

Colombo Port City – dispossession comes from the sea

Sound of protest: Colombo Port City Against Work¹

Narrator: In January 2016, fisherfolk, civic rights activists, religious leaders and concerned citizens took to the streets of Colombo in Sri Lanka. They were protesting against the construction of the Colombo Port City, a project by the state-owned Chinese company CCCC, part of the One Belt One Road initiative.

As well as expanding the port infrastructure, the plans involved the construction of a new financial district and special economic zone to be built on a large area of reclaimed land next to Colombo's existing waterfront. The People's Movement Against Port City organised a range of actions, as well as a fisherfolk hunger strike. The group demanded the suspension of the controversial project, alleging the severe environmental, social and political implications for coastal communities and whole marine areas.

Sound of corporative presentation of the project

"At the crossroad of the east, on the shore of the Indian Ocean, a new city is rising. Port city Colombo is jointly developed by CCCC a fortune 500 company and the government of Sri Lanka. It is a single largest foreign direct investment in this country"

"With new commercial legislation modelled after British laws, coupled with preferential tax, customs, immigration, regulations and other attractive policies, Port City Colombo will attract top multinational corporations and global talent. Port City Colombo has adopted the latest sustainable city concepts with emphasis on people-friendly environment."²

Narrator: "The reality is a bit different. If this project inspires optimism for some, instilling fantasies of a Sri Lankan Singapore, for others it marks a disturbing new order of accelerated dispossession.

The master plan connects the new financial city with Fort – the business district and former headquarters of Portuguese, Dutch and later British colonial power. The plan, which took inspiration from the colonial era, is not in development yet, but is already displacing some urban communities. In the nearby neighbourhood Slave Island, threats of erasure are already knocking at the door. This has triggered local activists to engage in building up community and artistic resistance, as in the case of the young artist collective "We are from here".

Meanwhile, outside of the city, the massive reclamation of land from the sea, necessary for creating the 665 acres of soil for the Port City project, which was completed in 2019, is strongly impacting the livelihood of fishing communities.

Herman Kumara, founder of the National Fisheries Solidarity Movement of Sri Lanka, explains the costs of this sand mining:"

Herman Kumara "Along this coast of Negombo to Colombo, many places are been damaged. In certain places there is a natural barrier, the riff. Because of the sand mining the riff is been damaged and it is falling down and this is definitely affecting the land. Even today several families, their life have been destroyed, I mean their place has been destroyed, their houses and their properties, which will be increased in the future. It could be very serious when they continuously take the sand. So we are living here, this is the coast; the sea goes like this; when we excavate and we mine the sand from this place, the sand will be replaced gradually from here. You see? Currently we cannot see it with our eyes, but fisher people can see it, because they are the people who are going there. Many of the fishermen are saying that this is happening so they say this will be a very serious effect in the future. Gradually this place will be washed away. So people will be moved inside or they don't have any other place where to leave. So fishing of course is one part that affects right now. Gradual sea erosion is taking place right now, which displaced families around this land area but this will be more serious when this whole land will be taken away. So that is the danger. The sand mining will

¹ Civic protests, Colombo, April 5, 2016. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Vr67ASNxpYk&t=125s>

² Collage of commercial, corporate videos of Port City Colombo. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ywtBQ9bfY0g>
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IDWwk024fHE>

be continued several years so the sea erosion will be very serious. So companies need to refill, replace the area with sand, so in the future also the sand mining will be going on. At present they got 16million cubic meters to fill the area and they want to go further in the country, which will damage the environment, the income of the people, and their livelihood.”

Narrator “NAFSO works for peace and sustainable development in fishing communities around the country, but also with women’s groups, youth, plantation workers, small farmers and factory workers. As Kumara says, such large-scale sand mining risks destroying the western coast of Sri Lanka, including the marine ecosystem and its coastal communities. This is also harmful for different coastal economic sectors, as the extraction of sand is altering the seabed, and destabilizing the dynamics of the waves crashing onto the shore.

Sand mining transfers a finite resource from one dimension into another, from the local maritime commons to the transnational private urban space. Since the beginning of Port City project construction, some coastal areas have been swallowed by the sea, with fish catches declining. At the Negombo fish market the impact is already visible.”

Sound recording of the Negombo fish market

Subashini Deepa (SD): “We know now, we met some fishermen that are suffering and crying. We ask why, what is the reason, that time they told [there is] not enough fish in the sea. We cannot find any, especially prawns, not enough to fish and they cannot sell it, so economically they are down.”

Narrator: “Subashini Deepa is the coordinator of Sri Vimukthi, or “fisher women liberation”, a grassroots organisation.”

Francesca (F): “do you know how many people are gonna be affected by this plan?” SD: “port city? We collected data, in Kalpitiya 100 families were totally damaged. F: So they have been displaced and they lost their job. SD: yes F: so what are they doing now? SD: we asked that question. At that time they told: we cannot go to the sea, so they said we need to go out of the country and other fisherman go to day small jobs, tuk tuk. Fisherwomen they went to factory.”

Narrator: “Sri Vimukthi has an office in Negombo, where fisherwomen and fishermen meet to discuss the challenges they are facing. Subashini is monitoring the changes affecting fishing families.”

E: “What changes are you seeing?” Fisherman talking. Translation “He mentioned the kind of fish, oraba, gorea, moda, kosa, he mentioned the big fish that have died”.

E: “And for women? How is it?” SD: “They’re also living under the poverty because if they don’t find money they cannot manage their families, especially children, so at that time they take loans from the bank and they sell jewellery so they take money and they maintain their families, otherwise they cannot live. Other politicians are not concerned so we need to raise their demands and forward and take the dialogue. E: And what does your organisation do for helping? SD: We conducted some training, dry fish making, put their shops, so they earn through their job so they manage their families. Other women are suffering, they went to another job, like labour, factories, they went.”

Narrator: “The association was born in 2001 when some fishermen were arrested for fishing in Indian waters; their wives joined and worked hard on their release. After their liberation, these women continued to extend their solidarity network, engaging in advocacy and policy, and centring women’s leadership – fundamental for alternative micro-economies in times of crisis. Right now they are at the forefront of the protest against the Port City project.”

SD: “In the beginning, beginning meaning 2015, fishermen started the big protest. Catholic bishop took the compensation and they kept quiet. So after that, two years later, fisherwomen took the leadership, so this is our civil society, environmentalist and Herman. So we took signatures, saying – we are against this project, please stop – and we submitted it to the fisher minister; we called for some protests in front of the fort. Especially fisherwomen, every month they came on the road and the told “Stop port city!” every month they’re raising their voice” E: “And they come from everywhere or just from Negombo?” SD: “No, Negombo but I have identified ten places, fisherplaces. Same time, same day, they come to the road, they come to the road, they get together and they raise their voice.

Narrator: “As of today, the landfilling of the area where the Port City should rise has been completed. After this first step, a main demand of Sri Vimukthi and its allies is to use this space for forestation instead of skyscrapers. Their struggle is not only against the port city itself, but the related effects that are exacerbating resource extraction, threatening food production and livelihoods.”

Herman Kumara: “We saw this project coming from the government since 1977, that is the time when neoliberal policies were introduced into the country. Aquaculture as one of the major area of focus for export, it happened to be an exporter oriented country and in 1993 the whole country declared the export process and so on, this means liberalise all the economy, land, water and also labour and everything possible. One of the major situations was with the environment, the damage of the environment was serious and was really affecting the life and livelihood of communities, because it reduced the fish catch and polluting the water, the income was drastically reduced and the conflict between communities went up. So there were several project that came such as the Negombo lagoon seaplane project and some of the areas declared for aquiculture and so on and use the coastal area for tourism project, declaring many funds for industrial development. Within that context the port city project came in because the government wanted to develop a financial-city, attract investor to the country and they wanted to build up land, which is controlled by their own means. This means there is no clear rule governed by the country but it is still to be developed or introduced.

According to the constitution or the law of the country, when there is a new land area reclaimed, this should be signed by the president of the country. The agreement it is not done by the president itself, it was done by the chair person of the Port Authority of the country, which is illegal, this is one of the major concern because it is not done according to the law. The second thing is that if there is such a land to be developed, there should be a study EIA, this has not been done for the area and for the country, it was not at all consulted by the people. The third thing is that if such landmass is being built, it should be governed by some legal system but until now it has not been drafted or enacted, so we don't know it this belong to China or Sri Lanka or municipality of Colombo City, so nobody knows how it is going to be governed, so no EIA, no legally signed, no clear governing system.

The sea mining is not the only adverse effect for the country. We know this port will be part of the Belt and Road Initiatives that goes to many parts of the world, in that context this is not only damaging to fishing people but to the rest of the country, in terms of sovereignty. The similar type of development project supported by China in Hambantota harbour, we got some loan to develop that harbour. Last year it was supposed us to pay the first instalment, which we could not pay. In that, China said, ok you are exempted to pay the first instalment but you give the land, so 15000 acres of land has been given to China as part of the first instalment. So in a similar way, when we need to pay back the loan with Colombo Port City, we don't know what will happen next because they will ask give me some are of land from Colombo or somewhere for us to release you from the instalment. By 99 years later government can claim it back. The way we are moving ahead... It should be kind of a miracle that we will have the money to... Unless there is a revolution and we say no you are not allowed to enter our country; these countries are globalised, so you need to be cooperative with other at anytime, so in that context you cannot live in a isolated way, you cannot say no, we don't give you the land back after 99 years and so on, but it could be an extension. Again 99 years maybe, so 180 yeas, we dont how.

F: So this is a sort of invasive debt trap...

R: of course, China is trying to develop its imperialism through the Belt and Road Initiative. It happened to many other countries, no so this is our turn. They also say they have an historic root, called Silk Road, so they want to come back to that glory again.”

Narrator: “The possible jurisdiction emerging from the Colombo Port City project raises questions of sovereignty. When debt is translated into material control, issues of sovereignty become a matter of security, and asymmetry of power relations.

The issue of sovereignty goes beyond owning and governing the port and the area reclaimed from the sea; the development of related infrastructures encourages a change in the country's property laws, anchoring what some call “modernisation” into the national land regime. This entails undermining the national restrictions for foreigner investors to buy land, in a country where 80% of its population is rural. In this way, the geopolitical dimension is materialized through physical geographical transformation.”

Herman Kumara: “The national physical development plan, shows many so called infrastructure development projects. It shows some ports, some domestic airports, highways, 5 industrial zones, which connect with highways, which are connected with Asian super highways, through Dhanushkodi – Rameswaram, the ancient historic Hanuman bridge. In such development activities going on according to the national physical planning, Gawalmundi is trying to restructure the land policy also, because it helps to develop land policy through the MCC Millennium Challenge Cooperation agreement which Gawalmundi is trying to sign with US, which the previous government attempted to sign but they rejected because of the opposition. Giving the permits to own them, which will be one step for the owner to sell the land. One of biggest issue of the country is that rural poverty depends from companies. So they pay interests daily, weekly or monthly, which they cannot pay the loan back, and ultimately the land belong to these companies. What I want to highlight is that the rural land could be sold out to the companies. The companies would use it for mega-scale development projects, so that’s the logic. That’s the whole idea, because they want the documents, they want to make it competitive, they want to give the ownership and finally you are already indebted, but maybe you can sell out this land for a small amount of money. So with the national physical plan been implemented the people become landless and they will only be labour, so they go to the city searching some jobs and they become slam dwellers.

E: Whats your hope for a change?

Herman Kumara: That’s a good question. International solidarity is very important because the root of the issue that we are facing in Sri Lanka is not only rooted here; it is rooted in many ways in many other countries. We have to address those issues collectively; we cannot overcome the problem as a country. Maybe if we have a very strong organisation or movement you can face the country situation, but in one you can face the project here but maybe the same project is from somewhere else, from the same country in some other way. As a global runner, you need to fight globally. That’s why we need to have this global movement working together.