



## Interview with David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro (Ministério Público do Estado do Pará (MPPA))

Ambika Samarthya-Howard

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**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Could you talk about your role as a legislator, and how it relates to the coalition of the Brazilian Association of Members of the Public Prosecutor's office of the Environment (ABRAMPA), and some of the climate action work?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** My name is David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro, I'm General Administrator (GA) of the Public Prosecutor's Office of the State of Pará (MPPA) in Altamira [municipality]. I work in the Public Ministry of the State of Pará. I've been a prosecutor since 2015. My main activation is under the environment here in Altamira, the third biggest city in the world [by area], the biggest city in Brazil, and definitely the biggest city in Pará.

Altamira is the center of many environmental problems. We have an Environmental Protection Area (APA), a special area of preservation called Triunfo do Xingu, which is the most damaged special area of preservation of the state.

We have around 12 to 13 special areas of preservation here. The central city is not big, but our territory is one of the largest in the world. We need to deal with it, but it's challenging because most of the territory is unexplored, and in special areas of preservation. It means there are no streets, no ways to get there, unless you get on an aeroplane or a boat. My work as the GA is especially with the environment, but I also work with the consumers in the third sector, especially the collective rights. I'm the only prosecutor who works with the environment.

Our situation is very delicate because our environment here has been damaged since forever. There are many special places here that need protection. The APA I mentioned before is one of these special spaces. Right now, we have a big problem, especially in Pará, about the registration of the lands.

Pará has, in terms of territory registration, three or four times its size. There is a problem with knowing who the owner of the land is. Who is doing the cattle? Who exploits the land?

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Are you saying three people would be negotiating who owns the lands?



**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** Something like that. Visually, Pará is three times bigger than its normal size. The problem is not just about ownership of the land. The Instituto de Terras do Pará (ITERPA) tracks all the land to make it clearer.

We have a system called Cadastro Ambiental Rural (CAR), the accreditation of the rural area. It's a very fallible system because all of the included data can be fake.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Is it due to corruption, or just due to data? Is it maligning that's making this so difficult or is it just very hard to track land?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** Both. Of course, there are a lot of state emissions, but it's related to something historical about our state. Right now, it's easier for most of the people who exploit these areas not to be identified because they can just devastate and degrade everything and make the CAR grow.

The main way that we can look for them is to just go there or look for something in the other organizations, for example, the Agricultural Protection Agency of the State of Pará (ADEPARÁ), where people usually register cattle.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Is there anything helpful? Have you used MapBiomias?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** Yes, we use MapBiomias and the information from the National Institute for Space Research (INPE). The MapBiomias uses the data of the INPE to make all the tracks, it is useful. We have a geographer here in Altamira who specializes in tracking all the information, the degradation, deforestation, and all the damage to the environment.

We can make a history of all the ownership of the areas, but at the same time, we have problems identifying the ownership because of the fragility of the CAR. For example, we have 18 registrations that belong to a 16-year-old girl. It's absurd. At the same time, we have registrations in the name of dead people. It can't be real, and it can definitely be corrupt. They probably will do it to not show who the real owner is here.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Why would they not want to show the real owner?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** It's very simple, because they can just degrade and devastate everything, and the state will never know who is doing it.

If they can't go there, they will never know. You can't understand who is working in the area, who is doing all the movements in the area, and who is using it. The identification of the service is the main problem of Pará. I'm not sure about the rest of Brazil.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** As someone who's representing the government of Brazil or the government of Pará as a legal attorney, how would you ever find these people?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** We have a few tools that can help us discover it. For example, we can ask for ITERPA or ADEPARÁ. Sometimes the land in all the data is the name of the person. Sometimes we can search for something in the registration of the lands.



The CAR system is considered to facilitate the use of the land, but at the same time, it's very easy to deceive it. Usually, when we make a registration, the state needs to confirm it, but there is a big delay from the beginning of the process to the end of it. The people using the land can exploit it for maybe five years before the state finds out. It's a long time between registration and discovering that something is wrong.

Usually, the state discovers it when environmental crime and damage to the environment are happening. As the GA of Altamira, we start our investigation to know who is doing it, because most of the time, the people registered in the CAR are not the people causing the damage. Sometimes it's a person who lives in another state, with no relationship to Pará.

You, Ambika, can be a person who owns a CAR in your name. The system was considered to trust in the good faith of the person who works with it.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Once you understand that there's a fraud or corruption or something, what's your role in bringing justice?**

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** The Brazilian constitution allows us to prosecute every kind of environmental crime in two ways: the administrative and civil way, and the criminal way. The criminal law in Brazil regarding the environment is very soft; people usually don't go to jail for it. At the same time, the civil law has been well constructed, the main tool is to reduce the financial gains of this person. We block their values, lanes, items, and ownership.

Most of the deforestation crimes were made to be resolved on a bargain. The civil law is the best way to hold them responsible, track them, look for them, and make the penalties higher so that it doesn't stimulate them to continue the exploration and exploitation.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: You bring them in for civil and court cases, you have to show that they're doing something wrong, that they're related to the land. How does the role of the quilombolas and the Indigenous groups work in terms of collective rights and this process?**

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** Right now, my GA doesn't work with the Indigenous people or the quilombolas. We have a specific GA here in Altamira that works with them. Most of the quilombolas and the Indigenous peoples are attached to the federal work, but here in Altamira, we have the Promotoria Agraria, the rural GA leading the rural conflicts of the state.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Are there policies that you're putting in place in Pará that affect the rest of Brazil?**

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** No. We have the ABRAMPA as a very good group of people who are doing environmental work and are interested in publishing our works. And Luciano [Loubet, president of ABRAMPA] is a great partner. We've been exchanging information and experience.

ABRAMPA was at our COP30 event in Pará, and we're trying to export the experience in Altamira to other states. No one before me has done something like that.

Usually, the secretary of the environmental state prosecutes without information about the degradation or deforestation. We are trying to track all the people responsible, make them accountable, and look for the people buying the meat or profiting financially. We're trying to make it bigger and a good experience for other states with the same problem.



We still have to work a lot to make it for free. We are currently adjusting our relationships with ITERPA to solidify our information and data.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Could you tell us a few success stories in detail, things that you have done that you're proud of, or any wins that you've had?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** I've been working in the Division of Administration (DA) of Altamira since 2024, so I'm very new here. Before, I was in Monte Alegre, Carrancas, and Carajás. I worked in two cities of Marajó, which were called Bagre and Gurupá. I used to work on everything. The cities are small, so they didn't have a specialized GA. My environmental work on the cities was not rare, but uncommon. The main problems there involved crime. Altamira has these problems too. I tried to work with the federal prosecutors, but they are always doing the same things; my colleagues in Pará were replicating the job of the last prosecutors.

I seated my team and started to think about ways of enhancing and improving our job, which led us to where we are now, with good investigations developing. They are all under seizure, under the secrets of justice, so we can't talk about it. Data confirms that some cases will soon have good results. I can assure you that this is working.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** What do you think is different about those cases that has made it work?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** First of all, the prosecutors who worked before me and the other ones that I've talked to didn't try to associate with other governmental institutions. I'll tell you how my work usually happens. We are here in the office, we just received a notification from the Secretariat of Environment of the State (SEMA) to inform us that an environmental crime had occurred.

Usually, SEMA sends us a number that represents the damage and the responsible person of the CAR, the rural registration. Normally, the prosecution of Pará, and even the prosecutions of the Federal Union, start a prosecution with this data. The problem is that all these processes and prosecutions have not succeeded.

We sit in it, study it, and search for ways to change all this logic, which is illogical to me. We have been enhancing the way of searching for this type of crime, with tracking the people responsible and effectively punishing them.

Our main focus is not just receiving this information from SEMA, but enhancing it, increasing the data, and exchanging confidential information with ITERPA, the Pará, or maybe even with the government, to make this data common. Most of the time, they just don't communicate with each other, which is insane.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Do you think that ABRAMPA is a good way to solve that problem?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** Definitely. ABRAMPA has excellent prosecutors. Luciano is one of them. Everyone tries to contribute in some way. Every time we have doubts, we exchange experiences and information. Many people there are well-known in Brazil for their abilities and skills. I can't be happier to work with them, because ABRAMPA helps to enhance our skills, learn



with more experience. And exchange opportunities, maybe even sharing some politics or practices with other states.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Before this year, the work you've been doing was primarily criminal law, and not environmental law. Where was that?**

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** I always worked in Pará. The public ministry where I worked belongs to Pará. We have five public ministries in Brazil; every state has one. And there is the Federal Public Ministry, a Public Ministry of the Union, and a Labor Public Ministry.

I started my job in 2015, working in Marajó, in Gurupá, and in Bagre. After that, I went to Canaã Carajás, which is a very big city with big problems. Then I moved to Monte Alegre. And since 2025, I've been in Altamira. I've been working with the environment and the collective rights because I was just fascinated with it.

I met ABRAMPA and started to search for ways to protect it even more and more. My team, my colleagues, are just amazing. It's not only Sabrina, but also Kiara, Rosana, and Igor, our geographer.

We are trying to change the scenarios. Brazil is about to receive the complaint, especially in Belém. We're trying to change things. We're surfing the wave and enjoying the moment. We're trying to make it clearer, more transparent, in ways that people can be comfortable and feel secure about their environment.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: What do you think, from your perspective, is the most important messaging?**

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** It's hard to say. I don't know how Pará is going to lead it. Our governor Helder [Barbalho], works very hard to make it better for all of us, but at the same time, the public ministry is not directly associated with the government in Brazil. We try to see how we can contribute to it. That's the main focus, in my personal opinion.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Would the main focus be on how Pará is contributing to the climate agenda?**

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** Yes. For me, that's how things should work. The public ministry of Pará can do a good job of reducing deforestation, degradation, and forest fires. Pará is developing the system of Red Blues, a way to receive money for not emitting carbon. The environment is a good way to make money and invest it back in the state.

The lobby of the agro is very strong in Pará, and there are a lot of agribusinesses. We understand that the agro should exist in a sustainable way. We're trying to make things clear, make them work sustainably, and respect our laws. Everyone knows that here in Pará, in Brazil, laws are very well built, but of course, there are flaws. We need to revise them and reduce or eliminate the flaws.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard: Having come from a non-environmental legal background in Pará and now working in the environment, what would you say is your biggest surprise?**



**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** In the beginning, this was a shock. In Brazil, we had something like 2,000 laws involving the environment. It's very hard for us, we need to know a lot about the law. I discovered, to be honest with you, my new passion. I started to understand the law. I read it, study it, and make it more familiar to me and to my team.

We have a good team here, and we are often very comfortable with our work. I just keep trying, studying, evolving to deliver the best job, not just for me but for the society that I represent and that I want to defend. I'm making our work something that we can export in the future as a good way to defend ourselves and future generations from this degradation and deforestation.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** You're particularly drawn to it because it's challenging or because you can see the outcomes?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** I'm not sure, I just love it. I don't know if you can say this about your job, but it was love at first sight. I love the challenge. I love the opportunities to deliver something better than ever. I try to impress my friends with my job. It's a method that I try to build into every place that I work, especially in Altamira, where we feel the challenges.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Is there anything you want to share with me from your research that I haven't asked you about?

**David Terceiro Nunes Pinheiro:** There are places in Pará that need special protection, and it would be better for Altamira and other cities to have a specialized GA only for the environment that could do a better and more specialized job. I want to see the public ministry of Pará growing and enhancing its capabilities.

A network in our public ministry will create a group trying to prosecute criminal organizations. It's under construction. It's an institute of our public ministry. They're expecting to see better results in the future.

Our main focus is on doing our best to protect the environment because it is essential for our well-being. This year is a good opportunity to reunite with the government and institutions to make it even more responsible.

**Ambika Samarthya-Howard:** Thank you so much.

*Ambika Samarthya-Howard (she/her) is the Solutions Journalism Network's Chief Innovation Officer: She leads on innovation and technology, leverages communication platforms for the network strategy and creates cool content. She has an MFA from Columbia's Film School and has been creating, teaching and writing at the intersection of storytelling and social good for two decades. She has produced content for Current TV, UNICEF, Havas, Praekelt.org, UNICEF, UNFPA, Save the Children, FCDO, Global Integrity and Prism.*

*\* This interview has been edited and condensed.*