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Envisioning the future of the water of Northern Province: An imaginative exercise on water security of Northern Province

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Abstract

For ecosystems and human societies, water is essential and crucial. Human activity today has a significant and wide-ranging impact on both land and water. These facts reflect the environment's physical changes. Urbanization, population increase, socioeconomic change, changing energy requirements, and climate change have all had a profound impact on the world's water resource systems. It is considered that attaining water security is essential to sustainable development. Studies on a holistic perspective with continuously changing dimensions are only beginning.

This study focuses on envisioning the future of water security of the Northern Province of Sri Lanka. This was one of the key activities performed by the research team. In this action research, participants were able to perceive the challenges they faced regarding water/security/governance (where are they now?). The purpose of this visioning exercise is to make the participants think where they should be heading to.

The data were collected through a well-organized dialogue called as *World café* method with meticulously selected participants from different socioeconomic backgrounds. This was a moment to imagine the water future in the respective areas of the participants. They were introduced the idea of the visioning exercise and requested to close their eyes if needed. No discussion was required. Then, write down those words that came into mind in the given colored slips of paper: one idea in one slip; hold onto those slips. A total of 12 workshops were conducted with different groups of participants and the visioning exercise was done at least with 10 groups in three different Divisional Secretariats, namely Kopay, Nallur and Karaichi.

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In the visioning exercise, participants were guided with the following phrases:

- Let us travel to the Year 2030. If there are no barriers whatsoever of any kind, in the best possible world, what will water resources and their uses look like?
- Choose the best words to qualify that ideal future.

Before this particular exercise, the participants also provided with an opportunity to comment on the factors that caused challenges for water security in their respective areas (where they are now?). This exercise was a bit confusing among the participants and the researchers at the beginning. The researchers also found it difficult to figure out the idea and purpose of this visioning exercise.

A thematic analysis approach was adopted for the data analysis. The study identified five key themes as the visions envisioned by the participants. They are: Community, Rain Water Harvesting (Surface/Groundwater resources), Water quality, Management and Quantity.

The participants got an idea as to “why bother with dreams of the future when the problems of today seem so great?”. Problem-solving and visioning are both crucial; they are very different strategies that should be combined. Through visioning, the participants could achieve a shared objective, find hope and encouragement, open the door to fundamental change, feel in control of their destiny, and think creatively and with a sense of enthusiasm.

Keywords: *Visioning exercise, Envisioning, Water security, World café method, Northern Province, Sri Lanka.*