



MANAGING CONFLICT IN WATERSHEDS OF SRI LANKA: EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

THE COMBINATION OF POPULATION PRESSURE AND WEAK GOVERNANCE OVER NATURAL RESOURCES MEANS THAT TENSIONS OVER ACCESS TO FORESTS AND WATER ARE INCREASING.



ARD, INC.

Buttala anicat left bank canal control structure used by farmers to cultivate rice in both rainy and dry seasons. These farmers are intensive water users and significant beneficiaries of Menik Ganga water resources.

Sri Lanka has faced two types of conflict that affect natural resources management. In the northern and eastern part of the country, civil war has been waged for most of the last 20 years, and only recently have moves to peace allowed displaced people to return. In the densely populated south of the country, land and water resources are under increasing pressure, and disputes over access to natural resources are increasing. During November 2004, an ARD team visited both areas and undertook detailed case studies of the relationship between conflict and natural resources management. Several villages along the southern fringe of the buffer zone were visited to assess impacts of the civil war. A complete transect was made of the Menik Ganga basin, a water-stressed river basin in the south of the country formed the basis for assessing causes and effects of conflict over land, forest and water.

The two-decade long civil war created a buffer strip between the Sinhala and Tamil communities, and many villages in or close to the buffer zone were directly affected. Some villages were abandoned for up to 10 years until the threat of direct conflict receded and people could return home. These displaced farming or fishing communities generally stayed together as entire communities tended to stay in the same refugee camps, and in most of the villages visited they tried to return together. Where they managed to stay as a homogeneous group they could largely reestablish traditional rights of access to forests. However, in some cases, communities were broken up during the period of displacement because some people decided to stay in their new locations; many had relatives they lived with, others found off-farm employment. The returning refugees were frequently the poorer, less advantaged community members and they have not regained their access to forest resources to anything like the same extent.

In the southern communities, the combination of population pressure and weak governance over natural resources means that tensions over access to forests and water are increasing. Head-tail differences resulting from overwithdrawals of water from upper communities and upstream pollution affecting downstream water

quality both generate conflicts. In addition, site specific issues over water for religious purposes and for wildlife have added to the tensions found throughout the Menik Ganga basin. Short-term solutions are sought but there is no systemic capacity to prevent them recurring.

An additional complication has been the strengthening of government powers to create and enforce forest and wildlife reservations. Some forests in the civil war buffer zone were designated as preserves during the period of displacement, and communities feel they have lost a lot of access. In Menik Ganga, large areas of forest previously open to local communities were designated as wildlife reserves, and are now surrounded by electric fences to keep people out and elephants in. The lack of any coherent capacity on behalf of provincial and local authorities to integrate management of land, water and forests means that a piecemeal situation has evolved that ends up satisfying a few people while marginalizing the majority. This is made more complicated as authority over land, water and forests rests with different Departments at national level, and they make planning decisions that do not effectively involve local communities. Water for irrigation is allocated separately for water for drinking or for industry, for example, so it is difficult to view resource management from a more holistic perspective.

A final case study examines a successful example of local management over water resources, where decisions over rights and access to water have devolved from central government to water users. Still in its infancy, the Ridi Bendi Ela Farmers Company provides one solution to conflict reduction.

Irrespective of the cause of the conflict, all of the case studies confirmed that it is inevitably the poorest and most marginalized parts of communities that suffer the most. They are the first to lose access to land and water resources, the least able to fight for their rights. As pressure on natural resources grows, particularly if there remains a disconnect between central government, local government and communities over how to manage it, we can be certain that the most vulnerable will continue to be the most severely affected when conflicts arise.

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