



Water Politics in Water Development Projects in Sri Lanka

H.T.K. Ishara Jayarathne

Researcher

Centre for Policy Alternatives

Colombo 5, Sri Lanka

Email: ishara@cpasocialindicator.org

Abstract

This study explored the discourse on water politics in the water development project in Sri Lanka. The main objectives of this research were to identify water politics, to study the politics between the government and citizens in the context of water, and to explore water-related issues in the development project, to examine whether the water policy has been fully implemented, to identify if those policies have rebuilt the relationship between citizens and the government. The Deduru Oya water development project, which is located in the Wariyapola divisional secretariat in the Kurunegala district, was selected for research. This study was based on in-depth case studies and face-to-face interviews conducted in a village covered by the Deduru Oya water development project. The fieldwork was carried out over 7 months from April to September 2023. The researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with 40 respondents using a semi-structured questionnaire and conducted 20 in-depth case studies. In focusing on the theoretical approach of this research, several existing theories (eclectic approach) are used to analyze the relationship between the government and citizens in water politics and the politics of water. For this study, the Patron-client relationship, Hydro hegemony theory, John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern's game theory were used. The findings of the research showed: The water development project spans from its initial stages to its final implementation. The implementation of water development projects, intended as solutions to water-related issues, significantly impacts and transforms citizens' lives across social, economic, and political spheres. The study examines the socio-economic and political challenges arising from the Deduru Oya Development Project, revealing how government-led initiatives disrupt livelihoods, displace communities, and trigger conflicts. The study also critiques the absence of a coherent policy framework, exposing power struggles and the



misuse of development projects for political gain. Ultimately, it underscores the complexities of water politics, emphasizing the need for rights-based policies and better governance to mitigate adverse impacts on affected communities.

Key Words: Water Politics, Politics of Water, Water Rights, Citizen, Government, and Development Projects.

Introduction

This study explored the discourse of water politics in Sri Lanka, focusing on the relationship between the government and citizens within the context of water development projects. It aimed to analyze how these projects shaped interactions and power dynamics in the post-implementation phase, revealing the broader politics surrounding water governance. Despite Sri Lanka being rich in water resources, with an annual per capita water supply of 2,400 cm (Samad, 2005), persistent conflicts between citizen groups and the state over drinking water access have marked the country's recent history. Notable cases such as the Ratupaswala water issue and the 1980s crisis surrounding the Lunugamwehera Reservoir under the Kirindioya Irrigation and Settlement Project received national and international attention. However, these problems often became short-lived media spectacles or electoral tools, without resulting in long-term solutions. Consequently, water-related issues have remained unresolved and politically manipulated, and by March 2021, the number of families in Sri Lanka facing drinking water shortages had risen to 400,000.

The government has implemented water supply projects to enhance access to water, with local councils responsible for providing water to rural areas in Sri Lanka. It is essential to analyze the alignment between the government's goals and citizens' expectations in both the pre- and post-project phases, as development projects are fundamental units of the development process (Abeygunawardena, 2002). However, the increase in water crises linked to these projects, including environmental changes, agricultural pollution, groundwater contamination, and decreased rainfall, requires further study. Political power significantly influences water policy formulation and implementation, as water is a critical resource with



economic, environmental, and social implications. The exercise of political power affects the distribution and management of water resources, and water governance involves a set of laws, policies, and processes that guide decision-making to ensure equitable and efficient service delivery to all stakeholders (Bakker, 2003; OECD, 2015; Stockholm International Water Institute, 2015).

Despite years of debate, Sri Lanka still lacks a comprehensive water policy. Since the 1960s, several initiatives were undertaken, including the creation of the Water Resources Board and international projects in the 1970s–80s to support irrigation and policy. In 1992, the ADB-funded CWRM project aimed to assess institutional capacity and develop a unified policy. The 2001 Water Resources Management Project further supported infrastructure and policy efforts. However, repeated attempts since 1996 failed due to political resistance, leaving policies as unimplemented drafts. Although the Cabinet approved the National Water Resources Policy in 2000 and established the Interim National Water Resources Authority in 2002, opposition from engineers and political actors stalled progress. The policy remains valid but unenforced, contributing to ongoing water-related issues. Immediate steps are needed to finalize and pass the draft Water Act. Currently, Sri Lanka has around 52 laws and 41 institutions managing water. This study reviews these mechanisms and previous unsuccessful policies, including the Water Resources Bill and National Drinking Water Policy.

Lowi's (1964) argument that policy creates politics suggests that public policy arises from disputes within different decision-making arenas. In Sri Lanka, the governance of water resources has been influenced by a mix of traditional practices, colonial legacies, and modern policies. Despite the existence of various policies and regulations addressing water availability, quality, distribution, and sustainable use, the country still lacks a cohesive and comprehensive water policy.

Research Methodology

This study employed an in-depth case study approach and face-to-face interviews conducted in a village located within the Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat Division of the



Kurunegala District, an area affected by the Deduru Oya water development project. Fieldwork was carried out over seven months, from April to September 2023. During this period, the researcher conducted face-to-face interviews with 40 respondents using a semi-structured questionnaire and carried out 20 detailed case studies. The theoretical framework of the study adopts an eclectic approach, incorporating multiple theories to examine the relationship between the government and citizens in the context of water politics. Specifically, the study draws on the Patron-Client relationship, Hydro-hegemony theory, and John von Neumann and Oskar Morgenstern's Game Theory to analyze the politics of water and power dynamics between the state and affected communities.

Analysis: Water Politics, Citizen and Government

Case Study - Deduru Oya is considered the main water source of Kurunegala District in North West Province. Originating from the western slopes of the Kandy- Matale Mountains, Deduru Oya is the fourth largest river basin in the country (Samarakoon et al., 2017). 700 houses and 584 families are affected by this project. 2556 acres of land will be submerged including 1536 acres of paddy land. The total land area impacted by the project is 4400 acres (Irrigation report 2007-2013)

Cernea (1996) identified seven major consequences of community displacement by development programs—landlessness, joblessness, homelessness, food insecurity, marginalization, social disintegration, and loss of access to common property. As Robinson (2013) notes, water politics and social movements advocating for equitable access will be critical in human history. Social change involves shifts in relationships, conditions, and societal roles (Amarasekara, 1984). Development projects, though meant to solve problems, can sometimes worsen them depending on how they're implemented. With large-scale development initiatives, public and private sector roles often shift, influencing the dynamic between the state and citizens. These projects generate socio-political and economic challenges both before and after implementation. Pre-development issues often stem from social, economic, and political tensions, while post-development phases may either resolve or intensify these problems, or create new ones. Thus, state-led macro development projects



frequently result in complex, localized issues that merit critical examination across both stages.

Marginalization due to the collapse of economic power in Resettlement

The process of resettlement, especially when individuals are unable to attain a better socioeconomic status, often results in marginalization due to the collapse of economic power. This disruption makes it difficult for people to maintain their original skills, leading to mental distress and early protests. A significant concern raised during resettlement is the breakdown of social networks and loss of social capital, as relationships with neighbors and mutual support systems are disrupted. Nayak (1986) emphasizes how the distance from relatives and the loss of economic cooperation can deteriorate living conditions. This is illustrated in the case of 58-year-old Premadasa from Wariyapola, who had long depended on his relatives for farming and social support. He highlights the emotional and practical toll of being separated from his community, noting how the decline of economic stability led to social collapse and even police intervention during protests. His experience reveals that social problems were evident from the beginning of the project. Viewed through Marshall's theory of social citizenship, it becomes clear that when citizens attempt to express their concerns, the state often suppresses their rights instead of addressing the underlying issues.

Landlessness and Homelessness

The acquisition of land for development projects significantly disrupts the foundational aspects of production systems, commercial activities, and overall living conditions. In the Deduru Oya project, original settlers faced the loss of their land, leading to economic impoverishment and early resistance to resettlement plans. Before development, families owned more than two acres of land, but resettlement policies failed to ensure equal redistribution, offering only 1/2 acre for main families and 1/4 acre for sub-families. This discrepancy sparked concerns and protests, particularly among those who relied on agriculture as their main livelihood. The case of Gunaweera, a 71-year-old farmer, illustrates this issue: having built a stable life and a well-constructed home, he was forced to relocate, and his post-resettlement home failed to meet the previous standard. His experience



highlights the emotional and economic strain of forced displacement and reveals how inadequate housing policies and insufficient compensation worsen the challenges faced by resettled individuals. Marshalling Cernea's (1997) insights, the loss of homes and land is not merely a temporary setback but can lead to long-term homelessness and social vulnerability.

Similarly, the experience of Nilanthi, a 39-year-old mother of two, illustrates the deep changes in livelihood caused by the reduction of agricultural land. Her family once cultivated two acres of paddy land, but resettlement left them with only 1/4 acre, making farming unsustainable. As a result, her husband was forced to shift to unskilled labor in a quarry, signifying a fundamental change in the family's production system and income stability. Field data confirms that most families originally possessed 2 1/2 to 3 acres of land, but resettlement left them with insufficient plots, especially for paddy cultivation, which was central to their livelihoods. This loss of arable land has disrupted their commercial activities and increased the risk of poverty, a trend also observed in global studies on land acquisition. Additionally, challenges such as a shift in employment patterns, lack of irrigation, and minimal job creation further contribute to worsening living conditions in resettled areas. These case studies emphasize the need for more equitable land redistribution policies and adequate support mechanisms for those displaced by development projects.

Disruption of economic conditions due to job losses and job changes

Living conditions—including economic well-being—are central to development, as highlighted by Amartya Sen, who defines development as improving living standards. In the Deduru Oya project, resettled communities faced powerlessness, insecurity, physical and mental stress, and unmet basic needs, which deeply affected their economic situation. Chambers and Conway (1992) note that living conditions consist of both material and non-material assets, as well as survival strategies—all of which were disrupted by the loss of 2,556 acres of land, including 1,536 acres of paddy fields, submerged by the reservoir. Protests revealed that the collapse of traditional farming livelihoods made adaptation difficult, leading to marginalization and lower land productivity. Although the government claimed rice production was unaffected, affected communities feared that losing paddy fields could increase rice imports, threatening food security. Attempts to shift livelihoods from



farming to fishing through a new fishing society were resisted, as farming and fishing are neither economically nor culturally interchangeable.

Somadasa, a 53-year-old farm laborer from a traditional farming family and a father of three, reflects the community's concerns: "A rice farmer does not want to trade animals. They promised us fields but didn't keep their word. Is giving money a solution? We opposed that. They ignore our income. We nurtured our farming like raising a child." His statement highlights how the loss of their primary livelihood has impacted not just the economy but also their sense of identity and stability, emphasizing that new opportunities cannot easily replace what was lost.

Suppression of public protests against the development project by force

The study of resettled families in Polgammuna, Peterveliwatta, Telahera Farm, and Kaluvaragaswewa revealed significant political tensions, particularly between the affected communities and the government. From the onset of the Deduru Oya project, local resistance emerged, with affected individuals staging protests against displacement. These demonstrations were swiftly suppressed through state intervention, including the deployment of police forces and arrests of protestors. Nanayakkara, a 49-year-old farmer and farmers' union secretary, encapsulated these experiences, noting the use of political force to silence opposition and enforce compliance. Following this, the government proceeded with forced evictions, releasing water into the area without prior warning, leaving many unable to recover belongings or harvest crops. Residents continue to express feelings of injustice, emphasizing the abruptness and brutality of their displacement.

Beyond political conflict, the Deduru Oya project resulted in numerous post-resettlement social problems commonly observed in development-induced displacement worldwide. These include the disruption of original settlements, loss of land and homes, restricted access to public services, and challenges in education and transportation. Environmental degradation, drinking water shortages, and the breakdown of neighborhood ties further compounded the difficulties faced by affected communities. These issues reflect



broader patterns in forced resettlement caused by development projects, where economic and infrastructural goals often overshadow the social and human costs borne by local populations.

Social Disintegration and Alienation: The Impact of Resettlement

Social disintegration can also be observed through these projects. In the Deduru Oya Project, the society that emerged due to resettlement becomes distant, leading to the breakdown of social organizations, including organizational agreements, among people. Resettlement due to development projects also poses a risk of community division. During the study of the Deduru oya Development Project, it was observed that the resettlers were unable to maintain formal social relationships with the original settlers. Resettlement leads to societal alienation and a breakdown of social organization, including established agreements. As a result, associational democracy has broken down, with resettled people not being recruited into existing societies, etc., and facing discrimination to marginalize them from the resettled areas. Social injustice caused by displacement can destroy the economic and political importance due to development projects and it can destroy the individual socially and economically and it has become a social problem that disturbs the individual's life socially and economically. ^wolfensohn, 1995& More than 50% of the people in the inundated area of Deduru Oya reservoir were farmers (Centre for Environmental Studies, 2003). The people of Polgammuna, Peterveliwatta, Telahera Farm, and Kaluvaragaswewa villages, who were relocated and affected by this project, have lost their traditional lands and houses. The loss of crops coupled with the loss of land, and land acquisition for development projects, alters the fundamental basis of the production system, commercial activities, and living conditions. Resettlement also limits the amount of land available for consumption by the original residents of that area.

One of case studies illustrates the socio-economic and psychological impacts of resettlement through the experience of Jayanthi, a 38-year-old housewife and mother of two, who relocated to Wariyapola with her family and now works in brick cutting with her husband. She highlights the disruption to her eldest son's education caused by the school change, noting that the unfamiliar environment and separation from former friends negatively affected his academic performance and emotional well-being. Her account underscores the



broader consequences of resettlement, including the breakdown of social ties, economic instability, and diminished support networks. The loss of land and livelihoods not only undermines a family's economic base but also contributes to mental stress and social isolation, ultimately weakening both economic and social cooperation and leading to a significant erosion of social capital.

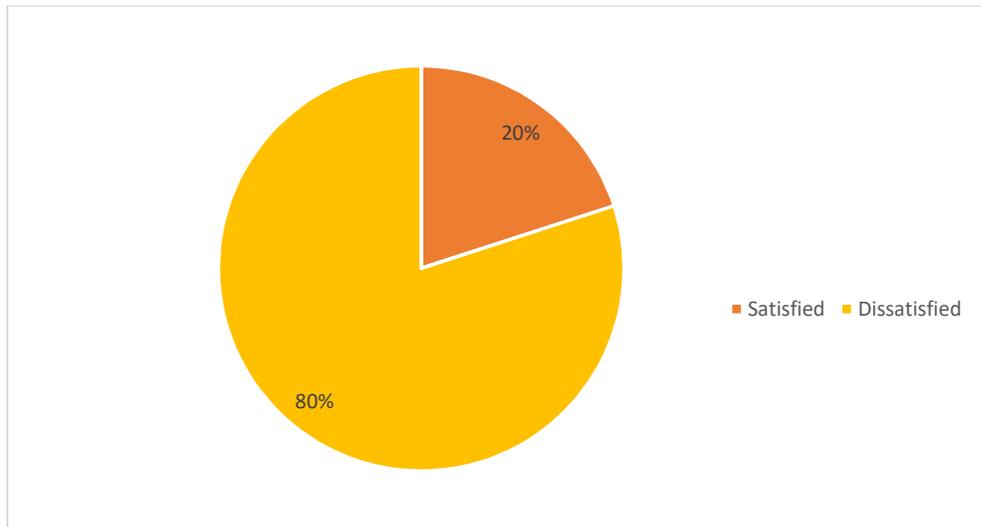
Resource Conflicts After Resettlement

The post-resettlement phase of the Deduru Oya project revealed significant challenges related to the use of public resources, affecting both resettled and original settlers. In Polgammana, resettled families face serious issues, particularly the lack of access to clean water and burial grounds. Tensions have emerged as original residents refuse to share existing communal spaces, such as cemeteries, with the newcomers, leading to increased social friction and environmental strain due to competition over limited resources. These critical concerns, however, are often overlooked in the compensation and planning processes of development projects, despite their long-term implications for community integration and well-being.

Dayani, a 34-year-old woman living with her husband, children, and elderly mother, reflects these issues in her account. She points to the continued lack of a cemetery and clean water access, and the reluctance of original settlers to share resources with resettled families, emphasizing that their concerns are only acknowledged during election periods. Her statement illustrates the neglect of essential post-resettlement needs by authorities. Field data support her claims, with only 20% of surveyed families expressing satisfaction with available public resources, while 80% reported dissatisfaction, underscoring the widespread nature of this problem and the urgent need for policy responses that address both material and social dimensions of resettlement.



Graph 1 - Satisfaction with the use of public resources after the Deduru Oya project varies among the affected population.



Source – Field data 2023

Resettlement results in the alienation of people's social ties, frustration, the erosion of interdependence-based behavior control, and loss of integration. The resettlement process often leads to children discontinuing their education, causing disruptions as they transition to a new school.

Economic Shifts and Job Market Adjustments Among Resettled Communities

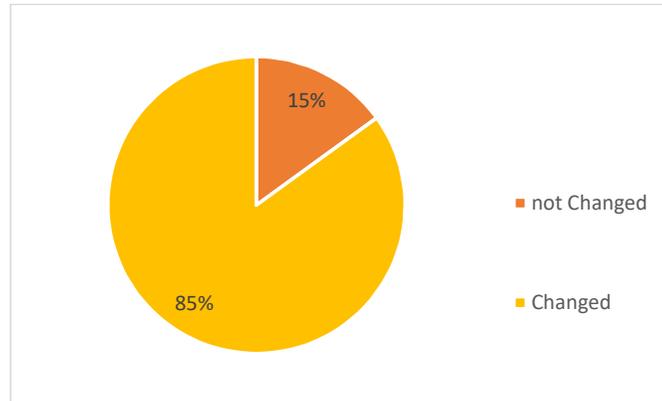
Displacement and resettlement can affect employment structure in three ways:

1. Loss of jobs in institutions and workplaces in urban areas,
2. Loss of land ownership in rural areas and access to land,
3. Loss of use of assets under common property dominion. (Cernea, 1997).

It appears that there has been a significant change in the way of life of the families in the Deduru Oya field. Except for a few families, the way of life for all other families has undergone transformation. The following circular chart illustrates their current changing lifestyles.



Graph 2 – Job Change due to development project



Source – Field data 2023

The analysis of occupational changes following the Deduru Oya project highlights a significant transformation in livelihoods, particularly among those who were previously engaged in paddy farming. After resettlement, many families lost access to cultivable land, forcing them to abandon agriculture altogether. As a result, 13% of the displaced population engaged in subsistence farming without adequate land, while others sought alternative forms of employment. Government employees, a military officer, and a police officer were relatively unaffected. However, a substantial proportion of former farmers—25%—shifted to brick-cutting, indicating a drastic change in their occupational identity. Only one resettled family in Polgammana successfully ventured into small-scale entrepreneurship by opening a shop. This pattern of occupational displacement reveals the economic instability caused by the project. Interpreting this scenario through von Neumann and Morgenstern’s game theory model (1944), the relationship between original settlers and displaced groups appears as a competitive interaction, where each party navigates economic constraints and pursues individual welfare, often without cooperation.

This game theory framework operates under several assumptions: first, that the original settlers and displaced groups are distinct, identifiable parties with shared objectives like economic development; second, that both parties clearly understand the consequences of each other’s actions; third, that each party acts to protect its interests, even if it negatively affects the other; and finally, that decision-making occurs independently, with no

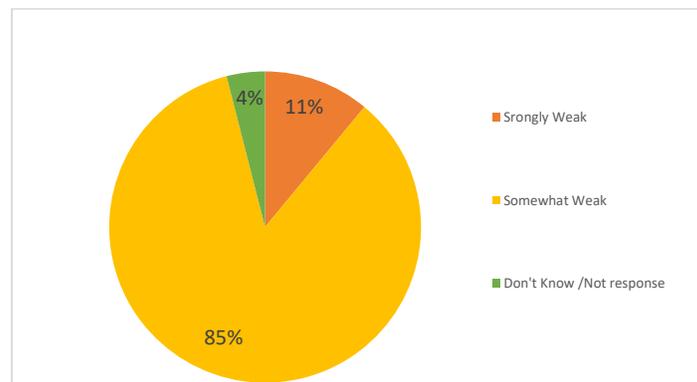


collaboration. The field data suggests growing tension between these groups due to competition over limited economic resources. Early settlers have shown reluctance to interact with resettlers, leading to further alienation. Sumana, a 45-year-old mother of three who now runs a shop after resettlement, captures this divide: “Although our shop is located in the middle of the village, only resettled people visit. This situation is a result of these absurd projects.” From a policy standpoint, an essential concern in migration research is how well migrants integrate into local labor markets. Challenges include the inability to secure employment, displacement of non-migrants from available jobs, and the concentration of migrants in low-wage sectors that are often unattractive to locals—factors that collectively deepen economic divisions in post-resettlement settings (Migration in Sri Lanka, 1980:59).

Inadequacies in Compensation for Displaced Families

In the field study on compensation, it was found that the majority were not satisfied and did not receive the value they expected. It was observed that the responses to compensation varied across different levels. Among the families studied, 85 percent stated that the compensation system was weak, while 11 percent considered it very weak. Consequently, the majority rejected the compensation method. It is also indicated that the value of their lands was not sufficiently received.

Graph 03 - Responses to compensation.



Source: Field data 2023



The decision of the Cabinet on the resettlement of families was as follows, (Source - Irrigation Department Report 2007-2013, p. 10)

- Providing an acre of land and an acre of paddy land for each of the farming families who depend on agriculture under the Radawibedi Ela project (for 76 families).
- Allocating one acre land per 77 displaced families in the Telahera area in Kobeigane Divisional Secretariat.
- Granting half an acre of land from Peterweli Estate in Ganewatta Divisional Secretariat to a section of land losers, half an acre of land for sub-families, and quarter of an acre of land for sub-families. Arrangements have been made to resettle these IDPs in the following places.
- Under the Radavi Ela Project - Kaluwaragaswewa Divisional Secretariat
Telahera Farm Land - Kobeigane Divisional Secretariat
- Polgammana Estate - Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat
- Peterweliwatta - Ganewatta Divisional Secretaria

Table 01 - Extent of land for which compensation has been paid

Extent of land for which compensation has been paid	
Extent of lands for which compensation has been determined	3052
Number of government reserved lands	861
Number of lands available for future compensation	2183
Total number of lands	6096 acres

(Source - Irrigation Department Report 2007-2013, p. 6)

Table 02 – Payment of Compensation

Payment of Compensation	
Total land area	1800 hectare
Amount of compensation	94 million (SLR)
Progress	65%

(Source – Irrigation Department Report 2007-2013, p.8)

The case of Dayasiri, a 54-year-old father of three, highlights the widespread dissatisfaction with compensation among families affected by the Deduru Oya development



project. Despite policy measures outlined by the Cabinet, including land allocations and compensation, many resettled individuals—like Dayasiri—reported receiving significantly smaller plots than their original holdings and inadequate financial restitution for lost paddy fields. Now working at Telahera Farm, Dayasiri earns less than he did before and perceives discrimination in the process. Field data support this sentiment, revealing that the majority of affected families found the compensation system insufficient, pointing to a clear disconnect between the policy framework and the lived realities of resettled communities.

Drinking Water Issues in Post-Resettlement Areas

Nearly fifteen years after the implementation of the Deduru Oya development project, its consequences remain unresolved and continue to escalate. Field data indicate that the government failed to adequately address infrastructure and drinking water issues during the resettlement process. Many residents still rely on tube wells constructed during President Premadasa's era for clean water, revealing the lack of systematic planning in the resettlement phase. Although these issues are frequently highlighted during election campaigns for political gain, they are often forgotten once elections end. This ongoing neglect has fostered a growing disillusionment with politics among affected communities. Premadasa, a 68-year-old farmer, underscores this sentiment, pointing out that despite the construction of the Deduru Oya reservoir, people continue to suffer from inadequate water supply, as even the little water in wells is redirected to the reservoir.

From a postmodern political perspective, it is evident that both public and private sectors lack autonomy during development, particularly when economic progress is tied to global capitalism. As Uyangoda (2011) asserts, economic development in such contexts is often dependent rather than self-sustained. This dependency is visible in Sri Lanka's reliance on foreign aid for public sector projects, such as the Deduru Oya Water Supply Project, funded by the Economic Development Cooperation Fund of the Export-Import Bank of Korea. These aid-based projects tend to bring new challenges and crises, further complicating outcomes. As the project illustrates, early-stage issues may persist or evolve, while new ones may emerge due to public sector inefficiencies. Ultimately, social, political, and economic



factors intersect to shape the project's trajectory, making them critical in determining its post-development success or failure.

Water Politics in Policies: Based on Policies related to the project

In the public sector, development projects lack a specific, consistent policy and instead follow a general framework that varies from project to project. Although a common policy outline exists, the Deduru Oya State Development Project exposed several shortcomings during its implementation. The standard framework involves selecting a project area, conducting land assessments, notifying the Ministry of Lands, acquiring land, determining compensation, and initiating the project. However, development policy analysis reveals that actual practices often deviate from this process. This chapter explores four key areas: state development policies, public sector policies related to the project, the government's approach to resettlement, and policies addressing emerging issues. Development projects, typically handled by project officials and collaborating departments, are key to achieving objectives like infrastructure enhancement. However, inconsistencies in planning and implementation—especially in compensation and resettlement—can undermine their success. In the case of Deduru Oya, while infrastructure improved and some employment opportunities were created, issues such as displacement, job loss, and inadequate compensation persisted. Complaints about land valuation and payment procedures, alongside socio-economic challenges in resettlement, emphasize the need for more inclusive and well-structured policy frameworks in future development planning.

Table 03 – Basic Informations

Houses affected by Deduru Oya Reservoir projects.	700
Number of families	584
Submerged land area	2556 acres
Paddy land size	1536 acres.
Total land area	4400 acres

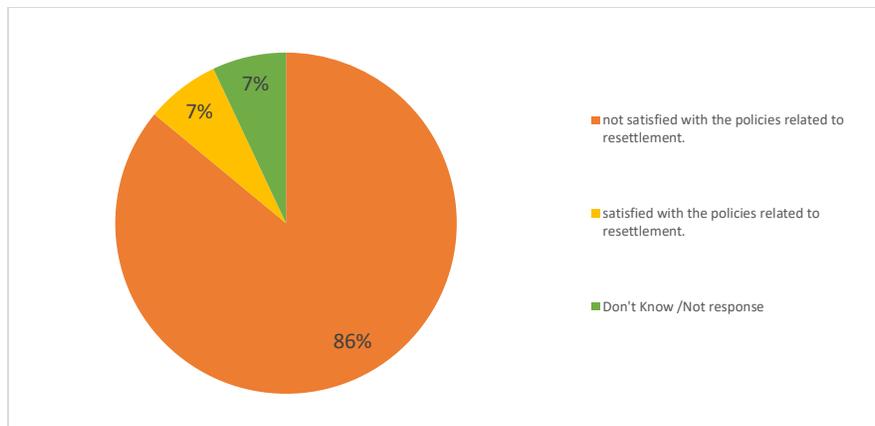
Source: Irrigation Department Report, 2007-2013.

Resettlement policies can also be observed in the policy study of the Deduru Oya Development Project. The main function of the Ministry of Resettlement in Sri Lanka is to



formulate, update, and implement the resettlement policy. The settlement policies implemented in a development project also influence the success of the project.

Graph 04 – The policies related to the Deduru Oya project in resettlement



Source – Field Data 2023

The data shows that 86% of participants expressed dissatisfaction with the resettlement policies related to the Deduru Oya project, while only around 7% were either satisfied or had no opinion. A key policy in resettlement was the compensation system, where amounts were determined by government assessors through the LAC committee under the relevant Regional Secretariat. For example, the compensation offered was Rs. 50,000 per acre of coconut and Rs. 300,000 per acre of paddy land. However, practical realities deviated from policy intentions. The acquisition of land for the project disrupted production systems, economic activities, and living conditions. A case in point is Nilanthi, a 38-year-old mother of two, whose husband, a farmer, was forced to work in a quarry after their family lost two acres of land, receiving only a quarter-acre in return—insufficient for continued cultivation. This reflects a broader dissatisfaction with the government's top-down policy approach that failed to protect the livelihoods of resettled individuals.

The project also included policies promising compensation for lands submerged by the reservoir and plans to resettle affected individuals under four designated Regional Secretariat Divisions. However, significant shortcomings were identified in both institutional policy and its implementation. These include inconsistent policies across projects, weak

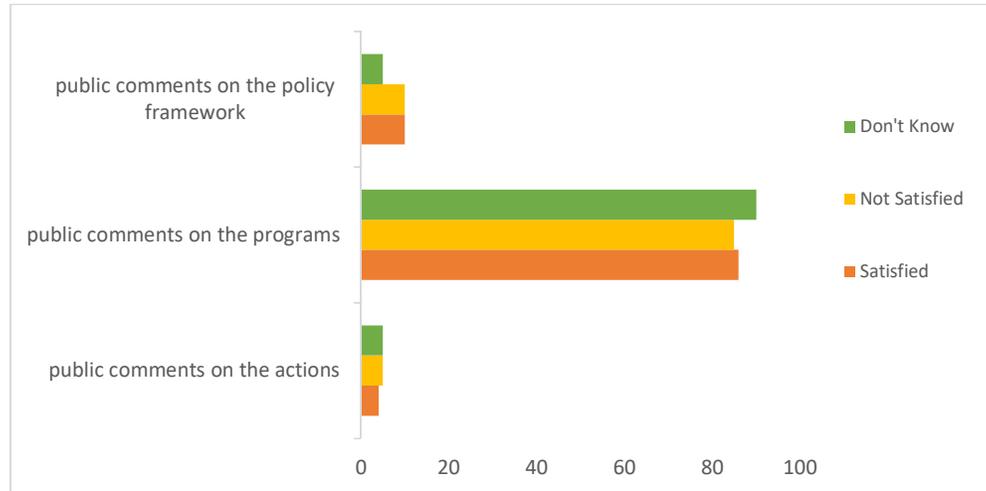


execution, and the absence of overarching public policies—only temporary project frameworks were in place. Furthermore, development projects lacked policymaking autonomy, being heavily dependent on political decisions. Critically, the breakdown of social capital among resettled communities was overlooked; stronger development policies could have preserved existing social networks and mitigated social disintegration. Additionally, political favoritism in resource allocation created contradictions and inequality, as the actual needs of affected populations were not prioritized in policy formulation. The State Development and Design Statutory Corporation, involved in the Deduru Oya project, states that they have status policies. They are committed to high management methods, optimal use of resources, creative utilization of the latest technology, working for the betterment of employees and external suppliers, complying with regulatory and statutory requirements, working to protect the environment, ensuring workplace safety, and continuously developing the quality management system. The question remains whether these status quo policies work in practice.

State welfare has been crucial in consolidating political power (Handaragama and Rasnayake, 2011), and the success of development policies relies on evaluating their potential welfare outcomes (Abeygunawardena and Senaratne, 2002). However, the lack of consistent policies in public sector projects hampers the ability to assess the welfare impacts, weakening the pre-evaluation process and undermining long-term results. Effective welfare policies require addressing issues in the pre-development phase and ensuring communication, which is central to shaping discourse and preventing problems (Hapuarachchi, 2017). For development initiatives, it is essential to ensure that individuals affected by projects maintain stable living conditions and have the freedom to choose relocation, as economic development and human well-being are central to societal progress. The Deduru Oya project failed to prioritize these aspects, reflecting poor planning and a disregard for basic human needs. Furthermore, the preservation of self-respect, essential for dignity and threatened by poverty, was overlooked, and the project's implementation lacked coherence, with policies influenced by politics rather than a structured, equitable framework (Herat, 2017; Pressman and Wildavsky, 1973).



Graph 05 - Public comments on the actions, programs and plans of the Dedurooya project.

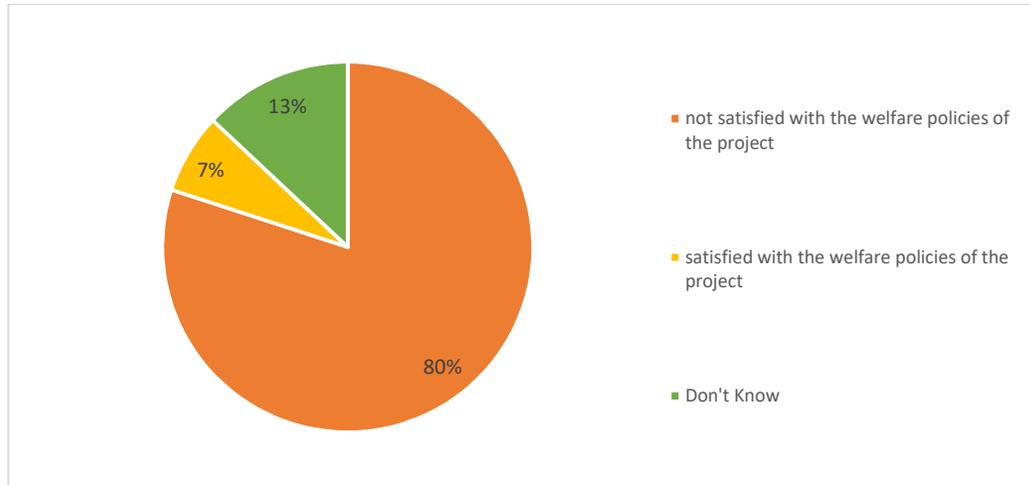


Source: Field Data 2023

According to the field data, public feedback on the Deduru Oya project's actions, programs, and plans indicates that only a minimal policy framework was implemented, failing to meet the needs of the broader community. Most families involved in the study expressed dissatisfaction, highlighting that the project's benefits were distributed selectively, favoring individuals aligned with political parties rather than serving the general public. This sentiment is reflected in statements such as, "All those benefits were provided to people who supported political parties. There is no welfare in them for people like us." Public discontent is particularly evident in relation to resettlement, compensation, welfare, and grievance mechanisms, which were perceived as inadequate under the project's development policies. Including welfare considerations in development planning is essential, as the public sector bears the responsibility for such provisions. Article 27(9) of Chapter 6 of the Constitution of Sri Lanka mandates the government to ensure social security and welfare. Therefore, it is crucial to integrate appropriate methods, plans, and policies into development projects, particularly for those directly affected. As Abeygunawardena and Senaratne (2002:60) emphasize, policy decisions should be informed by an ex ante evaluation of expected welfare outcomes to ensure equitable and effective development.



Graph 06 - Satisfaction with the welfare policies of the project.



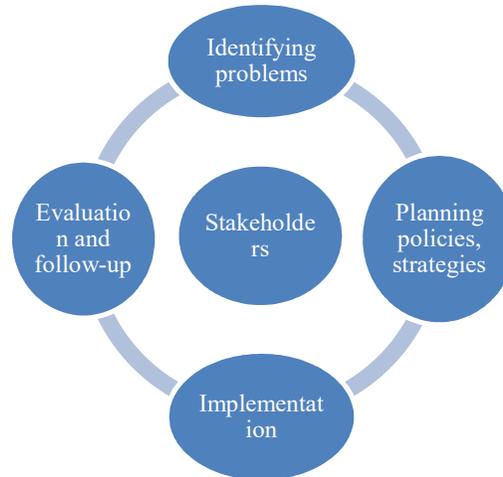
Source: Field Data 2023

During the field study, it was revealed that the majority are not satisfied with the welfare policies of the project. The dissatisfaction rate is 80%, and the satisfaction rate is 7%.

Overall, there is no consistent development policy framework guiding public sector projects in Sri Lanka, as policies tend to be created on a case-by-case basis without standardization, often driven by political interests and electoral motivations. Projects like Deduru Oya demonstrate that while governments introduce development measures for socio-economic advancement, these efforts often suffer from quality issues and lack a people-centered focus. A rights-based approach emphasizes that development should prioritize human well-being, including access to basic needs and participation in decision-making, rather than serving selective interests. Furthermore, effective communication is essential in shaping public discourse around development policies, and when development strategies are not aligned with communication efforts, it can lead to misunderstandings and crises. Therefore, ensuring transparency, inclusivity, and clear communication is critical for successful, equitable development.



Diagram 01- Development Project Cycle.



Source: Handaragama and Susantha, 2011:96

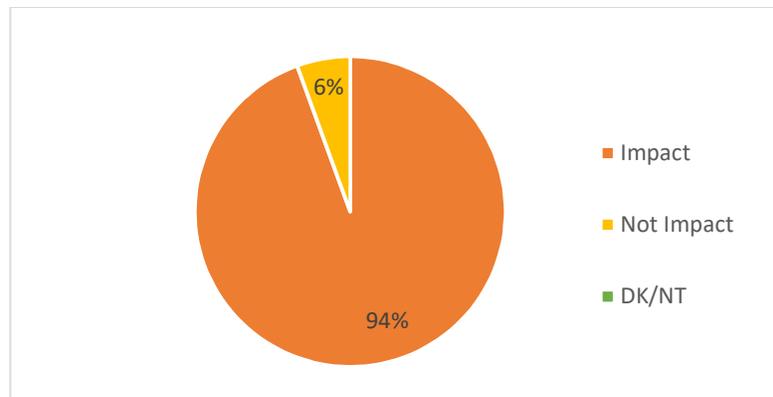
In development projects, stakeholders must identify problems and formulate appropriate policies to address them, as multiple stakeholders are often involved. However, in public sector projects like the Deduru Oya project, although social, economic, and political issues are recognized, there is often a lack of follow-up through new policy formulation or monitoring of implementation. The effectiveness and quality of policies directly influence project outcomes. For example, while the government attempted to address job losses caused by the displacement of paddy farmers by offering fishing as an alternative livelihood, the solution failed due to high entry costs and restrictions imposed by the Fishermen's Society, further undermining the economic stability of affected individuals.

Samaranayake, a 63-year-old former farmer and father of two, now works as a bricklayer after the Deduru Oya project. Reflecting on his experience, he explains, "I worked as a farmer for 20 years. After losing 2 acres of paddy fields, we never found paddy land again—they didn't give us. We aren't willing to pay 50,000 to become a member of the Fishermen's Association. We don't like jobs like fishing. We didn't do farming for work; it was a part of life." His account highlights a crucial issue: even when development projects offer new employment opportunities, their success depends on equitable access and the suitability of these opportunities for affected communities. His experience underscores that



alternative employment can not replace traditional livelihoods, particularly when, those livelihoods are deeply connected to cultural identity and a way of life.

Graph 07 – Public Perception of major livelihood impacts and measures.



Source: Field Data 2023

Field data show that while a few people believe the measures taken to address the impact on their main livelihoods were successful, the majority view them as a failure. In studying the resettled families of *Polgammana village*, several political problems were identified, including conflicts between the government and affected people, protests, and the use of state power to remove individuals from their land. The actions of project officials in handling these conflicts were found to be negative, as no steps were taken to address public objections either before or after the project's implementation. From the beginning, local residents protested against the project, but the government used police and political force to suppress these protests, even leading to arrests, and no corrective measures were taken afterward.

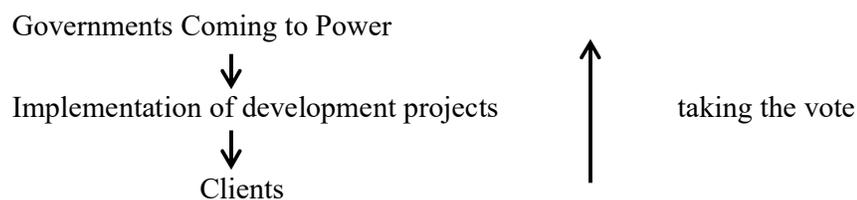
Piyasena, a 51-year-old father of two, was a farmer before the Deduru Oya project and has since returned to Polgammana, where he currently works on a farm. He recalls that initial resistance to the project was met with police violence and politically motivated arrests, as the authorities used their power to suppress dissent rather than engage with community concerns. Despite the protests, no meaningful solutions were offered for the problems created by the project. Piyasena's experience underscores the political repression endured by affected communities and the continuing erosion of trust in the government, stemming from its failure



to adequately respond to public grievances. His account illustrates how political interference overshadowed legitimate demands and deepened community alienation.

The implementation of the Deduru Oya water project and the resistance it triggered are closely linked to the dynamics of political patronage. As Handaragama (2013:101) explains, patron-client relationships involve politically powerful patrons offering employment, infrastructure, and other benefits to marginalized clients in exchange for political loyalty. In modern power politics, patronage includes the backing of political parties and leaders and can be viewed through both political and developmental sociological lenses. As Weingrod (1963, cited in Hettinge, 1984:158-162) notes, elections, public institutions, and development initiatives are often exchanged for political advantage, positioning the governed as dependents of those in power. Earlier attempts by successive governments to develop the Deduru Oya region had failed due to concerns over habitat rights. However, a turning point came under the previous administration when the project was launched to meet water demands and enhance agriculture. Such initiatives, especially post-2009, have increasingly become instruments of welfare politics, aimed at maintaining political legitimacy and deepening state–citizen ties.

Political Patronage in the Welfare Mechanism



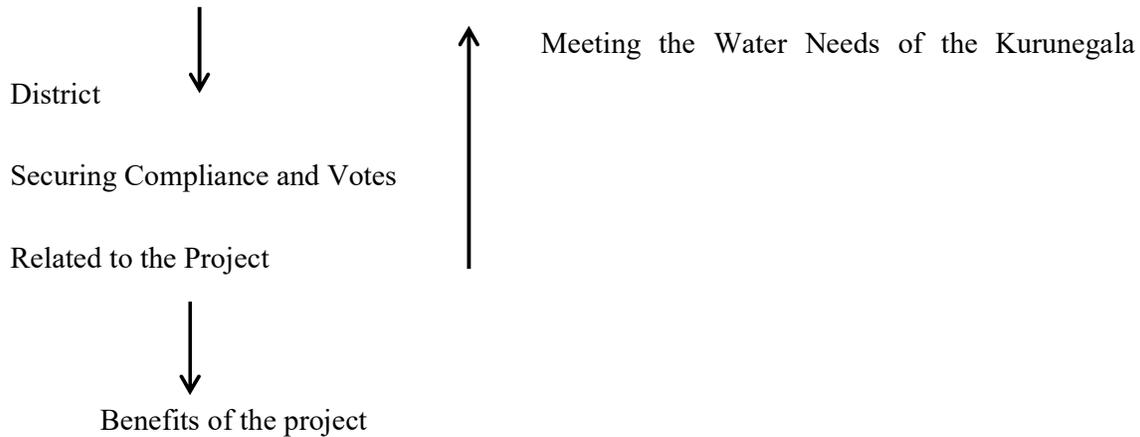
Source: Handaragama, 2013

As shown in the diagram above, the political patronage inherent in development projects can be emphasized. This aspect can be discussed in light of the arrival of new political sponsors, as mentioned earlier. In this context, securing votes from the clients becomes a decisive factor, relying on their support and leveraging political power. Political activities are pillars of influence and power (Mollinga 2008).



Political patronage related to Deduru Oya project.

Implementation of the Deduru Oya project by the authorities



Source: Field data, 2023

The Deduru Oya project illustrates how beneficiaries became key political clients, with water diversion shaped by power politics to secure voter compliance and political support. Interviews reveal that most locals, particularly in areas like Polgammuna village, did not benefit from the project, with only 14% acknowledging any development gain and 57% outright rejecting it. The project violated environmental and water rights, especially affecting access to clean water for domestic use. For example, Sena, a lifelong resident and farmer, described how wells dried up and clean water was no longer accessible, while limited distribution from water bowsers proved inadequate. Though water for crops was available, drinking water remained scarce, showing the failure of temporary government measures and lack of equitable distribution. Politically, opposition to the project grew into broader movements advocating for democratic and water rights, marking a shift in Sri Lanka's development politics as these issues became central in national debates.

The data analysis reveals several pressing issues in the dynamics of water politics between the state and its citizens. Key concerns include economic marginalization following resettlement, widespread landlessness and homelessness, job losses, and forced changes in employment patterns. Public dissent against the development project was met with



suppression, contributing to social disintegration, alienation, and resource-based conflicts within post-resettlement communities. Many resettled families experienced economic instability, limited access to employment, inadequate compensation, and persistent issues related to drinking water.

Furthermore, the Deduru Oya water development project—from its initial planning through to its implementation—illustrates a pattern of power misuse by public authorities and a violation of citizens’ fundamental water rights. The absence of a coherent policy framework, both prior to and following the project’s execution, has intensified the challenges faced by affected populations. Although these projects were introduced as solutions to water-related issues, they have often disrupted lives across social, economic, and political dimensions. In many instances, they have been manipulated by political actors as tools for consolidating power, rather than genuinely addressing the needs and voices of the people.

Conclusion

The study highlights the complex dynamics of water politics between the state and citizens, revealing significant socio-economic and political challenges associated with development projects like the Deduru Oya Development Project. Key issues include marginalization due to economic decline in resettlement, landlessness, job losses, and inadequate compensation, all of which contribute to social disintegration and alienation. The suppression of public protests and resource conflicts further exacerbate tensions between the government and affected communities. While water development projects are intended to address water-related challenges, their implementation often disrupts lives, underscoring the absence of a coherent policy framework. The research also reveals the misuse of power by the public sector, the erosion of water rights, and the instrumentalization of such projects for political gain rather than public welfare. Overall, the findings emphasize the need for a structured, rights-based approach to policy formulation and execution to ensure that development initiatives do not come at the expense of citizens’ well-being.



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