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## The mire of Brazil's BR-319 highway: Deforestation, development, and the banality of evil (commentary)



**[Philip M. Fearnside](#)**

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- *Brazil's BR-319 highway project is moving inexorably forward toward approval and construction, with the individual actors in the different government agencies acting to fulfill their assigned duties despite the overall consequence being potentially disastrous for Brazil and for global climate.*
- *The bureaucratic system failure this represents was codified as the "banality of evil" by Hannah Arendt, a problem that applies to many bureaucracies around the world, resulting in major impacts for the environment.*

- *President Lula is in a position to act on behalf of the wider interests of Brazil, but so far, he has isolated himself in a “disinformation space” that excludes consideration of the overall impacts of BR-319 and other damaging proposals in the Amazon.*
- *This post is a commentary. The views expressed are those of the author, not necessarily of Mongabay.*

The continued failure to halt the BR-319 highway cutting through the Brazilian Amazon is an example of the systemic problem identified by Hannah Arendt in her study of the minister of transportation of Nazi Germany, who had administered the movement of trains throughout Germany and its occupied territories, including the trains that carried millions of people to extermination camps

Rather than a moral monster, Adolf Eichmann was revealed at his trial in Jerusalem to be a typical bureaucrat who carried out the functions of his office and believed he had no responsibility for what that implied beyond the purview of his ministry. Arendt codified this as the “[banality of evil](#).” While the case that Arendt studied is an extreme example, the principle involved applies strongly to bureaucracies throughout the world, including those dealing with large infrastructure projects in Amazonia, such as BR-319.

The impacts of the overall BR-319 project are many times greater than what is considered in the licensing process, including the additions to the process through the recent “[accord](#)” between the Brazilian Ministry of Environment and Climate Change (MMA) and the Ministry of Transport that would implement a “Sustainable BR-319 plan” in a 50-kilometer-wide (31-mile) strip on each side of the highway. Roads planned to connect to BR-319, such as the 574-km (357-mi) AM-366 highway, would open the vast Trans-Purus region to the west of the highway to the entry of deforesters. This area is the most critical for the Amazon Rainforest’s water recycling function that, via the winds known as “flying rivers,” supplies rainfall to the city of São Paulo and to much of Brazil’s agricultural land (see [here](#) and [here](#)).

This forest also holds an enormous stock of carbon that, if released, would push the global climate [past a tipping point](#), devastating Brazil in addition to many other parts of the world. If global warming escapes control, Brazil’s northeast region would become a desert, expelling tens of millions of people who depend on agriculture there (see [here](#) and [here](#)). Most of Brazil’s agribusiness and family agriculture would suffer severe losses (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)). The dense populations along Brazil’s Atlantic coast would be exposed to severe [storms](#) and [rising sea levels](#), and much of Brazil would be exposed to mass mortality during heat waves that exceed human tolerance limits (see [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).



Burning in AMACRO region, which is slated to be connected to the Trans-Purus region via BR-319 and AM-366. Photo: Nilmar Lage/Greenpeace. 30/08/2022. Source: Lima (2022).

Almost all of the Trans-Purus region is targeted by the planned 740,000-square-kilometer (285,000-square-mile) “Solimões Sedimentary Area” oil and gas project (see [here](#) and [here](#)). This project would both put in place an economic process that guarantees continued extraction far beyond the time when the entire world must cease to use fossil fuels to avoid global catastrophe, and imply local environmental impacts from oil spills, road construction and the deforestation that results from invasion and land grabbing wherever roads open new areas of Amazon rainforest. The AM-366 highway would be of great benefit to [Rosneft](#), the Russian oil company that has bought rights to the first drilling blocks and that the governor of Amazonas state has endorsed as a “[priority enterprise for the state](#).”

All areas connected to BR-319 by road, including [Roraima state](#) and other areas linked by road to Manaus, capital of Amazonas, and the areas to be opened by AM-366, would receive the impacts of actors and processes migrating from AMACRO (the Amazonas-Acre-Rondônia border area that is now a major hotspot of deforestation and burning). The agribusiness entrepreneurs in the AMACRO region are planning to advance next into the Trans-Purus region, according to [sociological studies](#) at the Federal University of Rondônia in Porto Velho. The vast area involved means that no believable governance plan could

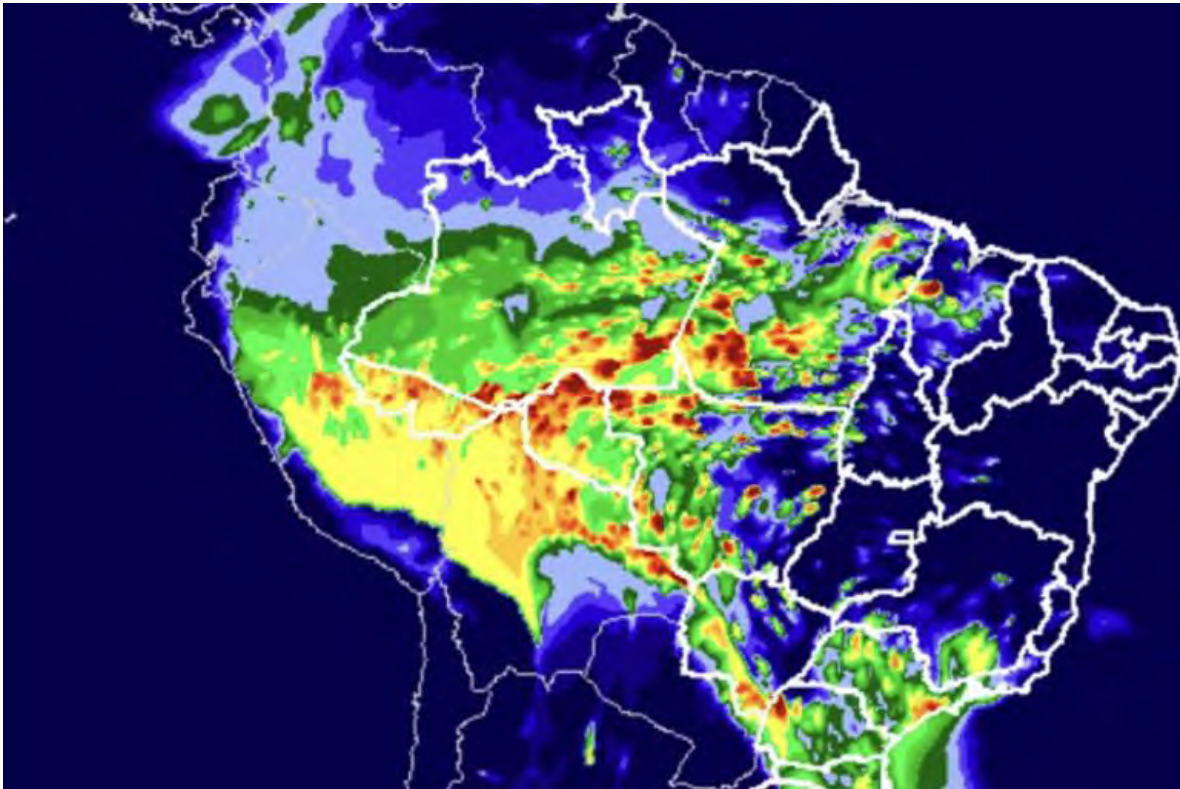
contain these impacts. None of this is considered in the licensing process for reconstruction of BR-319.

The plan to “reconstruct” Brazil’s BR-319 highway and open the vast Trans-Purus region to deforestation moves inexorably forward. Brazil’s three branches of government — the executive, legislative and judiciary — act as the proverbial horsemen of the apocalypse in this process, despite many of the individuals involved being well-intentioned or at least morally neutral.

### **The executive branch**

Brazil’s bureaucracy steadily advances toward the environmental disaster represented by the plans for the BR-319 (Manaus-Porto Velho) highway and its associated side roads. The Ministry of Transportation fulfills its function of proposing and building roads to connect place A with place B, leaving the environmental and social consequences for others to resolve. IBAMA, the environmental protection agency under the Ministry of Environment and Climate Change, verifies that all required steps in the licensing process have been completed, such as holding public hearings and submitting an environmental impact study that contains a specified roster of topics within a narrow area around the federal infrastructure in question. Once all the boxes have been checked, the project is approved, regardless of what other consequences it may have. The five Amazonas state roads planned to link to BR-319, including the AM-366 highway that would open the Trans-Purus region, are simply ignored in the federal licensing process that only focuses on the strip of land along the federal highway itself. No one is able to say that the total consequences of the project are too great and that it should not go forward.

President Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva might be able to fill this role, but he lives in a [“disinformation space”](#) where he has surrounded himself with people who, with the exception of Minister Marina Silva of MMA, feed him false information, reinforcing his desire to believe that the massive development projects he favors will have only minor environmental impacts. He has [not yet awakened](#) to the climate crisis, despite his rhetoric.



Smoke, mainly originating from the AMACRO region, covered much of Brazil in 2024. The agribusiness entrepreneurs in the AMACRO region are planning to move next to the Trans-Purus region to be accessed via BR-319 and AM-366. Map courtesy of Observatório do Clima, 24/08/24.

### **The legislative branch**

As in many countries, the primary concern of most of Brazil's legislators is to maximize their chances of reelection. For federal deputies and senators, this means supporting whatever the voters in their states want, and for politicians from Amazonas that means supporting the BR-319 reconstruction project. After more than two decades of constant disinformation, almost all the population of Manaus wants the highway and has virtually no idea of the scale of its impact. A positive feedback loop creates a vicious circle, where the more politicians and major media outlets praise the project, the more the population wants it, and the more exaggerated the claims become of its benefits.

An important tool for maximizing reelection chances is the ability to direct money flows to populist initiatives and to projects visible to electoral constituents through Brazil's system of "[parliamentary amendments](#)" (pork-barrel appropriations allotted to legislators who can distribute the funds essentially however they please). Brazil's National Congress is dominated by the Centrão ("big center") voting bloc, composed of [eight political parties](#) (PP, Republicanos, PL, MDB, União Brasil, Podemos, PSD and PRD — formerly PTB

and Patriota). These parties are not distinguished by their place on a spectrum from left to right, but rather by being openly transactional, essentially selling their votes in exchange for “parliamentary amendments” or other benefits, a phenomenon known in Brazil as [\*fisiologismo\*](#) (“physiologism”).

The Centrão voting bloc overlaps with that of the Ruralista caucus (representatives of large landholders), which is coordinated by the Agriculture and Ranching Parliamentary Front, or FPA. Together they hold 77% of seats in the Chamber of Deputies and 85% in the Senate. These voting blocs have been responsible for many environmentally damaging legislative acts, most recently the “[bill of devastation](#)” that would dismantle Brazil’s environmental licensing system, unless a presidential veto can stop it despite these voting blocs holding far more than the 60% of each house needed to override a veto.

### **The judicial branch**

In the judicial sphere, the Public Ministry (a public prosecutor’s office established by Brazil’s 1988 Constitution to defend the rights of the people, including the right to an “ecologically balanced environment”) and judges in the various levels of courts can make recommendations and decisions, such as declaring embargoes on infrastructure projects until specified criteria are met, only to have them overruled on the basis of a “security suspension.”

Security suspensions were created by Brazil’s 1964-1985 military dictatorship ([Law 4348/1964](#)), allowing any decision to be overturned if a single judge deems it would cause “serious harm to public order, health, safety and the economy.” Since Brazil’s 1988 Constitution this has been expanded to include the Public Ministry ([Law 8437/1992](#)) and to prevent any appeal from halting a development project ([Law 12,016/2009](#)). No matter how many laws, constitutional guarantees or international conventions have been violated, large projects like BR-319 can simply go forward if a friendly judge can be found to issue a security suspension.



Truck mired in the mud of BR-319. Image courtesy of Marcio Isensee e Sá / InfoAmazonia.

The members of the Public Ministry and judges in the courts do their work pointing out violations of laws and constitutional guarantees, but these are easily overturned by selective upper-level judges (*desembagadores*) who invoke the security-suspension laws. Perhaps the most dramatic example is the case of the Belo Monte Dam, where more than 20 cases were filed against the project on behalf of the Indigenous people whose right to consultation under [ILO Convention 169](#) and Brazilian Law ([Law 10,088/2019](#), formerly [Law 5051/2004](#)) were flagrantly violated. Most were overridden by security suspensions; [one case](#) was found in favor of the Indigenous people by a federal court, but the decision was appealed to the Federal Supreme Court by the administration of then-president Dilma Rousseff, where a “monocratic” decision by the then-president of the court allowed construction of the dam to proceed pending a decision on the merits of the case (see [here](#), [here](#) and [here](#)).

In 2022, a monocratic [decision](#) by the current president of the court addressed the merits of the case, ruling that the Indigenous people indeed had the right to consultation on Belo Monte, but the decision [must be ratified](#) by the full court. Since the dam construction had been completed in 2015, the decision has no practical effect, and the dam stands today as a monument to the failure of Brazil’s legal protections.

A security suspension has already been used to override decisions that would delay the approval of BR-319. Public hearings are a required part of the licensing process, and in the case of BR-319, in 2021 the Federal Public Ministry in Amazonas issued a formal [“recommendation”](#) to IBAMA to delay holding the public hearings. The president of IBAMA, at that time during the presidential administration of Jair Bolsonaro, felt free to simply ignore that recommendation and scheduled the hearing anyway. Just before the hearing, a court in Manaus [ordered](#) it be suspended (see [here](#) and [here](#)), but within a few hours a judge in Brasília issued a [security suspension](#) annulling the suspension. Ironically, the justification given was the need for the highway to transport oxygen to Manaus, an argument that has been [shown to be false](#).

The [Manaus oxygen crisis was used](#) both by local politicians and by the Ministry of Transport to press for approval of the highway. The minister of infrastructure at the time, Tarcísio de Freitas — now the governor of São Paulo — promoted the highway by dispatching a convoy of trucks to bring oxygen via BR-319 at the height of the rainy season, resulting in a predictable delay that cost many lives in Manaus, given that river transport [would have been faster](#). Perhaps it was this media event that led to using oxygen as the excuse for a security suspension rather than the usual use of alleged harm to the economy, although BR-319 is unusual in [not having an economic justification](#) and in being the only major infrastructure project in Brazil without the required economic viability study (EVTEA).

In summary, individuals in all branches of government are almost always well-intentioned as they do their jobs within their separate compartments. With reference to BR-319, the result of this compartmentalization of responsibility is a constant advance toward an environmental disaster due to the bureaucratic system failure epitomized by Hannah [Arendt \(1964\)](#) as the “banality of evil.”

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*This article is an updated translation of a text by the author that is available in Portuguese on [Amazônia Real](#).*

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