

Residents Protest Lula's Northeast Water Plan

By Bill Hinchberger | October 24, 2005

When candidate Luiz Inácio Lula da Silva visited the São Francisco River during the 1994 campaign, the second of his three unsuccessful presidential tries, Roberto Malvezzi sidled up to him during a break. Better known by his nickname “Gogo,” Malvezzi worked then as now with the lands and fisheries commissions of the Catholic Church. Progressive activists like Gogo could still gain access to Lula back then.

Gogo asked the candidate about his position on diverting water from the São Francisco River to other parts of the semi-arid Brazilian northeast, an idea defended by Lula's rival Fernando Henrique Cardoso. Gogo laid out the negative social and environmental implications of the costly engineering project. Queried by the press as well, Lula promised if elected to appoint a high-level commission to study the alternatives.

With the help of nature, activists managed to beat back Cardoso's water diversion scheme during his two four-year terms in office. A severe drought in 2001 reduced the flow of water to the hydroelectric dams along the São Francisco. Electricity output plummeted, exacerbating an already serious national shortfall. Federal officials concluded that the São Francisco River could not supply sufficient flows of water to both generate electricity and divert water to other parts of the northeast.

When Lula rode to office in November 2002 on a wave of promises of sustainable development, activists felt ready to stop the rearguard action and prepare a proactive “revitalization” scheme for the ailing waterway.

Imagine their surprise when Lula turned around and began trying to push the same old plumbing down their throats. Indeed Lula's proposal is more ambitious and five times more expensive—budgeted at US\$5 billion. “Our actions blocked Fernando Henrique's first version,” says Nadja Maria Guedes Farfán, projects director of the Association of Environmental Guardians of the São Francisco Valley (Aguavale) in Petrolina, a city on the bank of the river. “Now they've come up with some reports that try to minimize the importance of the negative impacts.”

Making money off the “drought industry”

The São Francisco River runs through a culturally rich but economically impoverished region called the “sertão.” The high plateaus of the *sertão* block airflows.

Temperatures remain high throughout the year. Except during droughts, the region receives adequate rainfall, between 300-800 millimeters per year. But the soil is impermeable and most of the rain either evaporates quickly in the heat or drains away as runoff. The struggle of subsistence farmers to eek out a living under such conditions has been captured in Graciliano Ramos' novel *Barren Lives*, with a film version by director Nelson Pereira dos Santos.

For decades politicians like Cardoso and now Lula have used the suffering of smallholders like those that populate Ramos' novel to convince taxpayers to throw money at the northeast. “They use the drought to attract public resources and transform them into private property,” says Gogo. In the 1990s, the press discovered that a single congressional leader had six wells, producing 26,000 gallons a day, on private land in the middle of the *sertão*. The phenomenon is embedded in the Brazilian political process and it has a name—the Drought Industry.

Cardoso and Lula aren't the first Brazilian politicians to try to divert water from the São Francisco to other parts of the *sertão*. Emperor Dom Pedro had a scheme drawn up in the 19th century, and the idea has reappeared periodically on the political agenda ever since.

Few of the estimated 17 million people who suffer from the lack of adequate water supplies in the northeast will be helped by the two large canals, which will either bypass or never reach them. The main beneficiaries are likely to be ranchers who grow tropical fruit and cotton for export.

Diverting water from the have-nots

Even if the water were to be reserved for the poor, another serious question remains: “How can someone suffering from anemia (the São Francisco River) donate blood to sick people (other water basins)?” Bishop Luiz Flávio Cáprio asked that question in a special section on



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diversion in the Salvador, Bahia, daily newspaper *A Tarde*. More recently Cáprio staged an 11-day hunger strike to call attention to the negative aspects of the scheme. He ended his protest on October 6 when Jaques Wagner, Minister of Institutional Relations, promised in a signed document to extend the debate about the program. Yet in statements published in the Brazilian press, Wagner stressed that the agreement did not mean that the Lula administration would suspend the initiative.

Large dams, deforestation at its headwaters and along its banks, pumping for irrigation, and pollution have long plagued the São Francisco. Of the 504 municipalities along its 2,700-kilometer course, only 78 have adequate sewage facilities. Erosion drives 18 tons of silt into the riverbed each year. Indeed the São Francisco no longer has the strength to reach the sea: specimens of “robalo,” sea bass, found exclusively in saltwater, have been discovered trapped as far as 50 kilometers upstream.

Once-plentiful freshwater fish are disappearing. Dams have interrupted spawning cycles; gone are the peripheral pools and lakes, important for the recuperation of stocks that were once evident during periods of high water. During an official expedition in 1880, engineer Teodoro Sampaio wrote, “The São Francisco is an enormous spawning tank which never lacks fish.” Contrast that with a prediction 125 years later from Pedro de Souza, president of the fishing colony in Juazeiro, a city along the riverbank: the stocks, he says, are “going to reach zero.”

Activists hope they can defeat Lula’s scheme without a crisis like the 2001 drought. In Petrolina, an independent public prosecutor has filed suit to challenge both the

environmental impact report and its public review process. Activists like Gogo and Nadja plan to spread the word in the interior among the grassroots.

In larger cities like Salvador, environmental groups like the Environmental Group of Bahia (GAMBA) are working within official water basin committees and other networks to hold the line. “The São Francisco is on everybody’s agenda,” says Renato Cunha, GAMBA executive director. “It has become an example at the national level.”

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RESOURCES:

GAMBA Grupo Ambientalista de la Bahía
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