

SRI LANKA: CONFLICT MITIGATION THROUGH COMMUNITY-BASED WATER RESOURCE MANAGEMENT

This action research paper investigates the role that community based water resource management can play as a tool for conflict mitigation and management within Sri Lankan tea plantation communities. Identifying that water is a key trigger for conflict within tea plantation communities, this paper finds that a community based water resource management project is effective in mitigating and managing conflicts within plantation communities and provides an opportunity to resolve wider conflicts occurring within these communities.

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*A case study of tea
plantation
communities in Sri
Lanka*

Abstract

Conflict and violence motivated by competition over water resources occurs daily in plantation communities in Sri Lanka. The so-called *Indian Tamils*, brought to Sri Lanka by the English during colonial rule, remain marginalized in various ways. Isolation, political polarization, “Indian Tamil” ethnic identity, youth unemployment and geographical positioning have, in many instances, attracted the Indian Tamils to join the main ethnic conflict. This main ethnic conflict often overshadowed the unique conflict occurring within plantation communities. Based on a series of needs and context assessments conducted in the plantation sectors, this study found that water, as a resource, plays a key role in either triggering these conflicts and acts as a root cause of conflict and violence. Further, findings show that a community based water resource management project is effective in mitigating and managing conflicts within plantation communities and provides an opportunity to resolve wider conflicts occurring within these communities.

This study used an operational research approach to identify conflict that exists over water resources in selected communities within the plantation sector in Sri Lanka. The process details the implementation of a gravitational water system and assesses how the water system operates as a tool for conflict management and mitigation within these communities. The research is based on two major water system initiatives; one is the 15 year Area Development Programme that World Vision Lanka runs in the plantation sector and the other is the large AUSAID funded Rural Integrated Water and Sanitation (RIWASH) project implemented by World Vision Lanka in the plantation sector. The research process started with context assessments of each programme/project and ended with focus-group discussions and key-informant interviews as part of the reflective evaluation process. These were accompanied with a continuous consultative process. This data was then analyzed providing qualitative results.

The community-based water resource management systems introduced into tea plantations reduced household level conflict/violence, community level conflict/violence and inter-group level conflict/violence through the processes outlined below:

1. The introduction of the water system allowed family members to spend quality time with each other, thus allowing members to care for each other, listen to each other and to have dignity as a family.
2. The water system stabilized the competition for water among the plantation communities through fair distribution, sustainable use and protection of water resources as well as, itself, operating as an additional resource to the community.
3. The water system connected the management and the local government with the communities where there was a space for inter-group dialogue.

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Introduction

Working in the tea plantation sector as a humanitarian worker for more than five years triggered a realization that I too belong to these communities through my ancestors, though I was not born and bred in this particular society or the geographic region.

Sri Lanka is a Buddhist country with a Sinhalese majority of 73.8 per cent. The other ethnic groups present are Sri Lankan Moors (7.2 per cent), Indian Tamils (4.6 per cent), Sri Lankan Tamils (3.9 per cent) and other (0.5 per cent)¹. The Nuwara-Eliya District in the central province hosts the Indian Tamils as the majority ethnic group making up 74.2 per cent of the population in this district.² The census process in Sri Lanka was initiated in 1871 and categorized the Indian Tamils and the Sri Lankan Tamils collectively as Tamils until 1901. From 1901, the group split into Indian Tamils and Sri Lankan Tamils. They remain in these groups to date. The fragmentation of the Indian Tamils as a separate group occurred even though almost 98 per cent of these communities obtained citizenship in Sri Lanka in the 1960s (by birth or by registration) (Silva, 2005).

The Indian Tamils were brought into Sri Lanka during English colonial rule and settled into plantation sectors. The English started coffee plantations in Sri Lanka which failed in 1869 due to a rust disease³; subsequently they introduced tea. The Sri Lankan community (the native communities – Sinhalese and Sri Lankan Tamils) did not support English tea cultivation because they opposed the English and because they were scared of losing the vegetation they relied on for food. This motivated the English to search for laborers from southern India. Southern Indian communities were promised maldivian fish and gems during their stay in Sri Lanka.⁴ These communities were brought into Sri Lanka in small groups on small boats, which landed on the north-western coast of Sri Lanka. Each of the groups had a supervisor who was called *kangani's*.

¹ www.statistics.gov.lk, 2011.

² <http://www.nuwaraeliya.dist.gov.lk/>, 2011.

³ Department of Agriculture – Government of Sri Lanka (<http://www.agridept.gov.lk/index.php/en/institutes/338>).

⁴ These stories were given by the focus-group discussion members (elders) and triangulated against stories from the plantation sector.

From the coast the groups were brought into the central hills by foot and cart. Once they reached the particular estates, each family was given a 10 by 10 foot room which was part of 10-12 such rooms together forming a line. Each estate at that time had 8-10 lines constructed close to each other to form a division (representing a modern village) and there were 5-7 such divisions within an estate.

These communities then started working in the tea plantations. They cleared the virgin jungles where the native Sri Lankan Tamils and Sinhalese were living. This triggered tensions between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese and the Indian Tamils. The Sri Lankan Tamils and the Sinhalese thought that the Indian Tamils were supporting the English and destroying their livelihoods.

After independence in 1948 these plantations were taken over and managed by the government until 1972. Then according to the Land Reforms Act in 1972, most of the state owned land was leased by the government to private plantation companies on a 99 year lease agreement. A maximum of 50 acres of land was allowed to be owned by individuals. Despite changes in management which transferred ownership from the English to private companies the communities experienced the same conditions in most of the estates. The communities felt, and still feel, that they had been leased with the land.

The context was, and still remains, that women have to start their work by 7.30 am and finish at 5.00 pm while men work from 7.30 till 2.00 pm.⁵ Each of the estates have divisions which vary from upper – on top of the hills, to lower – in the middle of the hills or at the base of the hills. The estate management has full control over the boundaries. The entrances to the estates are carefully planned and managed with security. Housing is located in the interior of the estates/divisions and tea factories placed near the entrance. The plantation estates have high security and many protocols are required for visitors to gain permission to visit friends and family members living in the estates, especially if visitors request to stay the night. These protocols must also be adhered to by government officers who wish to visit the plantation estates.

The government officials also acknowledge that they do not have proper access to the estates and the estate managers and the plantation companies are seen as owners of everything including people as well as data about these people. Sometimes the government officials/officers depend on the estate management for population and other statistical data. Local governance and the government

⁵ Information verified with the estate management.

administration system is discriminating when compared to other areas in the country. Plantation estate communities have less access to government representatives. In most parts of Sri Lanka one government official is usually in charge of an administrative unit comprised of between 300-400 families and tasked with ensuring that these families have access to government services. In Plantation estate community's administrative units usually consist of around 800-1000 families restricting the ability of the government official to provide resources to every family in their unit (GN⁶ and DS⁷ Divisions). This causes communities to deviate from the government systems as the government representatives do not have enough resources or power to look after them.

Communities continue to blindly vote for political parties but the political parties do not attempt to solve any of the issues outlined above. Most of the trade unions in the tea plantation communities are complex and politicized, where each political party has its own trade union within every estate/division. The grassroots leaders for these parties/trade unions are called *thalaivars*.⁸

From the creation of the plantation estates, management promoted common toilets and common bathing areas for the communities. These common facilities were maintained by the estate managers through an appointed person. Common facilities were primarily introduced to increase profit by saving land that could be used to produce tea. Any extension to the *line rooms* or blocks of houses (eg. building of a temporary kitchen, other livelihoods facilities, a private toilet or a private bathing area) had to be approved by the plantation estate management. This approval was normally declined as it would result in a loss of tea bushes and reduced income margins.

One of the major issues that the communities faced, and still face, concerns confusion over identity. Tamils living in plantation estates are sometimes referred to as *Sri Lankan Tamils*, while at other times the same groups are called *Indian Tamils* even though they are now citizens of Sri Lanka. This differentiation in name can be motivated by a number of reasons including for political manipulation, to benefit the plantation communities or in order to discriminate against these communities.

⁶ GN - Grama Niladhari Division: The grass root level government administrative unit and the officer in charge of this office is called the 'Grama Niladhari' or the village head.

⁷ DS - District/Divisional Secretariat: meso level government administrative units.

⁸ The same system of 'thalaivar's/kangani's' or supervisors appointed by the English.

The next long lasting and unresolved issue concerns land. The tea plantation estate communities do not own land. They can't buy or sell land either. This is because land is either owned by a large-scale business, an estate plantation company (on a 99 year lease) or in rare cases by the government. The government does not provide any alternatives for how this land ownership issue should be rectified.

In addition to problems with land ownership is the issue of temporariness. Plantation communities continue to lack proper addresses to their houses. Any communication that they are supposed to receive from family members, friends or even from government institutes (voting cards, birth, death, marriage certifications etc.) must come to the estate office which is then distributed through thalaivars. Thalaivars do not deliver the mail to people's houses, but to the field where the man or the woman works.

The next issue is the tension caused by the scarcity of water, which is essential for plantation communities to survive. Water is used for drinking and cooking, washing and cleaning and sometimes for livelihood activities. While it may be hard to believe that water is scarce in tea plantation communities because almost all of the rivers in Sri Lanka originate from this area, previous analysis has shown that competition for water and water mismanagement in these communities creates tension and is a significant root cause of conflicts at both the inter-personal and group level (in the home and in the community). It has also been made evident that many other difficulties have arisen because of water scarcity

The issues surrounding identity and land are long standing and must be dealt with at a higher political level which demands a great deal of time, effort and commitment from many parties. Conversely, it has been made evident that finding solutions to water resource based tensions could be resolved quickly and with minimal resources at a grassroots level. This operational research report argues that community based water resource management not only solves water based conflicts but also creates a ripple effect that affects many other conflicts and tensions within the sector and can provide a means to mitigate and manage other conflicts within these communities.

Hypothesis

The current study argues that community based water resource management is a key conflict mitigation and management process within the tea plantations in Sri Lanka.

This hypothesis is outlined in more detail below:

1. Water is a scarce resource in the Sri Lankan tea plantations;
2. Water resources are not managed properly in the sector;
3. This causes tension or competition among individuals, groups and institutions;
4. This creates a source of domestic and inter-group conflict;
5. Managing this resource at the community level with community and other stakeholder participation is a strategy to mitigate and manage these conflicts;
6. This also leads to the *option* of managing and mitigating other conflicts within the area.

Review of Literature

The current study defines conflict as a relationship between two or more parties (individuals or groups) who have, or think they have incompatible goals. The term violence is defined as consisting of actions, words, attitudes, structures or systems that cause physical, psychological, social or environmental damage and/or prevents people from reaching their full human potential (Fisher, Ibriham Abdi, Ludin, Smith, Williams & Williams, 2000, p. 4).

This study takes conflict mitigation to mean reducing conflict intensity through proper strategies as well as controlling present scenarios (DictionaryDemo, 2000) and the definition of conflict management as aiming to limit and avoid future violence by promoting positive behavioral changes in the parties involved (Fisher et al., 2000, p. 7).

There are many approaches to conflict mitigation and management used within various contexts in the world. The contexts have been large scale (macro – world wars) and small scales (micro – domestic violence). Each of these mitigation and management processes are unique and have their own strengths and weaknesses. These processes are carefully selected depending on the root causes of the conflict, the nature of individuals, groups or institutions involved and the dynamics between them. Previous successful implementation of conflict mitigation and management tools in similar cases adds value to the use of the process.

Robinson's (1972) assertion that not all conflict is bad and not all cooperation is good is true for the conflicts in the Sri Lankan plantation sector. Most of the conflicts within the estate sectors are seen as contributing towards positive change which is anticipated by the community. Conversely, some conflicts have been very unproductive and even destructive. Some of these negative conflicts have been triggered by water resources or water has played a part indirectly (Sinnaththammbi, 2010).

Resource based conflict is not new and water is one such resource that has been a root cause of conflicts in many parts of the world at the macro level (between countries) and the micro level (between communities and individuals). For example, it is well-known that water is one of the major root causes of conflict and a trigger of the conflict between India and Pakistan (between countries). Water has been

a root cause of conflict between upstream and downstream dwellers and between the bureaucracy and the local communities in Chandrabhaga, India (among states within a country) (Chakraborty, 1998) and in Sri Lanka between the Sri Lankan Tamils and the Muslims in the east (Garred, Niles & Annaraj, 2006) and in the north (within two factions of the same community/village) (Lowrey, 2007).

In Sri Lanka, water resources have played a huge role in triggering the national conflict and was one of the triggers for the final war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government Forces – the Mavil Aru blockage by the LTTE (Manoharan, 2006).

There have been many ways in which these communities and countries have tried to solve or manage the above water based conflicts. Some initiatives operated at a higher level demanding policy changes, some operated at a mid-level and some operated at a grassroots level working with communities. Community based initiatives to mitigate and manage water resource conflicts have been used in various parts in Sri Lanka including the plantation sectors (tea estates) (PalmSriLanka, 2004).

There is little empirical research on how water has been a root cause of conflict and how community based water resource management could be used as a conflict mitigation and management process in the plantation sectors in Sri Lanka – not only for water based conflicts, but also for other conflicts within the sector.

The steps or initiatives for conflict mitigation and management through programme staff and or communities and stakeholders are listed below (Fisher et al., 2000):

1. Facilitating individuals or groups equal access (to resources in demand/that are scarce).
2. Influencing policies/facilitating or mobilizing communities to influence policies which are relevant to the conflict.
3. Empowering communities – giving voice to the voiceless and necessary capacity building of soft skills (leadership, negotiation, mediation, communication, non-violent action).
4. Ensuring sustainable community infrastructures and governance for a continuous process of peacebuilding.
5. Partnerships and bringing key individuals on board. Participation and inclusive decision making.
6. Facilitating and/or building capacities of communities and stakeholders (inclusive of staff) to become conflict sensitive in their programming/initiatives (Hasitha Abeywardana, 2011).

- a. Understand power dynamics, interests and relationship patterns of individuals, groups and other stakeholders in the context.
- b. Continuous monitoring of the context and the impact of the interventions (positive and negative).
- c. Coming up with alternatives/options for negative impacts or missed opportunities.

Methodology

The research process analyzed both primary and secondary data during the implementation of a 15 year Area Development Programme run by World Vision Lanka and a RIWASH water implementation programme. The analysis was conducted exclusively in a qualitative manner.

The primary data for this study consisted of a Local Capacities for Peace/Do No Harm (LCP/DNH)⁹ and a Peace and Conflict Impact Assessments Conducted (PCIA) (Conflict -sensitive approaches to development, humanitarian assistance and preacebuilding - A RESOURCE PACK, 2004). This assessment had been conducted at three stages of the RIWASH and the Area Development Programmes initiated within the area of Ambagamuwa and Nuwara-Eliya Divisional Secretariats.¹⁰

In addition, continuous context monitoring systems and feedback mechanisms were conducted on operational implications based on high probability, high-impact triggers. These were done on a quarterly and monthly basis as a review process. This monitoring was conducted through focus-group discussions and key-informant interviews with key community members and stakeholders during the implementation of both the RIWASH and Area Development Programme.

Observations were also undertaken at the field level conducted by staff working on the implementation of the water projects. Field staff met with communities twice a month for three consecutive months during the implementation of the project and report back on their activities and events that were

⁹ (Anderson, 1996).

¹⁰ This is the Divisional level Government Administrative System. The hierarchy of government administration system goes from the grass root level to the Grama Niladhari Division, then the Divisional Secretariat followed by the District Secretariat.

occurring. Additionally, discussions with project staff members were conducted once a month for three consecutive months with an average of 8-10 staff members per discussion.

Analysis of secondary data was also used for this research project. The secondary data consisted of a needs assessment conducted for the area using PRA and PLA tools for the long term development programmes, Local Capacities for Peace/Do No Harm assessment reports - desk review of the context assessments conducted for the adjoining long term area development programmes within the other divisional secretariat (within the Central Province and Nuwara Eliya District)¹¹ and Sampath Pathikada, which is government data available at the divisional secretariat offices (specifically on the particular divisional secretariat). Additionally, internet resources, publications and other research and books were analyzed and finally RIWASH monthly management reports (previous 12 project reports and peacebuilding and conflict sensitivity sectoral reports).

The primary focus area for the study was the Uvakelle and Macduf Estates in the Lipekelle Grama Niladhari Division within the Nuwara-Eliya Divisional Secretariat in the Nuwara Eliya District. The beginning of this operational research coincided with the beginning of World Vision Lanka's RIWASH Project in the plantation sector (2011).

Findings and Discussions

Through the analysis of the primary and secondary data detailed above a series of results were identified. The analysis identified the presence of conflict at three levels: at home, within communities and occurring at a higher political level within the Uvakelle and Macduf Estates in the Lipekelle Grama Niladhari Division within the Nuwara-Eliya Divisional Secretariat in the Nuwara Eliya District. In addition, the findings detail the implementation of the water system into the selected communities and the impact that the water system had for these communities. Findings show that the water system effectively reduced conflict/violence at all three levels; in the home, within communities and at a higher political level. Analysis also showed that the water system provided an opportunity for the community to resolve wider conflict unrelated to water.

¹¹ DNH is an inter-agency tool that helps organizations to understand the contexts, its dynamics and the positive and negative impact the project could/has had in the communities (Anderson, 1996)

(a) The Levels of conflicts

(i) The First Level of Conflict: At Home

Women in the tea estates, specifically within the selected areas, get up in the morning at about 4.30am (an average)¹². Their first task is to make sure that they get a good position in the queue to collect water from the common water tap somewhere near their line room. The last person to join the queue will have to spend approximately 20-30 minutes to get one or two full buckets of water. The wait time varies between line room segments as some line room segments have one tap for 10 family units while others have one tap for 15-20 family units. Conflict can arise first thing in the morning between neighbors in the queues. Some people jump queues and some women use their buckets to hold their place in the queue instead of being physically present which can create conflict (some women put their buckets in the queue at midnight to avoid waiting in the morning). In many instances the last few people in the queue do not get water due to blockages or breakages caused by communities in the upper divisions. When women get into these fights men will usually get involved later. Sometimes these events reignite cycles of conflict, which had been latent for some time.

(ii) The Second Level of Conflict: Within Communities

The next type of conflict that occurs in the morning is at the community level and is between the upper divisions and the lower divisions. Early in the morning the upper division communities block the water or break the pipelines to divert water to their divisions, communities and families restricting the water use by communities situated in lower divisions.

It was noted that in most cases women are responsible for collecting water in the morning as well as other chores like cooking for the family, cleaning and preparing the children for schooling. In most cases men do not help with these tasks compounding the pressure for

¹² Women's/Girls' Day Diary tool.

women to complete the tasks alone. This creates tension and frustration for women, which leads to conflicts in the morning between the parents and children as both men and women need to start work by 7.30am in the tea fields. Often because of these tensions in the morning, the parents (men and women) go to work late and they face conflict in the field with their supervisors (kangani's). When this happens continuously it leads to conflicts with the management and in extreme cases they will lose pay.

The plantation estates did have common bathing and toilet areas (some of them are still available and used). Eventually the communities started building toilets and private temporary bathing areas within the vicinity of their houses to ensure privacy and security for women and children. Even so, most community members could not use these facilities continuously and effectively as they did not have access to water. This resulted in the continued use of the common facilities. These common toilets and bathing areas have created conflicts due to a lack of security and improper maintenance. The groups that were most effected were children and women. With these challenges, the communities continued to defecate in the open and they continued to wash themselves in water that flowed downstream to other communities who used the same water for drinking and cooking purposes.

The estate communities in this area tried to compensate their low income with additional income generation options. The most common methods were animal husbandry (especially cattle rearing) and small scale vegetable gardening. These processes created a lot of waste in the community as many people use the same stream to wash the area where the animals lived (cow or goat shed, poultry sheds etc.), the animal (cow or goat), gardening equipment (with pesticides) and vehicles. This created or exacerbated pre-existing conflicts between upper and the lower division communities.

(iii) The Third Level of Conflict: Higher Levels

Since these communities were brought down from southern India and settled with minimal facilities, they expected the plantation estate management to provide necessities for their

welfare. In a way this was justifiable due to the agreements that were made with estate management and the government and under which the communities were brought to Sri Lanka. The communities considered water a necessity and expected and demanded the estate management to provide them with safe and sufficient water. This proved very challenging for the estate management and they have continued to overlook this need. Negligence and inability of the estate management to provide this basic need has led to conflicts between the communities and the management. When community versus estate management conflicts arise, it concerns the trade unions and then these community level problems are taken up as socio-political conflicts between different political parties (trade unions).

Discussions based on water resources intensify during the time of elections – specifically local government elections. Sometimes these discussions end up in large-scale violence triggering another conflict. Communities realize that providing water is the responsibility of local government but do not know how to hold the local government accountable after the elections. Although the communities pay a subscription to their political parties/unions to speak on their behalf, the problem continues and remains unresolved from election to election.

(b) The Programme Delivery and Impact: Macduff/Uvakelle Estates

(i) Preliminary *community* infrastructures

The community based approach started in the project area by addressing the larger communities. The initial stages were to organize the communities together. There were several Community Based Organizations (CBOs)¹³ in the field and most of them had their own limitations and struggles making them inactive. After analyzing¹⁴ almost all of these CBOs, the RIWASH program staff found that the Funeral Assistance Society/Death Donation Society was

¹³ For each division in an estate there are CBOs.

¹⁴ Through an Organizational Capacity index tool.

functioning well. After approaching the CBOs executive committee, all of the households were invited to a Funeral Assistance Society meeting.¹⁵ During this meeting contextual issues, conflicts based on water resources, issues within the CBOs and the programme plans were discussed. There were several of these meetings with other CBOs as well – specifically to explain the CBO selection process and to avoid conflicts with CBOs who had not been selected for this work.

This created an open forum for the people to talk about their frustrations, suggestions and hope for the future. This was the foundation for the next step in making the CBO the driver of the community based water resource management process.

The project made sure not to create a new CBO for this water project. It was observed that in the past many organizations and projects had initiated new CBOs primarily for projects who then become project based CBOs or organizational based CBOs. Previously when the organization left or the project ended the CBO collapsed. This had happened to a previously attempted water projects.

The programme identified suitable CBOs for both upper and lower divisional communities. Then these different CBOs were brought together (starting with steering committees) to interact and build relationships. Step by step, the project built the CBOs capacity to ensure they were equipped with soft skills.¹⁶

With time, the estate management and local-level government officers were linked with these CBOs. This gave the communities more space to engage directly with the policy/decision makers and express their day to day problems. There were instances where there were first time visits for government officers into these estates.

¹⁵ This is a Community Based Organization registered under the Divisional Secretariat and functions on a welfare basis only to help households when they encounter deaths within their families.

¹⁶ Soft skills include awareness programmes on human rights, resource identification and management, life skills, context analysis skills, negotiation skills and leadership skills.

(ii) The infrastructures for water

With the proper analysis of the needs proposed by the communities and technical analysis with the hydrological expertise, a local gravitational water system was designed for both of the communities (upper and lower divisions) from the Macduff/Uvakelle Estates.

The design process involved consultancy with CBOs, the communities and technical expertise - individuals who were from the local context. There was only one water source for this project and it started from a particular part of the upper division (in the forest within the upper division). This stream had not only been serving the upper division but also the lower divisions and other external communities before it merged with the main branch of the Mahaweli River.¹⁷ Both of these communities have been fighting over this stream for the past several years. The initial discussions included the following:

1. The water catchment – the preliminary inlet and the damn, to be constructed within the forest (land owned by the wild life department).
2. The second and third (two) tanks would be constructed within the upper division (estate owned land¹⁸). The two tanks were to ensure equal intake and distribution to both of the divisions. Alternatively a single second tank with double outlets to serve the two communities separately would be built (this was to be decided based on the cost, context and availability of water).
3. Then from these tanks, there would be pipelines taken out for distribution for each of the divisions (based on the discussions above through two tanks or through a single tank with two separate outlets).

¹⁷ The longest river in Sri Lanka

¹⁸ Prior approvals were obtained through a memorandum of understanding with the plantation estate management.

4. The initial inlet and the premises where the two tanks are situated would be secured with barbed wire and an attendant would be appointed – the attendant would be paid by these two communities/divisions from the fee for water usage (per unit of water usage should include the water fee, equipment waste and the maintenance fee and the costs for the caretaker).
5. The care taker will be in charge of the repairs/coordination with the local authorities, meter reading, security of the premises and will also act as a meter reader.
6. The construction would be done on a participatory basis – with community participation or *shramadana*¹⁹ to transport raw materials to the site from the off-load site. The estate management would release men and women with paid leave once a week. Other constructional expenses inclusive of the raw materials to be provided by the programme implementers with cost sharing with the plantation estate management.
7. All households within these two villages would get individual water lines (permanent and temporary houses); the village head Grama Niladhari would be involved in this process to ensure the details are shared with the government departments.
8. The water will be purified before being distribution and the communities would pay for the water.

After agreeing on the details above, the construction started.

During the construction process, there were some tensions observed; they were at minor levels and were solved with the help of the three parties involved in the project – the community (upper and lower divisions), the tea estate management and the project staff. The tensions and conflicts were:

1. The upper division communities did not fully appreciate the project as they had water resources closer to their village/division and their contribution to the construction process reduced over time. The lower division communities made a complaint about

¹⁹ Shremadana or community participation was seen as one of the good connectors between these two communities, so this was capitalized for the implementation process as well.

this during the joint CBO monthly meetings. This was seen as a warning sign for future conflict. All stakeholders involved in this process negotiated and rectified this problem before it worsened. Some of the other stakeholders were the religious leaders from both the communities and the *grama sevaka*/village leader.

2. The influence of external parties over the project implementation began increasing. The different political parties started influencing the process in an attempt to claim ownership of the process. This was rectified through a continuous communication process with the communities and the estate management. Key representatives from each political party and local government representatives were invited for the monthly CBO meetings so they could be updated on the projects progress.

After these involvements, the *grama sevaka*/village leader volunteered himself to become the advisor for these CBOs and the process. He also brought and introduced the local school principle and the social services officer to attend these meetings as advisors. In addition, the local government representatives started to attend CBO meetings on a voluntary basis – initially they saw it as a capacity building exercise, then later they started participating as advisors on WASH policies.

As it was a participatory process involving many stakeholders, the construction process took more time than had been anticipated. This was acknowledged by the stakeholders as a learning process. Once the project was completed, it took another month for the project to be opened as there were tensions over who would officially open the facility. The main struggle took place between the political parties. This struggle was solved through the CBO. The CBO collectively decided that the present chairman of the local government would be invited to open the project.

(iii) Overcoming Political Pressure

One of the key stakeholder groups within this system was the political parties. The political parties became a key stakeholder because the project concerned water and sanitation. As mentioned above, when they saw a community movement collectively addressing a key issue they thought it would be the best place to lobby for their parties. Each of these political parties approached the CBO and the leaders to look for avenues of involvement.

Pressure or involvement was not only observed in this area, but also in other areas where community movements were established and communities were working to voice their concerns. When the estate management observed this influx of politicians/political representatives entering the estates, the resistance from the estate management became prominent. This in return triggered a great deal of inter-group tension within the plantation estates. Usually this kind of intervention and tension would lead to greater conflicts resulting in violence such as large scale labor strikes, clashes between political leaders and the stoppage of the entire project.

With the introduced systems, communities responded wisely. All of the political leaders were included in the process through the *thalaivars* and proper recognition was given to each of them. This also helped the CBOs to gain extra resources through government allocations of fixed deposits for emergency needs.

(iv) Usage of the Water and Addressing the Levels of Conflict

As outlined in the assessment plan and design, each household in the division was given an individual water line. This was provided for the upper and lower division communities. The water source was located in the upper division and was well protected with fencing and locks.

A meter collector was appointed with a fixed salary. Each household was fixed with a water meter and it was agreed that there would be a trial run for two months with one month of free water. It was also agreed that during this period the water flow, the usage and the demand would be observed and would be used to finalize the rate per water unit used.

The project made sure to cover staff quarters as well. This was initiated by the CBOs and the other stakeholders as they saw that this would be a good way to connect the community and

the estate clerical staff. The initiative was seen very positively by those staff members as there had been low levels of conflicts between these two groups from time to time.

Positive Observations on the Levels of Conflict

The First Level: In the Home

After the opening of the gravitational water system, the first thing which was noticed in the division was the absence of the queue early in the morning. Each individual household had access to individual tap lines into their houses or beside the door behind their houses. Women in the houses did not have to get up early in the morning to be in the queues which meant they could rest more than had previously been possible.

The involvement of men helping women with household activities in the morning was very low, but women had more time as some of their burdens were reduced. Tensions for women in the mornings were reduced – women had access to water in their houses for cooking, washing and preparing the children for school. Children mentioned that the situation at home had changed and that their mothers (and sometimes their fathers) had more time to spend with them and could help with their homework (educational support). Children especially mentioned that their mother's workload (because they no longer had to collect water) in the mornings and the evenings has decreased and they saw that some conflicts arising at home, especially in the mornings and evenings, had also decreased.

The Second Level: Within Communities

Because every household had access to water in their home, conflict that had previously arisen from arguments in the queue over gathering water has diminished. In addition, the properly laid out pipeline system means that people are not able to break or divert the water from the lower divisions, thus eliminating a situation that had previously created community level conflict. The

water flow and the release of water during the drought season²⁰ too were communicated to the households/villages/divisions.

Women and girls gained privacy through the water system. They could bathe and wash clothes (at least during the wet seasons when the water flow was good) in private. Harassment, unwanted tensions and conflicts during their journey to the common bathing places (during the day and at night) was reduced and they were no longer exposed or vulnerable to these experiences.

The next observation was the increase in punctuality of women (and even men) at the plantation estate office/field. This reduced the conflict between the labor and the management – especially between the labor and the *kangani/thalaivar*.

Open defecation reduced. Households started building their own toilets (they began demanding land with the help of NGOs and other civil society organizations) with their own money or with money from other organizations. Building toilets became feasible because each household had access to enough water to clean themselves and the toilets after use, This reduced some of the critical community level conflicts that existed due to the pollution of the environment and water.

There had been frequent conflicts over the cleanliness of the drainage system that ran alongside the line rooms, especially during the rainy season. The communities did not clean the drains due to water scarcity and the improper drainage systems and maintenance. When water became available in every home, households started cleaning the drains in front of their houses and this reduced conflict between neighbors

Communities continued to use the overflow from the storage tanks for cultivation and animal husbandry, but this no longer polluted the drinking and cooking water for the rest of the community.²¹

²⁰ During drought seasons, the water flow was not available 24 hours per day. It was regulated between the upper and lower divisions within designated time slots separately or in parallel– as there were two distinctive pipe lines for upper and lower divisions from the storage tank.

The Third Level: Higher Level Conflict

With the introduction of this water system, communities started realizing the value of protecting and managing their water resources. They also realized that the forests around the water resources sustained their water resources and started campaigning against the encroachment or destruction of the adjoining forests. Several encroachers stopped this behavior and clashes between the community and the encroachers were reduced. Communities started accepting the fact that they too were responsible to protect and manage their water resources and that it was not only the responsibility of the estate management.

The communities also became more aware of the responsibility of the local government in the water management/distribution process. Previously, communities were not aware of who was responsible and blamed many people during elections and drought seasons. Now they systematically knew how to approach the local government and demand their services in a non-violent way. With the establishment of proper linkages/networks the local government too started accessing the estate sector and started collaborating with the estate management and the communities. This process established a strong link between the three main pillars (the plantation management, the communities and the local government) involved in the water based conflict within the plantation sector.

Other activities which contributed to the process:

Strict context monitoring and process impact monitoring (negative and positive) was undertaken to influence the (RIWASH) project staff management's decisions on a regular basis. These reports were based on high probable, high impact triggers which could cause tensions/conflicts

²¹ Though this was not a common problem for these two divisions (upper and lower) the other villagers and plantation estates were depending on these water streams for their cooking and drinking purposes. This was a tension between plantation estates or divisions which were not within the scope of the water system project.

within the programme, which then would lead to violence. Decisions based on this analysis led to the change of programmes or proper capacity building to prepare communities and stakeholders to face challenges and changes or to rectify harm caused by the project. This also contributed to the sustainability and smooth running of the initiatives and processes and helped the programme to maintain high quality relationships with all the key stakeholders.

Other capacity building initiatives were conducted to complement this process. These included men's involvement in initiatives, field exposures to other water projects within the same and different contexts and conflict sensitive programme training. One capacity building initiative of significance was the introduction of the WASH policy to the communities and other stakeholders with collaboration from the local government. This brought together the key groups who were in conflict – the plantation estate management, the local government and the communities

(v) Some of the Remaining Tensions

Below are some of the existing tensions which are being looked into by the communities and the stakeholders. They are in the process of being carefully analyzed and are awaiting proper solutions which will be conducted in a participatory manner.

Water usage still varies between households. People are using purified water for various things such as drinking, cooking, gardening and washing purposes. This is something that the programme staff, the communities and other stakeholders did not take into account during the planning stages. Though the meter reading is taken and the fees are calculated against the meter reading, the partners think it is unfair to use the purified water for purposes other than cooking and drinking (perhaps including domestic washing and cleaning). Discussion about this issue is seen positively by all partners. These tensions/conflicts have not erupted and are in a discussion process occurring between the community, estate management, other stakeholders and the programme staff.

The plantation estate management is reluctant to transfer the ownership of the water system to the local government mainly because of land ownership issues. The negotiations are still being

undertaken, but are progressing. The programme staff play a major role in this process along with the communities. Communities are happy that they are now part of discussions such as these that impact their lives. In the past the communities were neglected and not consulted in decision making processes, thus leading to large scale strikes and violent conflict.

Though the tensions/conflicts were mitigated or managed within these communities, the water source is used by many more communities located downstream. When communities in the upper divisions/estates at higher elevation continue to use the water for cultivation and animal husbandry it causes water pollution for communities in down stream communities. This continues to trigger conflicts between project and the non-project areas. Tensions are building as down stream communities are becoming jealous of the new water project which provides benefits to communities in the upper sections.

Conclusion

It was evident that water is a significant resource for the tea estate communities in Sri Lanka. Due to water's scarcity, water has created competition among the communities over access and has led to conflicts in households, between groups at a community level and at a higher level. These tensions/conflicts were not managed or mitigated properly due to the absence of proper mechanisms to ensure just distribution of this important resource.

Community based water resource management has proved to be an effective conflict mitigation and management mechanism for water resource based conflicts in the tea plantation in Sri Lanka. The implementation of a gravitation water system was found to mitigate and manage conflict that had previously occurred in the home, within communities and at a higher level with political and management actors. Access to water in each household dramatically decreased the workload of women who are primarily responsible for water collection. This resulted in less disputes in both the morning and evening within households. In addition, it was found that water being available in each household improved the ability of both men and women to arrive at work on time and reduced conflict that had previously occurred when men and women arrived to work late.

At the community level, conflict that had previously occurred when women were waiting in line to collect water ceased as this activity became redundant. In addition, conflict that had previously been instigated by the diversion and pollution of upper divisional communities resulting in dissatisfaction by communities situated downstream ceased as both communities had access to a reliable water source. The introduction of the water system also reduced the occurrence of open defecation and disputes that had previously occurred over the cleanliness of the communal drainage system. Women are now able to wash in privacy and avoid the harassment that had previously accompanied communal bathing facilities.

Further, this process created relationships and understanding between plantation estate management, government officials and community members providing the basis for these three groups to mitigate and manage future conflicts that may arise. Communities are now more aware of local government systems and processes and are seen to be taking greater responsibility for the water and environmental sustainability. It has become evident that, community based water resource management is an effective

conflict mitigation mechanism to solve non-water resource based conflicts in the tea plantation sector in Sri Lanka.

While some minor tensions remain concerning the use of purified water for activities other than cooking and washing and jealousy by communities who do not benefit from the water system project these tensions are undergoing discussion and are seen to be progressing positively.

Recommendations

1. The implementation of a gravitational water system demands the local government's involvement for sustainability. This would in return demand the continuous presence of the local government within the plantation estate system (private and company owned estates). Due to the restrictive context, this process will trigger tensions within the plantation management system. This shift is necessary for a policy change in the sector, but must be controlled properly to avoid further destruction to the system and the communities. Further, due to past experience the communities are reluctant to give politicians/parties or any organizations which are managed by them control over resource management systems.
2. Implementing community based water resource management should be integrated into the other sectors as well. Having the system alone will not address all challenges in a holistic manner. For example, alternative livelihood programmes, other health and nutrition practices, education initiatives and environmental solutions should be introduced.
3. It has been observed that the WASH initiatives are the most effective as a startup mechanisms to the estate sector – WASH is not only seen as a basic need for the community, but is also seen as a good connecting mechanism through which people can be brought together with a common goal. WASH related project models show potential integration with other sectors as well (eg. linked to health, some livelihoods and education initiatives).

4. The gravitational water system resolved most of the needs/conflicts within the target villages. However, water streams pass through other lower level estates and villages. These estates and villages receive polluted water because the target divisions/estates use upstream water for cultivation, animal husbandry and other cleaning purposes. Also, when these kinds of water projects are introduced the water resource at the initial stages/upper divisions (inclusive of estates) is controlled by those divisions/estates during drought seasons. When the natural flow of the water is controlled, the villages/divisions/estates in the down stream divisions fight with the upstream divisions/villages/estates.
5. The staff and some of the key decision makers (from the estate management and local government) should undergo an in-depth training on conflict sensitive programming and/or do no harm processes. This will ensure the quality of the programmes even in communities where tensions are very high.
6. The continued monitoring of the context and communicating with the estate management over critical decisions are some of the observed elements necessary for best practices which will work to minimize negative impacts experienced by community from the programme and will also promote timely capacity building and active mitigation and management of conflicts (by the community and the staff of the programme). It is highly recommended that this process is continued and imitated at similar projects/programmes within the area.
7. It is recommended that organizations should plan to work on a long-term and multi-sectoral basis if they want to engage in these kinds of projects/programmes (community based water resource management). The process takes time for trust building to occur between the community, the estate management, the local government and other key stakeholders and to ensure sustainability and ownership of the project by the communities. Water alone will not

achieve the necessary changes but the synergy that is produced through a multi-year, multi-sectoral approach can. Or, in this case the project was only present for a short time-period. Proper steps to build community mechanisms should be followed and the community organizations/structures should be advised on how to absorb/represent the whole community in order to attract potential funding streams from other organizations – including of government allocations.

8. Some of the key latent conflicts based on the water resources are yet to be revealed. The process of winning the trust and understanding in the context takes a long time. Though solving the immediate symptoms can mitigate and manage most of the conflicts, it is essential that the projects think of ways to complement strong advocacy initiatives by addressing the root causes of conflict. This cannot be achieved in isolation and strong partnership with other local and national stakeholders is essential. One of the major gaps seen in this project was the lack of involvement by other local and international NGOs. If these groups could be included then resources could be maximized to cater to a larger population and will also reduce inter-organizational tensions.
9. This operational research should continue until the evaluation of the project is completed. This will ensure a synchronization of the project impact with the process. This operational research process could be handed over to the designated peacebuilding coordinator of the RIWASH project for further development.
10. One of the other key observations was the women's empowerment that was achieved through the project. Women's voices were heard, they were part of the community level decision making and they were recognized by the estate management and the local government signifying key changes. The project induced men to get more involved in a domestic capacity or to support women in this role. These impacts were not actively studied during the research process but are an area that requires further exploration.

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