

THE SRI LANKAN EXPERIENCE OF ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT ASSESSMENT AND ITS IMPACT ON WATER MANAGEMENT ISSUES

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As an island nation, where the majority of the population is dependent on agriculture and fishing, Sri Lanka is also a tourist destination of some importance. Therefore its rivers, inland waters, irrigation systems and lagoons play a significant role for the economy, food security and social well-being of the country. In development activities, the manner in which water resources are managed has particular significance for future well being. The country is therefore at present attempting to resolve reconciliation of environment concerns with development needs.

The first Sri Lankan experiments with EIAs was in relation to coastal waters with the enactment of the Coast Conservation Act of No 57 of 1988. The later introduction of EIAs through the 1988 amendments to the National Environment Act No 47 of 1980 is seen as a significant advance with far reaching statutory impacts on the decisionmaking process related to development projects. It established the EIA both as a major decisionmaking tool and a innovative means of creating a forum for public opinion, in so far as there was allowance for public hearings in the Sri Lankan development process. It also set up a industrial pollution control system with establishment of Environment Protection License (EPL).

The EIA was primarily mooted by external support agencies (ESA) as a requirement to ensure that the development options under consideration were environmentally sustainable and any significant environmental consequences were taken into account early in the project design, with suitable mitigatory measures developed. Ongoing special projects funded by ESAs such as the Wetlands Conservation Project (European Community), Natural Resources and Environmental Protection Project - NAREPP (USAID), Coastal Resources Management Project - CRMP(USAID), Coastal Conservation Project (GTZ), Municipal Environment Improvement Project - MEIP (IDA) as well as the proposed National Environment Project (ADB) have and continue to act as catalysts in awareness building in environment issues as well as train personnel in state, private and NGO sector. CRMP has had special success in the development of the Special Area Management (SAM) concept in sensitive endangered areas such as the Hikkaduwa Marine Park and the Rekawa lagoon. The Muthurajawela Buffer Zone Development Programme carried out by the Wetlands Conservation Project is seen to have a significant impact in promoting stakeholder participation in marginalised lagoon fisher communities.

The recent national efforts at decentralization has also affected the handling of environmental issues. The major national environmental agency involved in this area, the Central Environmental Authority (CEA) has also recently devolved some of its environmental regulatory functions to Pradeshiya Sabhas (PSs), the smallest elected local government authorities within the legislative structure. The North Western Province has also enacted its own Environmental Act operative within the provincial boundaries, the only Sri Lankan Province to do so to date.

The participatory element envisaged in the EIA process however was contrary to the prevailing bureaucratic culture and its top down authoritative nature. Also within the strongly hierarchic culture of the country, the erosion of democracy in the country during the recent past and the lack of a participatory culture, operationalizing the consultative element envisaged within the Western norm which often guided legislature design was particularly difficult.

After 1990, environmental issues mostly relating to water bodies (eg. Upper Kotmale Hydro Power Project, Kandalama Irrigation Tank, Trincomalee Coal Power project, Rajawella Hotel and Golf course (bordering the major Mahaweli reservoir, Victoria) Kalpitiya Coal Power Project) has frequently become the focal point for political activism.

Environmental awareness has grown throughout the 1980-90s with development planners and environmentalists clashing frequently. Recent and ongoing areas of confrontation and controversy are plans to set up a tannery bordering Kalametiya lagoon, a coalpower project in Chilaw and a refinery planned in close proximity to Bundala, a national park which is also the only Sri Lankan wetland protected by the Ramsar Convention. Environmental NGOs have also increased their involvement, working along with local communities, in protesting against issues which often escalated to violence.

Within the state sector, some political decisionmakers saw the institutionalizing of the EIA as a hindrance to development and in 1996 proposed to curtail the time provided for public comment on EIAs from one month to two weeks. When this measure resulted in public outcry, the state brought in through a Gazette Extraordinary of March 1997, legislation which could override existing EIA regulations specifically related to power and energy generation.

A further development related to EIAs was that due to the limited number of persons and organizations, trained and experienced in carrying out EIAs, the process has taken on a somewhat closed circuit nature which is at odds with the essentially participatory nature envisaged by the activists and organizations which set up the mechanisms. Also within the structure of the EIA, the Social Impact Assessment (SIA) process, which is the element most closely impinging on community participation and household well being continues to be less well developed, with no discernible attention to gender concerns.

The paper studies the development of environmental consciousness and activism within the framework of the sustainable needs and limited resource base of a developing country. It proposes the need to broadbase awareness of EIAs with a resultant demystification of the EIA process as necessary steps to improving stakeholder participation and community accountability in water related projects.

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The author has over 16 yrs experience as university lecturer and researcher and is presently partner in a consultancy firm which carried out work for both national and international agencies. She has worked extensively in water management projects and has been consulting with the International Irrigation Management Institute (IIMI) since 1988. She has presented papers in international forums including the 1996 Stockholm Water Symposium and is a member of the Steering Committee of the Global Water Partnership.