

Social structure, change, and interaction in communities surrounding the Seethawaka Export Processing Zone (SEPZ), Sri Lanka

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The Seethawaka Export Processing Zone (SEPZ), established in 1999 in Avissawella, has emerged as a major site of industrial development with over 20,000 employees. While its economic contributions are widely acknowledged, its sociological implications remain underexplored. This study, grounded in sociological theories of social structure, social change, and social interaction, examines how the SEPZ has reshaped community life in adjacent villages. Drawing on Giddens' Structuration Theory and modernisation perspectives, the research highlights the dynamic relationship between industrial expansion and local society. A qualitative case study was conducted in Halhotawatta, where ten participants were selected through purposive and snowball sampling to ensure diversity and access to hard-to-reach voices. Data collection methods included semi-structured interviews, direct observation, and short questionnaires, and thematic analysis was used in the study. Findings reveal multidimensional impacts. In terms of social structure, SEPZ-related employment expanded opportunities for youth and women, reconfigured household economies, and fostered new livelihood patterns such as rental housing and food vending. Processes of social change included rapid urbanisation, weakening of traditional community bonds, and heightened exposure to environmental risks such as air and water pollution, which contributed to respiratory illnesses and declining wellbeing. Patterns of social interaction shifted as migrant inflows generated both cooperation (through trade and labour exchange) and tensions (linked to cultural differences, drug use, and crime). A striking outcome is the absence of structured engagement between SEPZ authorities and residents, leading to mistrust and exclusion from decision-making. The study concludes that the SEPZ is simultaneously a driver of economic progress and a source of contested social transformation. It argues for integrating community voices, enforcing environmental safeguards, and institutionalizing Social Impact Assessments (SIAs) to ensure that industrial growth contributes to sustainable and inclusive development.

Keywords: *Community development, SEPZ, Social change, Social interaction, Social structure*