

Sri Lanka: Reinforcing Community Mobilisation in reducing corruption in River Sand Mining (RSM).

Experiences of the Deduru Oya and Maha Oya Area Water Partnerships.

Corruption Linked to River Sand Mining.

With demand for river sand for construction almost trebling over the last two decades, the mining of sand from rivers in proximity to major construction centres rose to levels not only affecting the livelihoods of riverine communities and water supply to rural and urban populations but with irreparable environmental consequences as well.

The state as a response, through the Mines and Minerals Act of 1992 established the Geological Survey and Mines Bureau (GSMB) as sole authority controlling sand mining assuming that a centralised integrated arrangement for regulation would be more effective than the earlier locally focussed operations that were administered by the district/divisional level administrative machinery. It was anticipated that pressures exerted due to local political and other imperatives including corruption could be avoided.

The GSMB tasked with national oversight but being mainly a technical unit found itself unable to cope with other than the issue of licences from a central office with monitoring and regulation almost non-existent. On one hand the licensing system created a bottle neck while on the other the heavy demand with supply constraints encouraged illicit operations due to very high returns. This led to many large scale illicit operations including heavy mechanised mining with disastrous consequences. While the use of

machinery has since been banned due to a initiative of the Ministry of Environment and the GSMB has since started increasing its field offices from two to ten the oversight coverage without involving the normal local administration in a meaningful manner has still not significantly impacted on illicit operations. On the other hand the centralised operations are now subject to higher level political pressures



and infusion of major players with allegations of insider connivance in what are essentially closed operations though some local authority recommendations are sought for licensing.

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Sri Lanka Water Partnership

“ Promoting Integrated Water Resources Management In Sri Lanka”

“Monopoly Monopoly + Discretion Accountability = Corruption”

- Klitgaard

Community Mobilisation to overcome corruption in RSM.

Corruption occurs in identifying sites and issuance of licences, estimation of quantities, mining monitoring and transport. In the face of grave danger to livelihoods several community, religious leaders and organisations concerned with the environment supported by some national NGO such as the Environmental Foundation, Centre for Environmental Justice, Green Movement, Network of Women Water Professionals and the Sri Lanka Water Partnership (SLWP) helped raise awareness and issues at various forums at local, provincial and national level. Formation of issue based and sector based organisations such as the Area Water Partnerships (AWP) formed by SLWP helped keep the momentum alive.

Anti Corruption Tactical/Strategic Approaches.

The communities of Deduru Oya and Maha Oya Rivers the main rivers providing sand to the capital adopted certain tactical/strategic approaches that have proved extremely effective.

- Find Champions such as religious leaders not intimidated by local politicians and sand mafias to take lead. Both Maha Oya and Deduru Oya leadership is provided by religious leaders with support of AWP

Lessons Learnt.

- Reinforcing community mobilization with other tactical approaches is necessary to overcome local pressures and be more effective in voicing concerns.
- Enforcement staff often seen as the problem are also part of the solution.
- Coalitions and alliances with CBO having similar issues in other areas give greater visibility to issues.
- Media both electronic and print are major allies in highlighting and fighting corruption.
- Linking corruption issues when disasters occur pressure policy makers and politicians to take remedial action

- Public Interest Litigation with assistance of national NGO . Supreme Court has intervened to ban mining in Deduru Oya and Maha Oya and set conditions for compliance by authorities

- Mobilise women and youth as they are equally affected. When wells run dry due to low water tables women who are responsible for drinking water are adversely affected

- Media tours and Dialogues to opt the media as ally in fighting RSM corruption.

- Form alliances with CBO /NGO confronting similar issues. Nilwala AWP in the South and Deduru Oya AWP in North West formed a coalition to overcome local pressures to take up sand mining at national level.

- Forming Water Messengers / Cells in sector agencies to support IWRM.

- Provide awareness training to enforcement staff not as part of the problem but part of the solution..

- Link RSM issues to disasters such as floods, landslides, droughts etc as they occur, to mobilise public and politicians.

- Develop BLOG sites to immediately share information, give publicity and “Name and Shame ” as being done currently by a Maha Oya Blog site focussing on coastal and river sand mining.