

State-Citizen Relations and Political Patronage in Water Politics

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Abstract

This study examines how political patronage reshapes state-citizen relations in water through the Deduru Oya Water Development Project in Sri Lanka. The research aims to examine how political affiliations and patron-client relationships influence access to water, state decision-making, and the broader quality of citizen engagement in water governance. The study adopts a qualitative approach, with fieldwork conducted over seven months in the Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat of the Kurunegala District. Data was collected through 40 semi-structured interviews and 20 case studies. The study applies three theories: political ecology, patron-client theory, and hydro-hegemony. The findings reveal significant marginalization of resettled communities, including landlessness, economic instability, and inadequate compensation. Citizens' voices were often excluded from decision-making processes, and public protests were suppressed, indicating a weak state-citizen relationship. Political actors exploited water development projects as tools to gain and maintain power, thereby reinforcing patronage networks. Additionally, the absence of formal, inclusive policies exacerbated governance failures, leading to resource conflicts and social disintegration. The study highlights that water politics in Sri Lanka extends beyond resource management to become a field of political contestation, where patronage and unequal power relations shape outcomes. It calls for more transparent, participatory, and rights-based approaches to water governance to promote equity and strengthen state-citizen trust. The

study highlights unequal water access, inadequate compensation, and the use of water as a political tool to secure votes, illustrating how political patronage shapes state–citizen relations.

Keywords: state-citizen relations, political patronage, water politics, Sri Lanka

Introduction

Water politics in South Asia is increasingly recognized as shaped not only by hydrological and technical concerns but also by political power, competing interests, patronage networks, and unequal access to resources. Water politics in Sri Lanka, particularly in the context of large-scale development projects, reveals deep-seated dynamics of power, patronage, and state-citizen interaction. Although water is conceptualized as a public good, one which all enjoy in common without dismissing another's share (Samuelson, 1954, p.384), its distribution in South Asia shows persistent struggles over authority and control. Similar patterns of political contestation over water are observed globally, highlighting the relevance of examining local manifestations in Sri Lanka.

The Deduru Oya Water Development Project offers an important case to examine these tensions. As a major state-led initiative in Sri Lanka, it highlights how political patronage and state-citizen relationships influence the outcomes of development interventions.

While research on water governance in Sri Lanka is expanding, few studies integrate political ecology, cultural ecology, integrated water resources management (IWRM), and gender-water perspectives (Athukorala, 2022; Samad et al, 2017; Chandraseakra et al, 2021). This gap limits understanding of how power, ecological factors, and social relations intersect in large-scale water projects. To address this, the study adopts a multi-layered theoretical framework, drawing on patron-client theory (Handaragama 2013), political ecology (Bryant and Bailey, 1997; Swyngedouw, 2004), and hydro-hegemony approaches (Zeitoun and Warner, 2006), and Marshall's notion of social citizenship. Each provides a lens to interpret the observed tensions in state-citizen interactions. Based on this, the study pursues two objectives: (1) to examine how political patronage shapes water access and decision-making in the Deduru Oya Project; and (2) to analyze the socio-economic and political consequences of resettlement for affected communities.

Research Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to investigate the dynamics of state-citizen relations and political patronage in water politics within the context of the Deduru Oya Water Development Project in Sri Lanka. Specifically, the research aims to: 1. examine how political patronage and power relations shape state–citizen interactions within the Deduru Oya Water Development Project. 2. Analyze how displacement and resettlement influence livelihoods, social relations, and access to water resources. 3. Assess the implications of water governance practices for equity, participation, and citizenship rights in Sri Lanka. Through these objectives, the study seeks to contribute to a deeper understanding of how power relations and political interests intersect with resource management, affecting equity and trust in water governance.

Methodology

Case studies and face-to-face interviews were conducted in a village located in the Wariyapola Divisional Secretariat Division in the Kurunegala District, an area directly affected by the Deduru Oya Water Development Project. A purposive sampling strategy was used to select 40 interview participants, ensuring representation of affected farmers, women, resettled households, and community leaders. Fieldwork over seven months involved 40 semi-structured interviews and 20 case studies to capture household-level experiences of resettlement and political interactions. All interviews and case-study narratives were transcribed verbatim and coded using thematic analysis supported by NVivo software. Themes were developed iteratively, and preliminary findings were validated through member-checking with selected participants to ensure accuracy and credibility. The secondary data was collected from books and published research papers, newspapers, academic articles, and journals.

Theoretical Framework

Water politics is deeply embedded in socio-political structures, and understanding state–citizen dynamics requires a robust theoretical grounding. This study adopts ecology, patron client relationships and hydro hegemony as analytical frameworks.

Political ecology is defined as the study of the interaction between political systems and ecological systems, examining how human activities, power relations, and institutional decisions shape environmental outcomes, resource distribution, and environmental inequalities (Robbins, 2012). It is applied to analyze state–citizen dynamics in water development projects. Through a political ecology perspective (Bryant and Bailey, 1997), this study demonstrates that water development extends beyond technical or environmental considerations, representing a fundamentally political process that reshapes state–citizen relations and reinforces existing hierarchies of power.

According to Scott (1972), patron-client relationships are informal, reciprocal ties between powerful patrons and dependent clients. In the context of water politics, political actors function as patrons by controlling access to water resources, while citizens act as clients who offer loyalty and political support in return, shaping state-citizen relations and reinforcing patterns of political patronage.

According to Cascao and Zeitoun (2010), Hydro-Hegemony Theory explains how a more powerful actor in a shared water system consolidates control over water resources, infrastructure, and governance through geographic, material, bargaining, and ideational power. This dominance allows the hegemon to shape rules, narratives, and allocation in ways that maintain unequal access and influence over weaker actors. In water politics, hydro-hegemony helps analyze how state

actors or elites control distribution, infrastructure, and decision-making, influencing state–citizen relations and patronage.

In this study, political ecology is applied to examine environmental interventions and social inequalities; patron-client theory helps analyze political control over water access; hydro-hegemony provides insight into state dominance over infrastructure and resource allocation.

Literature Review on Water Politics and Governance

Water projects and water governance in many parts of the Global South reveal that water is not only a natural resource but also a political resource — subject to negotiations of power, patronage, and state–citizen relations (Budds & Sultana, 2013; Hill, 2006). The political ecology approach to water underscores how hydro social relations are socially produced: water infrastructure, distribution, and management often reflect and reproduce existing inequalities and clientelistic networks, rather than equitable access (Budds & Sultana, 2013; Wilson, 2019). In such contexts, large-scale water interventions, dams, irrigation schemes, and water supply systems become tools through which states and political elites exercise control, distribute benefits selectively, and consolidate influence, effectively shaping citizen loyalty and dependency (Sidaoui et al., 2017; Coates, 2020). Research shows that participatory or “inclusive” water governance frameworks often fail in practice, because local elites or state actors capture governance mechanisms, resulting in elite dominance, marginalization of vulnerable groups, and weak citizen voice (Shunglu et al., 2022). These dynamics highlight a key paradox: while water policies and institutions may aim at inclusive management, in practice water politics can reinforce inequality, clientelism, and state–citizen asymmetry, undermining democratic accountability and social justice (Reis, 2019; Mason et al., 2012).

With regard to gendered water access, women often bear responsibility for water collection yet have limited participation in decision-making, reflecting intersectional inequalities in water governance (Sultana, 2009). Integrating gender perspectives underscores inequities and aligns with political ecology's focus on social power dynamics.

These global patterns provide a lens to understand similar inequalities observed in the Deduru Oya Project, where resettled communities experienced disproportionate social and economic costs.

In this light, the Deduru Oya Project offers fertile ground for a detailed empirical investigation of how water infrastructure becomes embedded in patron–client networks, shapes state–citizen relationships, and produces uneven social and economic outcomes, a gap that remains underexplored in existing literature on South Asia and Sri Lanka.

Discussion

This discussion examines how the Deduru Oya Water Development Project illustrates the intersections of state authority, citizen engagement, and political patronage in water governance. It links empirical findings to political ecology (Bryant & Bailey, 1997; Robbins, 2012), patron–client theory (Scott, 1972), and hydro-hegemony (Zeitoun & Warner, 2006) to explain patterns of marginalization, unequal access, and governance challenges. This positions Deduru Oya as a local expression of globally observed power asymmetries in water governance.

State-Citizen Dynamics in Water Politics

The Deduru Oya Water Development Project generated a range of socio-economic and political challenges, particularly for displaced and resettled communities. Resettlement disrupted land access, altered livelihoods, and weakened community cohesion, leading to marginalization and social disintegration. From a political ecology perspective (Bryant and Bailey, 1997), these

disruptions illustrate how environmental interventions are closely intertwined with power dynamics and social inequalities, often disproportionately disadvantaging resettled communities. This reflects Robbins' (2012) argument that political ecology examines how environmental change is shaped by political and economic power relations that tend to marginalize less powerful social groups. This study extends previous analyses by connecting these effects to citizen agency: how resettled families negotiate, protest, and adapt under political constraints.

The project fundamentally restructured agrarian life, reducing productive capacity and transforming both economic and social relations in affected communities. Previously, most families had access to over two acres of land, allowing them to sustain themselves through farming. However, under the resettlement plan, only half an acre was allocated to each main family and just a quarter acre to sub-families. This demonstrates a direct link between political decisions, resource allocation, and inequality.

Similarly, Nilanthi's experience highlights the change in household economic dynamics due to the loss of farmland. Her household illustrates how displacement forces shifts to informal labor markets, creating new dependencies and vulnerabilities.

The capability approach (Sen, 1995) highlights that well-being depends on freedom, security, and access to essential resources. In Deduru Oya resettled communities, these fundamental capabilities have been significantly undermined. The study shows that beyond material loss, the ability of citizens to exercise choice and maintain dignity is constrained by governance structures.

Living conditions include both tangible assets, such as land and housing, and intangible assets, such as skills and social networks (Chambers & Conway, 1992). The loss of these assets shows that resettlement is not only a technical process but also a political one, where access to

resources often depends on political connections. After the project, residents struggled to maintain their agricultural livelihoods, reflecting the unequal distribution of benefits. The reservoir built as part of the Deduru Oya Project submerged over 2,500 acres of land, including more than 1,500 acres of paddy fields, significantly increasing the social and economic hardships faced by affected communities (Samarakoon, Dayawansa & Gunawardena 2017). The case studies of Nimal and Dayani highlight how resettlement disrupted both tangible and intangible assets. The loss of land ownership undermined their primary livelihood as paddy farmers, while the relocation also affected their access to familiar social networks and local knowledge associated with farming. Following resettlement, both were compelled to take up wage labor on other farms within the resettlement area—a shift dictated by necessity rather than choice. Moreover, the uneven distribution of compensation further intensified their economic vulnerability and constrained their ability to re-establish sustainable livelihoods. (Field data, 2025).

A key argument made by affected citizens was that the government minimized the economic impact of losing fertile agricultural land. The farmers feared a significant reduction in domestic rice production and increased dependency on rice imports, which could jeopardize national food security. Their grievances were often dismissed by authorities, who promised alternative livelihoods like fishing. However, transitioning from farming to fishing was not culturally or economically viable for most. These two occupations require different skill sets, social identities, and capital investments. As a result, the proposed livelihood transition failed to provide an effective solution.

Fieldwork conducted in several resettled villages, including Polgammuna, Peterveliwatta, Telahera Farm, and Kaluvaragaswewa, revealed growing political tensions between citizens and

the state. These tensions manifested in protests, forced evictions, and occasional use of state power to suppress dissent.

In theory, citizenship implies a relationship of mutual obligation between the state and its citizens. According to Marshall's theory of social citizenship, citizens are entitled not only to legal rights but also to meaningful participation in the civic, political, and social dimensions of society (Marshall, 1950). However, in practice, these entitlements were violated as people's voices were ignored and their rights suppressed. The government's approach favored technocratic development over inclusive participation, leading to adverse outcomes for vulnerable populations.

The Deduru Oya case highlights several structural issues in Sri Lanka's approach to development. First, resettlement policies lacked transparency, and the distribution of land was inconsistent and unfair. Second, compensation failed to reflect the true value of lost assets, particularly land and housing. Third, no meaningful alternative livelihoods were developed, especially ones that respected the cultural and occupational backgrounds of those displaced. Lastly, state responses to protests demonstrated a lack of sensitivity and accountability, further eroding public trust.

While infrastructure development like the Deduru Oya Project may benefit certain sectors, it often does so at the expense of rural communities whose livelihoods are directly impacted. The absence of participatory planning, weak compensation frameworks, and forced livelihood transitions leads to long-term socio-economic decline. This confirms the necessity of participatory water governance.

Over half of those displaced were farmers who lost traditional lands, fundamentally altering their livelihoods. Jayanthi, a mother of two, described how her son's education was disrupted by resettlement and how social ties eroded due to worsening economic conditions. Limited access to

public resources like clean water and burial grounds further heightened tensions between original settlers and newcomers. Dayani's testimony underlined persistent problems with water scarcity and exclusion from communal facilities, with minimal and inconsistent government support.

Data showed widespread dissatisfaction: 80% of affected families were unhappy with access to public resources, and 85% considered compensation inadequate. Many displaced farmers abandoned agriculture, shifting to low-paying, unskilled jobs such as brick cutting, marking a dramatic livelihood shift. This economic displacement intensified competition and conflicts over scarce resources between original residents and resettled families, deepening social fractures.

The government attempted compensation by allocating land and organizing resettlement sites. However, testimonies revealed compensation often failed to match the true value of lost lands and crops. Dayasiri, a displaced farmer, reported receiving smaller land plots and lower income post-resettlement, alongside experiences of discrimination.

In conclusion, the Deduru Oya Project's forced displacement inflicted profound social, economic, and psychological harms. Loss of land and livelihood, weakened social cohesion, inadequate compensation, and unresolved resource conflicts combined to create persistent difficulties for the affected communities. These findings highlight the urgent need for comprehensive, inclusive planning and fair compensation mechanisms in development-induced resettlement to mitigate negative impacts and promote social justice. Policy reforms must strengthen legal protection for displaced communities, enhance transparency in resettlement processes, and ensure community representation in water governance decisions. Global studies show that large-scale water projects often reproduce social hierarchies and marginalize vulnerable groups (Budds & Sultana, 2013; Sidaoui et al., 2017). The Deduru Oya case confirms this pattern

in Sri Lanka, demonstrating how state-led water development reproduces inequality and undermines citizen agency.

Water as a Political Tool: The Role of Patronage in State-Citizen Engagement

The Deduru Oya State Development Project illustrates how water infrastructure becomes a mechanism of political power, restructuring state–citizen relations through patronage, control, and selective resource distribution. Although intended for economic development and water management, the project has become a critical case illustrating how water functions as a political tool shaping state-citizen relations through patronage networks, socio-economic disruptions, and contested governance.

The project illustrates how access to water functions as a form of currency within patron-client networks. Irrigation water was preferentially allocated to politically connected farmers, reinforcing clientelistic ties and shaping citizen loyalty. This pattern reflects Handaragama (2013) and Weingrod (1963), showing that access to essential resources often depends on political loyalty.

This section examines the multi-dimensional impacts of the project on affected communities, focusing on how patronage dynamics and state responses influence economic viability, social cohesion, education, and political engagement.

Nearly fifteen years after the implementation of the Deduru Oya development project, its consequences remain unresolved and continue to escalate (Jayarathne, 2025:114). The project's implementation significantly disrupted the livelihoods of residents, particularly those dependent on paddy farming. Many families lost their agricultural lands without receiving adequate compensation or effective alternatives, undermining economic stability.

Siriyawathi, a resettled mother, highlights the project's indirect effects on education:

“We moved here, and my husband stopped farming, so no one could accompany the children to school. I can’t travel far because of my youngest child, and there’s no reliable transport. We tried paying a tuk-tuk driver, but the costs were too high. We had to enroll the children in the local school, where the elder child faced disruptions despite previously excelling. The government’s projects don’t consider such impacts, and no solutions have been offered.”

Her statement illustrates how economic changes ripple through social aspects such as education, showing that development projects centered narrowly on economic growth often neglect human development priorities. This reflects a cycle of intergenerational disadvantage often produced by development-induced displacement.

Economic development is the primary goal behind such projects, intended to modernize underdeveloped socio-economic structures and generate financial returns over time (Gittinger, 1982; Fernando, 1978). Yet, the pre- and post-project phases reveal persistent economic problems, including conflicts between original settlers and new resettled populations, insufficient compensation, loss of jobs, and inadequate alternative employment.

A critical dimension of the project is the social and economic divide between original settlers and resettlers. The state failed to foster integration or strengthen civil society, exacerbating divisions.

Wijenayake, a former farmer turned shopkeeper, observes: “The village is split. Original residents don’t come to my shop only resettlers do. So, business profits are limited.”

This segregation reflects the absence of state intervention to manage socio-economic conflicts. The government’s neglect in integrating displaced communities sustains economic instability and social fragmentation.

Compensation for lost land and homes has been provided, but it remains insufficient, with residents' grievances largely going unheard. Insufficient compensation risks economic collapse for many families reliant on agricultural livelihoods.

The project resulted in a significant loss of farmland, the primary livelihood source for many families. The government's proposed alternative—fishing—proved inaccessible due to high membership fees (50,000 LKR) for joining the Fishermen's Society, which controls fishing rights.

Samaranayake, a 63-year-old former farmer, explains: "We farmed for 20 years. After losing two acres of paddy land, no replacement land was provided. We don't want to pay the fee to join the Fishermen's Association. Fishing isn't our way of life. Farming was more than a job—it was a part of life."

His experience illustrates that alternative livelihood opportunities must be accessible and culturally appropriate. The state's failure to ensure this issue is reinforced by economic precarity and discontent among displaced communities.

Field data confirms widespread perceptions of failure regarding measures to address livelihood impacts, with most respondents doubting the effectiveness of government actions.

Water distribution and control in the Deduru Oya Project have become entwined with political patronage. Access to water resources is manipulated by political actors to maintain influence over resettled and original residents alike. The unequal distribution of irrigation water favors politically connected farmers, reinforcing clientelist relations and undermining equitable development.

This politicization of water access exacerbates social divides and economic disparities, consolidating power among local elites aligned with the state. Patronage networks surrounding

water distribution create dependencies that shape voting behavior and political allegiance, illustrating how water governance becomes a tool for political control.

The project's socio-economic upheavals have generated political conflict between affected communities and the government. Protests against land loss and inadequate compensation were met with police violence, arrests, and suppression of dissent.

Piyasena, a former farmer and protestor, recounts: "We protested, but the police beat and arrested us. Political power was used to stop our protests. No positive actions were taken to resolve our issues. Even now, people distrust the government."

This suppression reflects a broader pattern of state authoritarianism in managing dissent, where political power is exercised to silence opposition rather than to negotiate solutions. The failure to address grievances deepens alienation and mistrust among the population.

The public sector's role in mitigating project impacts has been inadequate. There has been little meaningful follow-up on the socio-economic conditions of displaced persons or efforts to foster social integration between settlers and resettlers. Compensation schemes have been criticized for their insufficiency and lack of responsiveness to local needs.

Alternative employment initiatives have not accounted for cultural and financial barriers, leading to underutilization. Political repression of protests without addressing root causes has failed to build trust or cooperation.

Together, these failures highlight weaknesses in governance and planning, where economic development objectives are pursued at the expense of participatory decision-making and human development.

The Deduru Oya case reveals that water projects, beyond their technical and economic dimensions, are deeply political acts that shape state-citizen relations through mechanisms of

patronage, inclusion, and exclusion. When development projects neglect the social and political contexts of water governance, they risk exacerbating inequalities and conflict.

For development to be sustainable and inclusive, state actors must prioritize human development alongside economic growth, incorporating education, livelihood security, and social cohesion into planning. Transparent and participatory governance mechanisms are essential to mitigate conflicts and build trust.

The government must actively engage with affected communities, ensure fair compensation, and design culturally appropriate livelihood alternatives. Addressing political grievances through dialogue rather than repression is crucial for democratic governance.

The Deduru Oya State Development Project illustrates how water infrastructure projects can become sites of political struggle, where water is wielded as a tool for patronage and control. Economic dislocation, social fragmentation, and political repression underscore the need for integrated development approaches that center on human well-being and democratic engagement.

Only by balancing economic objectives with social justice and participatory governance can such projects fulfill their promise of genuine development—improving both livelihoods and state-citizen relations.

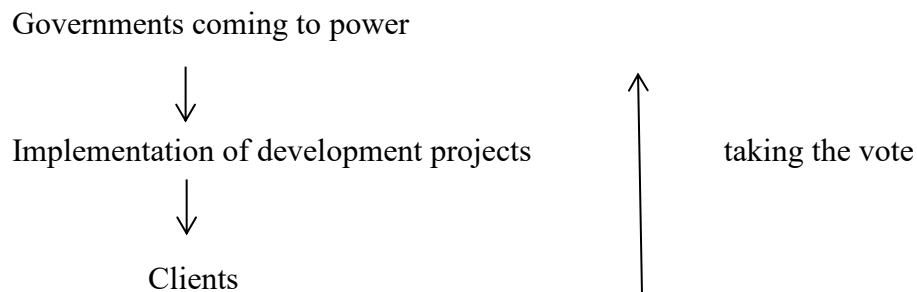
The implementation of the Deduru Oya Water Development Project, as well as the subsequent resistance against it, can be emphasized as related to political patronage.

“The patron-client relationship is the connection in which patrons with capitalist power provide employment, security, infrastructure, and other benefits to relatively disempowered poor clients, to secure votes and other forms of favoritism toward labor.”
(Handaragama, 2013, p.101)

Patronage in modern power politics refers to the support of political parties and leaders. This approach can be investigated from both a political and a developmental sociological perspective. In the modern interpretation, the actors are the government, political parties, and politicians.

“Exchanges will be made with polls, public institutions, and development projects for power prospects. In other words, the above components are used as sponsors of governments or political parties that come to power. Here, the controllers become the servers. It implies a distribution of public institutions and resources between individual political actors and the governed.” Weingrod, 1963, cited in Hettinge, 1984, pp.158-162)

Successive governments made multiple attempts over previous decades to implement the Deduru Oya development project; however, these initiatives failed to be fully realized. The basis for this failure was that the habitat rights of the people living near the Deduru Oya Reservoir would be violated. However, marking a turning point during the previous administration, a development project was started based on Deduru Oya. The primary objective of this project was to satisfy the water needs and boost the agriculture industry in the district. The government that comes to power democratically implements various development programs to maintain their governing power formally and to keep the people connected to the governance frameworks. Accordingly, the development projects launched after the civil war in 2009 were integrated into the state's welfare-oriented political strategies.

Figure 1*Political Patronage in the Welfare Mechanism*

Source: Handaragama, 2013

As shown in the diagram above, the political patronage inherent in development projects can be emphasized. This aspect can be discussed in light of the arrival of new political sponsors, as mentioned earlier. In this context, securing votes from the clients becomes a decisive factor, relying on their support and leveraging political power. Political activities are pillars of influence and power (Mollinga 2008).

The implementation of the Deduru Oya Water Development Project exemplifies how development initiatives in Sri Lanka are intertwined with political patronage networks. Two key political objectives emerge: securing community compliance and consolidating political support among beneficiaries. As one beneficiary remarked, reflecting skepticism about the project's underlying motives: "This started only partially well. It is done to get votes. This can lead to one-sided development." Field data further highlight the uneven impact: only 14% of respondents believed the project enhanced development through improved water provision, whereas 57% reported no benefits and expressed opposition from the outset. These findings indicate that, despite the project's political utility, its developmental outcomes were limited, unevenly distributed, and largely contingent on political affiliations. This dynamic further underscores how political

patronage becomes embedded in development projects, particularly as the emergence of new political sponsors reinforces clientelist expectations and transforms access to project benefits into a mechanism for securing votes and consolidating political power.

Concerns about the Deduru Oya Water Development Project often focused on the violation of water rights, including the environmental and democratic rights of people living in the affected villages. Many also questioned the political patronage connected to the project. When the project was implemented, several small water bodies were diverted into the Deduru Oya, and families living nearby began losing access to clean water for daily use. This problem was especially visible in the resettled Polgammuna village, where people had to change the way they collected and used water.

Sena, a 49-year-old farmer who has lived in the village since birth, explained: “We used to get water from the lower well, but it doesn’t work anymore. After this project, all the little water that comes to the wells is taken away. That’s why there is no clean water to drink. At first, they brought water bowsers, but the 500 litres they gave us was not enough—not for drinking or for crops. Now they don’t even send bowsers. Water is always given to the same areas, so we receive very little. Water for crops can be taken from the Deduru Oya, and the betel trees get water from the south canal. But there is still no clean water to drink, and we cannot let the children drink from this canal.”

Sena’s experience shows that the government’s attempts to provide clean water were temporary and ineffective. This points to a clear violation of water rights and suggests that the project authorities did not follow a fair or scientific method of distributing water. As a result, principles of water democracy were not upheld.

In this situation, political sponsorship began to form around people's democratic rights, including their right to safe water. Political representatives who opposed the project acted as "political sponsors," while affected residents became "clients" of this emerging movement. Over time, these local concerns developed into wider political opposition. Political statements against the project first appeared at the regional level and later became part of national political debates. This shift can be seen as an important turning point in Sri Lanka's development politics, especially in discussions about democracy, rights, and water governance.

Conclusion

The Deduru Oya Water Development Project shows that water politics in Sri Lanka is not merely resource management but is deeply intertwined with power, patronage, and state-citizen relations. The resettlement process and water-allocation mechanisms disrupted livelihoods, undermined social cohesion, and marginalized already vulnerable communities. Citizens' voices were largely absent from decision-making, and protests were often suppressed, revealing a governance system in which political interests frequently override social equity.

Through the lens of political ecology, this study demonstrates that large-scale development projects can reproduce social hierarchies and exacerbate inequalities. These perspectives together reveal that water governance involves as much political negotiation as technical management.

Policy recommendations focus on:

- Transparent resettlement guidelines.
- Participatory water-governance boards.
- Culturally appropriate livelihood programs.

These strategies aim to balance developmental objectives with social justice, human well-being, and meaningful citizen participation, providing a distinct analytical and policy-oriented contribution beyond previous studies.

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