
"Without water there is no life:" The rivers of the Bolivian Amazon

Forests contain and sustain innumerable and invaluable riches. Water is an intrinsic and inter-dependent element of forests—it is the basis of all life.

The Beni River crosses the Madidi National Park in Bolivia, one of the most biodiverse regions on the planet, as well as the Pilón Lajas Reserve. It is as if it were “the blood of these lands” (1).

The Bolivian government has been trying to promote mega-dam projects for years in this river basin, particularly the Chepete and Bala projects. The plan is to convert these areas of the Beni River into large lagoons with surface areas of thousands of kilometers. Both reservoirs would flood thousands of kilometers: around 771 km² of direct flooding and around 14,420 km² of indirect influence. As a reference, the surface area of the urban coverage of the capital city of La Paz is 149 km² (2). Both estimates do not consider impacts such as the right of way of roads, or effects for towns that are downstream, such as San Buenaventura or Rurrenabaque. The identification studies carried out estimate that the reservoirs, roads and power transmission lines would deforest more than 100,000 hectares (3).

The creation of these massive lagoons would mean that Indigenous Peoples and peasant communities would have to be evicted, and every living thing left on those lands would be submerged. The water cycle of this territory would change drastically, and therefore life would too. These mega-dams would irrevocably change these communities and the territories they inhabit.

Six Indigenous Peoples live on the lands that they want to submerge: the Mosetenes, Chimanés, Esse-ejas, Lecos, Tacanas and Uchupiamonas. Five of these are legally recognized by the Plurinational State of Bolivia. Indigenous Peoples in voluntary isolation also inhabit these territories. By expelling these peoples from what they call their ‘big house,’ their livelihoods, cultures and knowledge would also be exterminated. These peoples’ most basic rights have been violated, since the companies and authorities have not properly carried out free, prior and informed consultation; nor have they respected existing laws regarding peoples in voluntary isolation. In this way, they are infringing Bolivian regulations and the UN, which require mandatory steps be taken before executing a plan in indigenous territory.

Ruth Alipaz of the National Coordinator for the Defense of Native, Indigenous and Peasant Territories and Protected Areas in Bolivia (CONTIOCAP, by its Spanish acronym), says that “around five thousand people from indigenous communities would be displaced if these mega-dams were built. This is not counting peri-urban populations, such as San Buenaventura, Rurrenabaque and Reyes, as well as populations downriver which would also be affected. Around 150,000 people live in the area of these two dams. The threat is very latent, given that the law which declares these projects to be a priority is still in force. The constant harassment, discrediting and defamation of those of us who are resisting generates distrust. Meanwhile, interested companies and members of the government try to deceive the communities of the basin with promises of work, improvements in their daily lives, and electricity, etc. This is why in July 2022 we invited community leaders from this river basin to visit mega-dams in Brazil, so that they could see the impacts of similar projects with their own eyes.”

It is also undeniable that these huge dams would have impacts not only in the place where they want to build them, but also downstream and upstream. The Beni River flows into the Madera River, which in turn flows into the Amazon river. This whole basin would be affected by this mega-infrastructure.

The Amazonian territories downstream would no longer receive the sediments or nutrients of the Beni River, which are essential for the life of the river. Since the Beni River is the main source of sediment for the Madera River basin, this would affect hundreds of kilometers downstream. This causes soil erosion and a decrease in the availability of groundwater—which directly impacts the production of agricultural products in the communities of these areas.

The dams would also impede the passage of fish and other aquatic species that live in the rivers, and which travel long distances, to reproduce for example.

According to Pablo Villegas, a researcher at the Bolivian Center for Documentation and Information (CEDIB, by its Spanish acronym), “these mega-dams have been presented to the Bolivian people as a great business. They saw that the price of gas was falling, so they presented this as an economic alternative. But the price of energy in the case of the Chepete/Bala costs more than the price of energy in Brazil—which is the only market they plan to sell to. This is why, when they designed the Chepete/Bala, they installed power lines to Mato Grosso, with more than 1,000 km of cables. Profits for Bolivia do not even seem to be guaranteed. So, what is the interest? Well, it is in the very investment in building these mega-dams. They thought of the money they could move by financing the projected 25 billion dollars...and it is known that dams usually cost twice what is projected. It must be stressed that these mega-projects are contracts for specialized transnational companies. Almost all of the investment is abroad, but the impact is for Bolivia.”

Using the argument that the dams are in the “national interest,” these mega-projects go against environmental and social laws, destroying lands, rivers and forests. “Land grabbing is brutal in Bolivia today,” says Villegas.

These mega-dams are part of a project that includes many dams throughout the Bolivian territory, called the ‘Energy heart of South America.’ In Brazil these mega-dams are called ‘Itaipú expanded,’ because thanks to the Itaipú dam on the Paraná River on the border between Brazil and Paraguay, Brazil came to have great influence over Paraguay on many levels. This dam was approved during the dictatorship in Paraguay in 1973, and it left Paraguay heavily in debt until 2023 (4).

Feminist activist Elizabeth Peredo says that “everyone is thinking about energy because that is the topic of this civilization.” She also says that in Bolivia “the government’s vision of Buen Vivir [Living Well] has been distorted through the years and has turned into the idea of being a regional power in South America that sells energy.” This vision, she explains, influences the very concept of water, even within Bolivia’s constitutional principles on Buen Vivir and the care for Mother Earth.

And of course, to build these mega-dams it would be necessary to create roads. Which means that the territory would not only be degraded and deforested by large swaths; it would also be opened up to big mining and logging companies. That is, it would be opened up to more destruction of forests and rivers that are vital to the people who inhabit them.

And this is critical when one considers that mega-dams are not the only threat to the Beni River basin today.

Mining contamination and other threats

Mining is also destroying this part of the Amazon. Bolivia is one of the countries that imports the most mercury. This metal makes it possible to amalgamate gold found in the rivers. Mercury is very harmful to people's health because it attacks the central nervous system. Miners use great quantities of it, which impacts all of the life that these rivers sustain—and by extension the people who depend on this water and its diversity for their food. This mining activity, which in most cases is illegal, also brings more violence, prostitution, feminicides, human trafficking and illicit substances, etcetera into the territories.

Ruth Alipaz of CONTIOCAP explains that "The World Health Organization (WHO) indicates that the mercury limit for the human body is 1 part per million. In the Beni basin, the average is 7-8 parts per million, and the highest ranges are at 27 parts per million for indigenous Esse-Ejjas and in Asunción del Quiquibey. These are very worrisome data. They are killing us. There are reports of constant diarrhea, deformities and disabilities among Esse-Ejja children. They are poisoning the water and food. It is a genocide of the peoples who live in these territories."

The many threats to the Beni River are pooling in its currents, but governmental authorities and corporate investors choose to ignore them. The water that is being heavily contaminated by mercury from mining—especially upstream in the Chepete area—is the same water they plan to retain with the mega-dams. So far, there have been no environmental impact studies showing the dangers to human health and to the territories from the high concentration of mercury in the reservoirs (5).

And there is another growing threat to add to this list. This August 2022, the Bolivian government enacted a Supreme Decree to promote oil palm production. Experience from other countries warns that oil palm production leads to deforestation, scarcity and contamination of water, land grabbing, violence, and many other impacts. This decision has therefore brought a lot of fear to the peoples of the Beni River, since they see that many negative impacts are coming (6).

The Beni River and the Amazon in general—its valleys, forests, peoples—are part of a connected and interdependent whole, in which serious impacts to one part effect the others, often in unexpected ways. This is the reason that water, as the elemental basis of all life, "makes us think that any proposed social change must be systemic," Peredo concludes.

Julia Blagny

Director of the documentary "The Blood of Bolivia, from the Andes to the Amazon"

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Pr8u4lrOW_M

(1) Much of the information in this article, as well as the testimonials, is based on the research for and production of the documentary "[The Blood of Bolivia. From the Andes to the Amazon](#)".

(2) Tunupa, Solon Foundation, [Mega-hydroelectric dams: Export and die. The Bala-Chepete dam](#), 2nd edition ; and Jorge Molina, Daniel Espinoza, [Hydrology, hydraulics and impacts associated with the Chepete – Bala project, Institute of Hydraulics and Hydrology](#), 2016

(3) Idem (2)

(4) Pablo Villegas, [The energy heart of South America.](#)

(5) Idem (2)

(6) Página siete Bolivia, [Indigenous people warn of environmental impacts due to the production of biodiesel from "death palm,"](#) 2022.

