

SOME STUDIES INTO THE FEASIBILITIES OF A REHABILITATED COLOMBO-PUTTALAM CANAL

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A Committee was appointed by government to examine the feasibility in current circumstances of continuing the work of rehabilitating the Colombo-Puttalam canal, in the first instance to enable navigation from Hekitta to Waikkal, and later by extension into the Colombo Beira system and northwards to Puttalam. On the basis of a Netherlands engineering report, steel barges of 25 tonnes carrying capacity were assumed, powered manually or by diesel outward motor. Economic cost comparisons were worked out comparing manual barge, motorised barge, railway and lorry for several commodities with origins close to the canal (viz., bricks, tiles, clay, sand, coconuts, copra, DC, fibre, salt and cement), with differing distances of haul and different relationships of the origins and destinations of the cargoes to the waterside loading and unloading points. Cargoes with waterside origins and/or destinations showed lower cost by barge and so too with railside origin. Where feeder road journeys were necessary at both ends, the lower cost of barge, and rail diminished as the main haul distance decreased. However the findings are very sensitive to many of the assumptions used as to marginal cost components of each mode, especially as regards the impact on cost of the weight loaded on barges and lorries. Moreover, even where costs are clearly lower for water and rail transport, there are many institutional and behavioural reasons why consignors or consignees may prefer to have their goods transported at higher cost by road. Work is continuing to evaluate the benefits to other canal users such as fishermen and tourists, and the non-transport potential benefits, such as drainage, industrial water supply, amenity, etc.