Rethink the Nicaragua Canal

At the end of 2014, construction began on the Grand Canal in Nicaragua, a project shrouded in secrecy since its inception 2.5 years ago. The Nicaraguan government showed scant evidence of having accounted for the impact on the environment and on local residents, or of having adequately consulted the public in selecting the final 278-km route. Such disregard should be alarming to everyone. Projects of this magnitude warrant dialogue among all stakeholders. As construction is projected to span 5 years, there is still time to reconsider it and convene independent assessments and meetings that are transparent, inclusive, and respectful of different perspectives, to guide the project toward the best outcome.

Declared an income generator by the Nicaraguan government, the Grand Canal is owned by a Chinese company (HKND). It will enter Nicaragua from the Pacific through the Brito River, cross agricultural land and forests, and traverse Lake Cocibolca (the largest tropical lake of the Americas). On the Caribbean side, it will cross pasturelands, forests, natural reserves, wetlands, and indigenous communities, entering the Caribbean close to the Punta Gorda River.

At an international multidisciplinary workshop convened in Managua in November 2014, experts from the Academy of Sciences of Nicaragua (ASN) and the InterAmerican Network of Academies of Sciences, with support from the International Council for Science in Latin America and the Caribbean, explored technical and scientific aspects of the canal and shared their scientific concerns with the public, HKND, and the government. The final communiqué highlighted the importance of environmental impact assessments (EIAs) on biodiversity and regional water resources, including Lake Cocibolca, which supplies drinking water to the surrounding population. Particularly disquieting is how the initial construction supplies drinking water to the surrounding population.

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