

Unequal societies: A misplaced dimension of protracted conflict

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After 26 years of civil war Sri Lanka is coming to grips with the untried realities of sustainable peace. With the defeat of the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam and the end of the war in May 2009, Sri Lanka is heading towards significant opportunities for both peace and development. To take the full advantage of these opportunities a proper understanding of war time livelihoods and addressing of their consequences is essential. This paper considers how and why inequalities among and between groups, in economic dimensions occur under conditions of protracted conflict. It also argues that addressing conflict driven economic inequalities is imperative for sustainable post-war development.

This empirical analysis is done based on data collected in the Madawachchiya divisional secretariat division (DSD) of the Anuradhapura district in Sri Lanka. The field work was conducted during January-April 2008 in two of the 37 GNs in Medawachchiya DSD, selected randomly. The sampling unit was the household. Using a scientific sampling method a total of 82 cases were considered for research. The study is based on the livelihood approach developed by the Department for International Development (DfID) and its extensions to conditions of complex political emergencies. As analytical tools DfID and its extensions focus on what people do under situations of conflict rather than what must be done for people under such conditions. This quality of this framework is been used in this study to highlight the ground realities of people whose livelihoods have being directly or indirectly affected by conflict.

As evidence this paper finds that there exists both horizontal and vertical inequality, perpetuated by the protracted conflict. These inequalities were not only visible in households' income outcomes but also in asset endowment and livelihood strategy spaces. Drawing upon the conceptual wisdom of the DfID framework, the study argues that the disparities in asset endowments had created different livelihoods and unequal income outcomes to households. For instance because Sinhalese households possessed better assets (better education qualifications, higher levels of savings, more investments on physical capital, and effective political capital), they also had more opportunities in a conflict prone economy than the Muslims. In some cases the Sinhalese even acquired an 'economic rent' using conditions common to protracted conflicts.

In regard to vertical inequalities the paper also argues that those who were able to strategize with war induced conditions had achieved better success in a utilitarian sense, which leads to inequalities between them and those who did not possess such capability. This horizontal and vertical manifestation of economic inequality brings out a misplaced dimension of the ground realities. Cessation of conflict will eliminate future rent on conflict, and also change prevailing conditions. As inequality is both a means and end for political conflict, if left untended it will lock the country in to a conflict trap, increasing the risk of future conflict. Therefore, while questioning the sustainability of conflict resilience demonstrated by some households, this paper also emphasizes the importance of achieving shared growth by increasing assets and income earning opportunities among and within various ethnic communities.