

URBAN CONFLICTS IN NORTHERN AMAZON REGION: DISORDERED GROWTH OF WETLANDS/RESSACAS IN MACAPA

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Abstract

The Amazon Region is globally known for its immense wealth of natural resources. Sixty percent of the region is located in Brazil; however, that enormous territory has significant urban conflicts, considering that the irregular settlement growth phenomenon occurs in that same space. The purpose of this article is to show the squatter-settlement development process (called favelização) in the wetlands of Macapá, Capital City of the State of Amapá, and the initiative of the Federal University of Amapá, in search of new solutions for wetlands, locally referred to as ressacas, in the urban planning area.

Amapá is a new state of Brazil, created by the 1988 Constitution of the Federative Republic of Brazil. It has an untouched area of 38,821.20 square kilometers, being larger than many European countries. Amapá is a new preservation unit established in 2002 that became one of the most important natural heritages in the Amazon Region and was named the largest preservation unit in Brazil. It is the world's largest tropical-forest protected area. However, its Capital City, Macapá, with 398,204 inhabitants (IBGE 2010), has serious urban problems, because approximately 120,000 people are estimated to be living under subhuman conditions in wetlands, being part of a very negative global statistic: in developing countries, the non-stop urban growth is marked by the development and emergence of poverty and squatter settlements (favelas).

Recent research studies have shown that wetland dwellers are mainly immigrants originating from riparian communities that had previously lived along the Amazon River, surviving from extractive activities. However, with no healthcare or access to basic education for their children, those people decided to move to the city that was closest to their community: Macapá. They did not have skilled labor and faced difficulties to find a job; the risk areas located close to the urban center represented a cheap housing opportunity. In those areas, the riparian people reproduced the way of life they had in the forest, but in different conditions: they occupied government- or privately-owned lands and their workforce was dedicated to informal economy.

In Amapá, the abundance of space and natural resources lead to contradictory relations: thousands of people living in precarious settlements, with no access to basic sanitation, health or education, and few possibilities to participate in political decisions. Scarce opportunities and investments on the part of local governments in the research area have slowed down the contribution of researchers in the understanding of the urbanization phenomenon. However, since 2009, the Federal University of Amapá has been developing projects where the community's participation is an important element in the development of public policies: The "planning with the community" project, for example, has been a source of information on the current situation of those irregular spaces, because it conducts analyses that enable deep assessments of the problems in the informal-economy city. Macapá, where serious urban conflicts have emerged, is the starting point for our research study, as well as the intense process of irregular occupation.

Keywords: slums, irregular areas, wetlands, Amazon