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Hydro Power is considered as a really good source of renewable energy. In here Sri Lanka, hydropower generation has some long history which has been spreading throughout few decades. Many major hydro power projects were successfully concluded in here and output of those power plants still contributing to the national electricity supply of a country in a considerable percentage. But with a time, the suitable geographical locations to establish state owned mega hydro power plants became limited and governments had to direct their attentions towards alternative ways. More disastrous alternatives came to the stage within these circumstances. Among them, coal power plants, allowing to run private owned diesel power plants are the major examples in this context. Meanwhile few cunning private companies took an advantage in this gloomy condition from suggesting to establish mini hydro power plants in Sri Lanka.

Mini Hydro Power Plants

Concept of mini hydro power plants is not bad. There are pros and cons in every phenomenon. But in Sri Lanka, the dark side is clearly visible and has taken frontline while pros has not been emerging due to the critical and strong nature of disadvantages.

Generally, advantages of using mini hydro power plants are reliable energy source, no need of reservoir, relative cost effective nature and etc. But in Sri Lanka, there is a question in national level whether we can take those advantages or not. However, to get a power for small scale industrial zone or etc. can be beneficial if the power plant is maintaining in an ecologically sustainable manner. Tool is good if you use it in better way, but if you use it in harmful way that can cause to interminable disasters.

As we consider in earlier, disadvantages are obvious from mini hydro power plants.

1. Loss of Endemic and Endangered Freshwater Species Most endemic and endangered freshwater fish and crustaceans live in natural streams that are being obstructed and diverted for mini-hydro development.
2. Destruction of Rainforests in Catchment Areas Due to construction of headrace channel, penstock, power house, workers' quarters and access roads within protected rainforest reserves and buffer zones, many areas have been recently cleared of their endemic flora.
3. Loss of Ground Water for Agriculture Due to obstruction of natural streams and destruction of rainforests, ground water reserves have significantly depleted in areas where mini-hydro development has occurred.
4. Increased Soil Erosion and Landslides Due to clearing of vegetation along river buffer zones during construction period, severe soil erosion and sedimentation has been observed.
5. Collapse of the Eco-System and Bio-Diversity The wet-zone and the central highlands of Sri Lanka hold a rich bio-diversity that is already threatened due to human activities. This beautiful but sensitive eco-system is home to the vast majority of endemic and endangered species in Sri Lanka.
6. Spread of Mosquito Borne Diseases such as Dengue due to Dried up Streams Stretches of stream from weir to tailrace channel extending up to several kilometers go dry due to mini-hydro. The resulting ditches of water devoid of native species are ideal breeding grounds for deadly mosquitoes such as dengue.
7. Impact on Tourism Sector - Loss of Livelihoods and Income The rainforests, waterfalls, streams and rivers of Sri Lanka with immense aesthetic beauty are important to the local village based eco-tourism sector.

All of these disasters are occurring because of lack of proper mechanism to supervise and estimate about

the environmental influence related with those projects. Mini-Hydro plants currently in construction are done by a handful of private companies with the aim of generating maximum profit. Current process does not involve any Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) by an independent organization. Instead, the project developer submits an Initial Environment Examination (IEE) report often biased and full of false information and the process is not open for public comments. Certain corrupt officers at CEA receiving financial benefits through mini-hydro projects immediately approve the reports with no field investigations carried out during or after construction. The average contribution of a mini-hydro project to the national grid is approximately 1 MW which is just 0.02% of total generation capacity which stands at 4,200 MW. Even if all viable waterfalls, streams and rivers are dammed for mini-hydro projects, no more than 400 MW will be added to the national grid, which is less than 5% of the estimated energy demand by 2025. The depletion of ground water will eventually reduce the capacity of mini-hydro projects thus reducing its contribution to the national grid even further. It is absolutely clear that destruction of water sources by private companies for a miniscule amount of power is not going to help solve the energy crisis at all. The repercussions to the environment and society are far greater than the benefit.

In this sense we can understand we don't need further mini hydro power plants in future Because this land can't tolerate such harassments further. In 2018 Budget (They call it as blue and green or sustainable) government has introduced many sustainable development policies. However, policies can do nothing, if in ground level they get failure. In this budget they are emphasizing about the concept of Eco Tourism. But, how can eco-tourism be promoted, if beautiful natural resources and rainforests are destroyed by mini hydro power mafia. The most recent example for this story is a Kithulgala mini hydro power plant.

Kithulgala-The Recent Example

The mini hydro project of concern belongs to the Divisional Secretariat of Yatiyanthota and lies in the village of Mahabage on the north bank of Girangkitthaoya which is a tributary of the Kelani river. Palmstone Retreat, a tourist resort is situated right opposite the said land across the river. This river is utilized by the settlements downstream and it supports a wide array of flora and fauna. The project has begun in November 2015 and according to villagers it was first initiated around four years ago and was halted due to protests by the locals who foresaw shortage of water in the river which is required for their daily sustenance. After initializing the project many environmental problems were generated by the nature of it. According to environmental Foundation Limited(EFL), there were two main problems regarding this. Clearing of streamside could cause severe erosion condition at river banks. And the second one is blasting of the rocks of banks of the stream for construction purposes can cause severe damages to the living beings of the eco system due to the loud noise, dust and other issues. From considering all these issues, In April ,2017 Rathnapura district coordination committee decided to stop the procedure of constructing the hydro power plant and they also decided not to allow any mini hydro power plant to be established within the 10 km distance from Sinharajaboarders. This Bandaara reserve at Kithulgala where this proposed mini hydro power plant, is situated within that 10 km distance from world heritage rain forest, Sinharaja. So, it was stopped. But recently the construction process has begun again in contrast with all the prior decisions.

Ecological Importance of Area

Balnopus kitulgallensis and many indigenous as well as endangered plants and animal species can be found in Kitulgala area. For an example, Devariomiconema □ the fish species can only be found in Kitulgala area. In 19th century, the scientist named as Peter Bleeker discovered this fish species and after that considered as extinct because no one saw it for a long time. But, recently researchers related with Galle Wildlife Conservation society rediscovered them. There are 39 fish species are related with this area and 21 of them are indigenous while 17 of these species are included in IUCN red data book. And that Banndara reserve is situated nearby to Sinharaja rain forest and it can be considered as a same ecological interest with respect to Sinharaja. If there is any harm to it, can pave the way to disastrous effects towards Sinharaja rain forest. And this area provided the scene for the world famous award winning film, the bridge on the River Kwai because of the natural beauty of this area.

Upcoming Disasters

If the construction process continues further, there may be many disastrous environmental impacts. When natural water flows through concrete canals and ways instead of on the soil, the humidity of the soil is vanished and surrounding rain forests will be effected. As a results of it related rivers, streams can be dried up and soil instability can lead to the landslides, similarly what happened in Neluwa and few other areas recently. Gradual depletion of the rainforest density will pave the way to atmospheric and climate changes in particular area. Lack of water resources and climate changes will directly effect to the farmers and water consumption of villagers. According to the climate risk index 2018, Sri Lanka is among the first five riskiest countries. In that context, even slide environmental change can create a havoc. Even in 2018 budget Sri Lanka is talking about the eco-tourism. That Kithulgala area has wonderful natural potential to attract the tourists and implement the eco-tourism. If we loss this natural beauty in here, that potential and value in area, can also be vanished.

Abnormal Silence and Contradictory Actions

About Kithulgala and mini hydro power plant issues there have been many public protests until now. But the Central Environmental Authority or relevant minister have been unable to address the issue in correct manner until now and even they have been unable to create some fair negotiation platform regarding this issue. Even without environmental organizations and affected villagers, they have been discussing about the mini hydro power plant owners. Mini hydro power plant issue in Sri Lanka unlike other countries has become a mafia. Billionaire business men are the people who own those mini hydro power plants in Sri Lanka. They are selling that generated electricity to the government for really unreasonable, expensive prices. To continue this process without considering environmental hazards, corrupted officers in central environmental authority supports them and it's not a secret. President Maithripla Sirisena is the minister of the environment and he delivers brave statements over environmental conservation frequently. But unfortunately many of his statements has not become realities in the groundlevel. As a minister, it is his responsibility to take a look over this mini hydro power plant issue and take some fruitful actions to prevent the harm and stop establishing further mini hydro power plants in here, Sri Lanka. Otherwise, all the rainforests and water falls will be vanished by mini hydro mafia with a help of corrupted officers.

The Way Forward

Mini Hydro Power Plants? Mafia or not?

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In 2018 budget proposals, there are many suggestions to convert the all the vehicles to electric vehicles in 2040. And also annual electricity demand is also increasing rapidly. To reach towards these targets, In Sri Lanka, there are many other renewable energy sources are available to generate the energy. Government is going to establish the wind power plant in Mannarand that can be considered as a good approach. And also, there are projects to promote the solar energy generation and can be considered as forward bias and progressive effort. Meanwhile, waste to energy projects has to be implemented rather than destroying environment from entangling with mini hydro power mafia, which has been destroying natural beauty of the country and the potentials to promote eco-tourism.

Special Gratitude to- ☐ Rainforest Protectors of Sri Lanka ☐ Organization

Galle Wildlife Conservation Society

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