

# Causes for Inadequate Community Participation in Maintaining Common Heritages in Rural Communities

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## Abstract

*As main livelihood activity of rural inhabitants is agriculture they depend heavily on inherited open access common property resources (common heritages) such as village tanks, irrigation structures, rural road network, forest area and grazing lands. Deterioration of quality and quantity of these heritages has become a serious issue. A field survey was conducted in 2013 with 315 people in Anuradhapura district to identify factors that have motivated rural people to overexploit the heritages. More than 80% of villagers do understand that they are responsible in maintaining heritages and are also willing to contribute to maintain those. Nevertheless, their participation in maintenance work was suppressed by poor economic conditions, unfavorable attitudes and non-existence of a point of entry at present because such activities are done by contractors. At present, villagers do coordinate development activities through the Farmers Organization and the effectiveness the FOs depends on the capacity of the office bearers. Endowing responsibility of selected rural development activities to villagers would shape their attitudes in a favorable manner and to promote villagers participation in managing these resource as well. Such motives would reduce rural poverty and inequality in rural communities, on one hand, and promotes sustainable use of these common property resources, on the other hand. Effective awareness programs should also be conducted to train rural leadership and to change the attitudes of the community in a favorable manner.*

**Key words:** Common Property Resources, rural development, resource degradation, rural community.

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## Introduction

Sri Lanka is an island located in the Indian Ocean and 84% of her population is living in rural areas (Annon, 2012) depending heavily on open access common property resources (common heritages) such as village tank, grazing lands, forest and rural road network. No one can restrict the access and use of these heritages as those

are used for common purposes and thus they are subjected to congestion and degradation over time. Common property resources are the ones with unrestricted access and used for common purposes (Jodha, 1995b, Ramanathan, 2004, Ostrom, 1990 and Ranga, 1986). So, individuals are benefited at the expense

of the community and that is known as the “Tragedy of the commons” (Hardin, 1968).

Loss of biodiversity, species extinction, natural hazards and extreme climatic conditions are some of the unfavorable results of deforestation. At the same time, it reduces the numbers of wildlife supported, promotes land degradation and soil erosion and reduces the availability of water, minor forest products and ability to support grazing livestock (Kuri, 2010). On the other hand, when the use of forest is made illegal people tend to overexploit it (FAO, 1997). Therefore, sustainable exploitation of these resources is mandatory. In the past, such heritages (resources) were managed in a systematic and holistic way rather than individually. Some of the common property resources found in ancient villages included the upstream tree belt, hamlet buffer, downstream drainage, upstream water holes (Dharmasena, 2004) and natural forest. Though in the past, these components were maintained collectively by the villagers in a sustainable manner, at present, most of these components of the rural ecosystem are not in existence because foreign invaders changed the traditional system of maintaining these heritages and the responsibility in maintaining those was transferred to the hands of the state. As a result, rural people have gradually moved away from shouldering that responsibility and which has promoted their degradation.

## **Evolution of Maintenance of Heritages of the Community**

### **a. Village Tank**

Almost all common property resources found in rural communities were managed by the ancient people in a way to receive sufficient run-off water to village tank and to maintain a favorable ecosystem in and

around the village. Having paid due attention to the irregularity in rainfall ancient people constructed tanks to store run-off water and that system of tanks was known a cascading system (Madduma Bandara, 1988). Though there are different definitions for the cascade system, it is a connected series of tanks constructed to store, convey and utilize water from ephemeral rivulets. The village tank based settlements in Sri Lanka are viewed as the thrust of the hydraulic civilization (Madduma Bandara, 2009).

The “*Rajakariya*” system introduced by the ancient kings was implemented through the village committee (“*Gamsabawa*”) by the village headman (“*Gamarala*”) to maintain such heritages and it was also a way of donating labor and that process became a custom and a tradition in rural communities. The British rulers removed this practice in 1832 and no one attended the maintenance of these tanks until 1887 making the system unsustainable and decaying in certain cases. Nevertheless, the British rulers established the provincial Irrigation Boards in 1887 and made the Government Agent responsible in maintaining the village tanks (Panabokke, Sakthivadivel and Weerasinghe. 2002). As this system failed, the position of “*Velvidane*” (executive of paddy lands) system was introduced and *Velvidane* had the power to sue at the “*Gamsabawa*” or the rural court for villagers who violated the procedures (Panabokke, Sakthivadivel and Weerasinghe. 2002). In order to systematize the maintenance of this heritage the Department of Agrarian Services was established and the “*Yaya Niyajitha*” (an in charge of paddy tract) was appointed. At present, the Farmer Organizations (FOs) are responsible for the maintenance of rural tanks and FOs have failed to maintain tanks effectively due to a number of reasons including misconduct of office bearers and political interference.

**b. Forest Resources**

King Dutugemunu was the first king who introduced forest rules and regulations during the period 161 to 137 B.C. and the community managed the forest. After the British's invasion things were changed and forest cover has reduced from 80% in 1886 to 25% in 1956. Depletion of forest has caused due to agricultural expansion, increase in income and changes in life styles. Management of forest is no longer a responsibility of the community though the present forest policies are geared to increase timber supply, enhance social involvement in forest management and promote private sector involvement in plantation forest management (Zoysa, 2001). However, illegal as well as unsustainable exploitation of forest resources has increased over time and the Department of Forest Conservation has failed to control such activities. Poverty and landlessness are some of the important factors that have contributed to deforestation. A conflict between the Department of Forest Conservation and villagers has caused because the Department of forest Conservation views villagers as exploiters and illegal extractors of forest resources rather than the guardians (Dangal and Silva, 2011). Though the public participation is an easy way to reduce the rate of unsustainable exploitation of these resources it is not taking place yet at an acceptable level. Thus this study attempts to identify factors that have contributed to deterioration of common heritages (common property resources) in rural communities, assess the villagers' awareness of their responsibility in maintaining these resources and identify remedial measures.

**Methodology**

In order to gather the relevant data a field survey was conducted with a random sample of 135 farmers from nine villages and the survey was conducted in 2013. Data related to understanding about their

responsibility in maintaining these heritages, their level of dedication and constraints they have faced in maintaining the heritages were gathered during the survey and were analyzed using Microsoft Excel and SPS software packages and results are presented as statistical tables and figures.

**Discussion**

**Level of understanding about their responsibility**

Though 96 % of the respondents stated that they are believed that they are responsible in maintaining community heritages, they have over exploited such heritages. Over 90 % of the respondents understand that cleaning the village tank, cleaning the tank bund, attending minor repairs of the tank bund and de-silting the tank as their responsibilities. This is a favorable situation because villagers are aware of their responsibilities in relation to maintain the heritages because there is a potential to obtain villagers' participation in maintaining these heritages, instead government shouldering the full responsibility placing a heavy pressure on the national treasury. As such, policy makers should pay due attention to introduce appropriate policies to transfer some of these responsibilities to the hands of the villagers. Raising agricultural production in rural areas is the easiest way to reduce rural poverty while assured supply of irrigation water is a way to raise production. Disciplining villagers on the allocation and utilization of irrigation water as well as promotion of the maintenance of irrigation structures are alternative ways to raise agricultural production in rural communities. Of the respondents, 97%, 99% and 100% respectively stated that they are aware of their responsibility in repairing irrigation structures, proper use of irrigation structures and irrigation water.

These findings communicate a very important message that is; though villagers do not utilize irrigation structures carefully they are aware of the importance proper use of it. This indicates that, there prevails no knowledge gap but some other factors have motivated villagers to behave in an unacceptable manner and these factors should be investigated in detail and relevant policy measures should be introduced in order to remedy the situation.

Rural road network plays an important role in alleviating rural poverty because the high accessibility to motor able roads increases the mobility on one hand, saves the time required in getting things done, on the other hand. At present, most of the rural roads are substandard and the responsibility in maintaining those is in the hands of the government. This study examined the level of understanding of the villagers about their responsibility in maintaining rural roads and findings are presented in Table 1. Results reveal that rural communities are fully aware of their responsibilities in maintaining rural road networks though it is not happening.

At present, road networks are maintained by the government through contractors and this has forced the influential members of the rural communities to go behind local politicians to obtain funds to maintain these roads paving the way for the politicians to interfere with the livelihood activities of the villagers. Getting selected maintenance

work done through community participation and making a payment for the services rendered by villagers would be more effective in maintaining such heritages at a low cost while minimizing income inequalities in such communities. Such a practice would divert the funds flowing to the hands of few wealthy individuals who serve as government's contractors to the hands of a large number of needy people.

Sustainable use of natural forest and grazing lands is very important for the sustenance of these communities. Therefore the opinion of the villagers about the use of forest resources and common grazing lands were explored and findings are presented in Table 2. It was uncovered that the villagers are aware of the ill effects of tank bed cultivation (common grazing land), adverse effects of diverting the runoff flow coming to the tank, disadvantages of cultivating the reservations of the tank, importance of the vegetation along the tank bund and results of damaging the watershed of the tank. Under such circumstances, it is possible to maintain these heritages with community participation though the policy makers have paid a scant attention to that aspect.

Even though villagers are aware of their responsibilities, that alone does not make sense and thus, level of their dedication should be examined.

**Table 1. Villagers' awareness of their responsibility in maintaining rural roads structures**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percent reported</b>
Attending minor repairs of roads	92
Cleaning of drains	96
Refrain from blocking drains	99
Prevent others blocking drains	97

*Source: Field survey (2013)*

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**Level of dedication**

When due attention was paid to the findings of the study, it poses the question that, despite the high level of understanding of the villagers they have failed to maintain the common heritages in their communities, as expected. In order to find answers to this question, level of their dedication was examined.

Result revealed that, in general, 60% of the villagers expressed that they are willing to contribute to manage common property resources in the community. Details of dedication of the villagers are presented in Table 3. This information indicates that the level of dedication is lower than the level of understanding. Many people are not willing to spend their time to de-silt the tank though it increases the water storing capacity of the tank. When the tank is infected with water weeds tanks storage capacity declines but, nearly two third of the respondents are willing to contribute to remove water weeds. Similarly removal of shrubs and weed in the tank bund and attending minor repairs of the bund are very important. However everyone is not prepared to attend these activities though they are fully aware of the importance of these activities (Table3).

This is an area that should receive the due attention of the relevant authorities in order to maintain these heritages through community participation.

Of the respondents, 70% is prepared to contribute to maintain the road network though almost everyone understands it as one of their responsibilities. When irrigation structures were considered 74%, 55%, and 79% of the respondents had discussed with other to attend damages in irrigation canals, prevent damaging irrigation structures and minimize wasting of irrigation water respectively. This information indicates that their level of dedication is still at a high level. Almost every villager is dedicated to maintain the rural roads because the road condition is one factor that could influence significantly on the day to day activities of the people as it is directly associated with their ability to move (Table 4). When data presented in Table 3 were compared with data presented in Table 4, it is clear that people are more particular to dedicate to maintain resources that could impact heavily on their livelihood activities.

Dedication to maintain forest and grazing lands was assessed under different activities (Table 5). It is clear that the level of dedication to maintain forest and grazing land is not at a satisfactory level. Therefore proper guidance and appropriate policy measures would enhance the dedication of the villagers in maintaining these heritages.

It is clear that the level of dedication to

**Table 2. Farmer understanding about their responsibility in utilizing forest resources and grazing lands**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percent reported</b>
Ill effects of tank bed cultivating	91
Impact of blocking run off flow coming to tank from uplands	95
Ill effects of cultivating reservations of the tank	97
Destroying vegetation along the tank bund expedites siltation in the tank	94
Results of damaging the watershed	98

*Source: Field survey (2013)*

**Table 3. Villagers' dedication to maintain village tank**

Activity	Percent responded
Removal of water weeds	69
Clearing tank bund	84
Attending minor repairs of the bund	77
De-silting	55

*Source: Field survey (2013)*

**Table 4. Farmer dedication to maintaining rural roads**

Activity	Percent reported
Attending minor repairs of roads	92
Cleaning of drains	96
Discouraged villagers blocked the drains	99
Requested not to block drains	97

*Source: Field survey (2013)*

maintain forest and grazing land was not at a satisfactory level. One reason for this could be the impact of present forest conservation policies. As there was a mismatch between the level of understanding and level of dedication factors that have contributed to this situation were examined under institutional, economic and social dimensions.

### **Impact of economic, social and institutional factors on villagers' participation**

#### **Economic factors**

Because the average household income of the villagers was relatively low their agricultural income was insufficient to meet the financial requirements of their families and that has forced them (especially males) to look for nonfarm employments. Because the availability of such employment opportunities is low in rural areas they have out migrated and so, it is difficult for them to allocate time

to maintain common property resources under the prevailing economic conditions. According to the results 76% of reported that they have become unable to contribute to maintain these resources because of their economic problems. However, if the government can redesign rural development policies to divert certain amount rural development fund that are given to resourceful individuals such as contracts to villagers in exchange of their labor would ease this problem. Such a fund diversion would reduce the inequality in income distribution in rural communities, on one hand, while promoting the patriotic behavior of villagers with respect to the maintenance of their heritages, on the other hand. Thus, the policy makers should explore the possibilities in implementing such a procedure with immediate effect..

#### **Institutional Factors**

Under the institutional factors, Farmer Organization, cast system, class system and political influence were the areas considered because; those were considered by previous scholars as

**Table 5. Farmer dedication to maintain forest resources and grazing lands**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percent reported</b>
Discussed ill effects of tank bed cultivating(grazing land)	58
Explained the ill effects of cultivating reservations above the tank(Forest & grazing land)	44
Informed relevant authorities about villagers cultivating reservations above tank (forest & grazing land)	39
Discussed with villagers about bad effects of damaging the watershed	41
Took actions against people who damaged the watershed	36

*Source: Field survey (2013)*

important areas. Results indicated that unacceptable behavior of the office bearers of the FO, office bearer's reluctance to honor the general opinion of the membership, weaknesses in leadership and rotating the leadership among few influential individuals were the factors that have kept farmers away from contributing to the maintenance of these heritages regardless the high level of their understanding and willingness (Table 6).

These findings shed lights on another gray area of the issue. As weakness in leadership was a significant one, this situation could be corrected easily making the office bearers aware of their duties and responsibilities and training them on leadership characteristics and qualities. Disrespecting views of the villagers is an attitudinal problem and this should be corrected through appropriate trainings. Keeping the leadership in the hands of few individuals could be a result of backwardness, unavailability of potential leaders and over exercising of power by few individuals and that also could be corrected through proper training and awareness programs.

Other rural institutions such as different community based organization (CBOs) do not participate actively in maintenance of

common heritages since it is not the mandate of such institutions. Nevertheless, it is worthwhile of exploring the possibilities to pool strengths and resources of all CBOs for this common objective. If it is practically possible, an effective mechanism should be introduced. This study did not investigate that aspect as it was beyond the scope.

Of the respondents, 58% believe that they are not subjected to political influence in carrying out their duties and it is a commendable finding. According to 98% of the respondents, cast system has not influenced negatively on their activities and it is also a favorable thing because the division of communities based on such issues is a common practice in rural communities. Another 92% of the respondents are in the opinion that social classes have not become an important issue when the maintenance of common property resources was considered. This information confirms that the present behavior of villagers in relation to maintenance of common property resources is free from the influence of cast system, social classes and political interference.

**Table 6. Institutional factors de-motivated villagers**

<b>Activity</b>	<b>Percent reported</b>
Unacceptable behavior of office bearers of FO	40
Weak leadership of the FO	96
Failure to honor of common view of villagers	30
Rotating leadership among few influential individuals	32

*Source: Field survey (2013)*

**Social Factors**

Of the respondents, 50% stated that, individuals who are politically influential have taken the leadership in community work and thus, villagers are reluctant to participate in activities organized by such individuals. However, under the prevailing administrative setup influential as well as rural leaders are compelled to go behind local politicians in order to obtain the funds required to maintain the rural resource base. As this is the reality, rural leaders are subjected to political influence despite of their wish and so, it is not totally correct to point fingers at the rural leadership for obtaining political support. Under these circumstances, strong awareness programs should be conducted in these communities to educate villagers about the process of obtaining funds and only influential and capable individuals of the community have to take the lead until such a time that new leaders develop. Another 68% is with the opinion that, villagers do not participate in community development activities because they are selfish. This situation could be corrected by enlightening them on the importance of collective actions. Because community development activities are done by the contractors and villagers are not satisfied about the quality of contractual work was the reason for 77% of them for not contributing to community work. As this is a policy decision of the government it should be dealt at the higher level of authority and it is important to explore the possibility to get some of such work done through the community making a payment for the service rendered by the community. When all findings were boiled

down to a common idea, it is possible to mention that through the introduction of appropriate policy measures and imparting appropriate training, it is possible to make the rural people, the beneficiaries as well as the guardians of the rural heritages instead the state shouldering the full responsibility in maintaining such resources.

**Conclusion**

Though the level of understanding of the villagers about their responsibility in maintaining their heritages and their willingness to contribute are high, the level of active participation is constrained by factors such as poor economic conditions and certain social factors. At the same time villagers are not satisfied about the quality of maintenance work done by the contractors. This dilemma sheds light on some remedies. One is to educate rural communities on the rural development process of the government and motivate them to contribute in such activities. At the same time, it is important to strengthen the rural leadership in order to carry out their duties in a fair and just manner. Furthermore, in order to develop the patriotic sense in the minds of the rural people about their heritages, it is necessary to explore the possibility of giving selected rural development work to villagers and make them a payment to appreciate their contribution. This would motivate the villagers to maintain their resource base while reducing the income inequality that is prevailing in such communities.



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