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Photo: Janaka Withanage, Green Movement, Sri Lanka

The Southern Transport Development Project (STDP) also known as Colombo –Matara Highway considered to be the largest project ventured upon to bring development to the South of the island has brought misery and untold hardships as an immediate return according to the residents of the areas affected.

At the inception problems arose with regard to payment of compensation. Then came the rock blasting and related repercussions. Cracks started appearing on the walls of houses and some started collapsing. Irrigation systems were blocked and cultivations suffered severely. The irreparable damage done to the environment, home gardens, low lying areas and the natural habitats made the problem worse.

The communities in these areas did not have an inkling of doubt that this project will turn the “weather gods” against them. It is the singular grouse throughout the 129 km length of the highway and is one tale woe of each and every household.

Flood damage

The road traverses across four major flood plains in the wet zone i.e Kalu Ganga¹, Bentara Ganga, Polathumodara and Gin Ganga. Annual flooding was a natural occurrence during the rainy season. However, since the STDP construction began flood damage become more serious.

Flash floods occurred in the beginning of May 2007 was far more damaging compared to the natural floods people experienced in the past. We made a recent visit to Diyagama, Kirigampamunuwa, Kahatuduwa, Weniwelpola, Weedagama in the Japan Bank for International Corporation funded area of the road.

Mrs. A. Karunawathie of Kirigampamunuwa complained that due to floods upstream water stagnated in the area she resides ruining her cultivations.

In the Siyambalagahawatte area the floods made the low lying wetland go under water. A backhoe was used to cut the service road of the STDP to release the water from the highway. About 30 houses, accommodating about 150 inmates, were damaged and great inconvenience caused.

(Footnotes)

¹ “Ganga” means river in Sinhala language

At Kandawalagedara, Walahanduwa Ms. S.M. Kusumawathi and Ms. Geeganage Mallika said that their two houses went under two feet of water. Two wells which were in use for generations were damaged. Their kitchens were damaged and all their kitchen utensils were washed away. The walls of the houses are cracked. A falling rock had damaged the pavement of the house. One of the inmates of the house was a disabled person.

Ms. P. Mallawaarachchi of Bogahathanna, Narawala said that flood waters came in to her house from two directions. The stream (Ela) above her house is silted due to the road construction and not dredged and water flows in to her house from the land above.

Earth washed down has settled above the floor level of the house.

At DolagawaWatta, Baddegama six houses where 25 residents live, there had been five feet of water. The damages caused had been assessed but no compensation or insurance has been paid so far. Due to the danger of floods one particular household had been resettled after compensating. The floods affected all houses.

A separate site for about 20 houses has been allocated for Tsunami affected families. Earth has been washed away from the site. The main cause of flooding is due to non construction of culverts. Flood level had risen above the beds and all belongings including children's school books, clothing, electrical items, television sets etc. had gone under water.

M/s E. Wickramasinghe of Kohomanadeniya, Dolagawawatta, U.J. Anuradasa and D.D Wickramasinghe had stories of woe. A boutique belonging to D.D. Wickramasinghe had been damaged and all goods washed away.

Flood damage in the ADB funded area

According to newspaper reports in the Galle District alone 16 of a total of 18 Divisional Secretariat Divisions had gone under water inundating the whole area thereby paralyzing the day to day life of thousands of people and also causing loss of life, property and wealth and also their life long possessions. Whilst large areas had been swallowed by the deluge within minutes people were bewildered unable to believe their eyes. The reports also pointed out that large numbers were displaced in this district alone and there also had been several deaths and earth slips causing severe damages.

A large number of houses were reported to have been completely destroyed and some partly damaged. Elpitiya Divisional Secretariat area was supposed to have the most number of displaced persons in addition to several surrounding areas.



Photo: Dilena Pathragoda, Center for Environmental Justice

An elderly woman, A.G. Leelawathie, who had been residing with her family in the Kabaragala village since her birth said that her house, built of wattle and daub, had never gone under water during her life time but this time her house collapsed and the authorities turned a deaf ear to complaint the newspaper reporter said.

The feeder roadway from the highway, now being constructed, to Galle town runs across a paddy

land and not a single culvert has been provided to drain out water thereby resulting in 77 year old T.V. Francis's house going under water. He also added that the highway is the only reason for the inevitable flooding in Panagamuwa, Walahanduwa areas.

It was reported that the Divisional Secretary of Bope-Poddala had said that 43 houses and 08 business premises were affected by the floods and pointed out that this was a result of the construction of the highway.

A Provincial Councilor of the Southern Provincial Council had pointed out that although there had been very heavy rains prior to this there were no floods in the area after the initiation of the Gin Ganga project and this time all that had been annulled. He had also said that this matter should be given the highest priority and causes remedied. The Gin Ganga Irrigation Engineer too, had confirmed this version.

According to reports, a conference summoned to discuss and alleviate the sufferings of those affected communities, which was attended by the Highway Project construction related officers Contract Company representatives, Irrigation Engineers, Divisional Secretaries, Members of the Southern Provincial Council and Pradeshiya Sabhas, District Secretary and the Deputy Minister for Social Services it had been pointed that the Authorities in charge of the Highway Project turned a deaf ear to all the complaints made regarding the grievances of the residents and that they were facing the consequences. Those officers appointed to co-ordinate at village level to monitor the project do not as a habit, and in this instance too, attend these meetings.

Explanation of the Road development Authority

According to an official of the Road Development Authority floods had been due to Tsunami debris not been cleared, construction of feeder roads of the highway project and mainly due to the severity of rainwater falling within a very short period. According to information provided the relevant insurance company had completed about 50% of compensation payments.

In the ADB section about 50 houses had been damaged and action taken to compensate by the insurance company. The service road of the highway had not been constructed in the correct manner and the authorities will rectify all defects.

Compensation vs. sufferings

All the affected communities along the 129 km length have made colossal sacrifices of their belongings which they traditionally owned for periods of time running into generations and centuries.

According to a leaflet distributed by the Resettlement Office of the Road Development Authority, Bandaragama the total number of landowners affected was 6000 and their plots of land totaled 10,300 extending over 1100 hectares (2700 acres) and all have been compensated. The number of residents who lost their houses and land was about 1300, commercial buildings demolished amounted to 100 and all of them are supposed to have been resettled and the total compensation paid amounted to Rs.4200 million.

However, according to the affected people there are many irregularities in assessing the compensation. Community representatives who made the accountability claim were not paid 25% extra compensation paid to the others. Trees in the home gardens were not properly compensated.

Irreparable environmental damage

Environmental damage done by the road construction is far more serious. The erroneous Environmental Impacts Assessment was one of the main causes. Although the environmental problems including flood risk was highlighted by the environmental groups and communities, authorities were in deaf ears to accept that fact due to vested interest.

The newspaper reports pointed out that all the affected communities along the highway road of people causing loss of life, property wealth and all their possessions. Whilst whole areas were being swallowed by the deluge within minutes people stood bewildered unable to believe their eyes wondering why the weather gods were so unkind to them. The Galle District receives continuous rain during the South West Monsoon and never in the history have there been such floods. This time the rains lasted only a few hours but the devastation and havoc caused were unprecedented. There arises a question mark all along the length and breadth of this project.

Blocking of the water streams and the road which looks like a dam constructed across the flood plains and the destruction of the paddy fields causes flooding. No adequate span such as bridges and culverts were included to the design for the water movement. Blasting rocks, opening up hills and the vegetation increases the soil erosion and people are in fear of landslides. Habitat destruction along the road is irreparable. According to own EIA document there are many endemic and endangered species such as fish and reptile. There was no consideration of the loss of biodiversity during the construction. Construction of the service road is the most damaging. RDA had no environmental consideration during the service road construction.



Photo: Dilena Pathragoda, Centre for Environmental Justice

According to the resident lightning has become a major hazard after the clearing of the trees. There has already been one death directly attributable to the increased risk resulting from clearing for the Southern Highway. No measures have taken to educate public on this matter.

The Central Environmental Authority is blind to see the environmental damage of the road. So called Environmental Monitoring Committee and the Environmental Monitoring plan is ineffective to combat the environmental damage.

Compliance review

ADB's Compliance review panel made seventeen recommendations in their report published in 2005. Monitoring visit made by the CRP in June 2006 found that only three recommendations have been complied.

Most CRP recommendations still were not followed by the Road Development Authority. Supplementary EIA to assess the Environmental Impacts of Galle access road still not been published. People live alongside of the highway are facing numerous environmental and social problems such as cracks in the houses, dust pollution, heavy noise etc. Some people were not still compensated for their suffering.

What has become apparent is that ADB Management has allowed Compensation and handling of the damage to be left to the contractor to manage.

It was noticed that Japan Bank for International Corporation (JBIC) section does not follow the recommendations made by the CRP as they disagreed with the CRP report. A measure has to be taken by the ADB as JBIC is a co-financer under the ADB policy.

According to the people LARC Committee is not operating properly as expected at the beginning. Many of those meant to be on the Committee do not attend. No discussion allowed normally.

There were no adequate measures for income restoration. Many of those who had home gardens, small shops and supplying meals that have not been able to continue. Report conducted by the Center for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) confirmed that "most commercial enterprises have not reached an upward turning point in their replacement".

However, people have serious disagreement with the CEPA report. According to the people, report did not describe honestly what they had actually found and this leads people walking out from their meeting.

Conclusion

Southern Transport Development Project as locally known as Colombo-Matara Highway is a "Dream Road" of some politicians. However, directly and indirectly affected people make many sufferings. All these sacrifices have been made with great expectations.

Asian Development Bank, Japan Bank for International Corporation or the Sri Lankan government was unable to conduct the project in an environmentally and socially sound manner due to numerous reasons. ADB safeguard policies made no effective mitigation to the problem. Accountability Mechanism becomes ineffective tool due to the politics between agencies and the co-financers.

The pendulum of hope and optimism on the one hand and despair and pessimism on the other is swinging and all people hope that the results of their sacrifices are not in vain.



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