

Need for a Young Water Professionals Forum

One of the core issues that surfaced during implementation of the SLWP Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM) Programme was the inadequate representation and participation of young professionals as a collective in the decision support processes that exist in policy/programme development in the water sector. Being by and large a state sector activity the design management interactions in policy formulation and implementation flow usually through a nexus arrangement between the sector institutional heads and political authority sometimes conditioned by expert group assessments and even donor compulsions. In a few cases professional associations /unions do have some input to these processes. Institutional integration between organizations in a sector if it occurs, is expected flow smoothly down the line to all operational levels. It is well known that rapid technological changes are taking place and young professionals often with access to latest knowledge and skills are intellectually confined to operational loops while more often than not policy determination is in the hands of the senior professionals albeit with lots of experience and expertise but perhaps lesser understanding of the newer technological options. This appears so for many specialized sectors in Sri Lanka with the perhaps only the medical profession being the exception in Sri Lanka.

The process of IWRM integration is best served if a multi-pronged approach is adopted aimed at all levels and appear best suited at the early/mid- career level of these future water sector decision makers. It also appears the best level to integrate the academia with the professionals to ensure cross fertilization and adoption of a mechanism to work together.

With view to catalyzing this approach and providing platform for young water professionals to interact and network, SLWP organized the First Young Water Professionals Symposium in November 2012 in collaboration with the International Water Management Institute (IWMI) and support by Unilever Sri Lanka. The main water sector agencies and ministries, 4 Universities including the Post Graduate Institute of Agriculture and Agrarian Research and Training Institute as well as several related sector institutions and private sector corporates participated in the sessions and contributed to the symposium. The symposium highlighted the depth and scale of knowledge available with the young professionals and urgent need to integrate approaches beyond the horizons of their own professional competence and field of operations. A national networking platform was expected to surface but did not sustain in the absence of supporting institutional arrangements. It was soon realized that a tiered structure of platforms/forums were first needed and in consolidation move forward to a larger network.

The First Provincial Young Water Professional Group was organized in Uva Province with support of the National Water Supply and Drainage Board (NWSDB). It operates regularly with a young engineer as focal point. It has been identified that a minimum of at least 6 Such Provincial groups are needed to link it and upstream to national level. There is need for such an initiative in the Central, Northern, North Central, North Western, and Southern Province. Once established a central one in the Western Province could be established.

The Uva experience has clearly vindicated this approach as there is collective effort for teamwork outside the mandated agency boundaries in considering the imperatives that govern water resources use and management in the District/Province. Water resources mapping, allocation, use is viewed hydrologically and beyond the usual planning and operational horizons of line agencies. These ideas have also seen upstreaming to the Centre and given that these recommendations or issues are from wider collective of water professionals are more receptive to consideration by the decision makers.