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Participants speak: **Sustainable Natural Resource Management Project from the Bottom Up**

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By Cynthia M. Caron

In this newsletter I hope to elucidate several aspects of development-project funding and implementation based on my fieldwork in Sri Lanka. The information I present is a natural progression from my discussion in CMC-16, in which I outlined the ideals of nature conservation in Sri Lanka and defined and discussed the popular terms "cut and pasted" into today's "viable" natural resource conservation-project proposal: "community," "incentive," "participatory" and "sustainable".

I do not mean to single out the United States Agency for International Development (USAID) nor the International Irrigation Management Institute (IIMI) in this report. Last July and August when I was searching for a project to affiliate myself with, I was most impressed by IIMI's mission and the clarity with which it expressed that mission. As I am familiar with their cooperative agreement with USAID to implement the Shared Control of Natural Resources (SCOR) project, I am using it to illustrate how some conservation projects are formulated and implemented. The SCOR project is an excellent example of an international-donor agency funding good conservation work. We can use the SCOR project to view both the obstacles and the challenges that a project confronts as it moves from document-bound, laser-printed theory to nittygritty application. At first I thought that perhaps the SCOR concept paper was infected with unrealistic or far too many expectations. The more I explored how terms such as "community" and "participation" are operationalized in the field, the better I came to understand how these terms and their flexible definitions are sometimes inappropriate, why they are inappropriate, and what new avenues for community-based and -controlled resource management might lie ahead.

SCOR is an experimental sub-project of USAID's Natural Resources and Environmental Policy Project (NAREPP). NAREPP's goal is to strengthen the environmental-management capacities of government institutions, private enterprise, non-governmental organizations, the small landholder and the landless laborer so that all of these parties eventually internalize environmental considerations into business and development decisions. Training, education and awareness are the tools that lead to better global environmental management. This in the long term reduces (theoretically) the need for humanitarian aid for floods and famines (with due consideration, of course, for unforeseen natural disasters, which many argue are not natural at all, but the result of improper environmental management); foreign aid that often treats the symptom and not the cause — foreign aid that in every sense of the word is not (excuse me) *sustainable*. Through SCOR, foreign aid is used in a constructive manner, and its action-research priority has wider implications for testing emerging theories of natural-resource management that can help us come closer to our goal of involving people in sustainable environmental management. The SCOR

concept is exciting and takes us beyond what we already know.

For the past four months I have thought about the SCOR concept. I have spent approximately one month talking to farmers, beneficiaries of SCOR interventions, at the Anninkanda watershed, one of four sub-management units at the SCOR Nilawa Watershed pilot-project site. I have spoken to SCOR-associated government officials and staff members of USAID and IIMI. Thus I have accumulated the opinions, criticisms and expectations of the majority of SCOR participants from the bottom up.

Shared Control of Natural Resources (SCOR): The concept

SCOR's goal is to increase sustainable use of Sri Lanka's natural-resource base in ways that will improve peoples' livelihoods now and in the future, with due regard for the environment. By forging partnerships (shared control) between the State and resource users, SCOR aims to improve productivity by linking conservation techniques to new tenure arrangements in water and land. When an individual owns or has long-term control (such as a 30-year lease) over a resource or a piece of land, he or she has the incentive to maintain the productivity of that resource and will invest in (or adopt) technologies that sustain the income-stream from that resource over time. Once the resource user realizes an increase in productivity as a result of adopting conservation practices, he/she will be more likely to continue using these technologies. His/her neighbor might start experimenting with conservation, too. In so doing, the SCOR concept balances resource protection with production.

SCOR defines resource degradation as an institutional and socioeconomic problem. A primary goal of the project is to arrest the "land degradation process while providing protection incentives to users" through "expanding and strengthening the role of small-holders in agriculture, as individuals and as groups, in the management and control of the natural resources fundamental to the agriculture sector — primarily land and water. SCOR is aimed at introducing protection of land and water resources." The fundamental premise is that the progressive increase of users' control over natural resources through the resource-user group is vital to guaranteeing more productivity and profit with equitable and sustainable agricultural production in Sri Lanka.

USAID's overall strategic vision for Sri Lanka is "a democratic, greener" newly industrialized nation by the year 2001. SCOR directly fits into the USAID objective of "citizen participation in democratic systems because it will help Sri Lankan resource users organize and exercise greater control over their land and water resources" (USAID,1993).

A recent amendment to Sri Lanka's Agrarian Ser-

vices Act is the government's first show of support for the SCOR concept. The 1991 Act "encourages and formalizes the procedures under which farmer groups (or resource user groups) may organize and be officially recognized with corporate status with consequent rights to hold assets in common and enter into contracts." SCOR field staff members have the responsibility of forming resource-user groups (RUGs), training them in better environmental management and instructing them how to acquire the goods and services due them from their area's government and private service organizations. Group members thus are all responsible to each other, for if the group fails to perform, the services (such as marketing arrangements, subsidies, bulk-price rates etc.) might fall away with it. From my field experience I find that one element is missing — accountability. At present there is neither a group nor an individual entrusted with the responsibility of noting that the resource-user group upholds its end of the bargain — sustainable resource management. Furthermore SCOR implementers, with government officials and resource users, need to determine and to set levels of what sustainable resource management is. In the end this may be more difficult to do than creating a RUG that sustains itself over time.

SCOR: The donor perspective

"Sustainable might be an overused word, and no doubt it is the most popular of donor jargon," said Mohan Siribaddana, USAID-SCOR project manager, "but there is a need for it. What has happened to many of the rural-development projects started ten or fifteen years ago? They have disappeared. Why? They were not sustainable."

USAID is not new to participatory resource-management projects in Sri Lanka. They began with Irrigation Systems Management in the late 1970's. Resource-user groups were formed, and the management of irrigation systems was handed over to them. The water users became the direct managers of the resource. SCOR is USAID's first attempt at forest and land management in Sri Lanka.

"We believe that the sense of ownership creates a better environment for resource management," Siribaddana continued. "In fact our first concept paper was a land-and-water project that later developed into a rights-to-resources project. For a socialist country like Sri Lanka the word *right* is too forceful. A *right* creates too many expectations. It is too politically-charged a word and cannot be used in the Sri Lankan context. Therefore we created the shared-control concept. Natural resources are controlled and owned by the state. We define shared control as a public-private partnership that creates a sense of ownership with security for the resource user. This should lead ultimately to better resource management."

SCOR started in 1991 as a cooperative agreement with IIMI. The project design itself was ambitious and

participatory. IIMI staff held general discussions with farmers in watersheds, members of provincial councils, divisional councils, service organizations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), private-sector entities and top-level government officers. USAID gathered thirteen senior, Colombo-based government officials together to form a National Steering Committee (NSC). IIMI brought the thoughts and suggestions of farmers and local government officials to this core group's attention for general discussion. "This is an example of how USAID is more flexible and responsive to the recipient than other donor agencies," Siribaddana explained. "Other agencies operating in Sri Lanka send in a team largely comprised of expatriates who talk to very few people and submit a document listing things that need to be done. During our design process, we [IIMI and USAID] held a series of meetings over three to four months and spoke with everyone who eventually would be involved in the project."

"At first the proposal was too ambitious. IIMI selected four trial watersheds. We narrowed that down to two, one in the northern dry zone and one in the southern wet zone. During this final process USAID officials were skeptical about the South's Nilawa Watershed proposal. They felt that the student uprisings and disappearances of the late 1980's and early 1990's created a risky environment for investment and implementation, especially for a project that heavily relied on peoples' participation and dynamic change in resource-tenure arrangements. However many government officials, myself included, supported the decision to experiment in the south. The people of the southern province feel neglected by the government. My boss was a little upset that I did not support him during the meeting, but as a Sri Lankan how can I not help my own people wherever they are? This is another example of USAID's focusing on the recipient's needs and not on the donor's wants."

After the project was design there was some hesitation on USAID's part about hiring IIMI to undertake the implementation of SCOR. Under normal circumstances there is an open competition to bid for proposal implementation. Yet IIMI is Colombo-based, and has had decades of experience and success in water- and irrigation-management projects. The organization's biggest weakness was its lack of experience with forest management and land tenure. After much discussion, USAID obtained the appropriate waiver forms and signed a two-year, trial cooperative agreement with IIMI. At the end of the second year (February 1995), USAID hired a Bethesda-based consulting firm, Development Alternatives, Inc. to do a mid-term project evaluation. According to this evaluation, the SCOR concept was acceptable and IIMI remained the implementing organization.

Siribaddana expects to use seedling-survival rates from SCOR's reforestation projects as one indicator of success. He is concerned primarily about whether local residents are taking on responsibilities for refo-

restation and if not, why not. The SCOR concept does not include paying people to plant seedlings. The project provides only planting material, small user-grants for buying implements and refreshments and collateral for loans. In the SCOR view, paying people to plant seedlings and do other work is not sustainable — once the funds dry up, so do the seedlings.

SCOR is experimenting with a new natural-resource-management model. At the water-shed level this involves combining upstream and downstream communities (both socially and ecologically) and emphasizing their linkages. At the upper levels SCOR assists provincial steering committees to integrate the SCOR concept into already existing government and private resource-related institutions and through the National Steering Committee affects national policy and decision-making.

I asked Siribaddana how the quick implementation of the SCOR concept compares to other projects he has been involved with. "Any project on the pilot basis can show results and can be called successful for a variety of reasons," he replied. "Pilot projects have an intense focus and a small geographical area. We have the cream of the crop working for us, drawn by high salaries, work incentives and the excitement of working on an innovative project. There is a high opportunity cost involved, especially for government officials. The Asian Development Bank (ADB) has expressed interest in the SCOR concept even though we are still in the experimental phase."

"Replication is our greatest challenge," he added. "How can we get more NGOs involved? Every organization is watching us now. Even if SCOR fails, we can never really call it a failure. We [USAID and IIMI-SCOR] have done a great deal of radical thinking; thinking that no one ever has done before. We have planted concepts of empowerment and power-sharing in the minds of key government officials. In the end SCOR takes much political will. Policy changes are a start but are not enough. They must be followed by behavioral change. Now IIMI-SCOR must develop an exit strategy. The project cannot all of a sudden leave the farmer and the resource-user group alone. Beneficiaries must slowly become accustomed to doing thing without SCOR. We cannot foster dependency, for that would be a disaster. As we start to think about exiting, the solution might be to leave only one or two people in an area for a while to serve as social catalysts and to give technical advice and other types of support. The pull-out must be planned and slowly phased in."

What should happen after SCOR? According to Siribaddana the benefit-stream must continue: improved livelihoods for the beneficiaries through increased income, information and job opportunities. IIMI has done an excellent job in the field creating awareness about production and protection. The SCOR concept proclaims that production is an incentive for conservation, as evidenced through mini-hydroelectricity pro-

jects, agricultural markets and quality products.

Politically, this is a very uncertain time in Sri Lanka. The Center is devolving power to the provinces. No one is sure what devolution will bring in general, or for the SCOR concept in particular. Therefore SCOR personnel must educate farmers and strengthen their capacity to make decisions and plan.

Information plays an enormous role in planning. Divisional institutions need information to guide farmers in marketing and cultivating with market-orientation. Siribaddana insists this is easy. "It is as simple as planning for the upcoming season," he says. "It does not have to be sophisticated. However, the capacity of government institutions in this respect must be strengthened. If RUGs run as businesses as they should, they will follow a rational approach."

This approach dictates that conservation is not the end-result objective. Beneficiaries of SCOR interventions should engage in conservation activities because a lack of conservation would lead to resource depreciation. Resource-user groups are not formed solely for conservation purposes but for conservation that leads to increased production. Resource-user groups must feel empowered to approach institutions for information and services. Currently, farmers wait for government officers to approach them. Siribaddana feels strongly that one SCOR concept does not fit all situations. "Participation is an outgrowth of the dry-zone experience in Sri Lanka. It may not be appropriate for the wet zone. In the wet zone, to achieve production with protection, it might be better to link the individual private farmer up with already existing organizations and government institutions."

SCOR National Steering Committee (NSC): A government perspective

I was a bit startled by the aggressive tone that initiated my conversation with a SCOR National Steering Committee member, Mr. Ratnayake of the Department of Irrigation, Power and Energy. "Natural resources sector policy has evolved in Sri Lanka from practice. In our experience practice feeds policy. Action-research is nothing new," Ratnayake said. "But we [the NSC] are interested in several SCOR concepts. The two most important ones are treating the watershed as a management component, and the cooperative long-term tenure agreements with the Forest Department. In the past irrigation and water-use projects have focused only on downstream flow. We completely ignored the upstream tank [reservoir], aside from considering it as the primary water source. In terms of tenure, much of the land under Forest Department control is government-owned Crown lands leased to individuals on a short-term basis. To get people to address long-term management we need to address these issues. The NSC has approached the President's Office about expanding SCOR's pilot projects to other areas. SCOR's greatest contribution is that it consolidates much of the work be-

ing done in the field. This helps us [the government] with our overall data base, which in turn can change government policy."

Resource management and law enforcement are tricky and sensitive subjects. There are at least forty acts of parliament that relate to water use, few of which are enforced. According to Ratnayake an unspoken yet understood equilibrium between legal and illegal action exists in the dry zone. Encroachers and water poachers know who they are and what they have done. The truth is in many cases they had no choice. Dry-zone farmers practicing seasonal agriculture cannot wait five years for returns on conservation practices.

SCOR has brought a new approach to the decision-making table: regularize the encroachments and see how the farmer reacts. "Through SCOR we (NSC) have identified regularization as a way of forcing farmers to internalize environmental considerations," Ratnayake said. "Or so we think. The next step is to recommend a policy change to regularize [legalize] encroachments. To do this on a national scale would be chaos. We have no idea how the farmer will behave. We should try regularization in the two SCOR project sites. These are controlled situations with ample resources for monitoring and evaluation. If found successful the next step would be to introduce regularizations in tandem with the SCOR concept at the national level. Regularization adds a whole new set of rules and upsets whatever unwritten agreements already occur at the local level. Farmers with regularized encroachments would be obliged to follow SCOR concepts, for instance, cultivating a variety of long-term crops [like timber trees] that increase *long-term expectations, long-term interests, and long-term security*. Land issues are sensitive. We cannot undo our decisions once they have been done without causing an uprising."

Ratnayake agrees with Siribaddana that SCOR's wet-zone project is more difficult to implement than its dry-zone counterpart. Participatory irrigation-systems-management in the dry zone began in the early 1980's and has been legal government policy since 1989. In the wet zone IIMI had to start forming farmer organizations from scratch. The wet-zone experience is complicated by more absentee landowners and wealthier tea-growing project beneficiaries. It is not difficult to balance protection and production as long as protection brings more production and brings it quickly.

"Action-research is usually very helpful," Ratnayake continued. "However it would be better for the NSC and for SCOR if IIMI was working in a consultant mode. Under the current arrangement IIMI gives prescriptions and has to sell its concepts to the government. If IIMI was working as a government consultant, then the government would be involved in the action-research process and would have a better idea of what is going on and why. The policy process would be easier because the policy people would understand the SCOR experiments and their results. Fur-

thermore, working for the government would create a sense of accountability.

IIMI is an independent, international organization and it constantly reminds us (government) of this. The organization does not need to listen to us (in government) because they are independent of us. They are accountable to no one. All of us on the NSC have ideas and experience ourselves. It is almost as if IIMI is afraid that they will have to share the credit for any new innovative approaches. Research and development is not only about output, but the process. Here process is lacking."

At this point, Ratnayake really began to fume. "Let me give you an example. IIMI has a number of research components. We [NSC] do not know what the research topics are nor what methodologies are followed. IIMI just submits to us a report telling us what they have discovered. This is supposed to be enough for us to suggest policy changes. Recently IIMI submitted findings on a very successful soya-bean cultivation project in the dry zone — a massive harvest — about 1,600 tons. What IIMI did not disclose to us was the fact that this magnificent production used as much as, if not more, water than cultivating rice. In my duties to this ministry I am interested in water use. When research gives unsatisfactory results, IIMI should not hide it from us. Research goes wrong all the time, that is part and parcel of what research is all about. It is wrong, however, to hide negative results and the research process." A few months ago the NSC formed a smaller national working group to be more directly involved in SCOR research components.

Ratnayake said that he believed replicating and internalizing SCOR concepts would be extremely difficult. He reaffirmed what Siribaddana said about political will. The National Steering Committee is only for policy makers. The service institutions responsible for internalizing the SCOR concept, carrying on the SCOR project, and carrying out government policy have little involvement in SCOR implementation thus far. "Water is a powerful political tool on the provincial level," Ratnayake pointed out, "more so than on the national policy level. While we (NSC) might make a policy it is the responsibility of the provincial offices to "share" control and give up some of their power."

What happens if the SCOR projects fail? "In terms of Sri Lanka's development and our SCOR experience in the wet zone, we have to limit our investment possibilities, look for alternatives, and accept a certain amount of environmental degradation," Ratnayake said. "Yet every person and every official should always have a conflict at the back of his or her mind — the conflict between conservation and development. Through the SCOR project we are learning a great deal about institutional development. In the dry zone it is easier to internalize the SCOR concept, perhaps since farmer organizations in irrigation and water management have existed since the 1980's. There was talk about giving up

the wet-zone component of SCOR and handing it over to the area's government offices and NGOs. If we abandon SCOR in the wet zone no one is going to take it over. The project will fail if IIMI drops it. We need the wet-zone component because the success of linking groups and organizations, adopting conservation practices, and increasing agricultural production — the issues and events we have been able to assume and internalize in the dry zone — we are not close to achieving in the wet zone. We need to know why. Perhaps we need more or different incentives in the wet zone."

Participation is generally accepted in Sri Lanka due to pressure exerted by financial donors. Through SCOR, one dry-zone resource-user group has formed its own business with a working capital of Rs. 1.4 million (US\$26,400). The RUG negotiates with government service institutions over water use and canal management. The beneficiaries (RUG members) are holding the appropriate agencies accountable through their group's bargaining power. This makes less work for everyone in the irrigation sector. As the group evolves only the representatives have to bargain and the service agency has less to do because the farmer has "taken back the responsibility." Farmer groups work with service organizations and are setting priorities and agendas.

"What I hope to see in the next ten years as the private sector enters the country is the government becoming less service-oriented and more quality-control-oriented," Ratnayake said. "For the time being we are the only ones able to provide services. It would be an enormous improvement if the RUG could do business with anyone it pleases in the private sector leaving us [government] with a watchdog role and as a body to insure justice. Everyone always complains that the middleman exploits the farmer. In the open market middlemen are a fact of life. They always survive; these are very smart folks. This is why a group approach is important to form and train a strong, knowledgeable group. Show them how to access information so they can negotiate better with middlemen."

Ratnayake maintained that he likes working with USAID "because it questions everything and sticks its nose in everywhere." The other organizations granting money to his Ministry do not behave similarly. "The World Bank and the Asian Development Bank [the ADB] just give the money and go. Still, USAID could improve the SCOR process. They figure IIMI is a responsible professional organization. We all need to change this attitude and attach more accountability to the donor organization. This is the most money that I have seen granted to a 'soft' project [for environmental or institutional development]. World Bank and ADB normally fund hardware projects [infrastructure, roads, dams, energy etc.] and link up software projects afterwards. Only USAID takes these soft projects seriously because they are a political organization," Ratnayake said. "When you have political objectives you want to educate and train people. The Asian Develop-

ment Bank and the World Bank venture into these environmental and participatory projects because they are fashionable. Since they're lending institutions, these are not their main priorities. As part of their image they need to show that they are in touch with and involved in the latest research. I have been working with all of these groups for more than twenty years. When the next World Bank mission comes to review their investment they need concrete figures to calculate their returns. This is difficult to do with soft development projects versus laying down hundreds of kilometers of road.

"IIMI is an expensive organization. They hire the best people from government and few individuals return. Government offices and their service agencies suffer a net loss. We should receive net additions from collaboration and assistance from foreign organizations. International organizations do not think that way. They simply look at the bio-data and see that a person has been to Colorado or to Cambridge and seek him out. Most government officials have had overseas post-graduate training at the State's expense. I personally do not think it is right for us to leave. In the end projects must be managed by the average person. If the average person cannot manage the project after the implementing institution pulls out, then the project is destined to fail. Donor agencies want to influence environmental laws which are practically unenforceable in this country. What donors need to do is train government and extension staff with the capacity to include environmental considerations immediately into decision-making so that it becomes second nature to them." With that, Ratnayake piled and bundled up his folders and headed off to a committee meeting on the Southern Province Area Development Plan.

SCOR: The field perspective

On my first visit to SCOR's Nilwala project site, the IIMI field staff brought me to two of their project-

delineated sub-watersheds and introduced me to the more active intervention participants and show-case projects. The IIMI staff has divided the Nilwala watershed into four sub-watersheds. Each sub-watershed is treated as an individual management unit with its own social mobilizers and village-specific SCOR interventions. A number of interventions are introduced and, if accepted, pursued. Interventions cover everything from pinus tapping and flower-growing projects to vegetable production and mini-hydroelectric power schemes to workshops on better tea management and conservation farming. At least once a month the social mobilizers, the catalysts responsible for forming and encouraging resource-user groups (RUGs) and stirring-up support for and introducing new techniques, technologies and terminology's in their respective sub-watersheds, meet to discuss their progress, share their experiences and extend emotional support.

Senaviratne, the catalyst in the Anninkanda sub-watershed where I conducted this research, works long hours; sometimes from 7:00a.m. to 10:00p.m. He travels on a Honda motorcycle between villages listening to praise and problems, acting as a messenger to the field office in nearby Morawaka and warming up and up to government officials. He works six days a week except for Sunday so he can attend church services with his wife and four-year-old daughter. Senaviratne might work for IIMI-SCOR but he and his family live right among the project beneficiaries; actually his house is a forty-five minute walk along the same road that I lived on in the project area.

I made a deliberate decision to live with a family in the village of Talapelakanda rather than in a Deniyaya guest house. One of the biggest challenges in field research is rapport establishment. Since I was introduced as an American student who came to Sri Lanka to learn about *Mihidiya*, I was concerned that people might not distinguish me from other regularly-paid

A strong show of support during National Tree Planting Day. Dothalugala Heritage and SCOR organized both road-side and stream-side plantings.



Mihidiya-kenek. *Mihidiya*, the name of the IIMI-SCOR field office in Morawaka, is a combination of the old Sinhalese terms for soil and water. A *Mihidiya-kenek* is someone working for *Mihidiya*.

I never once heard a participant mention SCOR or IIMI. Most people know the *Mihidiya* bosses are from Colombo and they get their funds from America. All of the motorcycles the catalysts race around on have the USAID logo: a pair of solidly shaking hands on a red, white and blue striped background. When I returned to Deniyaya the second time, alone, I descended from the Colombo-Deniyaya inter-city express bus into the Anninkanda sub-watershed area hoping to find at least two or three resource-user groups functioning the way all of us SCOR-watchers in Colombo expected them to.

There is a local NGO in Talapelakanda called Dothalugala Heritage. *Mihidiya* hopes to strengthen this group by funneling its doctrine and the RUG concept by the organization's already existing membership and through enlisting new recruits to join in their resource production and protection schemes. Replication of the SCOR concept must be based on a simple, low-cost, systematic model. This model is the resource-user group concept outlined below. Dothalugala Heritage, now referred to in IIMI-SCOR-speak as a RUO, a resource user organization, embraces all of the RUGs formed in the Talapelakanda region. Below are the ten easy steps to recognition of a well-formed resource user group:

1. Has been formed for better resource use
2. Has a recognized form of leadership/core
3. Meets regularly with a participation rate greater than 60 percent
4. Keeps records of meetings and the status of group action
5. Has a group fund
6. Has agreed targets to achieve
7. Invests money, labor and time on activities for production and protection of land and water resources
8. Monitors own activities through self-monitoring and assessment
9. Has institutional/legal recognition
10. Has affiliation with other organizations

According to the SCOR mid-term evaluation team's review, as of December 1994 there were 165 resource-user groups with 2,607 members operating and undertaking 33 different conservation and production activities in the two project sites. "Operating," however, is a vague term that the evaluation team never defined properly. With respect to group evolution (according

to the above list) at the end of Year Two, 47 percent of the groups had fulfilled steps 1-4; 24 percent through to step 6; 11 percent reached level 8; leaving only four percent (or six groups) achieving legal recognition complete with the ability to enter into contracts with, to sue and be sued by other organizations. According to the criteria listed above, RUGs do not really start "doing" production and protection (P&P) work until they reach level 8 and, as I will discuss in the two sections that follow, it is unclear whether groups are functioning as democratic, sustainable community groups that understand and have been trained to carry out their own P&P projects when SCOR support ends in 1998.

In December I attended a meeting at Dothalugala Heritage that established four new resource-user groups. After this function I realized that the first four criteria can be fulfilled at the first organizational gathering. Shri Bharatie, the former Conservator of Forests and now an IIMI consultant, chaired an efficient meeting that started off explaining the role of trees and forests in environmental amelioration and climate change.

This gathering created stream-conservation groups that will undertake the re-planting of the banks of four streams that drain from Dothalugala Hill. Days previous to this assembly Bharatie had walked the length of each stream, mapping each household and the extent to which each would be responsible for planting and maintaining a portion of the bank. These maps were used to explain the planting process and to let everyone residing near a stream know which of their neighbors was responsible and ultimately held accountable for maintenance.

The local Forest Department representative discussed the legal, shared-control aspect of the project. Since stream banks are reserves owned and controlled by the State, those who re-plant the reservations (most of which have been cleared and replanted in tea) will receive some private benefits. All those who are illegally encroaching on this land without a permit or have received short-term occupancy permits from the government will be regularized — given legal recognition with long-term occupancy agreements.¹ In exchange, the participants are sharing control of land ownership and management. They may plant a variety of vegetable crops and are obliged to plant timber trees and fruit trees that will eventually shade out these "illegal" tea gardens.

They have usufruct rights to the products of the trees that they plant. There are fifteen to twenty species available, timber trees such as mahogany and

1. In effect regularization reduces the threat of eviction in the short-term. By giving participants usufruct rights they have the incentive to practice sustainable land management so the seedlings flourish and bear fruit. This demonstrates Ratnayake's statement of long-term security and long-term interest. However if a new government is elected it has every power to overturn these regularizations if SCOR cannot work through the NSC and pass legislation that could only be overturned by a tedious amendment process.

jakfruit and fruits trees such as durian. Popular home-garden species such as coconut and papaya are also included. Some seedlings will be provided free of charge, while others will be subsidized by SCOR. After the formal presentations, the future participants asked a host of questions about land and tree tenure. For instance, can branches be pruned for fuelwood? If a tree is damaged or dying can it be cut down?

For the final exercise, the meeting broke into four smaller groups, one for each stream, and elected a group leader. Each group leader wrote down the names of his neighbors who attended the meeting and became responsible for briefing stream-side residents who failed to attend the session. Each new resource-user group discussed the scheme for another 15 minutes.

Tea, biscuits and an agreement to meet again after the rains to set a date for planting ended the two-hour morning affair. Successful establishment of four RUGs took place: the groups were formed to start better management of the stream bank and water flow, groups leaders were elected, attendance and notes were taken. However, was there a take-home message? Did these individuals have any idea that they are members of a group with collective rights and responsibilities? I do not think so. Neither does L.R. Perera, who is a Sri Lankan sociologist I worked with in SCOR evaluation.

IIMI hired Perera to evaluate resource-user group structure and function. I joined up with IIMI just at the right time. Perera was arriving at the half-way point in his research. In order to evaluate group structure he focused on group leadership, whereas I focused on the individual as participant and tried to decipher his or her incentive for participating in and perpetuating SCOR interventions.

Perera went through the watershed with the names and addresses of group leaders collected from the field office's files. I strolled around two villages with my field assistant, Weerasinghe (a local fellow who knew nothing about SCOR until I hired him to accompany me), and interviewed everyone I randomly happened across about *Mihidiya*, whether they participated in projects or not. We both came to the same general conclusion: the RUG concept is weak.

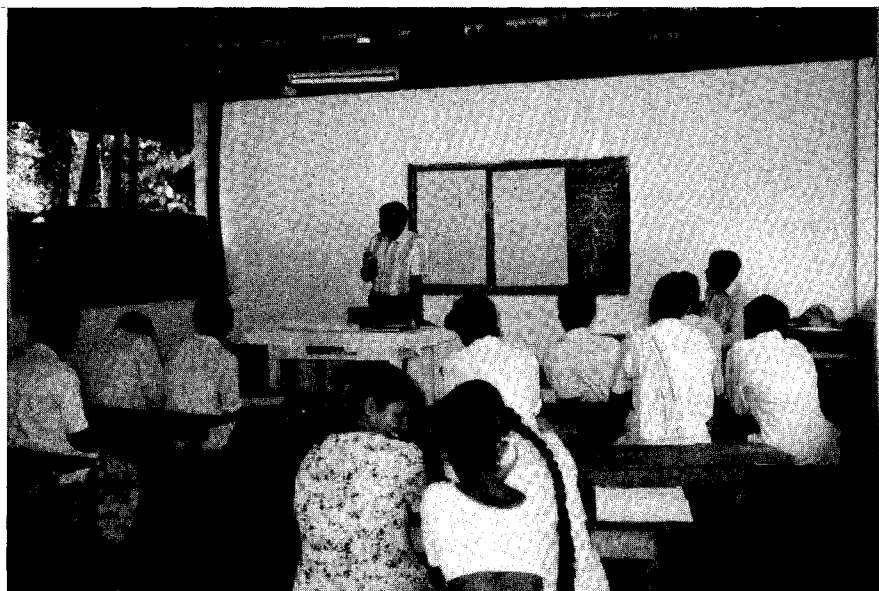
According to Perera most group leaders did not even know that they were group leaders. (How can groups without leaders hold regular meetings?) I interviewed 53 participants over the course of a month and attended several *Mihidiya*-organized events during that time. Participants could tell me about the work they had done and how they came to do it, but few identified themselves as part of a group. The majority identified themselves with *Mihidiya*, even fewer with Dothalugala Heritage. I shall return to this dilemma of group identity and consciousness.

If Perera had his way not a single group would be considered a group if its general fund (criterion #5) came from an outside source. "This money will be spent according to its origin," Perera explained. "If members have donated out of their own pockets, they will manage it carefully and have a personal stake in its expenditure. If someone from outside has granted it, the members will always think that they can get more."

He has a point here about sustainable financial management. RUG concept is new to the area and therefore risky. Even if farmers could spare a hundred rupees or two, depositing them into a uncertain collective fund is highly unlikely. The membership fee is ten rupees (US\$0.20). It is interesting to consider what the largest possible value of RUG membership dues

Production without protection: One enterprising tea grower living on the middle slopes of Dothalugala has harness a nearby spring to generate his own electric power. He does not participate in reforestation efforts nor does he fear that deforestation will effect him and his power source.





An organizational meeting held at Dothalugala Heritage

would be. If beneficiaries are not willing to invest more than ten rupees to participate and receive *Mihidiya* benefits, then this is a fair indicator of perceived "value" of the project and may leave SCOR as a short-lived phenomenon.

Resource-user group funds come from USAID user-group grants. These small grants, most of which are under US\$1,000, finance tools, seedlings and refreshments. Altogether SCOR-IIIMI has dispersed Rs. 2,791,878 (US\$58,000) in 55 grants (26 grants in Nilwala Watershed). Resource-user groups may use these sub-grants as collateral for loans from the Bank of Ceylon. Some newly formed RUGs in the dry zone's Huruluwewa project site have expanded their accounts to over US\$7,000. None of the Nilwala Watershed groups have attempted such expansion. My primary concern was not the user grant's origin as much as how it was spent and who decided how to spend it.

SCOR: The participants' perspective

I confess. I have been proven wrong. In CMC-16, I wrote that I did not expect educational opportunities to be one of the primary reasons for joining a resource user group. Training and access to new information were two of the more regularly cited reasons for joining a RUG. As one tea grower said, "They (*Mihidiya*) explain about new technologies. I like new ideas so I joined at least to improve my knowledge. Much of the information I knew, but the tea instructions gave good advice."²

Participants define a wide range of *Mihidiya* pur-

poses and objectives. Some view the organization's purpose as planting trees to reforest lands that "we ourselves" have destroyed, saving Dothalugala for drinking water, re-establishing the climate and developing villages. Many feel that *Mihidiya* promotes jobs that "educate us to obtain the maximum income from our lands." Residents joined, too, for such reasons as duty to future generations and achieving wider benefits for the community through employment and water conservation.

Nearly 100 percent of the beneficiaries pointed out the new, "active role" of government officials as *Mihidiya*'s greatest contribution. Farmers are of the opinion that even after the project officially finishes, the government officials will continue to come and will not return to their old ways: taking money or gifts for their duties and advice, the services they are obliged to provide as public servants. Farmers claim they will not tolerate such behavior from them after they have witnessed their behavior during SCOR interventions.

Other benefits cited were learning about landscaping and gardening, building contour walls and terraces, supply of seed paddy, collective strength and increased feelings about communal work, subsidized seedlings, meeting government officials and easier access to and response from government officials. People exchanging ideas and showing teamwork are positive outcomes. "Organizing people is a difficult thing," says one participant. "People will take anything that is free, even if it is a Tamil newspaper."

SCOR interventions in the villages of Talapelakanda

2. It is fair to say we development folk are a skeptical lot. In November as I was sharing some of my preliminary results with a fellow American development worker, he warned me that field staff prepare their "star" participants with answers to the questions most likely to be asked by an evaluation team. Since the SCOR project was evaluated in January 1995 it is quite possible that I received canned answers. However the fact that I did not have a field assistant employed by SCOR nor use any list of potential interviewees from SCOR's office increased the likelihood that I obtained more truthful comments from informal discussions.

Through education and training, SCOR hopes to strengthen the membership of Dothalugala Heritage so they internalize environmental considerations in farming practices and natural resource management.



and Beralapenatara are intensive. As mentioned earlier it is difficult to write about the success of RUGs since most of the individuals I interviewed could not identify themselves as members of a specific RUG. Rather, they claimed to be: members of Dothalugala Heritage, the local NGO and resource user organization; ones who participated in a *shramadan*³ to reforest Dothalugala Hill; or members of *Mihidiya*. Many who claimed to be *Mihidiya* members said that their names were on a list. Several did not participate in activities because they had no extra time or because *Mihidiya* activities were for poor people without jobs and land. Most residents did not view themselves as members of a separate and empowered RUG nor did they understand that many of the activities undertaken in the village had distinct projects unto themselves separate from the reforestation of Dothalugala Hill.

Market-oriented production: RUG 112 — Anthorium Flower Growing Group

Among the participants I interviewed, the members of RUG 112 had the strongest group identity. These 12 individuals, most of whom were women, were among the few who defined themselves as a group distinct from Dothalugala Heritage. They cultivated flowers in their home gardens. *Mihidiya* provided marketing assistance. The *Mihidiya*-sponsored field trip to the Royal Botanical Gardens at Peradeniya, with its short training course, gave each individual a defined sense of purpose and the expectation of fulfilling a reasonable economic goal. Members cited transportation, lack of market information, low price and small scale (limited product) as the principal problems with their effort. The group did not hold meetings. Someone

from *Mihidiya* came once a month to collect the flowers and take them to the market in Matara. Unexpected benefits from joining the group were a grant for Rs.4,000 and tools for clipping flowers. No one was exactly sure what was to be done with the fund.

Another flower-growing group had been formed in the village of Beralapenatara. I spoke with three members of the group, including the group leader. The leader had purchased subsidized seedlings from the SCOR project and seemed quite content with this service alone. It is unlikely that these individuals will re-group. Box 1 summarizes the individuals' convictions about the demise of their group.

Box 1: Participants speak out on flower growing: What went wrong and what to do about it

What went wrong:

- *Mihidiya* failed to provide fertilizer, sprayers, and insecticides
- The group leader drinks too much and is lazy and irresponsible
- As a group the membership themselves are weak; *Mihidiya* is not at fault
- The price per stem (Rs. 2) is too low; flowers are too difficult to market
- The catalyst stopped coming to encourage us

What to do next:

- It is *Mihidiya's* responsibility to re-organize our enterprise
- A former group leader is willing to take over the responsibility again if he receives financial remuneration and the group receives marketing assistance

3. *Shramadana* is the term for the traditional form of communal labor. Its origin is derived from *shrama* meaning 'labor or human energy' and *dana* meaning 'to give'. *Shramadana* was rejuvenated as a self-help village movement by Dr. A.T. Ariyaratne.

The flower-growing enterprise had no share-control aspect. Its purpose was to reduce dependency on tea by diversifying household economies, to discourage deforestation of the surrounding forest reserve for expansion of tea gardens and to provide women with an additional income source. The participants complained that Rs.2 (US\$0.04) per flower was too low. However beautiful these flowers might be, they could not compete with tea. (The price of tea continues to rise and is currently selling for Rs.18 — US\$ 0.20 — per kilogram.) If market coordination continued as it was, the project was not sustainable.

I am baffled by SCOR's introduction of an income-generating scheme that has no local market. There is not even an intermediary in the region that does business in fresh flowers. SCOR's field staff insist that there is a market. However *Mihidiya* owns the mode of transportation and controls the market information. These aspects of doing business have yet to be turned over to the production group. In some ways I do understand the rationale behind the scheme. Flowers grow quickly and labor costs are low. In a few short months there are financial returns (provided there is an outlet). These are all attributes that would induce people to join the group, thereby helping SCOR with its group-forming objective.

Agroforestry interventions

SCOR's field staff introduce soil- and water-conservation techniques into the area using agroforestry — a mix of agriculture and tree crops. SCOR's agroforestry interventions take several forms: interventions on Dothalugala Hill's upper and middle slopes, stream sides (as previously described) and private homesteads. With the exception of the latter, control of each agroforestry intervention is shared between the beneficiaries and the State.

To address shortages of drinking water in the dry season and water for cultivation year-round, Dothalugala's upper slopes boast 10,000 new seedlings planted through a program jointly organized by SCOR and Dothalugala Heritage. The upper-slope planting, meant to improve the Dothalugala catchment's hydrologic efficiency, is coupled with a prohibition on tree-felling.

Dothalugala is a state-owned forest reserve deforested in the 1960's by a government-granted private timber concessionaire. The forest reserve has been neglected by the Forest Department, which is common practice for small reserves located in remote areas where enforcement of rules and regulations is nonexistent. In recent years residents have felled timber for construction and to expand their tea gardens.

Under the SCOR scheme, the State retains full ownership of the 10,000 new seedlings and the land. The area will be maintained using *shramadana* and SCOR-granted funds to provide tools and refreshments. On the hill's middle slopes reforestation has a shared approach. Participants are responsible for reforestation and nurturing a certain defined area of the reserve in exchange for user rights to the multiple-purpose trees planted and rights to collect medicinal herbs growing within the reserve.

Participants engaged in soil-conservation measures on private homesteads are under an obligation to cultivate at least a quarter of an acre of their tea using techniques introduced for sloping agriculture. According to the mid-term evaluation team, 20 percent of the members have done so. The team suggests that participation in other SCOR activities might be distracting the remaining 80 percent from adopting the conservation measures. The farmers have ten different conservation techniques — from intermixing shrubs and



SCOR introduced flower growing as a way to help households diversify their income-generating opportunities.

grasses with shade trees to drains and stone terraces — to choose from. Along with planting techniques, emphasis is placed on organic fertilizer and mulching rather than chemical fertilizer. Farmers participate directly in the action-research component. Production (increase in tea yields) and protection (runoff) are measured by the farmer himself and reported to the SCOR field officer responsible for supervising the intervention. SCOR staff are trying to persuade The Small Holder Tea Authority to consider these biological conservation measures as an appropriate qualification for their loan and subsidy schemes.

Quantity versus Quality

RUG 102 & 102a: Udadola Reservation Planting and Nursery Groups

What is the critical mass for a group? Should there be at least 10 members? Some may argue that three active individuals are too insignificant to be considered a resource-user group. However, the three members belonging to RUG 102 of the Udadola Stream Reservation Planting and Nursery Groups understand how a group is expected to function, the importance of their endeavor and the future potential of their collective enterprise. The Udadola group operates under the same shared control aspect as will the four new groups formed in December (discussed in the field perspective section).

The permanent active members nurture their respective stream-side plantings. The reasons they gave me for weeding and keeping the area clean are “doing it for myself” and “in case a visitor comes to see.” Through responses similar to those given to the evaluation team, I found that the members, while fully cognizant of their usufruct rights to tree products, are confused about rights to timber trees such as mahogany. Farmers are uncertain whether they can harvest the timber in the future and dispose of it as they wish. Since timber trees have high income-earning potential, many participants are banking on them to provide a sizable return (Ratnayake’s formula for long-term investment and long-term expectation).

Timber may be a primary incentive for participating in and maintaining the stream-reservation project. The

team found most of SCOR’s nurseries operating efficiently; forewarning that the sustainable option for most communal nurseries begun as part of rural-development projects becomes private plant production. This may be true in Udadola’s case if the other two members stop attending poly-bag filling sessions, leaving the nursery to be run by the one member who houses it in his backyard. The last few members are struggling to keep their enterprise functioning. Box 2 summarizes their beliefs about their resource-user group.

I interviewed one former member of RUG 102 to find out why he gave up the project. This twenty-year-old youth claims to have stopped attending regular work sessions as, little by little, everyone else stopped coming. There were several occasions when he showed up for a meeting and was the only member present aside from the group leader.

“Most people do not come because meetings are a waste of time. If they were paid for their attendance then they would go,” he said. “There must be some gain although it did not necessarily need to be money.”

While others mentioned the membership benefit of having permission to purchase foodstuffs at the government-operated cooperative store, this individual apparently did not consider such a right as a benefit — if indeed he was aware of it.

Even those who continue to participate find attending meetings difficult. As one farmer put it, “Someone always complains that his child has arrived from school and is home alone or a relative needs to be taken to the hospital.” Meetings are starting to produce new feeling in the air: an atmosphere that everyone wishes to be somewhere else.

The rapid formation of resource-user groups within Dothalugala Heritage causes mixed feelings among the organization’s leadership, a small group that has a high rate of interaction with *Mihidiya* staff. Some believe that the proliferation of small enterprises is an indication of community unity. For these individuals the formation of many small separate resource-user groups with independent foci is an unexpected benefit

Box 2: Participants express opinions on stream reservation plantings and nursery work

Why they participate:

- To see if the results would be as successful as *Mihidiya* said they would be
- Trees are always useful and can be used in any way the caretaker wishes

Project weaknesses:

- All residents along the stream do not participate
- Reimbursement for seedlings sold from the nursery to the Forest Department is slow

Project’s future:

- Since *Mihidiya* has given members training they will be able to continue without *Mihidiya* assistance
- Weekly work sessions are becoming more difficult for the three members to attend

of the SCOR project. Reforesting Dothalugala was their primary expectation.

Other members feel that the rapid spread of RUGs is superficial and is meant to impress some (unknown) outsiders. The skepticism of these individuals stems from the fact that RUGs often die as soon as the names are written down on a sheet of paper. Small groups receive neither ongoing technical support nor market information, both of which would assist in strengthening groups into viable operations. "What a group does is not important," comments one. "All that is important to them (*Mihidiya*) is that the group exists. Otherwise they would not just form them (groups) and leave them."

Involvement in preservation interventions diverts time and energy away from the business of daily survival. Residents were particularly vocal about giving free labor without receiving immediate benefits. "Having to work for a living" leaves little time to plant and nurture seedlings. Older members of the community and those with families expect some type of financial remuneration, or at least subsidies, in exchange for their lost labor. Younger members are more enthusiastic about communal work. "*Mihidiya* does not believe in paying for this work," said one man involved in Dothalugala's reforestation. "We could accomplish much more if people received even a little money in return. Approximately 2,000 seedlings died on Dothalugala before they could be planted. We ran out of time that day. If we could have paid 20 people one hundred rupees we could have finished the work the following day. What is Rs. 2000 when we have enough money? However, they told us we can not spend our grant money on labor."

Forging personal relationships between beneficiaries, field staff, government officials and the social catalysts is part of the SCOR experience. The importance of maintaining the continuity of this leadership cannot be understated. Many participants believe that when staff leave the project (which of course is not always the personal decision of the individual) they are doing so because the project is a failure. "If our work was profitable, they (*Mihidiya* staff) would not leave," said one tea grower. Departure enhances the feeling of failure among the participants and lowers enthusiasm for the project.

Conclusion: Are we building and strengthening sustainable community-based institutions?

Dothalugala Hill (2,653 feet) is the highest point in the Anninkanda watershed. The priest at the local temple, along with a group of devout followers, organized the remainder of the community to confront their collective drinking water problem. The water

draining from Dothalugala Hill and its range is the only source of water for drinking and cultivation for the villages situated at its southern base. The monk and his associates arranged tree-planting days under *shramadana*, on National Tree Planting Day⁴ and on appropriate religious holidays. SCOR strengthened Dothalugala Heritage by means of a grant of Rs. 208,400 (US\$3,950) for the implementation of a production and conservation plan for the area.

If residents recognized environmental problems in the past and organized themselves to address these problems before *Mihidiya* interventions, are we wasting our time and energy forming resource user groups in the Nilwala watershed? When all is said and done I suspect that we will draw this conclusion. There is nothing wrong with strengthening Dothalugala Heritage, although that substantial user-grant will probably create more problems in the community than it will solve.

SCOR recognizes education and training as a way of strengthening communities. A community is enhanced if its members are better educated. None of the education and training sessions should be viewed as a waste of resources.

The production and protection interventions yielding private benefits over community ones are the ones most likely to sustain themselves. Community-wide benefits (soil and water conservation) will become a byproduct of shared control and private effort. Members realizing private benefits were the ones who praised *Mihidiya's* work and appeared most satisfied with the project. Those residents who were involved only in the reforestation of Dothalugala complained the most about *Mihidiya* and the formation of groups in general. If their attitude about the project does not change, it is unlikely that the seedlings will survive or that the prohibition on felling will be respected.

A British anthropologist with over twenty years of intermittent field work in Sri Lanka told me, "People in the South are individualistic and independent. They are always looking to see what their neighbor has and how their neighbor can be outdone. It is useless trying to force Southern people to work together."

Dislike for Dothalugala's existing leadership and the absence of an open forum for airing grievances, discussing future activities and exchanging information — as well as a system of accountability and for assigning penalties — hamper the organization's ability to evolve into a stable and sustainable democratic institution. There is overwhelming dissatisfaction with the current leadership. The chairman and treasurer are widely viewed as corrupt. Several members brought this fear to *Mihidiya's* attention and inquired about replacing these board

4. National Tree Planting Day, formerly on September 17 the birth anniversary of former President J.R. Jayawardene has been changed by current President Chandrika Kumaratunge to September 26, the birth anniversary of her father, S.W.R.D Bandaranaike, also a former Prime Minister.

members. This was 18 months ago. The concern has not been dealt with.

If Dothalugala's members understood that their organization was a self-governing institution they would know that they have the power (or more accurately the right and responsibility) to call a general meeting to openly discuss problems with the current leadership and suggest the possibility of electing new board members without *Mihidiya's* permission.

I was shocked when one of the founding members of Dothalugala told me that never once has the entire membership of Dothalugala convened after *Mihidiya's* November 1994 arrival in the area. The absence of such a forum mocks any legitimate system of checks and balances (accountability) and participation in decision-making. Aside from Dothalugala's core members, I found no other members who understood the organization's financial accounting system, how funds were spent, who decided how to spend funds, how much money the fund contained, etc. Being in the dark is probably one of the reasons why so many members are skeptical of the leadership.

Participants half-complained, half-voiced dejectedly that seedlings are not looked after, that areas are not weeded regularly, that common tools are used for private purposes, but that there was no impetus to do anything about it. No one felt that it was his or her responsibility to take the first step. Perhaps part of the reason is fear of "taking on" the community alone. If groups and Dothalugala assembled regularly — three or four times a year, say — people might feel more comfortable.

SCOR's hope that Dothalugala's membership will prepare a production and conservation plan for the area seems highly unlikely, since there have been no systematic exercises in planning, no goal setting, no implementation, no financial allocation and no evaluation. Statements made by participants such as, "Everything that has been requested by *Mihidiya* has been done" and "Whenever *Mihidiya* calls us, we come for work," are particularly troubling. They create the impression that RUGs are performing tasks under the direction of *Mihidiya*. Dependency is what SCOR is *not* about. When asked how similar conservation work will be undertaken after SCOR ends, answers ranged from, "I do not know" to "They have given us training so we should be able to continue."

Both USAID's Siribaddana and National Steering Committee's Ratnayake are worried about the government's and the private sector's ability to get villages to internalize the SCOR concept. It will be very difficult to internalize a concept that has no institutionalized mechanism ensuring accountability. It is rather ironic that not even *Mihidiya* is holding the groups accountable for fulfilling the evolutionary steps of becoming full-fledged RUGs.

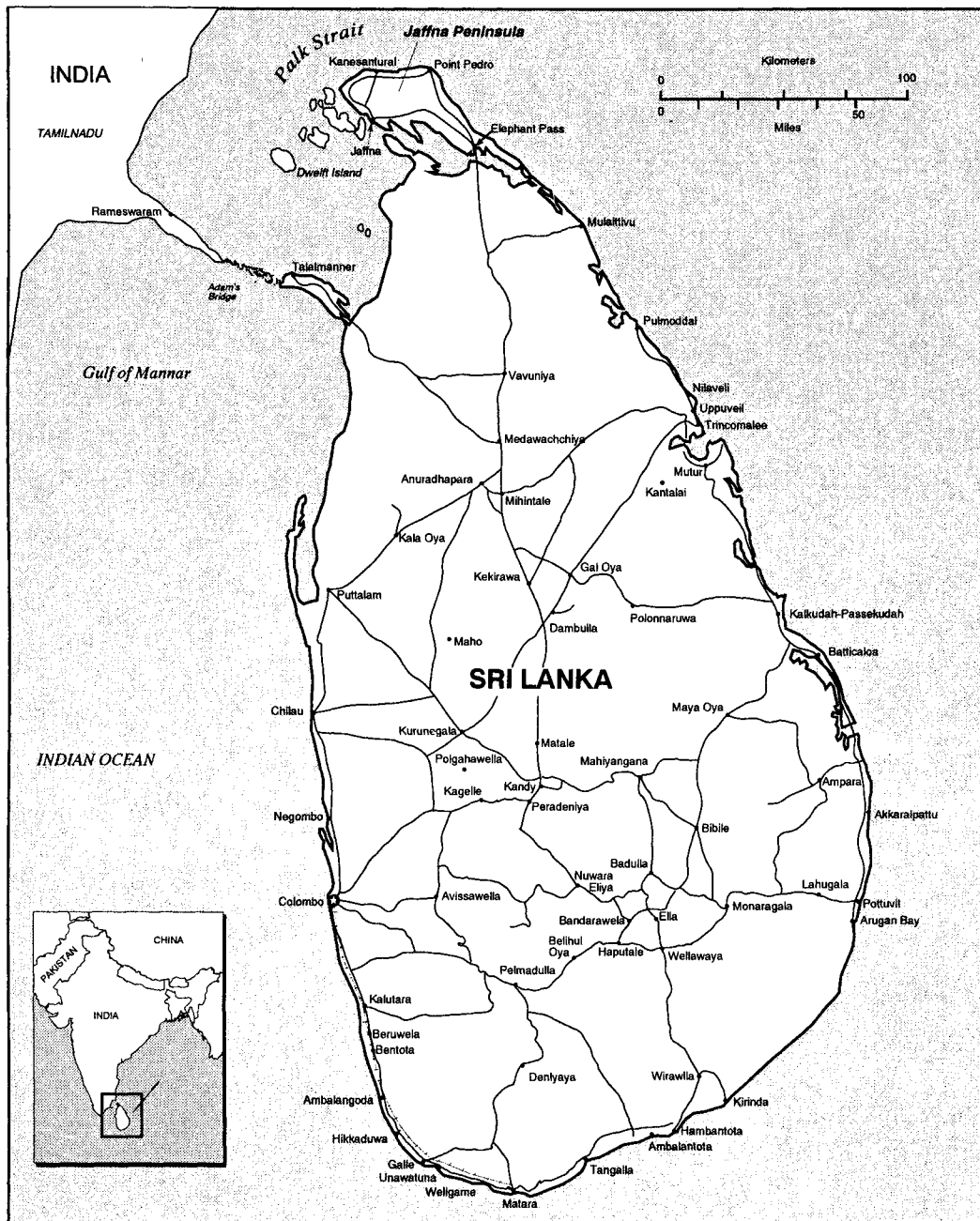
If groups are not holding meetings when SCOR is in their backyard, what would induce them to hold meetings afterwards? Members have no means of holding their leaders accountable for their actions. Even the shared-control projects have yet to define the appropriate level of "conservation" or to formalize a set of regulations and penalties if the beneficiary or the State does not uphold their respective ends of the agreement. In essence, what individual or organization is going to certify that SCOR interventions are fulfilling their biological, social and economic goals in the prescribed way once SCOR is officially over?

The community's capacity to organize labor to address community-wide problems is one that they surely cannot lose. Unless groups or Dothalugala Heritage as an organization are strengthened to make their decision-making more inclusive and to force a sense of responsibility among all the members, over time people might "revert" to their old ways. If you are *employed* by SCOR this means partial project failure. SCOR wants residents to adopt technologies that address problems before they become problems. But one woman aptly stated, "Every so often people get together and make some organization. After some time it is gone. After some more time they reorganize again."

The democratic ideals embedded in USAID's and SCOR's mission statements are contingent on good members and good leadership. Good members understand that it is their right and their responsibility to question their leaders even under the most uncomfortable of situations and often compromise their individual desires for the common group. Good leaders recognize the value of participation of community members in decision-making and holding open assemblies for people to voice concerns and constructive criticism.

If resource-user groups and Dothalugala Heritage's membership never hold meetings these objectives cannot be fulfilled. Practical, demonstrative exercises are lacking. Good provincial-level officials must show the political will to uphold national-level policy and engage in dialogue with other organizations and institutions. In SCOR's final phases it is the responsibility of everyone involved in the process to demonstrate to provincial-level leaders that they will not be "losers" under shared control.

SCOR lumped people into groups pursuing production and protection while trying simultaneously to invest in the individual. I think that this is one of the problems with the wet-zone project. There should be room for both: groups and individuals. Even with emphasis on and investment in an individual's environmental decision-making capacity, some community members may neither adopt the practices nor avoid pomposity. At those times the group apparatus is crucial for motivating these 'free-riders' of SCOR interventions and its collective industry. □



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