which altered decision-making structures and leadership dynamics. Despite these challenges, the Paiter Suruí community has shown remarkable resilience. Together, we interpret these as relational changes, shifts in how the community interacts with the world and with itself. We theorise these dynamics as forms of ontological violence, showing how sustainability initiatives, even when framed as collaborative, can destabilise Indigenous ways of life and reproduce colonial asymmetries.

Our findings highlight two mechanisms shaping these encounters. First, ethical imposition occurs when external actors unilaterally define the ethical grounds of sustainability projects, disregarding Indigenous perspectives and values. Second, ontological violence emerges when external discourses and practices disrupt foundational Indigenous modes of life, thereby reproducing colonial power relations in new forms. These mechanisms show how sustainability initiatives, while framed as collaborative, can perpetuate internal and green colonialisms that obscure Indigenous knowledges and destabilise Indigenous existence on their own terms. This underscores the need for a more inclusive approach in sustainability initiatives, where all voices are heard and respected.

The study makes three main contributions. Indigenous business scholarship highlights the ethical and ontological tensions in sustainability engagements, revealing how external interventions can undermine Indigenous self-determination. To critical sustainability studies, it conceptualises ethical imposition and ontological violence as mechanisms through which colonial power persists beyond epistemic or cultural domination. Ultimately, this research in political ontology offers an empirically grounded example of how theoretical concepts can be applied to organisational encounters across diverse realities. By advancing these contributions, the study underscores the urgency of centring Indigenous perspectives and ontological plurality in sustainability debates and organisational practices.