

Sri Lanka: Social and livelihood impacts of unregulated and illicit River Sand Mining (RSM).

Unregulated/Illicit River Sand Mining.

Unsustainable sand mining in rivers in close proximity or access to urban centres saw a rapid lowering of river beds in major water supply and agriculture supporting rivers reaching such proportions with disastrous environmental, social and economic consequences, that this largely unregulated industry was brought under a licensing and regulatory regime in the mid nineteen nineties. Meanwhile, agitation by communities affected by illicit mining with a concerted effort by the nations water supply authority the National Water Supply and Drainage Board affected by saline intrusion and impact on water intake levels saw stricter regulation in some rivers with complete ban of sand mining in others by the Supreme Court through public interest litigation. Nevertheless, these restrictions on one hand and increased demand on the other has seen a steep price increase in sand, resulting in illicit mining operations spreading to almost 35 rivers and tributaries. Initial involvement of the Sri

Lanka Water Partnership (SLWP) in RSM issues that eventually led to formation of an Area Water partnership (AWP) in Deduru Oya was a consequence of one of its main Partners, the Network of Women Professionals flagging this issue as an outcome of a Gender and water Dialogue they undertook in 2005 .

Social and Livelihood impacts of RSM.

The negative impact of RSM affects agriculture based livelihoods of the local riverine population. The damage to agriculture (rice and permanent crops) through lowered water tables and increased salinity flows has serious impacts on the household economy of the poorest families..

Damage to coconut plantations (their fibrous roots spread out rather than go deep and are easily toppled due to damage to banks) endangers livelihoods agricultural labourers. Therefore seasonal and sometime permanent migration to urban centres is noted.

Women with no options and little skills, may opt to migrate overseas as poorly paid house maids. This increases the burden on urban infrastructure in some cases and in others causes family dysfunction.



On the other hand agricultural labourers earn high wages in illegal RSM (three times the normal daily wage) so that few authorities and politicians want to upset the status quo by banning RSM even though there is flagrant violations of the law.

In many RSM prone areas, substantial numbers of young male school drop-outs have been reported as they prefer to earn quick money through RSM. This has long term detrimental impacts on national literacy and their own employability.

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The money earned by this pool of underage labour is spent on illicit activities such as drugs and pornography as the youth get affected by adult sand miners. Misuse of alcohol and drugs has increased amongst the youth (due to the fact that they have ready cash, sometimes more than their own parents), thereby creating social disharmony.

The health impacts are felt by miners even if there is no substance abuse. Few reach middle age without experiencing loss of hearing, ear infections and spinal problems. Addiction to alcohol and physical debility due to RSM places extra strain on an already overburdened public health system. Water related health and hygiene issues caused by declining access to domestic water has a detrimental impact especially on women further increasing their current domestic burden as caregivers and decreasing the hours available for income generation – thereby causing another form of social stress.

Women are seen as front runners in physical protests against RSM. In Deduru Oya when communities once activated a three month blockade of RSM, women played an active role in maintaining roadblocks, effectively acting as human shields for the male protesters since activism opponents and the Police are generally wary of attacking women demonstrators.

The sand mafia has access to resources and is politically connected; opponents of RSM and activists are often subject to violence and intimidation. Religious leaders who protest RSM and enforcement officers have been targeted. This brings a high degree of social stress and disharmony to RSM affected communities as a whole. Illicit RSM groups for nexus with other illicit activities such as liquor and drug cartels and attempt to seek social acceptability by joining service organizations.

Lessons Learnt.

Joining of forces of groups from other areas, when faced with common issues increases ability to secure response of authorities and overcome local pressures.

Communities need to be alert to prevent mafias capturing local service organisations.

Use of websites (Blogs) is a mechanism to share information in real time and alert authorities and other interested groups. Also naming and shaming inhibits malpractices.

Social accountability mechanisms should be in place to reduce corruption in the use of natural resources owned by the state whose misuse causes major social, economic and environmental damage.

Corruption Problems

This activity is focused on a holistic view of impact of corruption on the water sector and focuses on advocacy and capacity building of affected communities.

Corruption Prevention

The advocacy partners collectively agreed to support formation of a national collective of RSM affected people; efforts were made to communicate with affected groups in Maha Oya, Mahaweli Ganga, Kelani Ganga and Walawe Ganga. A Maha Oya Nilwala and Deduru Oya group was eventually mobilized and became very active. Cross visits were made and experiences shared. The impact of these community level activity encouraged them to report on illicit RSM. Local pressures reduced when outside communities are involved

Anti Corruption Strategies

Awareness of the issue is the key to community based formulation of anti corruption strategies. In a recent meeting it was clearly revealed that the fishing community of Negombo who had long complained about the high rates of coastal erosion and declining water supply did not understand the linkage between these problems and ongoing RSM in Maha Oya

Therefore awareness is seen as a key to anti corruption with efforts being made to sensitize communities through visual and print media. When a media tour involving members of the print and visual media was carried out on the 28th February 2006 it had a national impact in raising the profile of the issue and the President himself gave a statement.

Formation of coalitions/alliances with similar affected groups prevent suppression by local mafia and political interests.