



Conflict – Threat or Opportunity?

Land Use and Coping Strategies of War-affected
Communities in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka



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in Trincomalee, Sri Lanka

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SLE CENTRE FOR ADVANCED TRAINING IN RURAL DEVELOPMENT

Executive Summary

- Livelihoods in complex emergencies*** (1) Humanitarian agencies often portray humans in political crises or natural disasters as helpless victims in dire need of emergency aid. However, people mostly survive even without aid. They cope with and adapt to the circumstances of a crisis or conflict. Development assistance should use 'spaces' and 'opportunities', which people identify in order to secure their livelihoods in complex emergencies, and encourage and support communities to deal with their own developmental issues. It is in this line of thinking that the present study on livelihoods of war-affected communities in the East of Sri Lanka presents its main argumentation.
- How do people manage to survive?*** (2) The key question for actors and agencies active in rehabilitation and development in war-affected areas is this: How do people manage to survive and to pursue their livelihoods in the day to day stress of coping in an uncertain and violent environment?
- IFSP-CATAD Project 2001*** (3) Since 1998, the promotion of food and nutrition security as a contribution towards development in a conflict-affected environment is the challenging task of the Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) in the war-affected Eastern part of Sri Lanka. In order to explore and implement more appropriate project interventions without doing harm in a conflict environment, the IFSP commissioned the IFSP-CATAD Project 2001. This action-oriented research study explored livelihood strategies of conflict-affected communities in the Trincomalee District with particular emphasis on land use patterns and on food and nutrition security. This should provide the foundation for policy adjustments of IFSP and partner institutions.

- Livelihood System Analysis*** (4) The *Livelihood System Approach* (LSA) is an analytical tool to observe and understand behavioural patterns of people and communities in complex political emergencies. It looks into livelihood strategies of people in a given *vulnerability context* (the frame conditions). People have access to six forms of *capital assets* (natural, physical, human, social, political, and financial). These are the resources, which people can combine in order to carry out *livelihood strategies* and achieve certain *outcomes*. These outcomes have positive as well as negative impacts on the livelihood (*feedback loops*).
- Coping or adapting?*** (5) Livelihood strategies will differ with regard to whether people have to deal with gradual trends or sudden shocks: *Adaptive strategies* denote processes of change which are more or less conscious and deliberate in the way people adjust livelihood strategies to long term changes and challenges (trends). *Coping strategies* are short-term responses to periodic stress or sudden shocks of both natural and political hazards.
- Why institutions matter*** (6) Institutional arrangements include formal and informal forms, are ambiguous and subject to multiple interpretations by different actors. Institutions are dynamic and are continuously reshaped over time. Power relations are embedded in institutional arrangements, and these are thus part of a social and political negotiation process. Administrative, political and military power holders often play a fundamental role in determining access to resources.
- Qualitative village studies*** (7) The IFSP-CATAD Project 2001 focused on comparative and qualitative village studies in order to contribute to a better understanding of the multiplicity and complexity of rural societies in a conflict environment. The research sample consisted of five research locations from different geographical areas of the Trincomalee District. The study was carried out by an intercultural team of young German and Sri Lankan scientists and practitioners in summer 2001.

- Sri Lanka: A complex political emergency*** (8) The civil war in Sri Lanka can be described as a *complex (political) emergency*: the ethnicised conflict is embedded in, and is an expression of, existing social, political, economic and cultural structures, and is characterised by loyalty to one particular communal group, and strong antipathy towards other communal groups. The overriding issue of the macro-conflict in Sri Lanka is the grievance between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority, which has escalated into a war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Sinhalese dominated armed forces.
- Perception and impact of war*** (9) All five research areas are situated at a borderline, either between uncleared (or 'grey') and cleared areas or between the settlements of different communal groups. These areas are characterised by a high occurrence of fighting, violence, the presence of both armed parties, and intimidation. The psychological effects are striking: a lack of self-confidence, a tendency to keep a low profile, frustration in view of limited life opportunities, fear and desperation are widespread in these non-stabilised areas. Conflict, war and risk, nevertheless, have quite a different impact on each of the communities. In some locations, villagers still pursue their traditional livelihood activities and farming systems, even though under constraining frame conditions. In other locations, the conflict forced villagers to leave traditional resources behind due to the war and to search for alternative livelihood options.
- Three pillars of livelihood strategies*** (10) The research team identified three pillars of behavioural patterns, which distinguish livelihood strategies at different levels of the livelihood system:
1. **Managing personal risk of life** looks into how people cope with the increased probability of negative consequences for personal lives.
 2. **Managing household economics** identifies different strategies of organising the capital assets within a household (capital assets).

3. Accessing external support discusses how individuals or communities make use of structures and processes, in particular, how they access or influence political and military actors (structures and processes).

Each of these pillars is further divided into sub-categories. This categorisation allows an easy comparison of behavioural patterns in different locations or of different families in the same location (cf. Chapter 5).

Declining assets and entitlements

(11) Livelihood strategies comprise a **portfolio of short-term coping and long-term adapting strategies**. Many adapting strategies deal with **declining income earning opportunities** and the **risk of investment**, which is higher in conflict areas compared to peaceful areas. Furthermore, adapting strategies reflect the **declining entitlements to resources**, e.g. the disrupted access to land, water and jungle resources. Furthermore, households gradually deplete their capital stock after each shock. Cash income is more easily acquired through outside funds (state payments for home guards, welfare) or overseas employment (remittances cash flows). Relief-oriented aid offered by the state and NGOs might have supported a reorientation of household strategies towards tapping these funds instead of investing scarce assets in an insecure environment.

Distorted economies

(12) The impact of the distorted regional economy for village communities is striking. Farmers are in a very weak bargaining power towards traders and entrepreneurs who provide inputs and market their products (fish, onions, paddy etc.). The **oligopoly of economic actors** allows them to keep prices for agricultural and fishing products at a low level, which reduces the profit margins of the producers. These constraints for farmers seem more prominent in the conflict-affected areas of Sri Lanka than in the peaceful ones. Such covert control of the economy places a small group of people as winners who take profit from the war.

***Coping of key actors:
low profile*** (13) The way key actors of governmental organisations and economic entrepreneurs cope in turn influences and shapes the villagers' access to their capital assets. While villagers apply coping strategies to pursue livelihoods, people within institutions do so to survive, defend their power and position or even to extend and strengthen it. At a community level, the lack of local leadership due to the fear to expose oneself encourages opportunistic behaviour of those with good links to power holders at the expense of others and discourages collective action. The behaviour of actors in the governmental organisations and administration is similarly shaped by a strategy of showing a low profile. Administrators are reluctant to take responsibility and action legally ascribed to them, in case this has political and ethnic implications. The consequence of this strategic action and behaviour is that entitlements to resources are unevenly distributed according to ethnicity. This has been and continues to be one major cause of the ongoing conflict.

Land Tenure (14) Secure land entitlements are a precondition for the resilience of livelihoods, viz. the capacities of households to absorb shocks and to adapt to stresses induced by climate, price instability, unemployment and, in complex emergencies, political crisis. The degree of security of land use rights and resource endowments has a fundamental bearing on the livelihood options of households, and consequently their planning horizons and investment decisions. Complex political emergencies cause changes in the structure of land occupation due to population displacement and land seizures. Furthermore, existing governance structures at a local and regional level may collapse or are seriously undermined in enforcing the rule of law. Conflict is often rooted in inter-group competition over land and resources. In post-conflict situations, it is essential to establish tenure institutions which can resolve land disputes and tenure claims in a transparent and 'neutral' manner.

- Rival claims over land* (15) In eastern Sri Lanka, competing claims and disputes over land emerged between Tamils and Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims and Sinhalese and Muslims, which have their roots in the politics of memory and perception in the context of the politics of ethnicity and colonisation in Sri Lanka. Many Tamils have perceived the expansion of Sinhalese settlements in the North and East as an act of political and geographic ‘colonisation of traditional Tamil areas’. The Sinhalese understood it as an expansion into areas that they had abandoned in ancient times. In the context of the ethnicised conflict, the politicisation of land use rights, vested interests of armed actors and the link of the topic with the causes of conflict make it difficult for administrators and decision-makers to enforce the rule of law.
- Towards transparent land tenure institutions* (16) Four main issues of land tenure are fundamental to poverty alleviation and conflict transformation in the eastern part of Sri Lanka:
- **Lack of accountability** in how government institutions handle land use rights, fuels suspicion and deepens the ethnic divide in the multi-ethnic environment of the Trincomalee District.
 - Political interests and interference of power holders impede administrators from taking responsibility and action in politicised issues due to fear of negative effects and **political pressure**.
 - Social capital on community level, i.e. reputed local institutions or leaders, have lost influence and power in solving community conflicts. In turn, political capital of individuals or groups determines institutional arrangements in land disputes, and thus who wins and who loses. The political capital differs considerably among the three communal groups.
 - The **uncertainty and insecurity in land tenure** certainly prevents farmers from long-term oriented investment on land resources. Farming practices are more oriented towards risk minimisation or high return in short time, while neglecting sustainable land management.

Triple approach for project interventions (17) The complexity of conflicts demands a set of different components for a flexible intervention strategy, which provides measures on different levels of the livelihood system: strengthening capital assets (potential of people) should always be combined with removing constraining factors from the level of structures and processes. The research team recommends a *triple approach for creating incentives* to overcome the widespread relief attitude of humanitarian agencies in the Trincomalee District. The triple approach comprises: (i) *Responding to shocks* (asset-based support), (ii) *Adjusting to trends* (support of structures and processes) and (iii) *Promoting viability* (mobilisation of governance structures). (See Chapter 7)

LSA as planning tool (18) The Livelihood System Approach provides a holistic framework for understanding the various factors which determine behaviour, livelihood strategies and related outcomes. It introduces a systemic thinking into:

- Planning village projects (see Manual),
- Policy definition and framework planning (priority setting) on district and provincial level,
- Institutional analysis (an organisation is analysed with capital assets and coping strategies similarly like a household).

Intercultural learning (19) The IFSP and CATAD shared the experience of intercultural teamwork in 1999 and in 2001. In both cases, the teams, both German and Sri Lankan members, evaluated their experience of working in an intercultural team with very positive results. IFSP and CATAD understand intercultural communication and teamwork as a mutual capacity building process. The encounter with another culture challenges one's own habits and thinking. It provides a clear feedback on one's own behaviour and teaches fundamental skills for the work as a culture-sensitive advisor and consultant in development cooperation.