

Campaign to Protect Common Water Rights in Sri Lanka

(People's Responses to the proposed "National Water
Resources Policy and Institutional Arrangements" November
1999")

Alliance for Protection of Common Water Rights

Campaign to Protect Common Water Rights

To prevent privatization and marketing of water and to introduce a people based process of protection and conservation of water resources in Sri Lanka

Issue and background:

In April 2000 the Water Secretariat produced a document titled “National Water Resources Policy and Institutional Arrangements” which had obtained Cabinet Approval on March 28, 2000. Arrangements were made to prepare legal drafts based on this policy. Work had been done to prepare this policy since the third quarter of 1996, with no public awareness at all. The Cabinet made no public announcement even after the approval. No mention was made about the existence of this policy even at the Presidential and the general elections by either of the two major political parties.

The policy claimed to be for the objective of protecting and conserving the water resources to prevent a future water crisis and to ensure equitable distribution of water for the present and future generations. Study of this policy showed that the actual intention of the policy and arrangements were entirely different from those objectives, but were designed for ownership of all water resources to be vested in the state and to initiate a process of water marketing, diverting much of the water resources in the country for private commercial purposes by inviting international water companies for water marketing.

The back ground to this process was the proposal that was made by the World Bank in March 1996 in its “ Non-Plantation Sector Policy alternatives” to stop free water and irrigation to farmers as a means of encouraging small farmers to give up agriculture and sell their land.

This policy was also clearly influenced by the present processes advocated by the World Bank and TNC lead “World Commission on Water for the 21st Century” which strongly insists on “Pricing of water” and converting water into a “commodity”.(Copy of the Policy Document “National Water Resources Policy and Institutional Arrangements” is sent separately).

The implications of such a process of pricing of water would be unimaginably destructive on the lives, livelihoods and the people’s potential for effective participation of the people in development. (a critical analysis of the Water Policy is also sent separately)

While it is true that there is a serious need for water conservation and protection and also ensuring equitable distribution of water the present policy and arrangements have completely neglected the tremendous potential that Sri Lanka has for ecological water management and of obtaining people’s participation in proper water management.

The tremendous achievements that Sri Lanka had achieved in its 15 centuries of history of ecological irrigation development has not even been mentioned in this policy preparation that had been done over a 4 year period. Therefore it is extremely important and urgent that this policy and the attempted vesting of ownership of water in the state should be stopped. It is necessary to obtain sufficient space and time for people to look at the proposals made and also to present their views and the alternative ways of water conservation, protection and management that would not deprive the people and nature of their essential needs of water for survival.

Many people’s organizations have initiated campaigns, awareness building and dialogue with policy makers to achieve this space and opportunity towards a sustainable and just approach to water management. The purpose of this effort is also to achieve sustainability through the retention of

water as a resource given by nature free to all living beings, all human, animal, plant life and to the environment.

The Potential of this Campaign

This campaign has a tremendous potential to enhance people's active participation in the overall development debate and awareness on the development processes at present, their implications and also the alternatives available. This campaign is closely related to the campaigns to protect domestic agriculture and food security. Therefore, it has been designed to be taken up together with the current campaign for reasonable prices for paddy and other agricultural products. Very large participation in the debate over the need for rethinking on the World Bank and IMF proposed development strategies has resulted in this process.

Major proposal of the Campaign

It is proposed to set up a "People's Commission on Water and Agriculture" comprising of suitable scientists, scholars and representatives of people's movements to initiate a process of discussing the proposals made in the present Water Policy and to collect views of the people about people - friendly and eco- friendly ways of water conservation and management, respecting the economic and cultural background that should be considered in dealing with water.

Water has become one of the most widely discussed issues at present due to the fear among people about the consequences of making water a traded commodity. The same policies and processes of market expansion have led to an extremely serious crisis in small farmer agriculture. The farmers have been asking for nearly 6 years, to set up a permanent commission to hear the farmers' ideas and suggestions about alternatives saving this situation. Therefore, it is suggested to combine these in this commission

This commission will visit about 8 important districts where water and agricultural issues are crucial and will also look into the lessons that can be learnt from the historical experiences of water conservation and their applicability in the present situation. Practical approaches that can be adopted in reducing pollution both in agriculture and industry would be looked into.

The tremendous potential in water conservation and maximizing the retention of water within the environment would be studied.

We feel this Commission would complete its work within about 6 months.

Campaign Activities so far

Some organizations were aware and were creating awareness about the proposals made by the WB for water privatization since 1996. This was one of the issues highlighted in the earlier campaigns such as the "Jubilee 2000" – "Debt Campaign" in April –Dec 1999 by the Sri Lanka 2000 Coalition. 300,000 signatures were collected.

Thus, when the Government prepared its Policy Document "National Water Resources Policy and Institutional Arrangements" in April 2000 and giving it Cabinet approval on March 28, 2000, there was considerable awareness among people which led to a wide spread questioning of the policy and the secretive and non- participatory and undemocratic manner in which this policy formulation was done

Study of the Policy Document

The Policy document, which was obtained by the active organizations and media through indirect sources, was studied by organizations such as Environment Foundation Limited (EFL), Green Movement of Sri Lanka (GMSL), MONLAR and a few other organizations. Much of the contents were translated and a special issue of “Sandeshaya” on “Water Crisis” with analysis and background information taken from the “World Commission on Water for the 21st Century Report” was published.

2000 copies are printed normally, but the demand for this issue was so high that it was increased to 4000 copies. Much of it is already sold out. It was sent to almost all Parliamentarians since many of them claimed to be unaware of this policy. This document and several other documents produced by other NGOs have been widely circulated and discussed among people’s Organizations, farmer groups etc.

Poster campaigns and distribution of leaf lets

At the end of August several organizations together printed 4000 large posters, 8,000 hand bills and also organized several media meetings.

In the last quarter of 2000 “Alliance for Protection of Common Water Rights “ was formed. The Minister responsible for Water Resources and the President had to respond to the questions raised as a result of several mainstream independent media picking up.

Media Debates

Almost all the independent electronic media conducted media debates and invited the Minister responsible and other key officials and also the organizations campaigning against water privatization, marketing and the proposed vesting of water resources in the state were also invited.

Discussion meetings with farmer groups and other citizens

In urban poor areas

The policy will affect the large numbers of poor farmers in villages and also the poor in other sectors. Over 150 meetings have now been conducted to explain and discuss the policy. The Govt. or the Water Secretariat, which is the responsible institution, has not yet published the Draft Policy. Therefore, the contents of the policy and its implications have to be verbally explained. This process is still continuing and gathering momentum.

One important outcome of this process is that the discussions are not only about the implications of the present policy proposal but, also about more environmentally sound, low cost and people based alternative ways of water conservation and management. They also lead to further discussion about Debt, globalization, WB and IMF policies and about ways of overcoming adverse effects of these.

The areas covered include Colombo (low income groups) Mattakkuliya, Wanathamulla, Borella, Rajagiriya, Narahenpita, Kirulapone, Battaramulla. Most of these meetings were organized by the Women’s Bank Programme (A Thrift and Credit Society with a very large membership among the urban women of low income families), conducted by an NGO in Colombo and the Green Movement of Sri Lanka.

There was a similar awareness-building meeting conducted in the fisheries areas from Kalutara to Negambo, the Southern coastal region. Meetings were also held among Scientists organized by the

Sri Lanka Institute of Engineers, A meeting was organized by, Environmental Foundation Limited, the Green Movement of Sri Lanka and MONLAR for Parliamentarians and Politicians. Meetings were also conducted in semi urban areas such as Ja- Ela, Kadawata, Katunayake and Negambo.

A large number of meetings were conducted in the irrigated agricultural schemes and settlement areas such as Udawalawe, Lunugamwehera, Muthukandiya, Senanayake Samudraya, Mahaweli Systems C,B, A and H, Namal Oya , in Ampara District, Ratnapura, Balangoda, Badulla, Kurunegala, Rajangane. A large number of meetings were held in Polonnaruwa, Dehiattakandiya and other parts of the district.

There were similar activities among the Buddhist clergy, Catholic Groups such as those connected with SEDEC, Kithu-dana Pubuduwa (and Inter Religious Alliance) . The Holy Family Sisters convened two meetings for their congregation as part of their awareness building process on Globalizations and its impact on the poor, which were attended by about 125 sisters each from all parts of the country. The Water Marketing issue was one of the key issues discussed.

Major Campaign from Independence Day (Feb 4) to World water Day (March 22)

Intensified campaign from Independence day to World Water Day

(Feb 4 to March 22) was decided. 25,000 leaflets and 5000 posters were printed and distributed almost island wide for the **Meditation of Resolution to Protect the Common Water Rights**, a gathering of about 1,000 in Hingurakgoda on February 4th – The Independence Day. There was wide media coverage given to this.

Institute of Engineers of Sri Lanka, Catholic Bishops' Conference lead Caritas Sri Lanka and several other prominent institutions conducted seminars where opportunities were provided to both Govt. and people's organizations to debate the policy proposal. Similar debates were organized for parliamentarians, politicians and trade unionists

Water Petition

A public petition is being signed in most areas with at the active participation of a large number of organizations that has joined the campaign. The petition in summary says that

“Water is a free gift of Nature. It is a crime against the right to life to convert water into a commodity. Therefore we do not agree with the proposal for state ownership of water resources of the country intended to initiate Water marketing”.

The petition also proposes the setting up of an independent people's commission on Water and Agriculture to prepare people's proposals for people friendly and ecological water management and conservation

Signing of this petition is being done during the first phase from Feb 4 to March 22. It will be continued later as part of the campaign.

Planning and Organizational Meetings of the Alliance for Protection of Common Water Rights

The above Alliance presently comprising of several organizations actively involved in the campaign, met on several occasions and has decided to launch a journey across the country.

Objective: To express the people's will to protect the common Water Rights and to symbolically express the truth that "Water is a free gift of nature , given to all living beings and not a commodity to be used for marketing and private profit making"

Planned Activities from March 19 to 22

A Pilgrimage of Expression of Will to Protect Common Water Rights

This journey will take the form of a religious pilgrimage by people of all religions. They will start from their own areas, carrying water from the major irrigation reservoirs of the ancient times and the newly built tanks and also the small village tanks built and looked after by the people.

There will be three starting points. Sri Maha Bodhi in Anuradapura will be one such place where the people from Padaviya, Puttalam, Kalawewa, Hingurakgoda and Polonnaruwa will gather . They will offer water and carry out religious ceremonies at Sri Ha –Bodhiya on 19th Morning and will begin the journey across Dambulla, Kurunegala, Colombo, Kalutara, Galle, Matara, Thangalle, Hambantota, Tissa and reach Kataragama on 21st Evening

The second group will start in Kandy at Dalada Maligawa (Temple of the Sacred Tooth Relic) on 19th Morning and journey across Nuwara-Eliya, Welimada, Badulla, Monaragala, Wellawaya, Thanamalwila, Tissa and reach Kataragama on 21st Evening,

A third Group from Dehiatta Kandiya will join them passing through Mahiyangana and Badulla. Another group from Balangoda and Ratnapura will join them in Wellawaya.

These groups will walk across towns and meet people gathered in these towns, distribute leaflets and sign the petition. There will be street drama groups and the Sadhu Jana Ravaya Singers will accompany the pilgrims.

At Kataragama the water from the sources across the country would be offered to the gods and to nature, asking for their blessings to this effort to protect water as a free gift to all living beings.

On the 22nd Morning there will be a big farmers rally in Tissamaharama, which will be attended by around 5000 farmer families who are now having serious difficulties due to problems of proper water management. This activity will also highlight the present crisis situation of paddy farmers, potato, onion, chili and vegetable farmers. It is expected that in the journey across the hill country the issues of the plantation workers too will be highlighted and the workers now struggling for a wage increase would be joined.

The organizations working with the Potato Farmers, and plantation workers will play a major role in this part of the journey.

Concrete Proposals / Demands of this activity

1. Withdrawal of the "National Water Policy and Institutional Arrangements" that has been given Cabinet approval on March 28th, 2000, which intends to take over ownership of all water resources by the State in order to convert water into a commodity and start water marketing, inviting International water companies for water marketing and management

2. Setting up a People's Commission on Water and Agriculture to look into an alternative approach to an ecological water Management and protection approach, gathering people's Views, historical knowledge and experience. This would be combined with the long standing demand of the small farmers to set up a commission to look into the farmers'

situation and to find alternative approaches in agriculture and Policy

Request for Support for some activities of the Journey and of the People's Commission

As already described much of the campaign work has already been done with resources contributed locally. A large number of NGOs and people's organizations are actively involve in this work with their own resources and contributions of time and work.

Some of these organizations are listed below:

Green Movement of Sri Lanka
Environmental Foundation Ltd(EFL)
Movement for National Land and Agricultural Reform (MONLAR)
Lawyers for Human Rights and Development (LHRD)
Movement for Defense of Democratic Rights (MDDR)
Committee for Protection of Farmers Ri9ghts, Polonnaruwa
Committee for Protection of Eppawela Phosphate deposits
SETIK, Kandy