

# Hydrosolidarity in Sri Lanka's Pinga Oya Basin

## Women Take the Initiative to Bridge Religious and Ethnic Divides

**SIWI's call for hydrosolidarity within a river catchment is taking on a new and innovative meaning in Sri Lanka, where NetWater (Network of Women Water Professionals), a grass roots organization led by Ms. Kusum Athukorala, has stressed the importance of intergenerational equity for sustainable development of water resources.**

In particular, NetWater's current action platform, the Women, Water and Wisdom Program, has through its youth and water awareness program promoted water literacy and hydrosolidarity among secondary school children in a critical catchment of the country's Mahaweli River and its main tributary river, the Pinga Oya.

### Physical and Ethnic Tensions

The Pinga Oya flows through the highly populated multi ethnic areas of Akurana and Poojapitiya DS divisions. This catchment has a diversity of economic activities including industries which cause pollution such as paddy mills, saw mills and factories. There are also considerable encroachments of the Mahaweli reservation along Pinga Oya, which is heavily built over. Raw sewage is discharged into the river – a major health hazard, since the same water is used for bathing and washing. In addition to causing 100 cases of typhoid in one year, uncontrolled pollution has also led to problems at Polgolla dam and tunnel. Indiscriminate filling of paddy lands has not only reduced food production capacity but also given rise to flooding.

The Pinga Oya's history of environmental degradation is due to a combination of politically supported encroachments on the river, an increasingly negative attitude of the community towards the Pinga Oya, (once the source of life, now treated as a sink and dumping ground) and the corresponding negligence of regulatory authorities.

For the first time in recent history there has been a recent flare up of ethnically related tensions among the Muslim and Sinhala communities in the Central region. While this disturbance has its roots in political divides, it points to the need to reduce and eliminate further possible tensions which

may arise in the multi-ethnic catchment.

"The Pinga Oya area has not been directly affected by this ethnic tension yet, but there is nevertheless a disruption of pre-

vious harmony between the two groups and upstream-downstream tensions are exacerbated by the environmental crisis," says Athukorala.



Children record the condition of the river through transect walks.



Inter-ethnic groups of stakeholders discuss a plan to save Pinga Oya.



Construction of houses from both banks almost obliterates Pinga Oya, and river constriction causes major flood damage.



The Honorable Gamini Jayewickreme Perera, Cabinet Minister for Irrigation and Water Management studies an environmental message board with Ms Kusum Athukorala, Founder and President, NetWater.

### Water as a Catalyst for Cooperation

Quoting srwi Professor Malin Falkenmark, Ms. Athukorala says NetWater's grassroots Jala Hamuwa ("Water Meeting") program is seeking to make water "the catalyst for cooperation rather than a cause for conflict." Mobilization and action by students in the Pinga Oya catchment have helped change

attitudes and behaviors in the Sinhala-dominated upstream communities and the Muslim-dominated downstream areas in the Pinga Oya watershed.

"This was set within a culturally sensitive framework of action," says Ms. Athukorala. "Bilingual multiethnic programs sought to mobilize the children as conduits

for water-related development information to the community."

### Youth Support from Below; Political Support from Above

A special mobilization effort was required to make the more conservative Islamic schools enthusiastic about the Jala Hamuwa programs. A leading school for girls in the area, the Akurana Muslim Balika Maha Vidyalaya, aided NetWater in the effort. There, in August 2002, the first outreach program for parents (who were encouraged to attend by the students) in Pinga Oya drew 627 participants.

In addition, a critical turning point for NetWater was achieving the personal support of Hon. Gamini Jayewickreme Perera, Sri Lanka's Cabinet Minister of Irrigation and Water Management. Here, NetWater achieved the Hague's World Water Vision's objective of "Accessing Political Decision-makers (APD)."

With pressure from above, the local bureaucracy was encouraged to take steps that, for the first time, stopped a construction project from encroaching on the river bed. Other successes include:

- The local government's decision to formally demarcate the river reservation
- A survey of the encroachments and a report on causes and consequences of flooding
- Private sector sponsorship for a series of environmental message boards building on religious texts to be set up on the banks of the Pinga Oya
- Support from local religious leaders and educators

Most importantly, the Jala Hamuwa meetings have become a rallying point for concerned citizens in Akurana who had opposed environmental degradation, particularly those who had initiated legal action (albeit unsuccessful) against illegal construction on the river bed.

Now that NetWater's initiative has set in motion a combination of political commitment propelling an energized bureaucracy and, to a certain extent, a more conscientious community, the next step will be the setting up of a multi-stakeholder dialogue within the catchment to carry out the necessary remedial action.

"Much more effort will be needed before the strangled river flows free again for the children, but a good beginning has been made," says Ms. Athukorala.

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