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Sri Lanka: Mahawelli Authority - Decentralisation and basin management 2003

- International Office for Water - Cooperation - International actions - Integrated water resources management (IWRM) -

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For more than a thousand years, the Authorities that have succeeded themselves on the island have wished to control the too abundant rainfalls during monsoon and insufficient water resources outside the monsoon. The result has been a water-related civilisation whose best modern example is the "Mahawelli Authority of Sri Lanka" (MASL).

This institution covers 40% of the island territory: large hydraulic works, water storage, hydropower, regulation, distribution, conveyance of raw water, irrigation, collection, processing and commercialisation of agricultural products, providing of fertilisers, seeds and phytosanitary products, schools, recreational facilities and even cemeteries were built and are managed in a centralised manner.

Flow regulation is guaranteed by an outstanding network of canals and subterranean tunnels that connect the main rivers of the Eastern and North-Western part of the island to the south.

But, after decades of development, the MASL is still not able to get energised.

Under the impulse of the World Bank, a huge programme started for transforming the Authority: new distribution of tasks, subcontracting of secondary tasks, decentralisation of decisions and the billing of the water service will be needed on the short term, even only to enhance the work that has been carried out for so many years.

Decentralisation of the management of the various interconnected basins has been initiated. To be careful, the people in charge firstly selected a consistent sub-system, the Kala Oya basin, North West of the island. They insisted on **the creation of a new pilot body, the Kala Oya Basin Organisation (KOBO)**.

This new organisation, originating from the central office, is still different. Although it has lost its economic and development role, it has gained that of environmental developer. It should, above all, have a decentralised decision power involving the civil society. A pilot Basin has started to learn how to operate.

In 2003, the World Bank requested to IOWater-INBO an evaluation of the proposed reforms and a transfer of experiences. Two French experts went to Sri Lanka and their assignment dealt with legislative, institutional and organisational aspects:

- **the draft water law which was being submitted to the Parliament** still included some seeds for conflicts and dysfunction;
- the planned organisation did not seem to specify enough the responsibilities of each party concerned, nor the effective implementation of the needed co-ordination, in particular **the responsibilities and powers of the Basin Committee**.
- The planning and programming of projects did not rely enough on the regulation demand approach. They were made difficult by the weaknesses of the economic indicators used. Communication about the projects is still insufficient.

At the end of the mission, they submitted their findings and suggestions in the form of a comprehensive report which was very well evaluated and used by World Bank supervision mission.