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Psychology, psychosocial expertise,
and collective human rights

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In the waters of time: Collective traumas in the transposition of the São Francisco River

Suely Emilia de Barros Santos¹ , Clarissa Marques² , Giselle Oliveira Santos³ ,
Maria da Conceição Florencio Monteiro Bezerra³ , Renata Pereira Farias³ 

¹ Universidade de Pernambuco, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia Práticas e Inovação em Saúde Mental, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Saúde e Desenvolvimento Socioambiental, Laboratório em Ações Coletivas e Saúde. Garanhuns, PE, Brasil. Correspondence to: G. O. SANTOS. E-mail: <giselleoliveirap@hotmail.com>.

² Universidade de Pernambuco, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Saúde e Desenvolvimento Socioambiental. Arcoverde, PE, Brasil.

³ Universidade de Pernambuco, Programa de Pós-Graduação em Psicologia Práticas e Inovação em Saúde Mental. Garanhuns, PE, Brasil.

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Abstract

This article aims to share the experience of the transVERgente University Outreach Program at the University of Pernambuco, which, through a multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary team, works with peasant communities that have suffered collective traumas resulting from the implementation of the São Francisco River transposition megaproject. The methodology consists of experience-based reports drawn from outreach research conducted in the “sertão” (backlands) region of the state, employing a counter-colonial phenomenological approach through a cartography inspired by Popular Education. As outcomes, the text highlights the complaint filed with the Federal Public Prosecutor’s Office as a pathway toward possible reparations for the collective traumas arising from the invasion of rural territories by the São Francisco River transposition project. It also denounces how the lack of water, the rupture of ties with the land, and the dismantling of collective ways of life affect the mental health of community residents, producing suffering that extends beyond physical displacement, affecting memories, emotions, and trust in social relationships. In reflecting on collective psychosocial trauma and its unfolding effects, the text emphasizes the need to perceive trauma beyond the temporal logic of the law. It is time for higher courts to turn their attention to the impacts on the integral health of communities affected by megaprojects and to interpret these as imprescriptible socio-environmental damages, considering that the timeline of collective traumas does not always coincide with that of the statute of limitations.

Keywords: Human rights; Interdisciplinary; Rural population.

This article aims to share the experience of the University of Pernambuco’s transVERgente Outreach Program, which, through a multiprofessional and interdisciplinary team, accompanies peasant communities affected by collective traumas resulting from the São Francisco River transposition. The transVERgente program began its outreach activities in 2018, with the purpose of creating spaces for care, reparation, and dialogue in connection with the right to health and to a dignified life for a population rendered vulnerable by the impact of the river transposition in the municipality of Sertânia, located in the Brazilian state of Pernambuco.

From the outset, transVERgente has worked in collaboration with the *Sindicato de Trabalhadores Rurais, Agricultores e Agricultoras Familiares de Sertânia* (Rural Workers, Farmers, and Family Farmers Union of Sertânia), alongside community leaders and residents of the communities of *Sítio Cipó, Vila Produtiva Rural*, and the *Cooperativa Hortifruti-Granjeiro* – all affected by the transposition of the São Francisco River.

For the writing of this report, we drew upon the experiences emerging from outreach activities and research conducted in the sertão (backlands) region of Pernambuco, particularly at a moment when a complaint was being submitted to the *Ministério Público Federal* (MPF, Federal Public Prosecutor's Office) regarding individual and collective traumas experienced as a result of the implementation of the transposition project. It is important to emphasize, however, that the reflections presented here are also the result of thoughts and ideas that have taken shape through the authors' experiences in different academic and non-academic contexts: in meetings with community leaders and social movements; in classrooms and study groups; in cultural events, coco circles (traditional Afro-Indigenous song and dance gatherings), and soccer tournaments in peasant communities; as well as through contact with documentaries, films, drawings, music, and other artistic expressions.

This experience report is therefore approached as a narrative work in dialogue with authors who also write about themes related to lived experience. It thus constitutes a meaningful form of writing that articulates experiences and learning processes, placing dialogue at the center. In this regard, experience is understood as “that which passes through us, that which happens to us, that which touches us. Not that which merely happens, takes place, or touches” (Bondía, 2002, p. 21, our translation).

Taking collective traumas as the guiding thread of this article, it can be said that the experiences endured by peasant men and women manifest as deep scars in both individual and collective life histories. They reverberate across generations, and directly and silently affect the worldview of entire communities. From a counter-colonial perspective, which challenges dominant Eurocentric narratives, it becomes possible to grasp the complexity of these traumas and marks – particularly in their roots in colonization and in the physical, psychological, existential, epistemological, and ontological forms of violence it produced. As Fernandes et al. (2022, p. 3, our translation) note:

Even after the end of the colonial period in the Americas, in the 19th century with the emergence of independent nations, and in Africa and Asia, in the 20th century, indelible marks persisted that did not disappear with the independence and decolonization of these countries. On the contrary, they were perpetuated through forms of domination and power structures reproduced by the mechanisms of the colonial-modern capitalist world-system.

From this perspective, the authors point to modernity and its symbols as structures resulting from the process of colonization – one that imposed upon the existence of many peoples of the world (including Indigenous and traditional peoples of Latin America) a structural form of external aggression and self-aggression. In this sense, collective trauma refers to the existential wounds shared by a group or community, resulting from historical traumatic events that have shaped their collective memory and worldview. In the words of Gonzaguinha (1980), who sings: “When I release my voice, please understand / That, word by word, here stands a person giving themselves / Heart on their sleeve, chest open, bleeding / These are the struggles of our life that I am singing”.

The passage, delivered from an individual voice that lays bare, with an open heart, the collective daily struggles of living – struggles that include, often bloodily, colonization, slavery,

genocide, and racial violence, as well as environmental disasters and development projects that disregard the needs and rights of the affected populations.

Lugones (2008) discusses the impact of colonization not only as temporally localized acts of violence, but as part of a broader system that cannot stand alone – one that is sustained by colonialism and its hierarchization of social relations, creating a kind of global organization of power and labor control structured around ethno-racial and gendered criteria.

From a counter-colonial standpoint, as proposed by Nego Bispo in his perspective of contra coloniality, the construction of knowledge must be a collective process through which diverse forms of knowing, experiences, and practices engage in dialogue and unfold to promote a fertile space for the socio-historical recovery of peoples systematically obscured by capitalist, colonizing modernity (N. B. Santos, 2023a). In addition to Nego Bispo, who highlights a counterproposal and a collective construction regarding the memory of a people (N. B. Santos, 2023), other voices in decolonial thought question hegemonic narratives about the marks and traumas that render the experiences of subaltern groups invisible. Authors such as Fanon (2020) and Kilomba (2019) address the colonial context as a continuous source of illness, based on analyses of Black and non-White experiences and productions – that is, from a different social standpoint. In a dialogue between trauma and temporality, Kilomba (2019, p. 222, our translation) frames the colonial mark of racism as a wound that remains perpetually open:

An event that occurred at some point in the past is experienced as if it were happening in the present, and vice versa: the event occurring in the present is experienced as if it were in the past. Colonialism and racism coincide. The past assaults the present.

The author argues that ethnic-racial discrimination operates as a persistent colonial trauma, characterized by a timelessness that distorts the perception of time for non-White people. As Elza Soares (2002) sings:

(You know it's not easy, right, man?) / (Right, man? Jeez!) / (Check this out!) / The cheapest meat in the market is Black meat / The cheapest meat in the market is Black meat / The cheapest meat in the market is Black meat / The cheapest meat in the market is Black meat / (It only serves the non-Black).

In this context, past events of violence and oppression – such as those from the period of colonial slavery – are experienced as if they are occurring in the present, generating suffering and anguish (Kilomba, 2019). This overlapping of past and present in the experiences of peoples marked by colonization reveals the persistence of a collective trauma that continues to affect the lives of non-White people today. Thus, the fixation of collective colonial trauma memories cannot simply be erased but remains present, reinforced in the face of different forms of oppression (Schultz & Ferreira, 2023). The possibility of collective forgetting of the past becomes unattainable, since the trauma traps a repertoire of situations that evoke the past and form part of a present that is itself marked. Regarding the complexity of the human relationship with time and memory, Fanon (2020, p. 264, our translation) writes: “One of the most difficult things, both for a person and for a country, is to always keep before their eyes the three elements of time: past, present, and future”.

By including the collective dimension in his analysis, Fanon (2020) suggests that this difficulty in dealing with temporality affects not only individuals but also social groups and nations. The inability to integrate past, present, and future can lead to misinterpretations of history, difficulties in decision-making, and a lack of planning and projection. In this vein, the collective traumas resulting from the impacts of the São Francisco River transposition megaproject appear to disrupt daily life, making it difficult to experience stories in the territories as they were previously lived in

an integrative manner. Today, these stories are experienced and perceived as estranged. After all, this existential time becomes “Composer of destinies / Drum of all rhythms / Time, time, time, time” (Veloso, 1979).

Method

The experience report from outreach research “is understood as a work of language, a construction that does not aim to present a definitive statement, but rather constitutes a provisional synthesis, open to analysis and to the continuous production of new and transversal knowledge” (Daltro & Faria, 2019, p. 235, our translation). Thus, it enables the narrative of collective experience also through a theoretical-methodological perspective (M. B. Guimarães & Araújo, 2023). In this sense, this experience report is a living narration, a “narragraphed” account, whose construction also takes the form of a weaving of literary craftsmanship (Bezerra et al., 2024; Santos & Santos, 2024b). Here, literary craftsmanship is understood as a collaborative process that enables the creation of an intricate web of meanings, grounded in reality and fostering a counter-colonial approach to academic writing.

In this context, the methodology highlighted in this work arises from outreach actions conducted between 2018 and 2025 in the transVERgente university outreach program. Initially inspired by Integral and Community Reparation, an action-oriented methodology developed by the non-governmental organization *Acción Ecológica*, in Ecuador, transVERgente developed its work process guided by three interwoven intervention movements: “open your eyes,” “co-participation”, and “live with dignity” (Gomes et al., 2021).

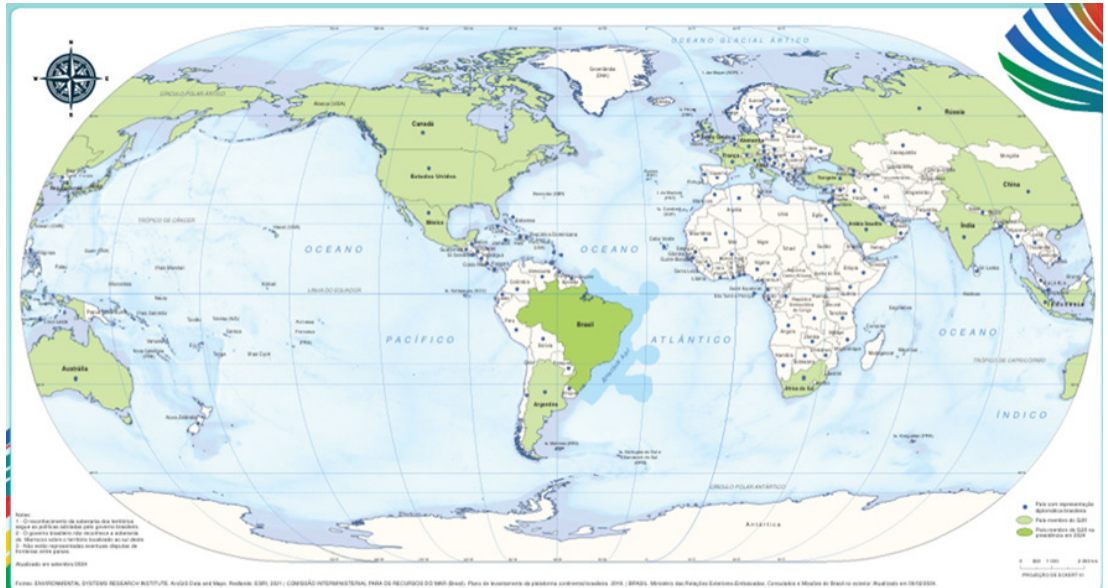
This marked the beginning of the construction of methodological pathways contextualized to the everyday life of the territories where peasant communities are located in rural Sertânia, in the sertão region of Pernambuco. Thus, beyond the methodological construction carried out by the outreach team, reflection was also given to the choice of a program name, with meanings revealed in the collective demands: “**Transpose** the injustices suffered by the people, and **See** beyond, the **People** who demand care” (Silva et al., 2020, p. 82, emphasis ours).

In this direction, upon entering the communities of *Sítio Cipó*, the *Cooperativa Hortifruti-Granjeiro*, and *Vila Produtiva Rural*, the program responded both to an invitation and to reports from the people themselves about various rights violations caused by the implementation of the São Francisco River transposition in their territories. In this context, a cartographic approach inspired by Popular Education (Freire & Nogueira, 2014) is assumed in order to move through these communities.

Cartography is often associated with the production of documents such as maps, topographic maps, and representations of space, among other methods in the field of geographic knowledge. There is mutability, susceptibility to error, and, above all, political, economic, social, and cultural interests in map construction, given that “territories are dynamic, without apparent boundaries, and this notion of ‘delocalization’ enabled remarkable and symbolic encounters” (Lima et al., 2022, p. 353, our translation). Here, an image released by the *Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística* (IBGE, Brazilian Institute of Geography and Statistics) is recalled (Figure 1).

In this world map representation, South America is shown occupying a central position. This is an important highlight from a geopolitical perspective, regarding the reference point of the Global South, as it contrasts with a colonizing narrative about the sovereignty of Global North countries. This representation emphasizes the interventionist nature of cartography.

Figure 1
World map with Brazil placed at the center



Source: Instituto Brasileiro de Geografia e Estatística (2024).

Within this context, when a cartographic approach inspired by Popular Education is adopted, the space, landscapes, and the convergence of borderlines are put into motion – but not only that. It is also possible to discover pathways unveiled alongside other individuals, to access narratives and knowledge, and to relate to and give meaning to the territory – building both physical and existential maps in co-participation. These maps highlight paths whose course is indicated by the living territory and by the people who inhabit it. In this sense, cartography inspired by Popular Education is also demarcative action. It demarcates an ethical, political, and aesthetic action that is collective, understanding Popular Education as a mode of knowledge in which “the knowledge of the world is also made through the practices of the world” (Freire & Nogueira, 2014, p. 34, our translation), closely connected with the knowledge of the people.

Within this framework, the methodology of this work our translationshared by the outreach actions of the transVERgente program – unfolds through a counter-colonial phenomenological attitude and reading. These methodologies intertwine, as they arise from and nourish one another. The outreach actions converge with scientific research, without separation or hierarchy.

Given that coloniality acts directly as a concealment of ways of being and living – colonizing thoughts, bodies, and actions, as well as cultures, traditions, and knowledges – it is understood that it renders existences invisible. From this perspective, phenomenology, as the art of allowing and making visible, contributes to the adoption of a counter-colonial attitude, since allowing and making visible are not necessarily discursive dynamics.

This becomes evident [...] in those phenomena rendered invisible by the logic of necropolitics, which is itself understood as an expression of the colonial logic. Thus, what is called coloniality must be thought of as the phenomenologization of phenomena that have been de-phenomenologized by colonial processes. (Cabral, 2022, p. 184, our translation)

In this sense, the outreach actions, scientific research, methodologies, and interpretive lens that compose this work move in a spiral motion, following decolonial turns, since “methodologies

must follow the territory, not the other way around [...]. Could this be a Sertão-centered Psychology?” (Santos & Santos, 2024b, p. 1161, our translation).

In line with the authors’ questioning, one may recall the band BaianaSystem, which raises important considerations:

It doesn’t matter what you know, what matters is what you do with what you know / It doesn’t matter what you have, what matters is what you do with what you have / I know I need the notes / I know you don’t notice me / I know that what goes around comes around / What goes around comes around (BaianaSystem, 2025).

Popular knowledge, academic writing, and outreach action in dialogue can mobilize spiral movements in the production of knowledge, methodologies, and counter-colonial practices – particularly in the fields of Psychology, Mental Health, Public Health, and Law. In light of this, what to do with what one knows? Thus, an interdisciplinary and multiprofessional “knowing-doing” is embraced through dialogues between academia and the traditional knowledges of the caatinga.

Within this context, ten peasants – men and women – from the rural area of the municipality of Sertânia, Pernambuco, who were affected by the construction and consequences of the São Francisco River transposition, took part in the making of this article. These ten peasants work in agriculture and raise animals as part of their daily activities. To these 10 participants, six professionals from the transVERgente university outreach program were added, from the fields of Psychology, Law, and Collective Health. All 16 participants attended the hearing held at the MPF.

The research and outreach activities of transVERgente are connected to the umbrella project “*Entrelaces de saberes com povos da terra: interlocuções entre ambiente, educação e direito à saúde*” (Interweaving Knowledges with Peoples of the Land: Dialogues between Environment, Education, and the Right to Health). The project was approved by the Research Ethics Committee (CEP) of the University of Pernambuco – CAAE: 33753220.6.0000.5191, under opinion No. 4.287.712.

Results and Discussion

Territory and transVERgent Experiences

A concrete expression of the developmentalist logic (Escobar, 2005), the transposition of the São Francisco River winds through community veins like a concrete serpent, cutting through ways of life, diluting presences, interrupting connections, and crossing daily lives – establishing new ruptures and continuities. As Melo et al. (2024, p. 2, our translation) state, “such projects often provoke major territorial interventions and socio-environmental injustices wherever they pass, altering ways of life and producing precariousness”. The *sertanejos* (residents of the region known as the sertão) demonstrate readiness to face obstacles and challenges despite the hardships and violence endured – and, as Milton Nascimento sings: “I no longer ask where the road goes / I no longer wait for that dawn / It will be, it will be, it must be, it will be a sharpened knife / The blind brightness of passion and faith, a sharpened knife” (Guedes & Nascimento, 1978, our translation).

This intervention not only reconfigures physical space but also unsettles historical and affective bonds, directly impacting the social relationships and mental health experiences of residents in the communities affected by the megaproject. Forced displacement, the loss of land, and the imposition of a new spatial configuration create a collective sense of deterritorialization and a rupture

with the ancestry that sustained productive practices, community ties, and intergenerationally transmitted knowledges.

This deterritorialization unfolds not only in the physical dimension but also in the temporal one. The territory remains preserved in memory – in the singular experiences of a people and in the traditions that persist. As M. Santos (2023) notes, to engage with space in a more implicated way, it is necessary to consider the simultaneity of multiple temporalities. There is no space in which the experience of time is the same for all people. The imposition of a single temporality – shaped by colonial and developmentalist logic – tends to silence other times: those of peasant experience, local knowledge, and community practices. At this intersection of times and ruptures, both suffering and resistance emerge – elements that are fundamental to understanding experiences of mental health in these territories.

With regard to the ways of life of these populations, one observes disorganization and distancing from traditional practices of planting and connecting with the land – impacted by external control over the water flow, which now no longer follows the time of the land but that of the new actors who have entered the territory, such as companies and outside workers. The project generates tensions within community relations, fragments bonds, and imposes new forms of territorial occupation. In *Sítio Cipó*, one of the communities accompanied by transVERgente, contact with the Moxotó River – once lived as both a symbolic and practical reference, tied to local dynamics of care and subsistence – has become a concrete yet, paradoxically, distant element. The course of the river, now crossed by artificial canals and technical infrastructure, comes to be regulated by external logics that do not ensure equitable access to resources, emptying traditional and collective meanings of connection with the territory.

The mental health experiences lived by the affected communities cannot be dissociated from the process of deterritorialization and the structural inequalities that run through the Sertão of Pernambuco. The rupture with ancestral practices, the fragmentation of community support networks, and the uncertainty regarding the future establish a collective sense of insecurity and mourning. In this context, mental health emerges not as an isolated and individual dimension but as an expression of the social and territorial conditions experienced in everyday life. Psychological suffering is linked to the loss of rights, the worsening of living conditions, and the rupture of affective ties with the territory – calling for an approach that accounts for the complexity of the issues that cut across these territories.

This rupture, however, does not occur only on a structural level. The trauma resulting from the transposition of the São Francisco River runs through the daily lives of the people who inhabit Sertânia and leaves deep marks on how they perceive their territory. It is worth noting that Social Psychology offers a perspective on the notion of collective psychosocial trauma, which manifests itself “in a collectivity through a historical process characterized by intense political violence” (Gonçalves, 2017, p. 188, our translation). The author also emphasizes that the manifestations of psychosocial impacts may appear in both individual and collective forms.

When it comes to collective psychosocial traumatization, mental health can be understood as interwoven with social relations. It is in this regard that Martín-Baró (1984) presents the notion of psychosocial trauma as a phenomenon that manifests in a heterogeneous and multifaceted way. Moreover, Gonçalves (2017) draws attention to the sequential and transgenerational aspects of collective psychosocial trauma.

During the work carried out by the transVERgente program, it was possible to observe how this territorial wound is reflected in relationships, gestures, and the bonds of trust that sustain

community life. The feeling of mistrust, for instance, has become a silent mark: if, before, the doors of homes naturally remained open, now they stay half-open – always with a watchful eye on whoever approaches. Not for lack of hospitality – which continues to exist with generosity – but because, the last time they opened their doors without hesitation, they saw their lands invaded, their ways of life undone, and their histories cut through by the concrete of the canal.

This experience leaves a collective trauma that cannot be reduced merely to physical displacement. It is a wound that marks the territory and resonates in the subjectivities formed there and in the generations that coexist within it. The land, violated, carries within itself a memory that reverberates in the way men, women, and families look toward the future – with caution, with contained fear, with a pain that does not scream but remains present. As Figueiredo (1994) affirms, an event is not something that merely erupts or passes through; it is, in fact, both rupture and transition. It alters the existing world and gives rise to another, positioning itself between these two times as a point of passage and transformation. The transposition of the Velho Chico (popular name for the São Francisco River) thus shatters one world and forces the construction of another – and the residents must rebuild their lives upon this rupture and deal with the weight of a change they did not choose.

By accompanying these communities, transVERgente has been able to observe how psychic and existential suffering runs through these experiences: there is a mourning that refers not only to a lost past but also to the present itself – now pervaded by insecurities and uncertainties. For this reason, the program's actions seek not only to offer listening and care but also to help residents find new ways to sustain their bonds and reaffirm their histories, ways of life, and dignity – even after the rupture.

When reflecting on the development of groups and traditional collectivities, it is essential to consider the connection of these sectors with the historical process of the formation of populations in Brazilian territory – rooted in its colonial origin and subsequent developmentalist growth. It is within this economic, political, sociocultural, and psychological landscape that what D. Ribeiro (1995) calls “Brasis” (Brazils – the great regions of the Brazilian territory – takes shape). In this sense, the power relations between the peoples connected to the land and waters and the broader society in Brazil have been marked by traumatic conditions imposed through sexual abuse, murder, territorial conflicts, and physical and psychological violence. Structural violence, present since colonization, manifests in various forms, affecting the lives and subjectivities of traditional peoples (Fernandes et al., 2022). The experience of peasant communities illustrates how collective trauma manifests in specific ways across different social groups. The loss of territories, the imposition of development projects, and symbolic violence are elements that contribute to the perpetuation of trauma and psychosocial suffering.

To connect the understanding of collective trauma in the context of the São Francisco River transposition with the work of Martín-Baró, it is essential to consider his perspective on psychosocial trauma and what he termed *limit situations*. Martín-Baró (1990), in his work – especially “*Guerra y trauma psicosocial del niño salvadoreño*” (War and Psychosocial Trauma of the Salvadoran Child) – emphasizes that trauma cannot be understood solely in its individual dimension, but also as a collective phenomenon, deeply rooted in social, political, and historical contexts. He introduces the term *limit situation* to describe extreme conditions of oppression, violence, and social injustice that generate large-scale psychological suffering.

In the transposition of the São Francisco River, the affected communities experience *limit situations* similar to those described by the author. Forced displacement, the loss of ancestral

territories, the destruction of traditional ways of life, and the disintegration of community ties represent traumatic events that transcend the individual, marking the collective memory and identity of these populations. Despite its stated goals of economic development, the transposition creates a context of rupture and social deconstruction that generates psychosocial trauma insofar as it affects the mental health and well-being of entire groups (Santos & Santos, 2024a). The “disruptive syndrome” mentioned in the text – which destabilizes psychological balance and severs affective connections – is a manifestation of this collective trauma (Martín-Baró, 1990).

The work of Ignacio Martín-Baró (1990) provides a crucial epistemological framework for analyzing the psychosocial impacts resulting from the transposition of the São Francisco River. His approach, which emphasizes the collective dimension of trauma, the relevance of social and political contexts, and the need for a social psychology committed to social transformation, makes it possible to understand the deep wounds that megaprojects can inflict on affected communities, as well as the urgency of developing approaches that promote reparation and social justice.

In this regard, the articulation with Martín-Baró (1990) enables an understanding of the trauma arising from the transposition of the São Francisco River as a psychosocial and collective phenomenon – going beyond the analysis of isolated individual experiences. From this perspective, the transposition is configured as a shared wound that influences the identity and historical trajectory of the impacted communities. Moreover, the transposition can be analyzed as a limit situation that describes contexts of oppression and violence capable of generating large-scale psychological, existential, and social suffering. Given this scenario, it becomes essential to emphasize the need for a critical psychosocial approach that considers the sociopolitical context and directs efforts toward social transformation and the promotion of justice for the affected communities. Thus, Martín-Baró’s perspective enriches the analysis of the transposition’s consequences by providing essential elements for a deeper and more critical understanding of the collective traumas involved.

In this context, transVERgente seeks to operate as a space for listening, care, and the collective construction of possibilities. After all, as a poem from Cordel Literature puts it, “Alongside suffering / Comes the strength to fight / To fight against cowardice / And the cold cruelty of killing” (Dias & Mélo, 2020, p. 51, our translation). Through interdisciplinary and multiprofessional action – bridging Psychology and Law – the program seeks to understand and intervene in the psychosocial and territorial impacts of the São Francisco River transposition, recognizing the importance of focusing on the mental health experiences of the residents. Clinical listening, Popular Education initiatives (Freire & Nogueira, 2014), legal guidance, and encounters with local knowledges and languages – guided by the voices that inhabit the territory and connect with the program – serve as pathways to strengthen community ties and promote spaces of care and action in relation to the territory.

The transVERgente project also highlights the importance of understanding public policies beyond structural aspects, considering their impacts on the territory, the fauna, the flora, and the traces of violence imposed by the megaproject – revealing coloniality in action. Access to water cannot be dissociated from an ethical and political commitment to the affected populations. Territorial transformations of this magnitude demand responses that integrate social justice and the right to dignity into the daily life of these territories, through the recognition that the mental health experiences lived across generations cannot be rendered invisible or disregarded amid promises of progress. By recognizing and valuing the knowledge, practices, and traditions that move with time, the territory reaffirms itself as a living space, where the marks of the past and the urgencies of the present are interwoven. In this sense, in the language of cordel poetry, “Our commitment is

something else / A university that mobilizes / Strengthens public policies / As the law envisions / Alongside local health / That provides care” (Dias & Mélo, 2020, p. 51, our translation).

From this understanding, some harms and violations of rights experienced by the three communities stand out. When it comes to material and immaterial losses, the meager compensation they received is experienced as a feeling of humiliation, tied to the loss of land, home, people, animals, trees, and crops. The cracked houses – damaged by explosions, left without repairs, or without any compensation – still reverberate in the lives of the peasants today. All these phenomena of material and immaterial loss go beyond their geographical concreteness, manifesting as emotional impacts in everyday life. These losses represent a tearing away from one’s origins and culture. Hence, people find themselves dislodged from their own being, from their emotional bonds, and from the collectively inhabited space, leading to suffering and/or illness accompanied by violations of their rights.

Regarding the deep suffering caused by such violations, it is crucial to uphold peasants’ rights to land and to a dignified life as a matter of mental health. The farmer’s close bond with the land and nature resonates in their body and in their ways of living and existing – contributing to the emergence of various forms of suffering and illness. After all, human questions related to the land are not limited to its economic dimension or to an isolated aspect of history, but concern the ways of thinking and living everyday life.

Discouragement, pain, irritation, stress, worry, despair, insecurity, fear, helplessness, and sadness are manifestations of suffering that can lead to more complex illnesses. All these are signs that these peasants have already exhausted their resources and strategies – even emotional and identity-based ones – for coping with so much violence and violation. The transposition of the river has been, and continues to be, a disaster with the potential to profoundly affect the peasants’ health in all its complexity.

Thus, a large portion of the population relies on medication to treat symptoms and illnesses. The need for medication to be able to sleep again, and the continuous use of antidepressants and anxiolytics, are recurring and worrying situations – pointing to the urgency for public institutions to pay attention to health care as a means of repairing the damage caused. After all, perhaps it is possible to say that peasants express, through illness, the symptoms of their erased history: does a person whose history has been torn apart not have the right to memory? The suffering – many cases transformed into clinical and psychological symptoms – reveals the concealment of problems with strikingly social causes, collectively experienced as a result of the works done as part of the São Francisco River transposition. There is also evidence of increased alcohol and drug use, including among adolescents, without the presence of any harm reduction programs.

The sense of helplessness in dealing with water scarcity, the destruction of fences, the loss and escape of animals, and the loss of trees with historical and emotional value lead to frustration about living in that place – manifesting in multiple bodily and emotional expressions of distress. One is reminded of a passage by Guimarães Rosa (1986, p. 34, our translation) in the book *Grande Sertão: Veredas*: “When close to much water, everything is happy”. The artwork shown in Figure 2 was illustrated by the artist Samarah Wippel Selski (@swsrte) and published on the Instagram page of the *Centro Brasileiro de Justiça Climática* (Brazilian Center for Climate Justice).

How, then, can one live happily in a context where water scarcity reigns? All of this reveals the deepening of psychic and existential pain, to the point where a direct connection can be made between falling ill and dying.

Throughout the program’s accompaniment, a direct relationship was evidenced between rights violations and their effects on the health of the peasants – aggravated by the precarious access

Figure 2
Illustration by Samarah Wippel Selski



Source: Centro Brasileiro de Justiça Climática (2025). Instagram. @cbjc_br.

to health services and the absence of governmental commitment to ensuring a dignified life. It is worth noting that the lack of water – supposedly a temporary situation – has persisted up to the date of publication of this article in the three communities affected by the transposition. The dream of having water becomes increasingly distant, giving rise to disbelief that it will ever come true. The three communities sacrificed everything they had for a dream that has not come to pass and that each day grows more distant, contributing to the emergence of distress – particularly depression.

The transposition brought the dream of “water for all,” yet the peasant farmers saw it slip away – and beyond that, they saw the waters of the Moxotó River disappear. The disbelief that

water will ever reach them manifests as a form of suffering and anguish, as they find themselves trapped in this situation of water scarcity on their own land. Water does not reach the sertanejo farmers, even though it passes through their lands via the transposition canal of the São Francisco River. The communities live with the situation of being supplied by tank trucks, yet the water they receive is of poor quality. Moreover, since residents cannot store it for more than 15 days, they end up without water for long periods.

Another serious issue is the difficulty – or even the complete lack – of access to healthcare services. Despite the increased use of medication associated with the São Francisco River transposition works, residents still face difficulties accessing the municipal Primary Healthcare Unit and suffer from the lack of visits by Community Health Agents, who only provide home care for those who are bedridden. This absence reverberates in the population's health, which they associate with the neglect and abandonment by public authorities.

Lacking dialogue with public agencies, the peasants recount incidents related to the transposition that have gone unreported, with some media outlets being literally silenced. Nevertheless, there is a denunciation of government neglect – of authorities who do not listen to the affected people, do not see them, and make them feel disrespected and deeply unsettled by so many losses. The feeling of abandonment has been causing a painful and serious process of suffering and illness among the population.

Collective Traumas and the Statute of Limitations: The “Timeless” Threads of Socio-Environmental Damages

In 2018, the team that would later become the transVERgente Outreach Program visited Sertânia for the first collective visit to the peasant territories affected by the works related to the São Francisco River transposition, in the stretch known as the *Eixo-Leste* (Eastern Axis). For two days, they listened to different communities that were connected by the transposition canals. The connection, however, was not forged by the infrastructure works, but by collective traumas.

Between bus rides, meetings in parish halls, conversations on park benches, and discussion circles in community associations, one point of convergence emerged: a shared pain and sense of loss expressed through the testimonies. Some spoke of material losses, others of symbolic ones – such as landscapes and paths that no longer existed; still others spoke of people who were gone, and many shared the feeling of not belonging after the socio-environmental disruptions they had endured. Amid all this, one statement was repeated across the various communities: “We had no one to talk to, no one to turn to or complain to – no one stopped to listen to us”.

These listening sessions began to reveal traces of the “map of traumas” that over the years came to take shape among the traditional communities impacted by the transposition in that region. Among the many traumas were the pain arising from the violation of the right to be consulted, the anguish of having no one to turn to, and the outrage over the lack of transparency throughout the legal and administrative stages that accompanied the planning and execution of the massive transposition project.

At the end of this first clinical-juridical-cartographic experience, the field diaries and the team's collective reflections converged on a shared understanding: the cartographic outreach research strategy would also need to take into account the pathways of access to justice. To enter the justice system alongside the communities – going through the process with them, at their own pace, toward the long-desired access to justice – began to reveal itself as a vital thread in the web of meanings under construction. The feeling of (in)justice resonated with the concerns studied by

the group, especially regarding the processes of “neocolonization” (Montoya, 2025) that are often faced by Indigenous peoples and rural populations in Northeastern Brazil.

After the team’s decision to work with three of the communities they had listened to – *Sítio Cipó*, *Vila Produtiva Rural Salão*, and *Cooperativa Hortifrutigranjeiro* – the outlining of the legal strategy began. This approach was chosen because these three communities had been experiencing psychosocial trauma caused by the impacts of the São Francisco River transposition for 13 years, without ever being heard by governmental bodies. Based on the narratives of the communities, the transVERgente program filed, on March 13, 2020, a complaint with the MPF, the institution responsible for overseeing the actions of the Ministry of Integration and Development – which, in turn, is responsible for the construction works. It is important to emphasize that the MPF is responsible for protecting the population affected by the São Francisco River transposition megaproject, especially traditional peoples.

The complaint presented a brief summary of the damages (and traumas) identified during the listening processes, including lack of access to water; damage to mental health caused by various factors, such as changes in daily activities due to interventions in agricultural and livestock practices; irregular expropriation of territories, including the loss of animals and other property; as well as the absence of fair compensation or adequate repairs.

It is important to clarify how the terms “damage” and “trauma” will be used throughout this section. The authors adopt the perspective that they are referring to collective traumas experienced up to the publication of this article. However, in the narrative about the hearing with the MPF, it will sometimes be necessary to use the term “damage”, given the legal context of the situation. It is worth noting that this was one of the main challenges faced: making the justice system understand that what is experienced as trauma does not always fit neatly into the legal category of damage.

On September 28, 2022, a hearing was scheduled with the Federal Prosecutor in Garanhuns, Pernambuco. A representative from each community was mobilized to attend the hearing. Ten community representatives participated – one of them virtually, due to health issues – along with six members of the transVERgente team. During the session, community leaders were heard and had the opportunity to speak, without time limits, about what they had gone through and what they continued to face as consequences of the works related to the São Francisco River transposition.

One of those who spoke was an elder from the *Sítio Cipó* community, who had to testify virtually due to compromised physical and mental health. A member of the team accompanied him to ensure he could speak and to monitor whether, given the emotional weight of his memories, he would be able to continue recounting his traumatic experiences. Regarding the traumas, he mentioned the destruction of his small farm, the loss of his animals and his pitombeira tree, and the forced relocation of his home – that is, the violation of his identity as a farmer connected to the land where he had always lived. His testimony moved everyone present in the MPF hearing room.

The hearing became a moment of reparation – albeit partial – addressing the sense of violation stemming from never having been heard before. However, as a cordel verse puts it:

But the people are always wise / To the sweetened lies / That turn grave crimes / Into inevitable facts / And the Brazilian Jewel / With endless excuses / From the spectacle of disaster / We refuse to take part / Local protagonism / We want to uphold / The people’s voice commands / We shall only amplify. (Dias & Melo, 2020, p. 51, our translation)

Access to justice was moving through a door that had not been opened by institutional competence, but rather by the (re)existence of the communities’ voices. The testimonies continued

to be filled with painful memories, anguish, and indignation toward a State that, through its power structures, sought to convince everyone that the São Francisco River transposition was a grand development project – as neoliberal neocolonial discourses (Montoya, 2025) often claim.

How can one continue to speak of development after hearing the painful testimony of the representative from the Cooperativa Hortifruti-Granjeiro community, who brought to the MPF her profound grief over the loss of her father? A man who, before the construction works, had been active, communicative, and independent, but who, after the trauma of dispossession, inadequate compensation, and the inevitable relocation from his home, began to show deep melancholy and, according to his own daughter: “I’m certain that’s when he began to develop Alzheimer’s”. Her father could not attend the hearing, nor did he have the chance to share his trauma and pain with the justice system, for he died before the opportunity to do so became available – an opportunity made possible, in fact, through his daughter’s efforts. What remained for her was to live indefinitely with the painful memory of her father’s suffering during his final years.

As López and Carpenter (2024, p. 16, our translation) remind us, it is necessary to place “post-development” studies in perspective – as a kind of counter-hegemonic path, an escape from the traditional understanding of the subordination of peripheral countries in pursuit of progress (López & Carpenter, 2024). This path of escaping from the idea of progress becomes necessary when discussing the implementation of infrastructure projects in which rights violations are naturalized under the belief that development demands sacrifice (Vázquez et al., 2022). It is also important to note that the notion of development/progress commonly presented to affected communities positions the State as an intermediary agent – the one that grants concessions to oligarchic groups supposedly in exchange for collective improvements (A. G. A. Guimarães et al., 2021).

Other representatives from the Cooperativa Hortifruti-Granjeiro community brought traumatic accounts from a community still facing, to this day, one of the greatest contradictions of the São Francisco River transposition: a community that once had abundant water before the works, and lost it all after the river’s transposition was completed. The people of Hortifruti, as the community is known, had a reservoir in their territory. The blasting carried out for the construction of artificial canals caused fissures in what locals called “Sertão’s beach”, the community’s reservoir. Popular cordel poetry warns us how the colonizing discourse is produced: “In a cunning way / A doctor engineer / Came to explain to everyone / That the price of progress / Also brings some pain / But the profit that it brings / You’ll eventually come to like!” (Mélo et al., 2021, p. 23, our translation).

An error of judgment. The water was gone; the transposition drained it away and left behind a concrete canal carrying transposed water – one the community is forbidden to access. Moving to a reality without water is yet another trauma with no foreseeable end. It continues to wound as a daily reminder of the violations endured.

Representatives from the Vila Produtiva Rural Salão also brought accounts of the impacts experienced by their group. Here, a clarification is necessary regarding the use of the word group. The Vila Produtiva was a “community” artificially constructed by the Ministry of National Integration; that is, the people living there did not know each other before, had never been neighbors, and shared no prior communal ties. As a result of the forced displacement of several families, the São Francisco River transposition megaproject included the construction of what it called a *village*.

The testimonies confirmed transVERgente’s observations about the daily hardships faced by the families in the Vila Produtiva. Among many traumas they endure, there is a prevailing feeling of not belonging to a community – a kind of orphanhood regarding the fundamental right every person has to freely establish their bonds with a territory to which they feel they belong. It is a

story of violence, of disrupted identities, of broken bonds and affections – of a wound that shows no endpoint, no expiration date to “cease its activities” in the lives of those who inhabit the *Vila Produtiva Rural Salão*. As narrated by the poets and singers Beto Guedes and Milton Nascimento (1972, our translation): “What news do you bring of our friends? / What news do you bring from you? / I know that nothing will remain as it is, tomorrow or the day after / Clinging to a taste of sun as night falls”.

The excerpts above do not exhaust the description of what took place at the hearing in Garanhuns. They are merely examples meant to provide a glimpse of the traumatic experiences presented to the Federal Prosecutor on that day.

Following these accounts, the MPF expressed regret that these people had taken so many years to file a complaint – raising the question of how many times, over more than a decade of construction, the MPF had been in Sertânia to ensure that the transposition of the São Francisco River was being carried out in accordance with the numerous laws designed to protect the lives affected by it.

Had the MPF been more present during those decades of construction, the psychological reports – prepared under the terms of the *Conselho Federal de Psicologia* (CFP, Federal Council of Psychology) Resolution No. 6/2019 – regarding the traumas experienced by the three communities, and requested from three professionals during the hearing, would have held a different meaning for the institution (Conselho Federal de Psicologia, 2019). The Prosecutor would have been able to read those reports already familiar with the context they addressed. Nonetheless, the reports submitted later served to contextualize the reality of the damages still present – that is, to present to the MPF the reality it should have already been following on the ground.

It is difficult to accept that the Prosecutor’s concern became the statute of limitations on liability. The MPF should have recognized that these were continuous and intergenerational socio-environmental damages. This was not a matter of calculating a temporal limit under the statute of limitations, as in the conventional framework of civil liability theory, where, once the damage and the so-called “causal link” between agent, action, and consequence are established, a specific time frame opens for the case to be brought before the courts. Analyzing the statute of limitations for socio-environmental damage requires reflection on how the law must adapt to the challenges posed by continuous and irreversible harm to both the environment and human life (Pereira, 2020).

The statute of limitations for socio-environmental damage involves an analysis that must transcend the traditional interaction between environmental law and civil law concepts of limitation periods (prescription). Traditionally, a limitation period is understood as the loss of the right to bring an action due to the passage of a defined period, with the purpose of ensuring legal certainty and stability in social and economic relations (J. L. Ribeiro, 2019). However, environmental and socio-environmental damages – particularly those that affect the environment in a continuous and irreversible way – introduce additional complexity to this concept.

Socio-environmental damage can be understood as any harm to the community or to the environment that compromises the quality of life of present and future generations (Pereira, 2020). In this context, the statute of limitations for socio-environmental damage cannot be treated in the same way as that of private damages, since public interest prevails over private interest.

The Federal Supreme Court, in ruling on cases involving environmental damage, has recognized the imprescriptible nature of certain types of harm – such as pollution, which is considered a continuous aggression against the environment and therefore not subject to time limitations (RE 551.721/SC) (Costa, 2018). It would have been necessary for the MPF to make a systematic effort

to align the doctrinal and jurisprudential debates on statute of limitations in environmental cases with the magnitude and non-temporal nature of the socio-environmental damages described by the community leaders who attended the hearing. The traumas needed to be seen beyond the temporal logic of the law.

Jurisprudence has increasingly held that the statute of limitations for socio-environmental damages must be flexible, taking into account the pervasiveness and irreversibility of the harm – implying that offenders may be held accountable for longer periods, or in some cases, indefinitely. This has generated debates about the need for a systematic interpretation that more effectively addresses large-scale socio-environmental damage, such as that caused by ecological disasters or the predatory exploitation of natural resources.

The time has come for the higher courts to turn their attention to the impacts on the comprehensive health of communities affected by megaprojects and to interpret these as imprescriptible socio-environmental damages – considering that the timeline of collective traumas does not always align with that of a legal statute of limitations. In Sertânia, for the residents of *Sítio Cipó*, *Vila Produtiva Rural Salão*, and *Cooperativa Hortifruti-Granjeiro*, it is clear that their traumas do not fit within the limits of a calendar.

As for the complaint filed with the MPF, it was accepted, and a Civil Inquiry was opened. However, to this day, there has been no significant progress, aside from a virtual hearing scheduled for September 2025. It is worth emphasizing that this hearing was scheduled only after three long years of waiting. The families still have no one to speak to within the justice system – no one to turn to, no one to whom they can bring their grievances. No one has taken the time to listen to them again, except for the professors and participants of the transVERgente outreach program in Psychology and Law. The doors of the justice system once again seem closed to rural life. As expressed in the cordel poetry of Mélo et al. (2021, p. 21, our translation), “After all, there is no story / That fails to teach a lesson / However sad it may be / It stirs our reflection / Showing that injustice / Seeks to rule the nation”.

Final Considerations

The transposition of the São Francisco River has drastically affected several traditional peasant communities in the Sertão of Pernambuco – particularly *Sítio Cipó*, *Vila Produtiva Rural Salão*, and *Cooperativa Hortifruti-Granjeiro*, in the municipality of Sertânia – causing psychosocial suffering that culminated in collective traumas.

It is important to note that collective memory, built through narratives, symbols, and cultural practices, plays a crucial role in the transmission of trauma across generations. The traumatic past is not merely remembered – it is reactivated in the present, shaping social relations, forms of community organization, and perspectives for the future.

In this sense, collective trauma is not only the result of isolated traumatic events, but of a historical process of oppression, inequality, and racism that continues to reproduce itself in the present. In this context, the transposition of the São Francisco River represents the continuity of a colonial logic that subordinates the needs and rights of land-based communities to the interests of capital and the State. It is worth noting that all material and symbolic losses, and the way they were handled, are tied to a perspective of coloniality of power – associated with dimensions of social class, race/color, and gender.

The peasant population of these rural communities has been exposed to deterritorialization, loss of autonomy over their land, environmental conflicts, difficulties in accessing water, among other symbolic and material losses. The way these impacts unfold reflects a modern-colonial model imposed by the developmentalist logic – a process that denies traditional ways of life and the intrinsic relationship between rural communities and their territories. This, in turn, intensifies structural vulnerabilities and intersectional inequalities.

Here, it is important to highlight the role of transVERgente's outreach and research activities, through which the complaint to the MPF gained visibility and made it possible for the voices of the subaltern to be heard against the capitalist logic of coloniality. This complaint stands as a counter-colonial action – one in which voices that had never been heard finally find space to speak of collective traumas that have brought transgenerational suffering to a people who once believed in the false promise that the São Francisco River transposition megaproject would improve their lives and, above all, bring them water – the essential element for those who live from agriculture and livestock.

The MPF hearing process should be understood, first, as a space that foregrounds the voices of those silenced by the logic of coloniality, and second, as a step toward the submission of psychological reports prepared by professionals who have accompanied these peasant communities – reports that could support the filing of a Public Civil Action and/or Criminal Actions, as applicable.

It is important to recognize that the collective psychosocial trauma experienced by the communities of Sertânia is not limited to the moment of the transposition; it persists as an open wound in everyday life. It is not only the canal that cuts through the land, but a wound that crosses mental health experiences and demands ongoing processing. The rupture of the bonds with the land, with the waters, and with collective ways of existence produces suffering that extends beyond physical displacement, reaching into memories, affections, and trust within relationships. Even so, within the cracks left by this event, singular forms of resistance continue to emerge. There are still festivals being celebrated, agricultural practices that persist in defiance of that which is now concrete, and words shared in circles, in homes, in backyards. There remains a constant effort to rebuild a sense of belonging – a daily exercise of reinscribing into the territory that which was violently taken away.

Thus, the studies and outreach initiatives do not end with a legal complaint. It is necessary to continue following up with the communities and developing research that can persist as social, academic, and legal forms of denunciation, while also sustaining a movement of interdisciplinary dialogue that brings together diverse forms of knowledge – academic, from social movements, legal, human rights, and psychological, among others – as a way of affirming that collective traumas, in order to be addressed, require the creation of a network of resistance and counter-colonial action. This must take place within an ethical-political stance of listening to the voices that have been marginalized and made subaltern by developmentalist, colonial, and neoliberal thinking.

Works such as this are fundamental to understanding how neoliberal and capitalist interests affect the everyday lives and life projects of communities, and to examining the harms arising from the transformations that rural territories undergo when they are invaded by megaprojects. All of this culminates in collective traumas provoked by the promises of development proclaimed by the transposition of the São Francisco River – traumas that have ultimately imposed unequal and precarious ways of life upon peasants in the Sertão of Pernambuco.

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Contributors

Conceptualization: S. E. B. SANTOS, C. MARQUES, G. O. SANTOS, M. C. F. M. BEZERRA and R. P. FARIAS. Methodology: S. E. B. SANTOS, C. MARQUES, G. O. SANTOS, M. C. F. M. BEZERRA and R. P. FARIAS. Original draft: S. E. B. SANTOS, C. MARQUES, G. O. SANTOS, M. C. F. M. BEZERRA and R. P. FARIAS. Supervision: S. E. B. SANTOS and C. MARQUES. Formal analysis: S. E. B. SANTOS, C. MARQUES, G. O. SANTOS, M. C. F. M. BEZERRA and R. P. FARIAS. Review and editing: S. E. B. SANTOS, C. MARQUES, G. O. SANTOS, M. C. F. M. BEZERRA and R. P. FARIAS.