

# **Policy Statement on Mineral Sand Mining on Mannar Island: Social, Political, Economic, and Environmental Effects.**

## **Preamble**

Mannar Island ranks among Sri Lanka's most environmentally and culturally significant coastal regions. The island possesses high biodiversity, fragile coastal ecosystems, productive fisheries, fertile agricultural lands, and important cultural and historical heritage sites. Its communities have experienced decades of civil conflict, displacement, militarization, and socioeconomic marginalization. In the post-war period, proposals for large-scale mineral sand mining on Mannar Island have generated concerns regarding environmental degradation, resource depletion, threats to livelihoods, demographic insecurity, and inequitable development. Although mineral resources can contribute to the national economy, extraction should not compromise ecological integrity, community rights, democratic governance, or regional sustainability. This policy statement outlines a framework for responsible, transparent, equitable, and sustainable governance of mineral sand resources on Mannar Island.

## **Vision Statement**

*Ensure all mineral resource development on Mannar Island is environmentally sustainable, socially just, economically equitable, responsive to conflict dynamics, and fully accountable to the region's people and ecosystems.*

## **Policy Objectives**

**The objectives of this policy are to:**

- 1. Protect the ecological integrity of Mannar Island.*
- 2. Safeguard the rights, livelihoods, and cultural identities of local communities.*
- 3. Promote transparent and accountable governance of natural resources.*
- 4. Ensure equitable distribution of economic benefits.*
- 5. Prevent environmental and social harm; support reconciliation and regional sustainability; and align resource management practices with international standards.*

## **Guiding Principles**

Sustainable resource extraction must satisfy present needs without compromising future generations' access to clean water, productive land, healthy ecosystems, and sustainable livelihoods. Mining activities should be evaluated for both short-term profitability and long-term social, environmental, and economic impacts.

### **1. Precautionary Principle**

In cases of scientific uncertainty regarding environmental damage, biodiversity loss, groundwater depletion, or coastal erosion, precautionary measures must be implemented before project approval. Mining projects should proceed only if independent scientific evidence demonstrates that environmental risks can be effectively mitigated.

## 2. Human Rights and Community-Centered Development

The residents of Mannar Island are primary stakeholders in decisions about their lands, resources, and livelihoods. Their land, livelihood, cultural, and environmental rights, as well as their participation, must be recognized and protected.

Development initiatives must enhance human security and avoid generating new forms of vulnerability. Environmental Justice – Environmental burdens must not disproportionately impact marginalized, war-affected, or vulnerable communities. Policies should ensure fair and meaningful participation regardless of identity or status. Environmental Protection Measures: In accordance with these principles, the following protection measures are required.

These assessments must be independent, publicly accessible in all major languages, and subject to open hearings and review.

1. Protection of Coastal and Marine Ecosystems - Mining operations must not: accelerate coastal erosion; destroy sand dunes; or damage mangroves and wetlands.
2. Threaten fisheries and aquatic biodiversity. Legally designated conservation zones must be established to protect ecologically sensitive areas.
3. Groundwater and Water Security Protection- Given Mannar Island's limited freshwater resources, strict safeguards are required to prevent: groundwater depletion; saltwater intrusion; and chemical contamination, which adversely affect agriculture and household water security. Continuous hydrogeological monitoring must be mandatory throughout all mining operations.
4. Biodiversity Conservation - The island's ecosystems support migratory birds and unique wildlife habitats of international ecological importance. To support biodiversity and community well-being, mining policies must protect wildlife corridors, restrict operations near sensitive habitats, and ensure habitat restoration following extraction.

Deforestation and ecosystem fragmentation must be prevented. Social protection and community participation measures further reinforce these objectives.

5. No project can move forward without securing the Free, Prior, and Informed Consent (FPIC) from the impacted communities.
  - Consultation procedures must be:
    - Inclusive;
    - Transparent;
    - Conducted in local languages;
    - Free from political or military intimidation.

## 2. Protection of Livelihoods

Mining activities must not undermine:

- Fishing industries;
- Agriculture;
- Livestock farming;
- Small businesses;
- Traditional resource-based economies.

Where adverse impacts are unavoidable, fair compensation and livelihood restoration programs must be ensured.

### **3. Gender and Vulnerable Group Inclusion**

Women, youth, displaced persons, widows, and economically vulnerable groups must be included in all consultation and decision-making processes.

Special attention should be given to:

- Economic insecurity;
- Food security;
- Access to water;
- Public health impacts.

### **Governance and Institutional Reform**

#### **1. Transparency and Public Accountability**

All mining-related:

- Contracts,
- Licenses,
- Environmental approvals,
- Revenue arrangements,

All relevant documents must be made publicly available.

The public must have the right to access information regarding natural resource governance.

#### **2. Independent Oversight Mechanisms**

An independent oversight authority must be established, comprising:

- Environmental scientists;
- Legal experts;
- Community representatives;
- Civil society organizations;
- Local government authorities.

The responsibilities of this authority must include:

- Monitoring environmental compliance;
- Investigating public complaints;
- Conducting audits;
- Publishing annual reports.

#### **3. Anti-Corruption Safeguards**

Strong anti-corruption measures must prevent:

- Illegal land acquisition;
- Political favoritism;
- Resource exploitation without public benefit;
- Misuse of state authority.
- Violations must be subject to legal penalties and judicial review

## **Economic and Development Framework**

### **1. Equitable Benefit Sharing**

Economic benefits must directly support regional employment, skills development, infrastructure, healthcare, education, and community development.

- Employment opportunities for local residents;
- Skills training programs;
- Infrastructure development;
- Healthcare and education investment
- Community development funds.

### **2. Sustainable Economic Diversification**

The development strategy for Mannar Island must prioritize sustainable sectors, including:

- Fisheries,
- Eco-tourism,
- Renewable energy,
- Climate-resilient agriculture,
- Marine conservation economies.

Exclusive reliance on extractive industries creates long-term economic vulnerability.

## **Conflict Sensitivity and Peacebuilding**

As a post-conflict region, Mannar Island requires development approaches that support:

- Reconciliation,
- Social trust,
- Local autonomy,
- Community empowerment,
- Cultural preservation.

Resource extraction policies must avoid perpetuating historical patterns of exclusion, militarization, and centralized control.

Development must contribute to lasting peace and prevent social fragmentation.

## **Climate Change Considerations**

Sri Lanka faces increasing risks from:

- Sea-level rise,
- Coastal erosion,
- Salinization,
- Extreme weather events.

Mining operations that reduce coastal resilience or damage natural protective ecosystems increase climate vulnerability. Climate adaptation and environmental resilience must be central components of all policy planning.

## **Policy Recommendations**

The following immediate actions are recommended:

1. Impose a temporary moratorium on large-scale mineral sand mining until independent environmental and social studies are completed.
2. Establish legally protected ecological conservation zones in environmentally sensitive areas.

3. Introduce mandatory public consultation and FPIC procedures into mining legislation.
4. Create transparent revenue-sharing mechanisms benefiting local communities.
5. Strengthen environmental laws and enforcement institutions.
6. Conduct independent groundwater and biodiversity assessments.
7. Develop a long-term sustainable development plan for Mannar Island.
8. Ensure judicial oversight and public access to environmental justice mechanisms.
9. Encourage academic and civil society participation in policy monitoring.
10. Align national mining policies with international human rights and environmental conventions.

## **Conclusion**

The future of Mannar Island should not be determined solely by the commercial value of its mineral deposits. The island constitutes a unique ecological landscape, a homeland for war-affected communities, and a region of significant environmental and cultural value.

To ensure responsible governance of mineral resources, policymakers must actively balance economic interests with environmental stewardship, social justice, democratic accountability, and human dignity. All stakeholders must advocate for development policies regarding mineral sand mining that make sustainability, transparency, peacebuilding, and the well-being of future generations urgent priorities. Now is the time to demand action that secures these values for present and future generations.

Decisive steps must be taken to implement a people-centered, environmentally responsible policy framework to ensure that Mannar Island remains ecologically resilient and socially secure for future generations. The concerns presented in this statement are informed by the referenced study on the social, political, economic, and environmental impacts of mineral sand mining.