

Tragedy of Centralization and the Evolution of Resource Governance in Village Irrigation Systems of Sri Lanka

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Colonial regimes across the Global South imposed centralized reforms that profoundly altered traditional systems of resource governance; Sri Lanka's Village Irrigation Systems (VISs) were no exception. Using Systematic Literature Review methodology, this study reviewed 115 publications selected through rigorous screening and eligibility criteria to trace the evolution of VIS resource governance and climate adaptation rationales from the pre-colonial period to the present. The analysis reveals that centralized reforms, alongside commercialization trends and socio-economic dynamics, led to erode the integrated landscape governance attributes of VISs, *i.e.* self-governance with polycentric decision making, system-wide adaptation, multifunctionality, local institutions, and commons management, transforming them into paddy-upland semi commercial mixed production systems. Climate adaptation, once embedded within the multifunctional village-tank-cascade landscape, was narrowed to agriculture. The reforms also dismantled communal property regimes, converting regulated commons into *de facto* "open access" resources, resulting widespread overuse and degradation of VIS catchment forests, later reclassified as state forests in the 1980s. This transformation, which was resulted by centralization generated governance challenges, and created multiple vulnerabilities. However, governance responses often involved further centralization, rather than restoring order. Despite Sri Lanka ratifying the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change in 1993, which introduced integrated approaches at implementation levels, the "tragedy of centralization" continues to constrain resilience. Hence, this study emphasizes the need to restore integrated landscape attributes embedded into the governance, but with adaptation to present social, institutional and market realities, with policy coherence. Long-term sustainability ultimately depends on the VIS's capacity to remain adaptive and responsive to changing contexts.

Keywords: Centralization, Commons, Governance, Local institutions, Reforms

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