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Brazil : Basin Masterplans in the State of Tocantins

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Basin Masterplans in the State of Tocantins

(The News N° 21 - January 2011)

Even in the heart of the dry season, the Rio das Balsas and its tributaries carry clear waters, much to the delight of swimmers and fishermen in the area.

During the day, the children dive from the bridge that gave its name to the town of Ponte Alta do Tocantins, and, in the evening, adults meet for an aperitif on the river beach. Meanwhile, in the Rio Sao Valerio, although close, only a trickle of water is flowing, which is not even enough to supply water to the city of São Valério da Natividade.

In each of these two river basins, the Government of the State of Tocantins, with the help of Japanese Consultants (Nippon Koei Lac Co. Ltd.) and IOWater, is finalizing master plans for water resources management, aimed at reconciling its multiple uses.

Hydrogeological studies have shown that the contrast between the two basins is explained by the presence of the karstic aquifer Urucuia and its resurgences, guaranteeing the basic flow of the Rio das Balsas.

In the first basin, the orientations of the Master Plan focus on the necessary arbitration between environmental preservation, the practice of ecotourism and projects for building hydropower plants.

In the Rio Sao Valerio basin, the master plan indicates the need to build a regulating dam, storing a portion of the water during the rainy season and preventing that the people suffer from lack of water during the drought that characterizes this region of Northern Brazil. In addition to drinking water supply, the project will develop irrigated agriculture.

For the follow-up of the master plans, Brazilian law provides for the creation of basin committees. However, in the predominantly rural river basins of the Rio das Balsas and Rio Sao Valerio, the government is reluctant to create a new organization, as the population is already in high demand to participate in multiple participative organizations, for example in the fields of health, education and tourism.

The proposed solution is thus to create an inter-municipal consortium, allowing the municipalities of the river basins to pool their resources and expertise to ensure the implementation of the master plans for water management. Such a consortium may also receive financial resources from the taxes on water use, thereby ensuring the sustainability of its operation.

Tocantins State : master plans for the Rio Manoel Alves and Rio Palma basins 2007 - 2008

(The News N° 15 - December 2007)

IOWater participates, with the Brazilian consulting firm Gama Engenharia, in the formulation of Master Plans for the Rio Manoel Alves and Rio Palma Basins. The Government of the Tocantins State is the contracting authority for these two studies, financed by the World Bank.

The two rivers are born in the buttresses of the Serra Geral, are fed by the huge Urucuia aquifer and run from East to West to the Rio Tocantins, itself tributary of the Amazon. This year, a state of emergency was declared in several communities of the study area because of drought. The Master Plans of the Rio Manoel Alves and Rio Palma Basins will have to allow for better mobilization of the available water … or better organization of the human activities according to water availability.

The first stage of the study consisted of a "social mobilization" in each concerned community, inviting the water stakeholders and the population to actively think about the characterization and analysis of the current situation. The participants were numerous and productive in the meetings, thus confirming the Brazil's reputation of "participative democracy".

In the second stage, the same stakeholders are to propose scenarios for the future, then to deliberate on the choice of one of these scenarios, which will be used as a basis for an action plan.

At the end of the study, the creation of a Basin Committee is planned, as there are already more than a hundred in Brazil, to sustain a local management body.

For the Government of the Tocantins State, implementing a Basin Master Plan means the possibility of orientating the economic development in such a way to be sustainable and respectful of the environment.

There are large dam projects for irrigation-purpose in the Rio Manoel Alves and Rio Palma basins. Several hydropower stations are being built, others are planned. The area is favorable to the cultivation of sugar cane for the production of ethanol. At the same time, there is a great potential for the development of ecotourism. Among all these possibilities, the stake of the Master Plans is to enable the local stakeholders to collectively say what they wish for the future of their area in the short, medium and long terms.