
The Amazon: IIRSA thinks big, seeking business

Infrastructure development in the name of regional economic integration poses one of the greatest challenges to environmental sustainability and social justice today. The initiative for Integration of Regional Infrastructure in South America (IIRSA) is a striking example of this new trend. IIRSA proposes a series of large-scale, high-risk and debt-heavy mega-projects that would result in extensive alterations to landscapes and livelihoods in the region. In this development framework, mountains, forests, and wetlands are seen as barriers to economic development and rivers become the means for extracting natural resources.

The IIRSA initiative is coordinated by all 12 South American governments, with the technical and financial support of multilateral and national banks. It consists of 10 hubs of economic integration cutting across the continent and requiring major investment in transport, energy and telecommunications; and at least 7 sectoral integration processes designed to harmonize regulatory frameworks amongst the countries.

So far IIRSA has identified over 40 composite mega-projects for funding together with hundreds of smaller infrastructure improvement projects, with an aggregate cost in the tens of billions of US dollars. Given its magnitude and the scale of its potential impacts, many environmental organizations are referring to IIRSA as a “gigaproject.”

IIRSA is in fact a forum for innumerable conflicts and controversies that bear little relationship to alleged benefits for the poor. This is nothing new considering the political and economic interests involved and the amount of financial resources circulating. In addition to the governments of the 12 South American governments, other old and new actors from the financial area are involved, such as the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB), the Andean Development Corporation (ADC), the Financial Fund for the Development of the River Plate Basin (Fonplata), the National Bank for Economic and Social Development (BNDES), the World Bank (IBRD), and major corporations.

The combination of investment in highway construction, widespread dredging, and dams proposed under IIRSA, with significant investment from the private sector in resource extraction and agro-industry (for example soy-bean) will not only have direct effects on biodiversity, but also indirect effects on peasant and farm workers.

Historically, this has led to the displacement of rural and indigenous peoples, massive migration and deforestation. All of these developments potentially undermine the viability of the region's small-farm sector, established national parks, indigenous territories, and biodiversity reserves. Many of the projects proposed by IIRSA are in fact old national infrastructure projects that are being integrated into the regional framework in the hopes of reviving them. The environmental, social, cultural and economic impacts of these projects on areas such as the Andes, the Amazon Basin, Mato Grosso, Pantanal and the Paraguay and Parana Rivers will be significant and, in many cases, irreversible.

The Amazon is being incorporated by force in the integration strategy sponsored by IIRSA. Parts of the Amazon territory of interest to big capital are the target of investment seeking to insert them in the capitalist globalization dynamics, with its rationale of inequality and exclusion. The Amazon hub

covers almost 1,000 miles of the Amazon Basin, from the Pacific to the Atlantic coast. It includes part of Brazil, Colombia, Ecuador and Peru as well as the Amazon River and most of its main tributaries. This is an area covering 4,500 million square kilometres and involving approximately 52 million inhabitants. It contains almost half of the world's total biological diversity and between 15 and 20 percent of its fresh water supply.

Presently the Amazon hub contains 54 IIRSA projects, divided into 7 project clusters, most of them organized around the watersheds of tributaries to the Amazon River. The Brazilian Amazon is part of three hubs foreseen by IIRSA: the Amazon hub (Amazonas, Para and Amapa) the Guyanes Shield (Roraima and Amapa) and the Peru-Brazil-Bolivia hub (Acre, Rondônia, Amazonas and Mato Grosso). In the Brazilian Amazon the IIRSA list includes the construction of hydroelectric plants, lines of transmission between hydroelectric plants, construction and rehabilitation of highways, construction of ports, a pulp-mill, soy bean and instant coffee processing plants, a meat packing plant and transport works along over 6,000 km of navigable waterways as a way of increasing the movement of products and exit of natural resources.

The construction of new hydroelectric plants in the Amazon will have the function of generating energy to be used mainly by the most dynamic economic centres, enabling the expansion of waterways as well as of activities producing highly commercial export-oriented crops (for example soy beans) and supplying industrial plants that need large amounts of energy.

A characteristic element of IIRSA is that it is usually totally unknown, not only to local community leaders but also to the business community, leaders of federal bodies, members of the Judicial Power and parliamentarians, among others. The decisions on this new land planning and on infrastructure projects aimed at the region are not discussed with local state and municipal governments, and still less with social movements, non-governmental organizations, or Amazon educational and research institutions among others.

The struggle for access and control of the Amazon's natural resources is becoming increasingly acrimonious. Today this type of conflict is widespread in the region. A classical vision of the expansion of the southern frontier towards the north and of the eastern frontier to the west is not enough to explain the nature and dynamics of conflicts in the Northern Brazil, as the present trend is that of conflicts disseminated all over the Amazon territory, covering areas that are not necessarily contiguous and involving people and institutions from different countries.

However, the creation and consolidation of networks and fora of social movements, pastoral groups, non-governmental organizations and the academic community are increasing in a necessary and comprehensive response to a threat that is global in nature.

Article based on information from: "Amazon Hub", Building Informed Civic Engagement for Conservation in the Andes-Amazon (BICECA), <http://www.biceca.org/en/Index.aspx>; "Incorporação compulsória de territórios", e "IIRSA: os riscos da integração", Guilherme Carvalho, Máster en Planificación del Desarrollo (NAEA/UFPa) y técnico de FASE Amazônia – Núcleo Cidadania, published in Orçamento y Política Socioambiental, Nº 17, September 2006, Instituto de Estudos Socioeconômicos – INESC, <http://www.inesc.org.br/pt/publicacoes/boletins/boletim.php?oid=XGyKPM5ozlOetvHwajV6FgCFnwST07xN>

