

# On evacuation of people in the Kotmale Hydro Power Project: Experience from a socio-economic impact study <sup>1/</sup>

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The Development Studies Unit (DSU) has recently provided consultancy services to SIDA in connection with the evaluation of the Kotmale Hydro Power Project in Sri Lanka. The purpose of the consultancy was to study the present situation of the people who were evacuated from the Kotmale valley as a result of the project. The study is now finished, and it may be of interest to present it briefly. The following issues in connection with this study on evacuation of people in the Kotmale valley will be addressed: Aim and organisation, including an analysis of how the study developed, substantive findings, conclusions, and recommendations for future actions. However, it is first necessary to give a brief outline of the history of the Kotmale Hydro Power Project that also emanated into this specific study.

## Historical background

The Kotmale Hydro Power Project basically consists of a hydro power plant and a large dam to create a reservoir in the Kotmale valley. It was originally a project between two private Swedish contractors and the Sri Lanka Government. During the construction period it was found necessary to involve SIDA due to financial constraints. SIDA's accepting to provide the funds in fact meant "taking over" the implementation of a project designed by others.

Specifically, the original agreement left all responsibility for the evacuation and relocation of the local people living in the parts of the Kotmale valley to be submerged with the Sri Lanka Government. During the construction period, it gradually became clear to SIDA that the situation of those evacuated was far from good. In connection with planning the final technical-economical and environmental evaluations, it was accordingly agreed to define a separate study to look into the problem of evacuation and relocation. Thus the so-called "Kotmale Evacuees Study" (KES) was initiated in the spring of 1988.

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## **Aim and organisation**

The aim was to establish the present situation of the several thousand people that had been forcefully removed from their ancestral lands in the Kotmale valley. A key phrase in the Terms of Reference (ToR) reads:

"The study should aim at showing how the lives of the evacuee families have been affected by their relocation ... and particular attention should be given to ... the assessment of the evacuees of the changes in the quality of life resulting from their resettlement."

No data on the situation prior to evacuation existed. For this reason the study could not be conceived as a traditional evaluation which basically implies measuring changes that have taken place as a consequence of specific development activities. Instead, the study had to be understood as a type of impact analysis, that is trying to establish certain facts about the present situation of the evacuees. This was far from being satisfactory. However, it was apparently assumed that comparison with any existing data on comparable populations together with a certain measure of intuition could produce acceptable conclusions regarding the relative living situation of the population in question.

The ToR defined the actual fieldwork in the study to be primarily administering an interview schedule to a sample of the relocated families. Based on SIDA-policy, it was decided to hire a local consultant to execute the study. The local consultant was given complete responsibility for the study. At the same time, SIDA saw that this study clearly had important anthropological aspects to it. These were seen as connected with setting up and executing a methodological exercise of the fairly large-scale and complicated nature deemed necessary here, and more concretely with questions of methodology involved in researching the issues of evacuation and relocation properly. Towards this end, SIDA collaborated with the DSU on anthropological consultancy services of this nature.

The idea was that the local consultant (a geographer) and the expatriate consultant (myself) should cooperate on the various aspects of the study involving questions of methodology. SIDA/Stockholm and the DSU were to have the important function of backstopping. Practically speaking, this collaboration was to take place primarily during two visits by the expatriate consultant to Sri Lanka. The first was to be during the initial phase, involving decisions on among other things the overall methodological lay-out, preparing the interview schedule, and selecting and training fieldworkers. The second visit was to take place after fieldwork in connection with the analysis of data and writing the report.

As things turned out, the organisational ideal briefly outlined above came very far from being realised. Specifically, the cooperation between the two consultants came to a stop early in the work when the local consultant chose to stop communicating completely. The reasons for this are many. Several factors were involved, and their timing, relative importance, level of operation, and interactions make it complicated to sort out "causes" for how work on the KES proceeded.

In the following, I would like to point out some factors that seem to have bearing on this issue:

1. The fact of the unstable political situation in Sri Lanka had the important effect of delaying the whole study. This had negative feedback effects on other factors to be spelt out below.
2. The responsibilities and relations between the two consultants were, in spite of what initially seemed like a set of thorough and detailed ToR, not well defined and clear. This fact would seem to be to some extent at least a reflection of SIDA's somewhat ambiguous policies in the field of development and research cooperation. More concretely, the ToR on the one hand put the whole responsibility for the KES on the local consultant. On the other hand the ToR also contained a provision that for all practical purposes gave the expatriate consultant veto right on anything he disagreed to. This was certainly not conducive to setting up and maintaining a good working relation between the two consultants.
3. The issues of seniority and status between the two consultants, academic and otherwise, seem to have played an important role in this study. I chose to see this primarily as a rather unfortunate and unintended consequence of other factors, especially factor no. 2 above. As it happened, it was my impression that the local consultant was to some extent concerned with the fact that he was a full professor while his counterpart was a doctoral candidate. The issue of status differences was also brought up with reference to the Sri Lanka culture. The local consultant at least initially was concerned that he (naturally) knew the culture while his counterpart had no prior knowledge of it. He was of the belief that the latter in spite of this wanted to discuss and have opinions on local cultural issues. An example of this concerned the attention to women and to gender issues. This misunderstanding may partly reflect the vagueness of the ToR in spelling out the exact relations and responsibilities between the two consultants, partly it is related to the way SIDA's Development Cooperation Office (SIDA/DCO) in

Colombo handled the issue once it surfaced, and I believe it partly also reflects the idiosyncrasies of the local consultant. Possibly differences in disciplinary perspectives also played a part.

4. Given the scope of the workload and responsibilities put on the expatriate consultant as detailed in the ToR, together with the emphasis on cooperation with the local consultant, the budget for the anthropological consultancy services in the KES would seem to have been much too small. The consequence was that for example the time allocated for actual direct face-to-face contact between the two consultants amounted to only 1-2 weeks during the first visit. (The planned second visit never materialized, partly because the local consultant did not encourage it, and partly because SIDA's Infrastructure Division for reasons that remain unclear did not intervene.)
5. The fact that SIDA have never before dealt with issues of evacuation and relocation most likely is important. Any prior experience with these issues presumably would have lead to a better conceived study.
6. Connected with factor no. 5 above is the fact that the KES was executed by the Infrastructure Division of SIDA. The Kotmale Hydro Power Project is a large infrastructural project, and it is thus natural that the responsibility for executing it lies with this division. From a bureaucratic point of view it can possibly be argued that it made sense to place also the responsibility for the KES with the Infrastructure Division. This would however not seem to be conducive to an optimal emphasis on the human, anthropological core issues involved.
7. It is my impression that the local consultant in his performance at least to some extent was guided by outside ulterior motives not always compatible with the interests of the KES. An indication of this is the largely uncalled for emphasis on the infrastructural part of the study, as well as the very detailed recommendations following from this emphasis, together with the rather unmanageable size of the report.
8. For certain reasons partly connected with changes in personnel and an apparent stronger emphasis on getting the job done, the SIDA/DCO in Colombo seemed to be somehow inclined to do the job their way irrespective of the judgements in SIDA's Infrastructure Division in Stockholm.

9. It was my general impression that SIDA's Infrastructure Division in Stockholm had some problems cooperating with both SIDA/DCO in Colombo and the DSU in Stockholm on this study. As I understood it this was at least to some extent connected with a weak overall control function on behalf of the Infrastructure Division, together with what came across as difficulties in involving the DSU. The important function of backstopping in the organisational model developed for the KES thus never really materialized.

In ending this part, I would like to emphasize that I essentially find the organisational model developed for the KES both interesting and potentially productive. The task ahead should be to locate and remove flaws in this model and develop it, rather than to discard it.

### **Substantive findings**

Primarily based on the administration of an interview schedule, the local consultant produced a voluminous report. In essence, the conclusions drawn would seem to more or less corroborate earlier impressionistic views on the situation of the evacuees. A summary of the more important findings of the study follows:

1. A total of 3056 families have already been relocated. Of these, 1334 families opted for relocation higher up on the hill sides in the Kotmale valley itself, while 1722 families decided to move downstream and out of Kotmale. A further 905 families are listed for evacuation upstream. This makes for a total of 3961 families. The actual number of people evacuated has to be estimated from this figure. The evacuee population can be divided in two major categories, depending on the causes of evacuation: (a) submersion of lands and/or habitations due to inundation, or (b) subsequent landslides at least partly caused by the ongoing development activities in the valley.
2. Prospective evacuees were given a choice of relocation upstream or downstream. This seems to be only a theoretically interesting point however, since evacuees as a rule were not given supporting information to evaluate the implications of the two choices.
3. The evacuees were compensated in lieu of losses sustained on a differential basis. Most evacuees felt that compensation was not adequate.
4. Generally speaking, the relocation did not involve any transitional phase, and in particular no transit camp experience.

5. The evacuation process was successful to the extent that it met the targets in terms of timing. This unfortunate emphasis on evacuation had however the effect of a low emphasis on the following and very crucial relocation phase.
6. As a consequence of a low emphasis on overall planning and synchronisation of all aspects of the relocation process, the development of infrastructure and provision of basic services in many of the new settlements were lagging behind.
7. Especially initially, life in the new settlements had been very tough. For many evacuees there were delays of 2-3 years in the provision of for example irrigation water. Lack of domestic water supplies and fuelwood were apparent. Starting anew meant no income, and many families had to use compensation money for consumption needs instead.
8. For those relocated in Kotmale itself, there were special problems due to the non-availability of land. For this reason the official promise of providing each family with 0.8 ha of land was not kept, in reality allotments vary between 0.2 and 0.8 ha. Apart from this, almost one-third of the evacuees in Kotmale were not in occupation of their allotments. Although for other reasons, a parallel situation applies in the downstream setting. Here more than one-third of the evacuees operate less land than their original holding.
9. Traditionally, Kotmale people had relied on a timehonoured and well adapted wet-rice cultivation along the valley floor. Those evacuees opting to stay on in Kotmale, faced a dramatic problem in being relocated high up on the hill sides of the valley. Due to the total change of the ecosystem and climate they had to abandon wet-rice cultivation completely, and start as small-scale tea cultivators. In fact their new land is located in old tea estates. Agricultural extension services to care for this new group of tea growers and especially their need for training seems to have been almost nonexistent. Evacuees downstream, although able to continue growing rice, had to cope with a new situation implying increased market integration and internationalisation of the whole agricultural sector. This in effect meant that they overnight found themselves changed from small-scale, mixed-cropping, and subsistence oriented peasants to farmers producing a cash crop based on capital intensive technology.
10. Evacuees relocated in the large settlement schemes along the lower reaches of the Mahaweli river have problems of their own. Their new

settlements are in the so-called Dry Zone. This new environment implied initial problems of adjustment to a very different climate, seasonal drought, and various diseases they were unaccustomed to. Even at present, many evacuees have problems with these changes. This especially goes for malaria, a disease almost unknown in Kotmale. Today there is hardly a family that has not been affected by malaria.

11. Half the population relocated in Kotmale report that they obtain an annual income of Rs. 9000 or less. Among those relocated outside Kotmale somewhat more than half derive an annual income in excess of Rs. 9000 (Rs. 9000 roughly corresponds to the poverty line). This, together with for example the above reported differences in ownership of land, are clear signs of a social and economic differentiation among the evacuees. Furthermore, there are indications that this differentiation will increase. This contradicts the egalitarian ethos underlying the Mahaweli settlement operations as professed by the Sri Lanka government.
12. The opportunities for self-employment and income generation in the non-farm sectors are extremely limited both for women and men.
13. For all evacuees, the new subsistence practices to a large extent were to take place within large-scale and centrally coordinated productive regimes. As stated above, major aspects of this have not yet been realised. On another level, evacuees seem to have problems functioning within these new top-down imposed organisational structures, socially and practically speaking. The level of social integration within settlements is surprisingly low, there is an apparent lack of clear and articulated leadership, and institution building on the local level is lagging behind.
14. The study's ToR emphasized getting at the evacuees' assessment of their own situation. The uprooting from anything traditional, known, and dear to them, has left a deep and apparent lasting impression on the outlook of life and what the future will bring. Specifically, most people grieve the loss of old social ties and relationships by the dispersal of kin and the disintegration of compound groups. It accordingly should come as no surprise that a majority of the evacuees view the past situation as better compared with their present life.

## Conclusions

The study has given rise to understanding and insight in different spheres. Firstly, regarding the organisation of exercises of a cooperative nature between local and expatriate consultants, specifically involving components of research cooperation and building local capabilities. Given more concern with planning and organisation, such cooperative exercises hold great promise both in terms of results, time use, and costs. Secondly, in studying the details of one concrete example of a major evacuation and relocation operation with SIDA involvement. The potential long term importance of the Kotmale experience for SIDA is, I will argue, the impact it can have on SIDA's policies regarding future involvement in projects with involuntary resettlement components. And thirdly, through an international comparison, in highlighting core issues involved in evacuation and relocation operations. The former two issues have been dealt with above at some length, and in the following the latter issue will be briefly addressed.

A basic conclusion to come out of the KES, is that evacuation and relocation of people (or "involuntary resettlement" as it is now termed by for example the World Bank), is not something new. There is a growing body of literature on involuntary resettlement (IR) internationally, and IR is reported as a smaller or larger component in very diverse categories of development projects. Specifically, although IR is probably most common in projects involving water resources and energy development, it is by no means restricted to this.

It follows that SIDA most likely through the years have been involved in several projects with IR components. Kotmale is obviously a very special case, and SIDA deserves compliments for the way the Kotmale experience has been used to bring this particular issue out in the open. Another project clearly involving IR is the Bai Bang project in Vietnam, but beyond this there does not seem to be any knowledge within SIDA on any other involvement with IR nor its extent.

Some further comments on IR may be of interest. Firstly, the issue of IR domestically in states planning to implement it, is to a large extent a question of economic and political power. This is one reason why IR internationally affects largely marginalised populations, economically, politically, culturally, and ethnically speaking. This means that minorities, and specifically indigenous and tribal peoples, most often are found to be the victims of IR. In fact, hydro power development and dam building is now seen as possibly the single largest threat to the physical and cultural survival of many indigenous peoples worldwide. Secondly, a larger emphasis on IR would seem to imply a concomitant larger emphasis on and different approach to the planning of large-scale



development projects, especially those involving major infrastructure components in the water resources and energy sectors. It seems natural that important assumptions for this new approach to planning should come from anthropology. Anthropology is a field of enquiry whose basic premise and concern is man, and it is uniquely equipped to study and analyze those fundamental relationships between human cultures and the environment that are so dramatically upset in projects involving IR. Based on the understanding that this gives, anthropology is furthermore in a position to give advice on how to deal with these issues. And thirdly, a central aspect of a call for a new approach to the planning process in cases of IR, is the need to develop and use organisational forms based on cross-cultural and interdisciplinary ways of cooperation towards a common goal. This common goal would appear to be to develop total solutions to developmental issues that are optimal and viable in the long term, based on a humanistic inspired economics analysis of the costs and utilities for all parties involved.

A note to the anthropologically inclined reader: Internationally, there are growing signs on various fronts that things are on the move. To give just a couple of examples, there are indications that the World Bank is starting to view the issue of IR more nuanced. The interesting thing is that this emerging concern within the Bank seems to be advanced partly by Bank-employed anthropologists. Equally important, the Society for Applied Anthropology Annual Meeting in April 1989 discussed the issue of involuntary resettlement in detail. Subsequently the American Anthropological Association set up a Task Force on Involuntary Resettlement. The goals of this Task Force as well as some far-reaching agenda items were adopted, and the Task Force is now at work.

### **Recommendations**

The final reports by the local and the expatriate consultant put forward some clear recommendations to SIDA. These recommendations are basically of two kinds. The report by the local consultant is only concerned with recommendations dealing with Kotmale and remedying problems caused to the people there. This may be called short term recommendations. The report by the expatriate consultant in addition gives recommendations of a long term nature, that is they deal with the planning of future involvement with IR.

At this point reference will only be made to two such long term recommendations that would seem to be basic to any concerned and professional involvement with IR. Firstly, assuming that the best way of dealing with future cases of IR is to study past experiences, it would seem natural for SIDA to begin by cataloguing and

studying its earlier involvement with IR, as well as study available literature of a comparative and synthetic nature. And secondly, SIDA is currently working on devising a standard for Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA). Existing EIA standards as a rule also deal with IR, apparently as a matter of expedience. The standards now developed within SIDA should reflect the growing awareness and understanding that IR is not just another factor to be taken into consideration together with any number of environmental problems. IR deals not with a changing environment as such, but with *human populations in a changing environment*. This fundamental difference should determine the way IR is conceptualised as well as its relation with EIA.