

The Impact of Conflict on Households' Livelihoods

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Introduction

The ethnic conflict in Sri Lanka represented a major threat to the livelihoods of all people in the country and especially those in the conflict zones (Korf 2004; Nigel 2010; Kulatunga & Lakshman 2010). The rise of Sri Lanka's ethnic conflict and its impact at macro-level has been well documented (de Silva 1998; Abeyratne 2004). However, studies at micro-level which primarily focus on the nexus between ethnic conflict and households' livelihoods in the war zones in Sri Lanka are rare. None of the existing studies has fully captured the availability and accessibility of physical, social, cultural, economic, political, and institutional factors and agency in the context of conflict that largely determine the livelihood options of the households in 'ethnically bordered agricultural villages'. Furthermore, there is little information available on the dynamics of the livelihood strategies covering the pre-, during, and post-conflict periods. In this research an attempt is made to understand the complex nature of the socio-political and economic interactions of households of different ethnic groups, based on fieldwork in six 'ethnically bordered agricultural villages' in conflict zones of Ampara District in Eastern Sri Lanka.

Objectives

The major aim of this study is to contribute to a better understanding of the households' access to livelihood assets, causes and dynamics of livelihood activities and strategies of households in different ethnic groups by mainly focusing on the different opportunities and constraints faced by the households when carrying on their livelihoods in the conflict environment. The study also aims to contribute to the theoretical discussion on livelihood studies in the context of conflict. It is intended to achieve this through addressing the following research questions: (i) how do different households access and make use of assets? (ii) what are the impacts of conflict on households' livelihood activities? (iii) what type of livelihood strategies are formulated by different households in situations of conflict? and (iv) how can the dynamics of livelihoods in a conflict setting be incorporated into sustainable livelihood framework?

Methodology

To cover the plurality of voices that can emerge in the process of understanding the complexity of livelihoods in a conflict context, this study used a mix of qualitative and quantitative data collection. Information gathering methodologies included unstructured dialogues, interviews with key state and non-state stakeholders, collection of information from texts and official records, group discussions, in-depth interviews with households, observations and a survey. Considering the significance of the impact of conflict on different ethnic groups, the selection of the study area was done to represent different ethnic groups and the degree to which conflict had affected them. Fieldwork was conducted on three separate occasions between late 2007 and early 2010. The gathered information has been organised using a modified livelihoods framework enable capturing the complex nature of the impact of conflict on households' livelihoods at the micro-level.

Results

The impact of the conflict on access to livelihood assets and activities varied according to households' ethnic group, socio-economic status, location of residence, relations with political and military power holders, and relationships with people living in non-conflict zones in both Sri Lanka and abroad. The conflict situation forced many people from all three ethnic groups to abandon their traditional resources and livelihood activities in order to search for alternative forms. Although most of the households were losers in the conflict, there were a few winners, even at the micro level.

The research revealed that various livelihood strategies were used by households classified as survival, coping, and adaptation. Most of the livelihood strategies adopted by people in all six locations studied are mainly context based. Several strategies were common to the households of all three ethnic groups or at least to two of them. Certain strategies were selected predominantly by one group of people who shared the same ethnic identity. Further, the reasons behind using certain strategies differed according to people's socio-economic status and their political affiliations. The livelihood framework adopted in the study enabled to explore the influences of conflict that had shaped the major livelihood components at the local level.

Conclusion

The issues examined in this study are providing useful information and knowledge to set policies or design strategies for the future development of the livelihoods of conflict-affected people. The findings demonstrate that households' livelihoods were

inextricably linked with the conflict. The different elements of households' livelihoods of different ethnic groups in all six locations studied were affected both directly and indirectly through the conflict's impact on livelihood entitlement, people's lives, and in the creation of new forms of social inequality. Conversely, there was clear evidence that the livelihood changes which households made in the context of conflict were a cause of further conflict. The modified livelihoods framework used here allows for incorporating households of different ethnic groups and different segments of households in the same ethnic groups as central in the inquiry into the livelihood approach.

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