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Irrigation project takes off in the arid land of south-eastern Sri Lanka

I visited Sri Lanka after a three year interval in January 2002. More precisely, my destination was Hambantota Province in the arid region of the south-eastern part of the country. I was to work on the agricultural component of Walawe Left Bank Upgrading and Extension Project, which was being undertaken by the Mahaweli Authority. In recent years Sri Lanka has received less rainfall, which has resulted in constant shortages of water deposits in dams. In this season scheduled power cuts lasted for three hours every day, and this province has suffered from agricultural damage due to drought for the past three years.

Walawe River runs through the centre of Hambantota Province, some 240km away from Colombo. The history of the Walawe basin development dates back to the end of the eighth century, when the first water reserve (irrigation) system was formed by connecting small reservoirs, known as tanks, within the Walawe water system. Hydrological activities within the river basin up to the 12th century were mostly related to improvement of this system. After the 13th century most of the population in the area moved to the south-western mountain region, leaving the irrigation system to rot and collapse, and the deserted land to be covered by jungle.

In the 1960s the government of Sri Lanka initiated a project to promote resettlement and to improve the existing irrigation system in this area, and main (irrigation) canals were constructed along the entire right bank and the upper part of the left bank. In the 1970s the Asia Development Bank (ADB) started providing loan aid to the project, a move that was subsequently followed by the EU and the IWMI (International Water Management Institute, then known as the IMMI) in the 1980s. As a result an beneficial area on the right bank was increased, while slash-and-burn cultivation was still being conducted in the downstream basin of the left bank. Japan's loan aid began in the 1990s to assist with the rehabilitation and construction of some new canals in 4000ha of the upper basin of the left bank (Phase I), as well as help a new development project in 8000ha of its lower basin (Phase II). Construction of a reservoir system in Phase II began in January 2002 by the ordinary method of connecting existing small to medium-size reservoirs.

This project consists of several components apart from the engineering component to build up canals. There is an environmental component to monitor the conflict between humans and wildlife, such as elephants, as well as an agricultural component in charge of extension and training about agriculture for new settlers. The agricultural component is run by myself, together with two Sri Lankan colleagues. During my visit this time we conducted a benchmark survey by randomly selecting 335 farmers among over 1,800 already practicing agriculture within the project area. Also we were involved in preparation for the training of settlers and a demonstration farm, both of which are to start next year. The demonstration farm will be operational from this coming October. We three are determined to work hard to help realize smooth progress in canal construction and resettlement activities.

While I was in Sri Lanka, on 22nd February a truce agreement was hammered out between the government and the "Tamil Tigers"(LTTE), and peace negotiations were started. The long-term conflict may be finally coming to an end. This was a very impressive event for me, since I have been associated with this country for a long time, first as a JOCV (Japan Overseas Cooperation Volunteer) and later as a JICA agricultural expert. From now on the eastern and northern parts of the country will see further development, and vegetable cultivation in the north will start again. It may be also possible that our agricultural support activities in the south-eastern part will have to compete with those in the north. Though, of course, we still do not know to what extent the LTTE will make compromises in the peace negotiations. (By Ono, in Sri Lanka)



Interviews conducted by 15 local surveyors



Construction of canal (main 19km, tributaries 24km)