

Evaluating New Towns in the Context of Mega Projects

A Case Study of the Mahaweli Architectural Unit, Sri Lanka (1983-1989)

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Abstract

This research examines new towns constructed for the Mahaweli Development Project (MDP) — a mega dam project — begun in the 1960s, which involved a comprehensive resettlement programme that impacted approximately 1 million people, consisting of compulsory and voluntary re-settlers, and the traditional inhabitants. The key goal was sustainable agricultural reform, powered by hydro-electricity, to generate national economic stability. The initial 30 year MDP was accelerated to 6 years in 1977, and has attracted significant national and international interdisciplinary scholarship which tends to focus on the economic dimensions of the project. However, only a handful of studies examine the new towns designed by the Mahaweli Architectural Unit (MAU); a government initiative under the accelerated MDP, which designed and built 12 new towns between 1983 and 1989, from the perspective of architecture and urban design.

The research analyses the design of these new towns in relation to the principles, policies and aspirations of the MDP, and, most significantly, socio-cultural assessment reports produced at the initial stages, which were comprehensive in their scope. These reports made specific recommendations about physical planning principles, and identified concerns about the full implications of population redistribution amidst established multi-ethnic settlements in the Dry-Zone. These same reports underpinned the revised brief presented to the MAU. To evaluate the new towns in the light of these recommendations, this paper draws on archival material at the Mahaweli Archives in Colombo and recent field work in four new Mahaweli towns (Girandurukotte, Dehiattakandiya, Digana and Karalliyadda). The research is also informed by the reflective retrospective writings of the key architects of the MAU and an interview with one of them.

The research argues that the MAU embraced the MDP initiative to build sustainable new towns with a certain degree of success. The MAU, which engaged local and foreign architects, instigated a new paradigm of urban design practice in Sri Lanka. However, while the vernacular language employed sought to serve the community and promote urban growth at a rural scale, notable failures can be attributed to the apparent disregard for the detailed assessments and planning recommendations provided to the MAU, despite the rigor of the sociological reports and the architects' argument for a people-centred design approach.

With the advantage of hindsight, this research reflects on the lessons that can be learned, in retrospect, from this ambitious initiative which sought to create sustainable new towns in Sri Lanka in a period of profound political, economic and environmental change. Given the recent trend of the mega dam related resettlement programmes; increasing concern for resettled peoples and renewed emphasis on addressing sociological and environmental impacts, and the escalating number of large scale infrastructure projects in developing countries, and crises ranging from climate change to ethnic conflict — the global reality today — which force displacement, resettlement and redistribution of people, the findings of this research inform understanding of planning, design and implementation in future initiatives. This modest research renews emphasis on the importance of sociological concerns as a key dimension of sustainable development.

Declaration

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PROGRAM: **Master of Philosophy**

I certify that this work contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in my name in any university or other tertiary institution and, to the best of my knowledge and belief, contains no materials previously published or written by another person, except where due reference has been made in the text.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	<i>i</i>
<i>Declaration</i>	<i>iii</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>v</i>
<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>xi</i>
<i>List of Tables</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>List of Abbreviations</i>	<i>xvii</i>

Chapter 1: Introduction

<i>Overview</i>	1
1.1 The MAU and the History of Resettlement in Sri Lanka	3
1.2 The Context and the Scholarship	4
1.2.1 Research on the MDP and the Mahaweli Resettlements	4
1.2.2 The MAU and the Discourse of Urban Design in Sri Lanka	6
1.2.3 The MAU in Hindsight: Reflections by the Architects	7
1.3 The Gap in Knowledge	8
1.3.1 Research Questions	8
1.3.2 Aims and Method	9
1.4 Significance of the Research	10
1.5 Limitations of the Research	11
1.6 Structure of the Dissertation	13

PART I: THE MDP, MEGA PROJECTS AND RESETTLEMENT

Chapter 2: The Mahaweli Development Project

<i>Overview</i>	17
2.1 Sri Lanka and the Mahaweli River	17
2.1.1 Topography and Agro-climatic Zones	17
2.1.2 Demography	19
2.1.3 The Mahaweli River	20
2.2 The Mahaweli Project and the Resettlement Programme	22
2.2.1 Initiation, Operation and Outcomes of the Mahaweli Project	22
2.2.2 Resettlement Schemes under the Mahaweli Project	27
2.3 The MAU within the Mahaweli Project	29
<i>Summary</i>	30

Chapter 3: Theoretical Perspectives, Models and Frameworks

<i>Overview</i>	31
3.1 Cities and Towns	32
3.2 Central Place Theory	34
3.3 Impact Assessment Frameworks	38
3.3.1 Mahaweli Resettlement Surveys and Reports	39
3.3.2 Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) of the MDP	42
3.3.3 Social Impact Assessments (SIAs)	46
3.3.4 Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) Related to the MDP	48
3.4 Mahaweli Recommendations in Sociological Studies	51
3.4.1 UNDP/FAO (Barnabas) Study	53
3.4.2 Sogreah Study	55
3.4.3 Hunting Study	56
3.4.4 NEDECO Study	57
3.4.5 Some Aspects of Mahaweli Sociological Studies compared to SIAs	58
<i>Summary</i>	59

Chapter 4: Mega Dam Projects

<i>Overview</i>	61
4.1 Development Strategies: Past and Present	62
4.1.1 Early Mega Dam Projects	62
4.1.2 Mega Dams in Industrializing Countries	68
4.1.3 What are Mega Dam Projects?	70
4.2 From 'Mega' to 'Monster' projects	72
4.2.1 Dam Projects as Key Development Tools	73
4.2.2 From Good to Bad and Bad to Worse	76
4.2.3 A Controversial Debate	79
4.2.4 Current Trends	85
<i>Summary</i>	87

Chapter 5: Resettlement

<i>Overview</i>	89
5.1 Displacement and Resettlement associated with Mega Dam Projects	89
5.1.1 Displacement: Some Facts and Figures	90
5.1.2 Resettlements: Socio-Cultural, Economic and Environmental Concerns	94
5.2 Urbanisation and Rural Development: a Goal of Mega Projects	97
5.2.1 Resettlement Projects as Rural Development Instruments	98
5.2.2 Economic Opportunities in Resettlement Projects	99
5.3 Future Trends in Resettlements	101
<i>Summary</i>	103

PART II: ANALYSIS AND EVALUATION

Chapter 6: An Overview of Resettlement in Sri Lanka

<i>Overview</i>	107
6.1 State Sponsored Resettlement and Political Events	107
6.2 Resettlement and the National Policy Framework	110
6.2.1 Agrarian Development vs. Population Growth	110
6.2.2 Dry Zone Resettlement	112
6.2.3 Direction of Dry Zone Resettlement Schemes	115
6.2.4 Legal Provisions and the Process of Resettling within the Institutional Framework	117
6.3 The Physical and Socio-Cultural Parameters of the Project Area	119
6.3.1 Traditional Villages	119
6.3.2 Rural Townships	125
6.3.3 New Villages	126
6.3.4 Colonization Schemes	126
6.4 Resettlement Schemes and the Post-Colonial Planning Discourse in Sri Lanka	127
<i>Summary</i>	129

Chapter 7: The MAU and the Mahaweli Towns

<i>Overview</i>	131
7.1 The MAU and the AMP	131
7.1.1 Political Priorities and the Formation of the MAU	131
7.1.2 UlrikPlesner and the Formation of the MAU	134
7.1.3 The MAU (1983-1989) and its Operation	142
7.2 MAU Design Principles	154
7.2.1 Pre-MAU Design Principles and the MAU Response	154
7.2.2 A 'People Centred' Approach	155
7.2.3 Relationship of the MAU to the Overall Mahaweli Project	157
7.3 Physical Layout	160
7.3.1 Mahaweli Settlement Model	161
7.3.2 Models for Mahaweli Townships	174
7.4 New MAU Towns	181
7.4.1 The MAU Principles for Designing Towns	181
7.4.2 The MAU Towns	184
7.4.3 Mahaweli Buildings	205
7.4.4 Reflective Observations on the MAU Towns and Buildings	215
<i>Summary</i>	225

Chapter 8: Discussion

<i>Overview</i>	227
8.1 The MAU Design Responses in the MDP Context	228
8.1.1 Design and Concept Problems	228
8.1.2 Sociological Aspects	230
8.1.3 External Factors and Systemic Faults	234
8.1.4 Lost Opportunities	237
8.2 Significance of the MAU within the Pragmatic Architecture and Urban Design Discourse of Sri Lanka	239
8.3 Lessons Learned	245
<i>Summary</i>	247

Chapter 9: Conclusions

249

Selected Bibliography

253

*Appendix I: Interview Questions for Dr. Nihal Perera**Interview Consent by Dr. Nihal Perera**University of Adelaide HREC Approval**Appendix II: Some Facts and Figures about Mega Projects**Appendix III: World Bank Involuntary Resettlement Policies*

List of Figures

Figure 1.1	Mahaweli Development Project	2
Figure 2.1	Location of Sri Lanka	17
Figure 2.2	Topography and Agro-climatic Zones of Sri Lanka, and the MDP Area	19
Figure 2.3	Mahaweli River and its Basin, its Main Tributaries and other Main Rivers of Sri Lanka	21
Figure 2.4	AMP Area, Dams and Reservoirs	25
Figure 2.5	Settlements under the MDP	27
Figure 2.6	Mahaweli Towns	29
Figure 3.1	Ideal and Real Ranges of a Central Place Function	35
Figure 3.2	Market System of Central Places according to Christaller showing 5 of the Levels	36
Figure 3.3	Three Different Arrangements of Central Places	37
Figure 3.4	Major Reservoirs, Villus and Mangrove Swamps of the Mahaweli Basin	44
Figure 3.5	Representation of the Link between Poverty and Environmental Degradation in Mahaweli Resettlements	46
Figure 3.6	Interrelationships between Environment, Socio-cultural and Economic impacts in Mahaweli Resettlements	51
Figure 4.1	A Memoir	65
Figure 4.2	Kentucky Dam on Tennessee River in Tennessee River Valley	66
Figure 4.3	Norris Dam, United States. The First Dam Built by the Tennessee Valley Authority	67
Figure 4.4	The High Aswan Dam	69
Figure 4.5	Rate of Large Dam Building, 1950- 1986	71
Figure 4.6	Single-purpose Dams (27,982) or 71.4 % of Large Dams	73
Figure 4.7	Multipurpose Dams (9,752) or 24.9 % of Large Dams	73
Figure 4.8	Number and Purpose of Large Dams	74
Figure 4.9	Kariba Dam on Zambezi, Zambia	76
Figure 4.10	Five Key Decision Points- A Comprehensive Frame Work for Decision Making on Water and Energy Services Identified in the WCD	84
Figure 5.1	Traditional Fishing in the Xingu River, Brazil	93
Figure 6.1	Economic Activity in 1976	112

Figure 6.2	Population Density in 1976	113
Figure 6.3	Ethnic Composition in 1976	114
Figure 6.4	Migration of the Kingdoms of Sri Lanka (in Mahaweli Project Area)	114
Figure 6.5	Schematic Representation of a Dry Zone Tank Based Traditional Village	121
Figure 6.6	Schematic Representations of Different Traditional Villages: Dry Zone and Hill-country Villages	121
Figure 6.7	Traditional Dry Zone Village	122
Figure 6.8	Traditional Hill Country Village	122
Figure 6.9	Traditional Wet Zone Village	122
Figure 6.10	Rural Township	125
Figure 6.11	Settler Housing - Temporary and Semi-permanent	128
Figure 7.1	Secular Buildings - <i>Ambalama</i> and the Bridge	137
Figure 7.2	Vernacular Buildings - Dwellings	138
Figure 7.3	Vernacular Buildings - Buddhist Temples and Hindu Kovils	139
Figure 7.4	Colonial Influence	140
Figure 7.5	The MAU within the MECA Organizational Structure	143
Figure 7.6	The MAU Chart of Projects	145
Figure 7.7	The MAU Job Descriptions	147
Figure 7.8	The MAU Work Program 1	149
Figure 7.9	The MAU Work Program 2	151
Figure 7.10	Mahaweli Towns including MAU Towns	159
Figure 7.11	Townships in System 'C'	160
Figure 7.12	Types of Rural Agricultural Settlement Systems	161
Figure 7.13	Traditional Compact Housing Clusters	162
Figure 7.14	Layout Pattern of Settlement	164
Figure 7.15	Summary of Sogreah Settlement Planning Policies	164
Figure 7.16	System H - Typical Settlement	165
Figure 7.17	Diagram of the Spatial Organization of Settlements in a Region	166
Figure 7.18	MDB Standards for Infrastructure Services	167
Figure 7.19	Mahaweli Town Spatial Model	168
Figure 7.20	Distribution of Services by Rank of Centre	169
Figure 7.21	Recommended Central Places in System C	170
Figure 7.22	System C in the Mahaweli Project	171
Figure 7.23	Mahaweli System 'C' settlement	171

Figure 7.24	Proposed Layout for Town	175
Figure 7.25	Scale Comparison - Girandurukotte and Kandy	176
Figure 7.26	Girandurukotte Plan	177
Figure 7.27	Plan of Girandurukotte - Legend	178
Figure 7.28	Landscape Pattern and Road Network of Girandurukotte	179
Figure 7.29	Dehiattakandiya Plan - Proposed by the Hunting Consultants	180
Figure 7.30	Dehiattakandiya Township Plan - MAU	187
Figure 7.31	Dehiattakandiya Township - Google Maps	189
Figure 7.32	Girandurukotte Township Plan - MAU	191
Figure 7.33	Girandurukotte Township- Google Maps	193
Figure 7.34	Digana Township Plan - MAU	197
Figure 7.35	Digana Township- Google Maps	199
Figure 7.36	Karalliyadda Township Plan - MAU	201
Figure 7.37	Karalliyadda Township - Google Maps	203
Figure 7.38	Model Core House - Hunting Report	206
Figure 7.39	Low Cost Housing Proposed by the MAU	206
Figure 7.40	Experimental Core-House Built in 1984 by the MAU	206
Figure 7.41	One of Many Low Cost House Plans Prepared by the MAU	207
Figure 7.42	Typical Dry Zone Farmer's House	208
Figure 7.43	Traditional Dry Zone Housing Design	208
Figure 7.44	Mahaweli Shops - Dehiattakandiya	209
Figure 7.45	Mahaweli Shops - Plans	211
Figure 7.46	' <i>Walawwa</i> '	214
Figure 7.47	A Colonial Inspired Building, Sri Lanka	214
Figure 7.48	Dehiattakandiya Post Office Plan- Designed By the MAU	215
Figure 7.49	Welikanda Residential Project Manager's Office Designed by the MAU	215
Figure 7.50	The Main Street of a Typical Township - Dambulla Town	216
Figure 7.51	The Main Street of a Pre-MAU Township - Thalawa Town	216
Figure 7.52	The Main Street of an MAU Township - Dehiattakandiya Town	216
Figure 7.53	Distinctive and Personalised Shop Fronts	217
Figure 7.54	Unplanned Commercial Activity	218
Figure 7.55	Entrances to the Townships	219
Figure 7.56	Entrances to the Townships	219
Figure 7.57	Inappropriate or Under Used Places and Spaces in Townships	221

Figure 7.58	New Buildings, Building Modifications, Colourful Buildings not compliant with the MAU Guidelines, Observed in the MAU Towns	222
Figure 7.59	Comparison of Towns: an MAU Township, a Typical Sri Lankan Town in the Past, a Typical Sri Lankan Town in the Present and a Pre-MAU Township	224

List of Tables

Table 1.1	A Historical Overview of Resettlement in Sri Lanka	3
Table 2.1	Key Information of the AMP Sub Projects	25
Table 2.2	Statistical Data and Progress of Resettlements in the Mahaweli Systems	28
Table 5.1	Active World Bank Projects with Resettlement, including Number of People Displaced	90
Table 5.2	Distribution of Displacees by Cause of Displacement in the World Bank Projects	91
Table 6.1	Timeline of State Sponsored Resettlement in Sri Lanka	108

List of Abbreviations

AMP	Accelerated Mahaweli Project
CECB	Central Engineering Consultancy Bureau
CPT	Central Place Theory
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization
ICOLD	International Commission on Large Dams
IRN	International Rivers Network
MAU	Mahaweli Architectural Unit
MASL	Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka
MDB	Mahaweli Development Board
MDP	Mahaweli Development Project
MEA	Mahaweli Economic Agency
MECA	Mahaweli Engineering and Construction Agency
NEDECO	Netherlands Engineering Consultancy
PMU	Planning and Monitoring Unit
PWD	Public Works Department
PPD	Project Planning Division
SLFP	Sri Lanka Freedom Party
TAMS	Tippetts-Abbett-McCarthy-Stratton
TVA	Tennessee Valley Authority
UF	United Front
UNP	United National Party
UN	United Nations
UNDP/SF	United Nations Development Program/ Special Fund
USA	United State of America
USAID	United Sates Agency for International Development
WRD	World Register of Dams
WCD	World Commission on Dams