COVER SHEET

Poverty, Ethnicity and Conflict in Sri Lanka

(February 28, 2003)

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Abstract:
This paper investigates the nexus among poverty, ethnicity and conflict in Sri Lanka. The ethnicised conflict in Sri Lanka is embedded in and is an expression of existing social, political, economic and cultural structures. The civil war is thus not a temporary crisis, but a long-enduring feature. Rural societies in the war-affected areas are characterised by 'distressed livelihoods' or 'livelihoods at risk': They face multiple vulnerabilities caused by unfavourable state policies, environmental hazards, market-related risks and conflict-related uncertainties which enhance the threshold of vulnerability. Households thus have to adapt to gradual deteriorating economic trends and to cope with sudden political shocks in the form of violence. In many instances, transitory poverty caused by disruptions of the war (displacement) has declined into chronic poverty.

Ethnicity plays a key role in how people perceive vulnerability and how people make use of ethnicity for livelihood strategies. Paternalistic vertical support networks which sustain ethnic exclusion gain more importance in such livelihood strategies, thus undermining inter-ethnic exchange patterns. This perpetuates a trend towards increased ethnic separation and thus contributes to exacerbate the conflict. It undermines inter-ethnic social capital and constructs a biased perception of 'the ethnic other'. The key question that this paper poses, is thus how development policy can attack poverty under such circumstances and, at the same time, support conflict transformation towards more inclusive local-level institutions that cross ethnic boundaries.

Key words: ethnicity, conflict, livelihoods, internally displaced persons,

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Poverty, Ethnicity and Conflict in Sri Lanka

This paper investigates the nexus among poverty, ethnicity and conflict in Sri Lanka. The ethnicised conflict in Sri Lanka is embedded in and is an expression of existing social, political, economic and cultural structures. Since 1983 the war has had a devastating effect on all ethnic groups in the affected areas, causing widespread misery, inclusive of displacement, loss of property, injury and death and break up of communities (Silva 2003). The civil war is thus not a temporary crisis, but a long-enduring feature. Rural societies in the war-affected areas are characterised by 'distressed livelihoods' or 'livelihoods at risk': They face multiple vulnerabilities caused by unfavourable state policies, environmental hazards, market-related risks and conflict-related uncertainties which enhance the threshold of vulnerability. Households thus have to adapt to gradual deteriorating economic trends and to cope with sudden political shocks in the form of violence. In many instances, transitory poverty caused by disruptions of the war (displacement) has declined into chronic poverty.

Even though there are numerous fallouts of the war elsewhere in Sri Lanka, the dry zone has been the main theatre of war in Sri Lanka for the past two decades.[i] The geographical basis of the armed conflict in the northeast of the island is typically understood in terms of ethnic-wise population distribution in the country, various parts of Northern and Eastern Provinces being tenuously held by Sri Lanka armed forces and the LTTE, with the former determined to preserve the territorial integrity of the Sri Lanka nation and the latter fighting for an independent Tamil homeland (eelam) in the northeast. State-controlled colonization programmes, in particular, have been heavily criticized and often targeted by the Tamil fighters, accusing it an effort to expand the Sinhala frontier into so-called "Tamil homeland" (Shastri 1990). On the other hand, certain dry zone districts with a heavy Sinhala presence such as Monaragala, Badulla and Hambatota have reported high incidence of poverty and associated agrarian crisis throughout the post-independence period, warning us against a simplistic ethnically-biased analysis of dry zone socio-economic problems (Dunham and Edwards 1997, Moore 1985).

This paper examines the ways in which poverty and ethnicity colour the perceptions of vulnerability and coping among war-affected communities in Sri Lanka. It analyses available secondary data on poverty and related issues in the Northeast and employs primary data from a World Bank study on internally displaced people in conflict-affected areas in Sri Lanka and World Food Programme's Community Food Security Profiling (CFSP) focusing on 'settled' communities in the conflict zone. The paper also takes account of a study on war-affected livelihoods commissioned by the Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP). This essay covers all three ethnic groups in the conflict affected areas, namely Sinhalese, Tamils and Muslims, in order to assess experiences and perceptions of all three parties to the conflict in North-east Sri Lanka. The aim is to understand the interplay between poverty and ethnicity within a conflict setting in shaping perceptions of vulnerability and coping in ways that, in turn, feed into conflict dynamics. In other words, we examine the manner in which objective

experiences of poverty and subjective perceptions of ethnicity interact and feed into each other in ways that produce violent conflict among the various parties involved. Finally the implications of the findings for relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction are briefly assessed.

Theoretical Background

In trying to comprehend the interplay between poverty and social conflict within the Sri Lankan context, one needs to consider the role of an intervening variable, namely ethnicity. The ongoing civil war in Sri Lanka is typically understood as an "ethnic war" signifying a divide between the majority Sinhala community and the largest ethnic minority in the country, namely Sri Lankan Tamils. Recent studies, however, have pointed to the need to consider poverty, not only as an outcome of the ongoing civil war but also as one of the factors shaping the nature and participants of the conflict itself (Silva 1994, 2003). This, in turn, makes it necessary for us to explore connections as well as analytical distinction between poverty and ethnicity.

As conceptual categories, poverty and ethnicity have evolved in different contexts and in response to different analytical questions. As a much older concept developed mainly by economists, the concept of poverty has always focused on the issue of material deprivations. On the other hand, the term "ethnicity" evolved mainly by sociologists since the 1950s to signify culturally defined identities and social groupings primarily within immigrant societies (Hutchingson and Smith 1996). Hence these two terms have remained conceptually distinct and analytically separate. There are, however, emerging developments within each conceptual domain that makes it necessary to transcend the analytical dichotomy so far maintained and explore interconnections between material deprivations and identities of the people affected.

Recent conceptualisation of ethnicity too has increasingly moved in parallel directions. In place of the conventional primordialist approach that views ethnic sentiments and identities as overpowering, ineffable, and 'given', the instrumentalists conceptualise ethnicity as a highly malleable social, political and cultural resource mobilized by various interest groups, including the political elites and the masses. They also point to the manner in which ethnic identity overlaps with other kinds of social identity and people's capacity to assume various identities in different situations (Banton 1983, 1994, Hechter 1978, 2000). One of the central ideas of the instrumentalist school is the socially constructed nature of ethnicity and the leverage the individuals and groups have to "cut and mix" from a variety of cultural heritages to forge an identity of their choice (Horowitz 1985). This instrumentalist formulation of ethnicity can accommodate both objective and subjective experience of poverty and deprivation as factors shaping one's group affiliations and sense of identity.

There are two contrasting views about the nature and indeed the genesis of Northeast conflict in Sri Lanka. The first view treats it as a primarily identity struggle between the Sri Lanka state controlled by Sinhala Buddhist majority that seeks to establish and retain

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its hegemony over the whole of Sri Lanka and a section of the Sri Lanka Tamil minority, resisting this hegemonic campaign through an armed struggle. This view in turn has taken many different forms, some exploring how religious ideologies and concepts of the past have shaped these antagonistic identity formations (Nissan & Stirrat 1990, Hellman-Rajanayagam 1990, Silva 1999a) and others dealing with historical, political and cultural processes leading to formation of militant and antagonistic identities (Seneviratne 1999, Tambiah 1992, Kapferer 1988).

The second view, in contrast, has paid closer attention to the intense competition for scarce resources like land, educational opportunities and employment within a developing country setting, where economic growth over the past several decades has been inconsistent if not altogether erratic and key socio-economic problems such as poverty, unemployment and environmental degradation have affected large sections of the population, irrespective of their ethnic background (Shastri 1990, Pieris n.d., 1981, De Silva 1996).

The first view often permits the "ideological pole" of the continuum to speak too loud whereas the second view typically bends too much towards the "material pole". The aim of this essay is simply to stress the need to understand the interaction between material and ideological dimensions of Northeast conflict by focusing on the dynamic interplay between poverty and ethnicity in certain conflict-affected areas in the Dry Zone of Sri Lanka.

Recent developments in poverty research emphasize the need to go beyond income criteria in defining poverty and the importance of understanding the social and economic processes involved in generation of deprivations (Hulme and Shepherd 2003). Apart from material deprivations per se capabilities of people to meaningfully and positively respond to given situations (Sen 2000) as well as people's perception of their condition of deprivation (World Bank 2000) have received much attention in recent research on poverty.

In European social sciences, the expanding theory of social exclusion has sought to understand structural linkages between poverty and a range of group identities, including ethnicity, race, immigrant status, gender and social class (Barnes et al. 2003). The central argument of this theory is that certain people are excluded from opportunity structures in mainstream society on account of the structurally marginal position that is accorded to them by society. In other words poverty and deprivations of such excluded social groups are not so much due to the operation of a simple economic logic but rather due to the operation of a social logic whereby certain groups are knowingly or unknowingly treated as outsiders or even outcasts. The main emphasis has been on the way in which such perceived outsiders are excluded from the reach of the welfare state as well as from employment, housing and credit markets. The theory of social exclusion provides a useful bridge between economic and social explanations of poverty and related deprivations. While helping to understand some aspects of social processes generative of poverty, it does not fully explore the manner in which poverty itself influences the relevant social processes. Even though some attempts have been recently made to broaden its

geographical coverage (Sen 2000), so far its application has been largely restricted to the European context. The dynamics of inclusion and exclusion as manifested in ethnic relations, for instance, and the role of social conflict within these dynamics are yet to be elaborated.

Methodology

Understanding the complex interplay among poverty, ethnicity and social conflict in Northeast Sri Lanka giving sufficient attention to both material and ideological dimensions of the processes involved, calls for an appropriate mix of quantitative and qualitative data. This paper utilizes available secondary data, which are largely of a quantitative nature, and qualitative primary data from three data sets relating to selected communities in the Northeast. The analysis of secondary data aims to provide a macro profile and the context of the civil war. Community profiles from three different research studies help examine community perceptions, coping strategies, identity issues and conflict dynamics in general.

The World Bank study on internally displaced people aimed at understanding the impact of displacement processes on the nature and extent of poverty in the affected populations (Silva 2003). It covered a total of 5 IDP communities distributed in the districts of Vavuniya, Anuradhapura, Puttalam and Negombo (Table 1) . These communities were purposively chosen with a view to representing all three ethnic groups directly affected by the war in Northeast Sri Lanka. From each of the study communities information was collected through key informant interviews and focus group discussions. The overall findings of this study have been analyzed elsewhere (Silva 1999b, 2001, 2003). Here we will mainly consider the implications of the poverty profile in these communities for their concept of vulnerability, coping and identity formation.

Table 1
Basic information about Communities covered by the WB Study

Name Population	Type	Location	Ethnic Comp.	Total
Siddamparapuram	Refugee Camp	Vavuniya	Tamil	7341
Puthunkulam	Resettlement	Vavuniya	Tamil	650
Gajabapura	Refugee Camp	Padaviya	Sinhala	489
Erukkulampiddi	Relocation Scheme	Puttalam	Muslim	4000
North Pitipana	Voluntary settlement	Negombo	Sinhala (Catholic)	70

The World Food Programme study involved a livelihood vulnerability assessment of a total of 29 communities distributed in the wet zone, dry zone and conflict zones (Silva,

Weeratunga and Ibarguen 2002). A total of 13 communities studied had been directly or indirectly affected by the armed conflict in the Northeast. While the World Bank study directly focused on the IDPs located in welfare centers or resettlements or new settlements of some kind, the WFP study focused on 'settled populations' many of whom were or had been nevertheless directly or indirectly affected by the war. For understanding their perceived and real vulnerabilities as well as household and community coping strategies, a range of data collection techniques, including key informant interviews, focus group discussions and household case histories, were used.

Table 2
Basic information about Communities covered by the WFP Study

Name	Type	Location	EthnicComp.	Total Population
Kerudevil South	Resettlement	Jaffna	Tamil	2097
Thenniyakulam	Resettlement	Mullativu	Tamil	1000
Nasevanthivu	Resettlement	Batticoloa	Tamil	760
Karuveppankeni	Disturbed village	Baticoloa	Tamil	680
MannarPier East	Relocation	Mannar	Tamil	1020
Kurumbapiti	Resettlement	Trincomale	Tamil	236
Pottkeni	Resettlement	Mannar	Tamil	690
Poombuhar	Resettlement	Vavuniya	Tamil	850
Ganeshapuram	Resetttlement	Vavuniya	Tamil	310
Pubudugama	Relocation	Puttalam	Muslim	220
Arachchikattuwa	Disturbed village	Puttalam	Sinhala	500
Athawatunuweva	Border village	Apura	Sinhala	450
Kandekaduwa	Border village	Polonnaruwa	Sinhala	400

The GTZ assisted Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) commissioned a study on livelihood strategies of war-affected communities in the Trincomalee district, taking into consideration all three communities (Korf 2001 a,b,c; Korf et al. 2001). The six villages studied were all situated close to the borderline between cleared (i.e. army controlled) and uncleared areas, i.e. those under control of the Tamil rebels. These areas are particularly subject of uncertainty, violence and intimidation from both conflict parties. The livelihoods investigated covered paddy cultivation areas (Menkamam, Dehiwaththa), highland cultivation (Kumpurupitty, Ithikulam) and fishing (Vattam). The research team employed rapid rural appraisal techniques, including semi-structured interviews, focused group discussions and transect walks with samples of villagers and key informants.

Table 3
Basic information about Communities covered by the IFSP Study

Name	Type	Location	EthnicComp.
Kumpurupitty	Resettlement	Trincomalee	Tamil
Kalyanapura	Border village	Trincomalee	Sinhala
Ithikulam	Resettlement	Trincomalee	Tamil (uncleared)
Vattam	Border village	Trincomalee	Muslim
Menkamam	Disturbed village	Trincomalee	Tamil
Dehiwaththa	Border village	Trincomale	Sinhala

It must be noted here that the various data sets reviewed in this essay are unrelated and that they had been collected for purposes different from the specific purpose of this essay. This may be seen as a key limitation of the data used in this essay. Moreover, the agencies and co-researchers involved in the relevant studies are in no way responsible for the analysis pursued here.

War-related Social Impacts in Northeast Sri Lanka

All the national surveys conducted in Sri Lanka since the outbreak of the civil war in 1983 excluded the northeast region due to logistic problems involved in covering the conflict-affected areas. Even the special surveys designed to assess socio-economic trends in the relevant areas, such as the World Bank's Sri Lanka Integrated Survey of 1999 failed to generate valid and reliable data in view of problems posed by constantly changing security environments. Available population estimates are sometimes hotly contested by parties in conflict in view of their strategic and military significance. As a result, there is considerable ambiguity about key issues such as poverty incidence and trends, socio-economic profile, population composition and even the sheer size of the population (Shanmugaratnam 1998, World Bank 2002, DFID 2000).

Poverty is however known to be widespread throughout the conflict-affected areas. If one considers the number of displaced people who continue to stay in welfare centres as an index of acute poverty, an estimated 200,000, comprising roughly about 8 percent of the total population in the Northeast remained in welfare centers as of 2001 (GOSL 2002). The Sri Lankan government has estimated that the total number of internally displaced people inclusive of residents in welfare centers and those living outside the welfare centers to be 650,000, comprising roughly one-third of the population currently living in conflict affected areas (GOSL 2002). The percent displaced is as high as 80% of the current population in Vanni, one of the key conflict affected areas that received a major influx of people from the adjoining Jaffna peninsula in 1995.

The term poverty, however broadly it is defined, can capture only some minute details of the total misery that nearly 20 years of war has caused to the lives of many people who are merely victims of the war. With each break out of war many people lost their loved ones as well as assets accumulated over many generations and have been displaced repeatedly often frustrating their sincere efforts to rebuild their lives. The two primary economic activities in the northeast, farming and fishing being paralyzed by a combination of factors, including economic embargoes, transport difficulties, security restrictions, breakdown of marketing systems and rent seeking by armed forces, there was a near total collapse of the rural economy in many areas in the Northeast. The annihilation of much of the physical infrastructure, including roads, hospitals, school buildings, houses, electricity supply, irrigation systems, water and sanitation services and communication facilities due to aerial bombardment and artillery attacks added to the misery of the people. The war-related displacements, population movements and violence served to break up communities, family structures and the very foundation of civil society (DFID 2000, Silva 2001). Until the beginning of the ongoing peace process, many people had no hope of any lasting peace and some believed that they were condemned to live in welfare centers for the rest of their lives (Silva 2003).

The war presented only a limited number of options for people living in and around conflict areas. One could join the security forces, home guards, LTTE or one of the other armed groups depending of course on one's own ethnic identity, contacts and inclinations in life. On the other hand, provided one had the necessary resources and contacts one could move out of the conflict area to greener pastures elsewhere including overseas destinations (Siddartan 2000). Either of these options was typically not available for certain categories of people such as elderly, physically handicapped and the like. The large majority of people, however, had to find livelihood strategies based on locally available resources that adapt to long-term deteriorating econoimic trends and scope with sudden political shocks, such as the escalation of violence (Korf et al. 2001).

Even though the war affected the lives of every one who lived in the Northeast, irrespective of identity, status and income level, there are some reports that its devastating effects were more severe on the poorer and more marginalized sections of the population. Using their contacts, resources, international amnesty granted to war refugees and the expanding networks of the Tamil diaspora, the richer people moved out to safer areas, including Colombo and foreign destinations (Siddartan 2000, Fugglerud 1999, Mcdowell 1996). There has been a selective outmigration of the rich, leaving behind the poor to fight it out with the security forces and liberate the so-called "homeland" (eelam). This, in turn, explains the emphasis on "reducing conflict-induced poverty" in Sri Lanka's newly formulated poverty reduction strategy (GOSL 2002).

There is also evidence that the impact of the war was more severe in the case of the poor. For instance, according to one estimate while one in every 12 households got killed due to the war in the general population in the Northeast, among the poor it rose to one in every 7 households (GOSL 2002). Many of the long-term residents in the welfare centres as well as those compelled to remain in "uncleared areas" held by the LTTE and border areas control of which is contested by the LTTE and the security forces were poorer

people with limited options (DFID 2000). The recruitment to security forces has been most intense in the deep South of Sri Lanka characterized by widespread poverty (Goodhand, Hulme and Lewer 2000). Similarly, there is some evidence that in their recruitment drives the LTTE and other armed groups in the Northeast have targeted the more deprived sections of Tamil population in the Northeast (Ofstad 2002, Oliphant 1999). These processes, in turn, indicate that widespread poverty does contribute to perpetuation of war in one way or another.

Multiple Vulnerabilities

Vulnerability is often seen as an important concomitant, if not an intrinsic attribute of poverty.

> Vulnerability…. refers to exposure to contingencies and stress, and difficulties in coping with them. Vulnerability has two sides: an external side of risks, shocks and stress to which a household or individual is subject: and an internal side which is defencelessness, meaning a lack of means to cope without damaging loss (Chambers 1989: 1).

Even though the concept of vulnerability often highlights exposure to stress such as natural disasters that are particularly harmful to the poor, as Mayer (2003) has rightly pointed out, this concept can be broadened to cover difficulties arising from crises of socio-economic origin as well. From this angle a person's ethnic consciousness may be seen as a lens through which, a person tries to comprehend his defenselessness within a given socio-economic environment and at the same time develop some coping mechanisms against perceived threats.

In the war affected areas, we can identify three types of risks and vulnerabilities affecting various study communities in the conflict zone, namely environment-related risks and vulnerabilities, market-related risks and vulnerabilities, and conflict-related risks and vulnerabilities (Silva et al. 2002). These multiple vulnerabilities create a 'livelihood at risk' where a high level of uncertainty and risk pertains in the everyday life of people (Korf 2001c). Since all three vulnerabilities superimpose each other, they create a particular stress on the livelihoods of people.

In such distressed livelihoods, managing risk (and uncertainty) becomes a predomoinant feature of livelihood strategies. One can differentiate between income smoothing strategies to reduce ex-ante risk exposure as risk reduction strategies and consumption-smoothing strategies of ex-post loss management as response strategies. Ex-ante risk reduction strategies mainly focus on income diversification, building insurances mechanisms, and risk sharing strategies. Ex-post management strategies seek to stabilise consumption and place a heavy burden on houseold assets: in emergency situations, households will make use of their savings, liquidation of assets, and reduce consumption and food intake temporarily. In destitute cases, households might be urged to migrate, dispose off their key livelihood assets and thus create a dependence on charity and relief.

In many cases the post-crisis level of vulnerability will thus exceed the pre-crisis level due to the limited recovery potential (resilience) of the household capital assets (Korf et al. 2001).

The vulnerability increase is known as 'expanded vulnerability' (Bohle 1993). This degradation of coping strategies can lead to a tranformation of transitory poverty caused by displacement and limited livelihood opportunities in war times to chronic poverty and dependence on charity and relief which might persist in peace times. A 'reduced' metality becomes 'normalcy'. This decline into chronic poverty hits the poor with particular gravity, since the assets that can be disposed off to balance the external shocks imposed by war, are small and vanish quickly.

Environmental Vulnerabilities

Various communities in the dry zone, including conflict-affected ones encountered several environmental vulnerabilities. These vulnerabilities are present regardless of conflict and war. However, due to the reduced coping capabilities of people, and IDPs in particular, these environmental vulnerabilities can become a dangerous burden on the household assets. In the study area, the key environmental vulnerabilities comprised frequently occuring climate related risks (droughts, floods, cyclones), environmental degradation, such as deforestation, soil erosion and water scarcity, and crop damage by pests and wild animals (elephants, wild boar and monkeys). In some communities, farmers had completely abandoned farming due to the menace of wild animals. This, in turn, was attributed to increased deforestation, extending farming into forest reserves and inability of the farmers to protect themselves against the wild animals due to lack of effective means (e.g. guns) to keep them at bay.

Market-related risks and vulnerabilities

Having been largely cut-off from outside markets the communities in the conflict zone experienced certain market-related vulnerabilities. The war situation has seriously distorted local markets for food, labour and other commodities, because the Sri Lankan army and the LTTE have each imposed a system of checkpoints that restricts the movement of persons and goods. The prices of essential food items such as rice, floor, sugar and coconuts reportedly increased sharply. A black market situation has developed in regard to some essential food items in certain areas, including most of the conflict zone and more remote areas in the dry zone. Erratic fluctuations in food prices were more of a problem in communities heavily dependent on wage incomes such as those in conflict zones. In addition, traders often impose an oligopoly in conflict-affected areas based on close affiliation with local power holders which leads to a quasi monopoly and decreases the bargaining position of farmers. Food and other commodities produced in the study communities thus received very low prices in the market, particularly in comparison to prices of commodities purchased from outside, including the price of purchased inputs, because farmers and fishermen depend on local traders' cartells. It must be noted here, however, that the transaction costs of middlemen can be quite high due to to poor road and transport networks as well due to arbitrary taxes imposed by local power holders.

In almost all the communities studied insufficient earning opportunities especially for casual wage labour was mentioned as a key factor affecting food insecurity. Seasonal fluctuation in demand for wage labour and stagnation of wage levels, especially for women in farm and non-farm sectors, seriously affected food security of the most vulnerable households in many of the study communities. In certain areas, the local labour market was distorted by the influx of refugees that increased the availability of cheap labour and affected the local wage level downwards. This in turn affected both, the refugees and the host communities.[ii]

Conflict-related risks and vulnerabilities

The war served to intensify and expand greatly the threshold of vulnerabilities routinely associated with agricultural, fishing and other livelihoods in the unfriendly dry zone physical environment that constitutes the conflict zone. The uncertainty and risk associated with war increases and aggravates some of the environmental and economic vulnerabilities.

In the relevant study communities the nature of conflict-related risks had changed from the period of active conflict to those related to peace and reconciliation at the time of the WFP study. At the time of active conflict, the key problems experienced related to displacement, disruption of livelihoods, assets and infrastructure, injury, ill-health and death caused by war, taxes and restrictions on movement of goods and people imposed by security forces and LTTE and development of a war economy in the conflict zone and adjacent areas (Kodituwakku, Dharmasena & Perera 2001, CARE 2000, Reinhard & Kraemer 1999, Korf et al. 2001).

Markets were often not accessible due to fighting and war. Especially Tamil farmers living in remote spots of rebel controlled areas of the east had to cross the borderline between army and rebel controlled areas. They could not market their agricultural produce when fighting escalated and there was a high risk involved in passing through checkpoints. Farm and fishing families had to resort to subsistence strategies. Such situations show an overlap of market and conflict-related risks and vulnerabilities (Korf et al. 2001).

In the current transition process from war to peace, vulnerabilities associated with active armed conflict have declined and were replaced by new vulnerabilities and uncertainties associated with the change process. They include the fear of renewed conflict in some areas, fear of forced recruitment and increased tax burden particularly in LTTE-held areas, fear of loosing dry rations (food subsidies from the government) once peace is restored, and the fear of losing jobs on the part of home guards and other security forces personnel.

Ethnicity as a Framework for Assessing Vulnerability and Coping

Even though the war in Sri Lanka has been often described as 'an ethnic war', the part played by ethnicity independently or in combination with other factors such as resource competition has not been fully elaborated. War-related population movements have led to increased ethnic segregation, making much of the Northern Province ethnically homogenous with only the Tamil population remaining. At the same time, Muslim refugees expelled from rebel controlled areas concentrated in Puttlam and settlers in many of the Sinhala and Tamil border villages have been compelled to move into mainstream Sinhala or Tamil areas respectively (Hasbullah 1999). The implications of these trends for ethnic relations, conflict dynamics and ongoing peace processes have not been fully explored. In one insightful study in selected conflict communities in Sri Lanka, Goodhand, Hulme and Lewer (2000) argued that the war had led to a strengthening of bonding social capital within each ethnic group, while undermining bridging social capital that unites people of different ethnic groups for common socio-economic goals. This study pointed to significant interactions among ethnicity, violence and struggle for access to resources: "In Sri Lanka the 'loud discourse of grievance' tends to drown out 'the silent discourse of greed', however, it is clear that the conflict has created opportunities for gain for those who operate outside the law" (Goodhand, Hulme and Lewer 2000: 400). How ethno-nationalism serves as a medium for articulating collective grievances and how far the relevant grievances are real in the sense of being driven by actual experiences of poverty, livelihood insecurity and threats as against purely imagined threats need further analysis and closer scrutiny.

For those who believe in ethnicity, it provides a framework for understanding both vulnerability and coping. From the point of view of one's own ethnic group the "ethnic other" is often perceived as a primary source of vulnerability, while identifying one's own ethnic group as an important means of coping. This, in effect, leads to enhancing intra-group solidarity on the one hand and escalating inter-group hostilities on the other. This is often the basis of escalation of conflict dynamics.

Interestingly, people of each ethnic group in the northeast, particularly internally displaced persons (IDPs), often use the ethnicity framework not only to understand conflict related vulnerabilities but also market and even environment related vulnerabilities. People in the war-torn areas use clientelistic support networks along their own ethnicity as a distinct coping strategy. This places some ethnic groups in specific geographic locations at a comparative advantage to others. However, which ethnic group finds the strongest political patron differs considerably between the different regions. These patron-client relationships determine the access to important livelihood assets, such as employment, trade networks and markets.

Sinhala perceptions

For the Sinhala in the northeast, most of whom were either Sinhala fishermen from the east coast or farmers from the border villages, potential attacks from the LTTE had

largely enhanced the vulnerabilities of their livelihoods already made highly vulnerable by potential natural hazards (e.g. storms in the case of fishing and droughts in the case of dry zone farmers) and marked fluctuations in market prices for their produce. Apart from brutal massacres and occasional abductions committed by suspected LTTE attackers, fear of such attacks often compelled the entire villages, inclusive of men, women and children, to spend the nights in hiding in nearby jungles. Many had actually lost all the assets they had accumulated over the years, due to the manner in which they were displaced.

As a result, the Sinhala IDPs tended to perceive LTTE and, by implication, all the Tamils who are sympathetic to the cause of the LTTE, as the primary cause of their impoverishment, suffering and vulnerability. While often noting the good relations they had with Tamil neighbours at times of peace, the Sinhala IDPs noted the gradual deterioration of relations with their Tamil neighbours since 1983. When referring to LTTE, they used terms such as "unn", tirisannu (mindless animals), un maha yakku (those marauding devils), "koti" (tigers), terms typically reserved for animals or malevolent spirits harmful to humans. In describing their situation prior to displacement, Sinhala IDPs often used the phrase "koti kate inna minissu" (literally, innocent victims hovering about the mouth of the tigers), capturing the multiple vulnerabilities and uncertainties in life they faced due to possible attacks by the LTTE. The term "elephant and tiger menace" (ali-koti prashna) was used by Sinhala border villages to characterise their enhanced vulnerabilities resulting from the deadly combination of marauding wild elephants on the one hand and ruthless LTTE attackers on the other. It must be noted, here, however, that with the exception of a few Sinhala IDPs interviewed , including those whose family members had been brutally killed or abducted by suspected LTTE activists, most IDPs did not display a generalized hatred towards the Tamils.

In some instances the vulnerability notion was also extended to the relations that the Sinhala farmers had with Muslim traders who purchased their farm produce. For instance, in Welikanda in Polonnaruwa District the Sinhala farmers often complained that they did not get a good price for their farm produce because of exploitation by Muslim traders. This can be seen as an instance where market-related risks and vulnerabilities were interpreted in ethnic terms.

While often attributing their vulnerable position to "the ethnic other" the Sinhala IDPs tended to view their Sinhala Buddhist identity as an essential means of coping. This perception in turn had several empirical referents. Once displaced the Sinhala IDPs often returned to their villages of origin and joined relatives in these villages in search of refuge, support and peace. Many Sinhala IDPs have been fully or partially absorbed by their kinsfolk, sometimes stretching the kinship networks and obligations way beyond the levels normally found in contemporary Sri Lanka. Some Sinhala organizations took the lead in providing relief to Sinhala IDPs, mobilising voluntary philanthropic contributions from private individuals and agencies in the South. Each wave of Sinhala displacement from the border villages led to an upsurge in Sinhala sentiments and a stream of philanthropic activity from within the community. While we should not over-emphasise the role of intra-ethnic support mechanisms in addressing the humanitarian needs arising

from displacement and also take into consideration possible strains that will inevitably develop within such support mechanisms, its overall impact on evolving ethnic sentiments must be recognised. Thus the coping strategies of the Sinhala IDPs often reaffirmed their Sinhala identity. This is particularly significant in view of the fact that some of the so-called Sinhala IDPs have had a rather porous and fluid ethnic identity in the past, because of their religion (Catholicism) and the tendency to speak Tamil as the mother tongue, a tendency well entrenched in certain Catholic fishing communities in Negombo.

The Sinhala border villages have been increasingly dependent on the Sri Lankan security forces, largely Sinhala in composition and loyalties, for their continued survival in the border areas. The interests and survival of Sinhala civilians in the border areas are so closely identified with the security forces that once the army decides to withdraw from a particular area it is common for the Sinhala civilians to either look for cover or move to safer areas themselves. Apart from providing security and warding off potential LTTE attacks, the Sri Lankan security forces, inclusive of home guards, have been a rather lucrative source of employment for impoverished Sinhala inhabitants in the border areas, adding to their overall significance as a coping mechanism. A further dimension of coping strategies is that for local Sinhala women in marriageable ages soldiers have been sought after as marriage partners. As a result of all these tendencies and convergence of interests, Sinhala ethnicity has taken a new lease of life in the border areas.

In sum, while viewing "the ethnic other" as a primary source of their vulnerabilities, the Sinhala IDPs also tend to rely on their network of kin and fellow members of the ethnic group in general as an important means of coping with their day-to-day problems.

Tamil perceptions

The interviews with Sri Lanka Tamil IDPs in both camps and settlements revealed that, in contrast to Sinhala IDPs, the Tamil IDPs often perceive the Sri Lanka army and sometimes actions by the Sri Lanka government as a primary cause of their problems and grievances. When the army moves in, the Tamil civilians either look for cover in the nearby jungles or move to safer locations, including welfare centres. They fear of arbitrary arrests by the army, looting, arson, rape and possible retaliations against Tamil civilians by the army in case they are suddenly confronted by the LTTE guerrillas. While the vulnerability of their typically unstable livelihoods has been greatly enhanced by years of war in the north-east, multiple displacements, loss of assets, economic embargoes introduced by the Sri Lankan state, break up of families, and loss of social capital, military actions by the army was seen as the immediate cause of their misery and suffering. Many Tamil civilians felt that the high security zones of the armed forces in Jaffna deprived them of some of the most fertile red soil lands they used for farming. The waves of Tamil displacements and migrations were often named after names given by the army for their large operations (e.g. Operation Jayasikuru), indicating the associations deeply rooted in the Tamil psyche (Siddhartan 2000). The pass systems

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introduced by the security forces and restrictions imposed upon mobility of Tamil civilians were also seen as factors enhancing their overall vulnerability.

In the east of Sri Lanka, complaints of Tamil fishermen and farmers about the perceived exploitation by Muslim traders are quite common and damage the traditional relationships between these two ethnic groups. Many Tamils sell their produce to Muslim traders: "Muslim mudalali's come and buy our catch. They fix the price. We cannot go out and look for alternative market outlets because of security check points and harassments by the army". This in turn reflected the tendency among Tamils to ethnicize market-related vulnerabilities.

Much of the humanitarian assistance by donor agencies has been targeted for Tamil IDPs, much less though on farmers and fishermen who returned or remained in their original homes. This is understandable given the large- scale and repeated displacement of Tamil civilians as a result of the war. In addition, the Tamil IDPs heavily relied on their own social and family networks in coping with multiple problems resulting from the war. As already well known Tamil diaspora has evolved as a means of assisting the Tamil victims of the war to escape to safe heavens in western countries as refugees, illegal immigrants, students or marriage partners of those already migrated (Fuglerud 1999, Mcdowell 1999). Kinship and wider social networks within the country also serve to facilitate the move from the conflict zone to ethnic enclaves in Colombo, and where necessary start a fresh life in Colombo or migration overseas (Siddhartan 2000). Remittances from relatives abroad or relatives outside the conflict zone to those living in the conflict zone comprise an important aspect of livelihood strategies of Tamil civilians in cleared and uncleared areas in the north and the east (Korf 2001c, Korf et al. 2001, Silva 2001). As already noted, IDP families resort to a range of coping mechanisms, including sending male children to safer areas outside the conflict zone for education and employment purposes and as a means to protect them against security forces and potential recruitment by LTTE or other armed groups operating in the conflict areas.

Among other things common security threats and shared displacement experiences served to foster a strong ethnic bond within the fractured Tamil society. The development of certain Tamil ghettos in Colombo, instant collective mobilisation of Tamils in detention or welfare centres in response to perceived injustices or potential dangers, and a degree of relaxation of caste and gender disparities firmly entrenched in Tamil society are all manifestations of increased significance of ethnicity as a means of coping with armed conflict.

Muslim IDPs

Apart from fishing and farming, trade (especially long-distance trade) has been an important economic activity among the Muslims in the North and the East. The war has created some opportunities for profit, but on the whole it has led to additional risks in trade, in view of restriction of mobility in and out of the conflict areas and pay offs to LTTE and, in some instances, the army. The expulsion of Muslims from the North in

1990 by the LTTE led to the immediate displacement of nearly 100,000 Muslims and loss of their livelihoods (UTHR 1996). As a result, the Muslims have a more generalised sense of vulnerability compared to Sinhalas and Tamils. Like the Sinhala IDPs, Muslim IDPs too consider the LTTE as the primary cause of their displacement and related agonies in life. However, the Muslims do not have the same sympathy towards the Sri Lankan security forces that the Sinhala civilians have. Nor do the Muslims see security forces as part of their coping mechanisms, themselves being victims of security forces from time to time, as was evident in ethnic riots in Mawanella in May 2001.

In coping with displacement, Muslims have relied primarily on support mechanisms within the Muslim community. Most of the Muslims displaced from various places in the North in 1990 gradually moved to Welfare Centres established in Puttlam, a significant Muslim area, displaying a heavy reliance on Muslim support mechanisms, including existing kinship networks, Islamic organisations, mosques and the newly formed Muslim political party, Sri Lanka Muslim Congress. As the leader of this Muslim political party later became the minister of rehabilitation, rehabilitation of Muslim IDPs in Puttlam received considerable priority under this ministry. On the whole, the coping strategies pursued by the Muslim IDPs have involved a reaffirmation of Muslim identity, increased politicisation of Muslim interests and a spatial rearrangement of Muslim populations from a pattern of dispersed Muslim communities distributed throughout the Northern Province to a geographical concentration in the Puttlam District.

In the east, Muslims living adjacent to Tamil settlements have gained a powerful role in trading, a role they also play in other parts of the island. Even though they do not feel support from either LTTE or army, they are nevertheless able to fill a vaccuum created by the dense checkpoint system, because they can more easily transport goods through such checkpoints than Tamil traders could do. At the same time, they are historically inhabited in areas close to Tamil farmers and thus purchase their produce. Transaction costs might be high due to arbitrary taxation by local power holders from both sides, but still, traders can gain a considerable surplus as the increasing wealth of some Muslim settlements in the east seems to indicate. The socio-economic impacts of the war on the Muslim community are thus very diverse: While the IDPs from the north and many farmers from the east whose cultivation area has not been accessible during war times, have undergone hardship, some traders in the east have been named 'winners' of the war, particularly by Tamils.

Conclusion

Ethnicity plays a key role in how people perceive vulnerability and how people make use of ethnicity for livelihood strategies. Paternalistic vertical support networks which sustain ethnic exclusion gain more importance in such livelihood strategies, thus undermining inter-ethnic exchange patterns. This perpetuates a trend towards increased ethnic seperation and thus contributes to exacerbate the conflict. It undermines inter-ethnic social capital and constructs a biased perception of 'the ethnic other'. This paper highlighted the manner in which perceptions of vulnerability, risk and coping among the

conflict-affected populations are shaped by actual poverty experiences on the one hand and ethnic consciousness and notions of identity on the other. It shows the complex manner in which notions of ethnic grievances are fueled by actual experiences of displacement, victimization, and impoverishment caused by armed conflict. While ethnicity may be "imagined" in the sense of being an important basis of self-consciousness that often simplifies and, at the same time, exaggerates the issues involved, it is "real" in the sense of guiding thinking and action of the people concerned and it is somehow rooted in the real problems faced by conflict-affected populations in the dry zone.

Ethnicity may be seen as an intervening variable that amplifies the interaction between poverty and conflict. Ethnicity is the lens through which the affected populations understand their overall suffering, articulate collective grievances and work out their individual and collective responses and coping strategies. While the "greed" of warlords may play a role in perpetuation of war, it is "collective grievances" articulated in ethnic or other forms that typically drive the war (Collier & Hoeffler 2001, Hollingworth 2002). There may be certain positive functions of ethnicity within a conflict situation in so far as ethnic networks serve to assist the people from the war zones, in particular IDPs, and, thereby, help them cope with adverse consequences of armed conflict, including disintegration of many of the preexisting social institutions and mutual support mechanisms. However, articulation of collective grievances around ethnicity can lead to an escalation of conflict and a never-ending spiral of violence as already evident in Sri Lanka and to escape from chronic poverty.

Moreover, as elaborated elsewhere (Silva n.d.) ethnic perspectives tend to gloss over or even conceal the complex web of root causes associated with poverty, underdevelopment, social upheavals and suffering at the edges of human survival. Another drawback of the ethnically framed vulnerability framework is that it invariably shifts the blame on "the ethnic other", denying one's own agency and complicity in conflict dynamics. Furthermore, the evolution of ethnic inclusiveness in exchange patterns reduces the livelihood options and increases the dependence on ethnic based client-patron networks. These increase dependence and perpetuate poverty into chronic poverty. It is to be carefully analysed in how far such families manage to escape from chronic poverty in the current transition process from war to peace with its new opportunities. As long as these client-patron relationships pertain in whatever form, it might be difficult for poor families to improve their livelihoods substantially.

As regards social policy implications for a post-conflict situation, development practice cannot simply concentrate on humanitarian assistance and poverty alleviation totally ignoring ethnicity as something extraneous to relief and development. While community support for the displaced must be certainly encouraged, steps must be taken to arrest any resulting impact on ethnic polarization that may directly or indirectly contribute to perpetuation of conflict. Development projects can be understood as a strategic resource in an arenas of struggle: various actors compete for their share of the cake (Bierschenk 1988). This essay also points to the potential significance of participatory vulnerability assessment as a means to overcome any ethnic biases in popular notions about

vulnerability, risk and danger. These struggles can easily be fought out along ethnic divides. Building a dynamic civil society, not easily vulnerable to divisive tendencies associated with ethnic and other parochial loyalties, while being responsive to the needs of various groups in society is thus an essential part of peace building and relief, rehabilitation and reconstruction (RRR) efforts.

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Notes:

[i] It must be noted here that certain underprivileged and remote dry zone districts such as Hambantota and Monaragala played a prominent role in Sinhala youth uprisings in the south led by the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna in 1971 and 1987-89. Surprisingly, this itself has received only passing references in political and social analysis of armed conflict in Sri Lanka (Moore 1985).

[ii] However, we also find an example that goes contrary to the described trend: in Nilaveli area in the east, the war has opened an economic opportunity for onion cultivation that is very profitable, since the onion production from the Jaffna peninsula is cut off from the national market. Here, wage labourers find multiple occasions for jobs, even though only during the peaks of the cultivation season (Korf et al. 2001).