

World Commission on Dams, Documents and Submission

Regional Consultations South Asia, Sri Lanka

Upper Kotmale Hydropower Project: Another Disaster in Dam History

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We have many good and bad experiences as the results of large scale Dams. In 1991 as a result of the Mahaweli project about 20% of the rice and about 55% of the Chilli consumption of the country were produced in the Mahaweli command area. But today many of the farmers are facing various problems. The Mahaweli project promised water for two third of tile country and planned to export electricity to India.

Until the end of April 1992 more than 1,11,400 families or about 700,000 people were resettled. They lost their fertile homelands and resettled in colonies. The Mahaweli has failed to bring about the promise and failed to provide adequate water for the farmers.

Thousands of ancient tanks in the dry zone were bulldozed. Environmental implication such as increase in onsite soil loss rates, degradation of downstream water quality, loss of natural forest cover, eutrophication of reservoirs, change of seasonal flow regimes of rivers, sedimentation of reservoirs are very critical². 50% of the Polgolla diversion is already silted up. Due to the lack of water in the reservoirs because of no maintenance of the catchment we had to face power cuts. Total generation from hydro was reduced by 28% in 1996 due to dry weather³. The total extent cultivated under the Mahaweli command area during the 1996 cultivation year decreased by 13% to 119,100 hectares⁴. Lunugamwehera which is in the Southern part. of the country is a failure due to the bad siting. Clearing of lands more than the capacity of the reservoir is one reason. Kirindi Oya doesn't provide enough water to this reservoir. Now authorities are planing Uma Oya Diversion and Manik Ganga Diversion to meet the water demand. We hope that these two projects will create more environmental and social damage.

Samanalewa is another failure. Due to the leak in the right bank it doesn't generate the expected electricity The wet blanketing which is on going is not just dumping of soil. It is dumping of money into the reservoir.

Now the authorities are planning another two more dams. That is in Moragahakanda and Uma Oya. Removal of timber trees in Moragahakanda has already begun illegally. In addition they are planning to go ahead with the Upper Kotmale hydropower project which is rejected thrice under the National Environmental Act. My paper is not a mere presentation of the impacts of an existing large dam. May I take this opportunity to present our case against the Upper Kotmale Hydropower project.

Before I present our case you need to understand the Sri Lankan project approval for new development projects. I will take few minutes to explain our EIA procedure, which will be important for you to prepare guidelines for future projects.

Mr. Chairman, before any new project is implemented the Project Proponent (PP) will have to submit an Environmental Impact assessment (EIA) to the Project Approving Agency (PAA). Then this will be open for 30 days of public

commenting. Once the PAA receives the public comments they will evaluate the project and for this purpose the PAA can appoint a Technical Evaluation Committee (TEC). Depending on the public opinion and the opinion of the TEC the PAA can approve or reject the proposal. If the project is rejected the PPA can appeal to the Secretary to the Ministry of Environment. The Secretary will have to have a fair public hearing before any decision is taken. This is the most participatory and transparent process in Sri Lanka.

Mr. Chairman, Upper Kotmale is a 150 MW plant hydropower project proposed by Ceylon Electricity Board (CEB) which is a Government Agency responsible for generation of electricity in Sri Lanka. EIA for the project was submitted for approval of the Ministry of Irrigation Power and Energy in December 1994 and Central Environmental Authority was the concurrent agency for the above approval.

Events of the Calendar

First EIA (Public notice)	December 1994
Public Comments to the EIA	January 1995
Public notice for oral public hearing	January 1995
Oral Public hearing	January 1995
Rejection of the project by PAA	February 1995
Appeal by CEB under section 23DD(1) of the NEA	March 1995
Public notice appeal under 23DD	April 1995
Appeal hearing	June-July 1995
Final decision of the appeal	August
Public notice to the Addendum	September 1996
Alternative public hearings organised by EFL	October 1996
Comments on Addendum by EFL	October 1996
Letter of demand for a fair hearing	October 1996
Protest for not allowing a hearing	December 1996
Requesting a hearing for the appeal	March 1997
Requesting a hearing for the appeal	February 1998
Letter of demand hearing	February 1998
Approval of the project	August 1998

Reasons for the rejection of the main proposal are

*PP has not identified the suitable alternatives to the project.

*Possible impacts of the project such as:

- Destruction of waterfalls, mainly St Clair Major, St Clair Minor, Devon and decrease of water to Ramboda, Puna and Pundal waterfalls,

- Possible earth slides in the region where it is proposed to construct 22 kilometre long tunnels to bring water from Ramboda Oya, Puna Oya, Devon Oya and Pundal Oya.
- Damage to the lifestyle of the people at Talawakele which will be submerged partially
- Heavy soil erosion of the area (it is estimated that 15% of the reservoir will be filled annually)
- Drying up of about a 30 km long downstream stretch of the rivers and its impacts on the fauna and flora and the water users.
- Design uncertainties such as lack of flash flood area.
- Lack of proper plan for the relocation of about 600 families.

Reasons for rejection of the appeal

Lack of identification of alternatives and the possible environmental and social impacts

Reasons for the rejection of the addendum

In October 1996 an Environmental Impact Assessment on one possible alternative i.e. Yoxford option was submitted for public comments and it was suggested that the alternative is not feasible and therefore CEB asked approval for the earlier project. But this assessment was not complete. After the public commenting the proposal was again rejected by the Central Environmental Authority which is the PAA for this project.

In 1998 CEB again appealed to the Secretary to the Ministry of Forest and Environment. Then we at Environmental Foundation Ltd., asked intervention several times and we demanded a public hearing before any decision. Unfortunately no public hearing was held regarding this 2nd appeal and the project was approved on August 1998.

What is alternative?

Mr. Chairman, We are not the only party opposing this project. The Central Engineering Consultancy Bureau (CECB) which is a reputed Government constructing engineering firm, and a partner of the feasibility group suggested an alternative site on the down stream of Kotmale Oya at a place called Yoxford where the dam can be constructed with minimal environmental and social costs. According to the CECB proposal the capacity of the above option is 100MW. There will be no resettlements involved while the tunnels will be generated about 11 Km. It will also not destroy a single waterfall. Together with Lindula Option this project will generate 180 MW. We support this option. But these options were not seriously studied.

- Nature has gifted Sri Lanka with lovely waterfalls. We have already sacrificed for power generation two of the ten waterfalls which could be viewed from a vehicle. We will be destroying another 7 by this project. Any adverse impact on the aesthetics of this natural heritage (waterfalls) will definitely affect the tourist industry, the third largest foreign exchange earner in Sri Lanka.

- It is very obvious that the construction of Upper Kotmale hydropower project will be a serious threat to the people of Talawakele waterfalls, railway line, railway bridge roads etc. Also it is very risky to gamble on a non-viable project of this nature funded by a foreign loan.
- Most of all, during a major drought UKHP cannot generate a single Mega Watt of electricity, since this is a Run of the River (ROR) type project. So the sole aim of the project will be lost during a drought season.

Approval process:

The Upper-Kotmale Hydro Power project (150MW), which was twice rejected by the Central Environmental Authority and once by the Secretary to the Ministry of Transport, Environmental and Women's Affairs, has been given approval by the Secretary to the Ministry of Forestry and Environment in August 1998.

- It must be pointed out that at all stages of the decision making process public opinion was considered but no member of the public was invited to the hearing of this last Appeal.
- We as concerned members of the public wonder how the Secretary approved this project which had already been thrice rejected after evaluation by three technical committees which comprised of more than 40 of the reputed scientists and sociologists in Sri Lanka.
- Disallowing public participation in this appeal hearing demonstrates the bias towards the CEB. We feel that not giving an equal opportunity is a discrimination against the public.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, Sri Lanka needs to look at new energy options. But hydropower is not a viable option due to its impacts. Any decision should be made through a transparent and participatory process. But this process has not shown these accepted norms.

This project will destroy 3 major waterfalls. These waterfalls are a major part of the scenic beauty. We know that Japan is a country that preserves her natural heritage. We also know that most of their waterfalls are sacred or holy places. Ironically, Overseas Economic Corporation Fund (OECF) of Japan hopes to fund this project.

Mr. Chairman, Now I would like to conclude my presentation by stating the following. The implementation of the Upper Kotmale project means the destruction of a part of our heritage. It is our duty to protect these gifts of nature for the future generations. Financing of involuntary resettlement and destructive project will be another disaster in the dam history.

We have much hope about the WCD commission. We want to call for a moratorium until you finish this report.

- Also we would like the authorities to promote and renovate traditional tank system as an alternative to meet the water demand.

- The Mahaweli Authority should maintain the catchment and the reservations to safeguard the existing reservoirs and stop construction of Hotels, Golf grounds etc. in the reservations.
- Also we expect Mahaweli Authority to solve the problems such as drinking water problems of the settlers.
- Also we would like to see the Ceylon Electricity Board to promote Natural Gas power plants as an alternative to hydropower.