

Health & Sanitation Aspects of Communities Displaced by the Mahaweli Multipurpose Development Project – Sri Lanka

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The Mahaweli Project included a cascade of large dams along river Mahaweli, which drains one sixth of Sri Lanka. A total of 128,557 families were resettled in 7 project areas [1]. The project was initially planned to be implemented in 30 years, but due to a political decision was accelerated to finish within five years. Moving this large number of families within a short period created many hardships for first generation farmers. Thousands of people who were resettled complained mainly of respiratory problems, skin problems & injuries [2]. They also faced many other social, economic, environmental and emotional problems.

This paper looks at few displaced communities and evaluates the health and sanitation facilities (including pure drinking water) they enjoyed before migration, and what they enjoy now. In many cases the facilities are improved. But due to the haste in moving people, even the basic public health infrastructure was not provided to the migrants in the first few years. How fast this infrastructure came in to place in the newly resettled areas, and what prevented their provision at first, is discussed. This research in these resettlements 16 years after migration tries to analyze what worked right and what can be learnt from the mistakes. The methods applied in conducting the research included key informants discussion, group discussions, observations and field measurements.

Some of the reservoirs are contaminated by high use of agrochemicals including pesticides. Due to the high nutrient inputs some reservoirs faced algal bloom conditions. This raised concern about the accompanying deterioration in drinking water quality, creating problems for both humans and livestock. With timely action the recurrence of such blooms has been prevented.

The project has not made the farmers rich, as envisaged by the project planners. Due to the continuing poverty of these people, and the skeptical attitude about hygiene education, sometimes even the implemented water supply and sanitation facilities are not well maintained. This paper suggests strengthening of Community Based Organizations to remedy some of these problems.

Keywords: Resettlement; Water Supply, Sanitation

References

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