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Addressing the challenge of deforestation in Sri Lanka: Potentials of sustainable forest governance through policy and institutional integration

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Abstract

As one of the world's 35 biodiversity hotspots, Sri Lanka indicates a high level of endemicity in most taxonomic groups and a considerable number of threatened species (Voluntary National Review, 2018). However, the forest cover in Sri Lanka has decreased from 40% to 29.7% during the period from 1940 to 2017 (UN-REDD, 2017). Deforestation has become a challenge due to increased population, high demand for land and major development projects. Although there are several policies to improve sustainable forest governance in Sri Lanka, certain fragmentations and clashes can be identified when they reach their implementation stage. The national level institutions such as the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation face several accountability clashes with other government institutions that consider large scale development as a top policy priority. The result is the rapid deforestation and forest degradation.

This study focuses on why the forest governance in Sri Lanka experiences certain difficulties in addressing the challenge of deforestation and explores the potentials of sustainable forest governance through policy and institutional integration. The research was based on qualitative data gathered conducting semi-structured interviews with officials and representatives of the forest-related national level institutions, provincial and local government bodies, environmental non-governmental organizations and community-based organizations. Additional data were collected observing deforestation in lowland, montane, dry zone, monsoon and mangrove forests in Sri Lanka during the year 2019/2020.

The findings suggest that the major barrier against sustainable forest governance in Sri Lanka is politically-influenced arbitrary implementation of sudden 'development' policies by the government that encourage deforestation. The forest governance policies and the forest-related institutions need to be integrated towards addressing the challenge of deforestation.

Keywords: deforestation, sustainable forest governance, policy integration, Sri Lanka

Introduction, scope and main objectives

Sri Lanka is a tropical island and a biodiversity hotspot located in a highly strategic geo political center in the Indian Ocean. This location has resulted in rising the demand for Sri Lanka's lands for large scale investment and development projects and becoming a political, economic and military battle ground of the world powers such as the United States of America, China and India. Increasing population growth of the island also has increased the demand for land aiming agriculture and housing. These tendencies have badly affected Sri Lanka's forest cover. The alarming levels of

deforestation and forest degradation on the other hand indicate the negligence of several policies at the implementation stage by the responsible institutions and officials. Several policy, institutional and responsibility clashes contribute in fueling deforestation in Sri Lanka. Moreover, the greed to confiscate lands by the politicians of the governing party and their supporters has contributed in deactivating forest policies for their own profits and benefits. Currently, the policy priorities of the government cannot be identified as forest-friendly, and contrastingly such policies work on the other way around encouraging people towards confiscating forest lands.

According to the UN-REDD (2017), the forest cover in Sri Lanka has decreased from 40% to 29.7% during the period from 1940 to 2017. New indicators show that after 2019, the forest cover in Sri Lanka has been rapidly reduced to 16.5% (Sellapperumage, 2020) due to the actions of the newly elected Executive President and the government. This will definitely affect the status of Sri Lanka as one of the world's 35 biodiversity hotspots (Voluntary National Review, 2018). Some of the forest and wildlife officials and environmentalists fight against the forest policy implementation failures of the government and put their efforts to stop deforestation. However, when most of the policy implementation mechanisms work backward, sustainable forest governance has become a challenge in Sri Lanka. Against this background, the paper explores reasons for the emerging difficulties of Sri Lanka's forest governance in addressing the challenge of deforestation. Simultaneously the paper looks for the potentials of sustainable forest governance through policy and institutional integration.

The specialty here is that deforestation in Sri Lanka does not limit to one area or to one forest type. Forest destruction is evident island wide and covers all types of forests such as lowland, montane, dry zone, monsoon and mangrove forests. Despite the policies related to sustainable forest governance in Sri Lanka, the policy implementation mechanism portrays a different picture of unsustainable forest land utilization. The research builds its arguments around Sri Lanka's contribution and connection to the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Forest Goals and the Paris Agreement. Within this wider scope, the paper aims to find reasons for deforestation and review the contradictions in the forest governance policy implementation in Sri Lanka. In further, the paper identifies the root causes of forest governance to become a policy and institutional challenge, though Sri Lanka has agreed with the sustainable forest governance mechanisms proposed at the international level.

Methodology

This research relied on qualitative data gathered based on five case studies. Following the classification of the Forest Department (CHM, 2016), five types of forests were selected for this research; lowland, montane, dry zone, monsoon and mangrove forests considering the massive deforestation took place in them. The selected forest sites were as follows:

1. Lowland – Primary forest lands belong to the Land Reforms Commission located in the surrounding of the Sinharaja Natural World Heritage site.
2. Montane – Central Highlands of Sri Lanka. This site is consisted of the Peak Wilderness Protected Area, the Horton Plains National Park and the Knuckles Conservation Forest.
3. Dry zone – Nakolagane forest area which falls under the Buddhist Temporalities Ordinance.

4. Monsoon – Nilgala Forest Reserve, a rich savannah forest with a unique ecosystem. There is a high reptile and amphibian diversity. Communities consider it as a medicinal forest and obtain non-timber forest products.
5. Mangrove – Negombo lagoon, a sensitive ecosystem consisted of several mangrove and other species, and associated with the fishery industry.

The information was gathered conducting semi-structured interviews with officials and representatives of the forest-related national level institutions, provincial and local government bodies, environmental non-governmental organizations (ENGOs) and community-based organizations (CBOs). These respondents were selected around the above mentioned five case studies and the interview schedules were mainly based on the deforestation issues happened in such forest sites. Purposive and snowball sampling methods were used to select respondents.

The respondents from the government sector, represented the Ministries of Environment, Lands and Land Development, Buddha Sasana and Religious Affairs, Economic Development, and Agriculture, Departments of Forest, Wildlife Conservation, Coast Conservation and Coastal Resource Management, and Public Trustee, Central Environmental Authority, Land Reforms Commission, Urban Development Authority, Geological Survey and Mines Bureau, National Gem and Jewellery Authority, District and Divisional Secretariats, local government bodies and Police offices in selected sites. The respondents from the ENGOs at the national and local level and the CBOs that involved in struggles against deforestation in the above mentioned forests were also interviewed. Altogether there were 29 respondents.

Additional data were collected observing deforestation in the selected forest sites during the year 2019/2020. Simultaneously, acts, circulars, national policy documents, strategic plans, news and media reports related to forests were examined to triangulate the collected primary data. The data have been classified under a few themes and analyzed subsequently following the research problem and the relevant literature.

Results

This research examined why the forest governance in Sri Lanka experiences certain difficulties in addressing the challenge of deforestation, and explored the potentials of sustainable forest governance through policy and institutional integration. It is evident from the policy documents and the statements of the respondents that Sri Lanka has certain agreements with the international level sustainable forest governance programmes such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, Global Forest Goals and the Paris Agreement. In line with the sustainable development goals, the government of Sri Lanka initiated the 'Wana Ropa' national tree planting programme through the Ministry of Mahaweli Development and Environment. This programme was designed to address the issue of rapid declining of the forest cover. The programme intended to increase the forest cover to 32% by three years during 2016-2018 in district and divisional secretariat levels within the island. The programme included various activities such as increasing the forest cover and the quality of the forest cover, conserving biodiversity and natural ecosystem, utilizing waste lands for tree planting, and promotion and management of commercial forest cultivation (News.lk, 2015).

Following the Paris Agreement, in 2017, the same Ministry introduced 'A Blue Green Era programme' and continued for three years till the government defeated in 2019. The government aimed a 'Blue – Green Economy' by utilizing resources in both Ocean and terrestrial for sustainable development (Programme Book of Sri Lanka Next, 2017). However, the obtained progress of these programmes has been reversed when the newly elected Executive President has released forest lands for investment and development projects in 2019.

Sri Lanka has a large number of forest-related policies, plans and institutions. Forest Ordinance, No. 16 of 1907 (now Forest Conservation Ordinance), Fauna and Flora Protection Ordinance, No. 2 of 1937, National Heritage Wilderness Areas Act, No. 3 of 1988, National Environmental Act, No. 47 of 1980, Coast Conservation Act, No. 57 of 1981, Fisheries and Aquatic Resources Act, No. 2 of 1996, Marine Pollution Prevention Act, No. 59 of 1981, Antiquities Ordinance, No 9 of 1940, Plant Protection Act, No. 35 of 1999, Soil Conservation Act, No. 25 of 1951, Felling of Trees (Control) Act, No. 9 of 1951, Mahaweli Authority of Sri Lanka Act, No. 23 of 1979, Urban Development Authority Law 1978, Water Hyacinth Ordinance, No. 9 of 1909, National Zoological Gardens Act, No. 41 of 1982, Botanic Gardens Ordinance, No. 31 of 1928, Mines and Minerals Act, No. 33 of 1992, Irrigation Ordinance, No. 32 of 1946, Control of Pesticides Act, No. 33 of 1980, Municipal Councils Ordinance, No. 29 of 1947, Water Resources Board Act, No. 29 of 1964 and Sri Lanka Land Reclamation and Development Corporation Act, No. 15 of 1968 are some of the major policies related to forest governance in Sri Lanka (NBSAP, 2016). To implement these policies there is a large number of government institutions such as ministries, departments, authorities, boards and bureaus. These have different levels of powers and responsibilities.

There are national policies and plans brought by governments from time to time aiming better implementation of forest governance policies. National Conservation Strategy 1988, National Environmental Action Plan 1991, Coastal Zone Management Plan 2006, National Forest Policy 1995, Forestry Sector Master Plan 1995, National Wildlife Policy 2000, National Policy on Solid Waste Management 2002, National Environmental Policy 2003, National Biodiversity Strategic Action Plan 2016-2022, National Watershed Management Policy 2004, National Wetlands Policy 2004, National Biosafety Policy 2005, National Implementation Plan for the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants 2006, National Policy on Elephant Conservation and Management 2006, National Land Use Policy 2007, National Policy on Climate Change 2012, and National Policy on Sand as a Resource for the Construction Industry 2006 are some of those policies and plans.

The large number of policies and institutions in Sri Lanka indicates the complexities of policy implementation. A major point arisen from the respondents was the policy and accountability clashes among many institutions when a responsibility has not given to one institution. On the one hand, officials could easily ignore responsibilities and politicians could misuse policies and institutions for their own profits. On the other hand, forest governance cannot be guaranteed as a smooth mechanism when there are several clashes and loopholes in the policy process.

When considering the case studies in this research, the above mentioned clashes and conflicts were evident. In Sri Lanka 80% of lands belong to the state. These lands are supposed to be protected and managed by government authorities such as the Land Reforms Commission, Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation. The Sinharaja World Heritage site is under the Forest Department, but the surrounding primary forest lands belong to the Land Reforms Commission. As these primary forest lands have not been declared as protected areas, the government could decide to distribute them for investments or large scale development projects at any time ignoring the

conservation purposes and rich biodiversity in these lands. Constructions and human encroachments have resulted in destruction and degradation of precious ecosystems in such primary forests (Karunaratne & Akurugoda, 2019). When the pressure comes from the government politicians, most of the forest and wildlife officials remain silent.

The next case study of the montane forest in the Central Highlands of Sri Lanka that consisted of the Peak Wilderness Protected Area, the Horton Plains National Park and the Knuckles Conservation Forest faces severe threats due to government-sponsored human encroachments. This forest area is a habitat for many endemic and threatened species including leopards (*Panthera pardus kotiya*). During the colonial era, most of the montane forests were destroyed for tea plantations and hence there are very narrow strips of such forests remaining. Although the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation are responsible to protect these forest lands, the officials support the political upper hands by not taking actions against the encroachments of these precious forest lands (Newshub.lk, 2021 and Rainforest Protectors, 2019).

The selected dry zone forest in this research was the Nakolagane forest which falls under the Buddhist Temporalities Ordinance. Despite of more than 500 elephants inhabited in this forest and many lakes and elephant corridors, the chief Incumbent of the Nakolagane temple has leased forest lands for businessmen (Rathnayake, 2021). According to the National Environmental Act, No. 47 of 1980, conversion of forests covering an area exceeding one hectare into non-forest uses is prohibited. But the responsible Central Environmental Authority has given permission to the temple to lease the forest lands and provided an environmental impact assessment (EIA) report. The ENGO and CBO respondents noted that when the responsible officials are corrupted and the Buddhist monks get political powers, the forest lands can be destroyed without caring the law.

Nilgala is a protected monsoon forest which also known as a medicinal and a savannah forest. The respondents mentioned that this forest is under threat due to high levels of human encroachment for cattle ranching, chena cultivation and agriculture. Both the Forest Department and the Department of Wildlife Conservation are responsible in protecting this forest, but the land confiscations cannot be stopped in this area due to the influences of government-sponsored political upper hands (Dailymirror.lk, 2020 and Mendis, 2019).

A government minister proposed to destroy the mangrove forests adjoined to the Negombo lagoon to build a playground without concerning its environmental value and rich biodiversity. When a responsible forest official in the area did not agree to release the land highlighting the importance of mangrove forests, the said minister and his supporters threatened such official (Newsfirst.lk, 2020). This resulted in building a public arena to talk about the issue and public protests emerged. Hence the government hesitated to confiscate such mangrove forest. This shows if the responsible officials could strictly implement policies, the political influences can be kept at bay.

The ENGOs and activists have been involved in protesting and filing cases requesting environmental justice. Even in these cases the government politicians influence the courts and rarely could receive justice. The CBOs face threats from political upper hands and the policy makers and government officials never obtain local knowledge in forest governance.

The findings of this research indicate that despite of many policies and institutions, the major barrier against sustainable forest governance in Sri Lanka is politically-influenced arbitrary implementation of sudden ‘development’ policies by the government. Though there are officials dedicated to their duties and responsibilities towards protecting forests, life threats and financial barriers have

resulted in demotivating and reversing most of them. The policy and institutional complexities, clashes and overlaps also can be identified as a weak point in forest governance in Sri Lanka.

Discussion

The research revealed that the major problem in Sri Lanka's forest governance is the complex and multiple policy and institutional mechanism. Although there are several policies and institutions, there is no network or integrity between them. Most of the time the policies clash and the institutional responsibilities overlap at their implementation stage. Multiple institutions have resulted in high levels of negligence and irresponsible and ignorant service records of officials. Corruption reaches its higher levels when the businessmen and investors want to confiscate forest lands and offer large amounts of financial bribes to silent the responsible officials.

The involvement of political upper hands in forest governance has resulted in releasing lands for commercial purposes. The responsible officials have been threatened and transferred when they disagreed with political decisions. Most of these decisions are not eco-friendly or conservation-oriented. Politicians only think about their profits. Hence they never care scientific evidence. They think that the forests are useless and therefore, they should be confiscated and cleared for investments. This mentality of the politicians and their supporters brings a great risk to forests.

As Sri Lanka has connected with international agreements and programmes such as the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals, the Global Forest Goals and the Paris Agreement, some governments tried to formulate and implement forest governance policies in line with such agreements. These attempts declined when the newly elected Executive President and the new government started encouraging forest land confiscations. It means that if a government could direct forest governance in a right way, the officials and institutions could manage in continuing with them. The weakness, however, is the change of policies and their implementation according to the political changes of the government.

Still the protests to protect forests are taking place all over the island by the environmental activists and CBOs. However, there is no integration between these organizations. Most of the communities lack the knowledge and awareness about the importance of forests, existing environmental laws and the policy process. When the deforestation is rapid and government-sponsored and when the forest governance policies and institutional mechanisms are too complicated, partial and controlled by politicians, it is difficult to achieve success in sustainable forest governance in Sri Lanka.

Conclusions

The findings of this research indicate that forest governance policies and forest-related institutions have not been networked or integrated in Sri Lanka. The complex mechanism of policies and institutions has further complicated forest governance. Policy and institutional clashes are prominent and this has resulted in building a path to corruption and illegal confiscation of forest lands for investments. The major problem is that the government's political support over deforestation through threatening and suppressing officials. This trend of the government

encourages officials to remain in silence by not taking actions against deforestation and to accept corrupted money of the businessmen. Against this background, the programmes initiated by the previous government in line with the international environmental agreements have been declined and there is no way to force the new government to continue with them.

Although the environmental activists, ENGOs and CBOs campaign in protecting forests and directing forest governance to a right path, they do not have integrated strategies. The isolated campaigns to protect individual forest areas are insufficient to build a strong environmental movement against deforestation in Sri Lanka.

To address these issues and to implement sustainable forest governance, it is needed to review the conflicting and overlapping policies and institutional mechanisms and then to find possible ways to integrate and network them. Simultaneously, the ENGOs, CBOs, activists and communities who have a same aim to protect forests should get together towards building a powerful environmental movement strengthened with knowledge, skills and sense of national and international socio-political and economic discourses.

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