
Bolivia: Hydroelectric dam project questioned

The basin of the Beni River in western Bolivia, which comprises part of the Andean region and part of the Amazon forests, is being threatened by a hydroelectric megaproject, that is generating grave concern among local communities, environmental NGOs and academic circles.

The affected region occupies an area of 68.000 square kilometres, with altitudes ranging from 6,500 metres to 200 metres at "El Bala", where the river becomes very narrow. This has been the place chosen to set up this dam project. As a result of the topographic and hydrographic features of the region in relation to its potential for the generation of hydroelectric energy, the idea of such a project has been present for over 50 years. In 1998 it received new support by it being declared a "national priority" and now the elaboration of the reference terms for the prefeasibility study has been put out to tender. However, the area is not a "void space" as government planners view it. On the contrary, it is populated by a very rich flora and fauna which extends over its altitudinal gradient, which allows the existence of different forest ecosystem types, like tropical dry forests, tropical rainforests and subandean rainforests. Additionally, five protected areas are included in the basin. Two of them --the Madidi National Park and the Pilón Lajas Biosphere Reserve and Indigenous Territory-- are located in the area of influence of the dam. More importantly, the threatened area is inhabited by some 1,000 people, most of them belonging to traditional Amazonian cultures, as the Chimanes, the Tacanas and the Mosetenes. For decades these peoples have been subject to an acculturation process caused by the advance of the agricultural frontier and deforestation in their territories.

A study recently published by the NGO Foro Boliviano sobre Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo (FOBOMADE) reveals the negative environmental, social and economic impacts that the project would entail in case it is implemented. The opening of new roads will mean --as has happened in the Brazilian Amazon-- the penetration by loggers, poachers and colonizers. The filling of the reservoir will flood an area of 2,505 km², entirely covered by primary forests. Vegetation will be completely lost and animals will run away. The hydrological, nutrient and sediment fluxes will be completely altered, and the consequences of this phenomenon will affect peasants' villages and fields downstream. It is feared that the low quality of water coming out of the dam --which will be highly eutrophied-- will turn it useless. Additionally, even though from the engineering point of view the dam could work to avoid the effects of rises in the river's level on the populations of Rurrenabaque and San Buenaventura, the latest research concerning river conservation and management indicate --on the contrary-- that maintaining natural flood areas is essential to obtain benefits from the rivers' dynamics. From the economic point of view the project is also non-viable, since the expected sale of energy to Brazil will not compensate the expenses required to build the dam. It is to be underscored that to implement the project the Bolivian state will increase its external debt even more.

On July 21st and 22nd 2000 a Seminar-Workshop, organized by Foro Paceño, was held in the village of Rurrenabaque in order to analyze this issue. Once the studies on the expected impacts of the project, as well as previous similar cases in Colombia and Brazil were presented, the participants --local people, representatives of indigenous and peasant communities, staff in charge of the management of protected areas, organizations and institutions of the region, and some local authorities-- expressed their critical viewpoint on the El Bala project. At the same time, they are demanding that

the expected impacts as well as other alternatives for the sustainable development of the region are considered before the prefeasibility study is undertaken.

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"Consideraciones sobre un megaproyecto: El Bala", FOBOMADE, La Paz, s.f.e.; Bayler Peter B.,
"Understanding Large River-Floodplain Ecosystems", Bioscience Vol 45 Nr 3: 153-158, March 1995.
Those interested in obtaining further information on this project are invited to address FOBOMADE,