

Dimensions of Conflict outside the North and East of Sri Lanka

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Foreword

This series of Poverty Briefs (No. 1 to 10) was produced for OXFAM Great Britain (GB) by the Centre for Poverty Analysis to provide a macro overview of key thematic areas relating to poverty, of relevance to Oxfam GB's work in Sri Lanka. They are specifically designed to provide Oxfam GB programme staff with insights into the major issues, concerns, and debates within these themes and their linkages and effects on poverty in Sri Lanka. They also aim to highlight potential areas for policy advocacy by Oxfam GB. This input was used in staff preparation for Oxfam GB's Strategic Review in August 2004.

Oxfam GB's mission is, to work with others to overcome poverty and suffering. Its current programme focus is on: Livelihoods and poor people's access to markets; Gender equality, empowerment and ending violence against women; Public health promotion and access to quality water and sanitation facilities; Emergency preparedness and response; Relationship building between and within communities; and Empowerment of the poor through building of Community Based Organisations.

The views and opinions expressed in the Poverty Briefs are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect those of Oxfam GB or the Centre for Poverty Analysis.

This series of Poverty Briefs was prepared in mid 2004, prior to the events of the Tsunami on 26th December 2004. The context and issues discussed in some of the Briefs could have changed since then.

Dimensions of Conflict outside the North and East of Sri Lanka

1. Introduction

Consideration of conflict in Sri Lanka is often limited to consideration of the conflict between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL). While this has been the dominant political-economic factor in Sri Lanka's recent history, there has been a tendency to neglect and/or deny the existence of other forms of conflict or to consider them socially irrelevant.

The brief introduces other aspects of conflict in Sri Lanka and examines their correlation with poverty. The scope of the brief does not allow a detailed examination of each conflict and corresponding analysis of its relationship with poverty. The examination of poverty in each section will be confined to issues with relevance to policy development, possible areas for advocacy or to project implementation. The topics suggested fall under three broad headings, which attempt to capture a diverse range of conflicts.

For the purpose of this brief, conflict will refer only to negative social developments, between two or more groups with opposing ideas or issues, with the potential for the situation to manifest itself in violence. Some of the conflicts could have already become violent, but this is not the most important defining characteristic.

2. Conflict Dimensions in Sri Lanka

2.1 Socially Divisive Issues- Ethnicity, Class, Caste and Religion

When categorising conflict in Sri Lanka it is impossible to ignore the pervasive nature of some socially divisive issues and the way in which they have come to cause conflict or, have on occasion, been manipulated to cause conflict.

Social divisions such as ethnicity, caste and class, are common factors in many of Sri Lanka's 'other conflicts'. These factors will be examined in relation to several existing conflicts that have, at times, turned violent.

Conflicts in the estate sector

The issue of ethnicity is at the root of much of the conflict in the estate sector. Tamils of Indian origin, who make up the most part of the estate worker population, struggle to define themselves as a distinct social group.

Conflicts occur between estate workers and Sinhalese villagers, largely over land. The issue of ethnicity is used by each party to challenge the others 'right' to land. Sinhalese villagers have resettled from other parts of the country through government-sponsored relocation schemes or live in traditional villages which pre-date the estate system. Among the latter, there is the belief that land was 'stolen' from them by the British Colonialists and is now being occupied by Indian Tamils thus establishing the Sinhalese right to reclaim it. In the estates, Tamil workers are allocated land by the estate management for community infrastructure such as schools and play grounds. Any land that can potentially be taken away is therefore cause for conflict. The Indian Tamil estate population suffers from very low social development. The Tamil estate population is the most disadvantaged section of the population when it comes to levels of health, education and sanitation. For this reason the development of community projects is seen as vital to the improvement of their socio-economic condition.

There is another aspect of the conflict in the estate sector, which takes on a distinct inter-generational profile. Older estate workers seem to have been content living and working in the conditions made available to them. Many of the younger generation are better-educated and have different aspirations from the older generation. They do not want to continue to do the same manual work and would prefer alternative employment. The lack of identity papers, in particular, is a significant impediment in the search for jobs outside this sector. The differing attitudes about what type of work is acceptable causes conflict between older and younger members of the estate population. The conflict is related explicitly to poverty and their social condition and whilst this is a latent conflict, the disaffection it creates among the youth manifests itself in relation to other conflict issues.

A particularly disturbing trend is the open support, shown by some groups of estate youths, for the LTTE and its actions. Their support is most often simply vocal. They express their dissatisfaction and their feelings of marginalisation and discrimination by supporting the LTTE, which they see as fighting for the liberation of the Tamil people. Their support has on occasion caused violent incidents particularly when these groups express their joy at significant LTTE victories resulting in a large number of casualties among government forces. In this way, the conflicts in the estate sector are also linked to larger conflict issues in Sri Lanka.

Conflicts with the muslim community

There has been a steady increase of conflict directed against Muslims as a minority ethnic group. Much of the conflict is based on commercial rivalry. Muslims in many parts of the country are engaged in trade and related businesses and competition for market share sometimes leads to conflict. Another significant factor is the perception that Muslims congregate wherever they reside and form mono-ethnic communities. It is thought that they have a stronger sense of community identity and strive to create specialised infrastructure, such as mosques and Muslim schools for their ethnic group. This conflict is especially apparent in the Central and Southern provinces.

In the Central province (especially Kandy district) the conflict stems from rivalry between Sinhalese and Muslim traders. This rivalry has become ethnicised and other socio-economic factors are being brought into play. Sinhalese land and shop owners are unwilling to sell properties to Muslims because of the fear that Muslim traders will dominate the city. They are concerned that there are more Muslim places of worship and schools being constructed and therefore the ethnic balance and image of the area will suffer. In this way, competition in one aspect of their livelihoods has become ethnicised and leads to conflict. While this type of conflict is mostly latent, violent incidents have also occurred as a result.

In the south, the conflict exists as competition between Muslim and Sinhalese fishermen for fish resources. This is no more than a competition between two user groups for the same scarce natural resource but has become ethnicised because they happen to belong to two ethnic groups. Rivalry also exists between the two groups for political power and influence. There is a strong Muslim

voting block in these areas that supports the Muslims who seek political office. The situation is exacerbated by a recent trend where ethnic rivalry is used to create tension and to give rise to pseudo-nationalist feelings among the majority community and then used to promote certain candidates for public office.

Conflicts involving the Muslim community are not simply limited to those with the majority Sinhalese ethnic group. There is also significant evidence of conflict between the Tamil and Muslim minorities, especially in the Central Province. This is based on rivalry about community resources such as schools and teachers. There is evidence of a lack of Tamil teachers and a related perception that Muslim teachers, who teach in the Tamil language, are biased towards their own community. This is compounded by incidents in schools where children wearing special items of clothing or religious symbols (such as head scarves for Muslim girls and the pottu or caste mark for Tamil girls) are bullied or sometimes not allowed to attend school. Another dimension to this conflict is that one of the few occupations available to educated young people from the estate sector, outside the estates, is teaching. However, Muslim teachers take up most available positions in Tamil schools. Thus the minority Tamils from the estate sector perceive themselves to be doubly disadvantaged; opportunities to gain employment outside the estate system are denied to them and they believe their children's education is of an inferior quality because it is carried out by Muslim teachers.

A further significant aspect of conflict with the Muslim community is the existence of a large number of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) particularly in the Puttalam District. The people have left their homes in the Northern and Eastern Provinces when their villages were destroyed by the conflict or driven by fear that they would be attacked. They have settled in large numbers in the Puttalam District and their presence is creating conflict. IDPs compete with the host community for scarce resources such as fish, water and firewood. Grievances have been voiced because it is perceived that IDPs are unduly supported both by the Government as well as other agencies and organisations through the provision of temporary shelter, housing materials and dry rations. Members of the host community feel that they too live in poverty but available aid flows to the IDPs because of their special status. Worries remain that even after the conflict is resolved some members of the displaced communities will

continue to live in areas to which they were displaced, causing rivalry for other resources such as land and market share.

Caste and conflict

The caste system in Sri Lanka is a historical mode of social stratification based on traditional occupations. The rivalry and conflict that this system engendered continues to affect social relations, particularly in rural Sri Lanka. It is not often the sole cause of a conflict but rather gives an added dimension to already existing conflicts. An example is the conflict between farmers from the high Govigama caste and lower caste fishermen over water resources in inland tanks. Fishing is considered a 'sinful' activity for some higher castes because of its association with the Buddhist strictures against harming living things. Therefore, the caste argument is only employed in situations where it is beneficial. Essentially, the conflict involves competition for scarce natural resources where the caste dimension creates another source of rivalry.

Caste is also employed as a way of discrediting or marginalising certain candidates for political office while promoting others. The recourse to caste in this way also guarantees a certain voter base of the same caste that political parties use to their advantage.

Conflict in the south (JVP related)

The JVP insurrections of 1971 and 1987 were damaging episodes of social unrest in Sri Lanka. Whilst the conflict between the government and the LTTE has been more sustained and has affected society for a longer period, the conflict with the JVP cannot be considered less important. It is significant especially given the way the movement has transformed itself into an effective voice of dissent within the formal electoral political structure while retaining elements of its revolutionary ideology.

A feature of the movement has been its ability to reinvent itself. The suppression of the last insurgency resulted in the capture and summary execution of the entire leadership of the organisation, but they have managed in a few years to become a potent political force and today form part of the governing coalition. Much of the support of the JVP comes from rural areas where they are seen to be more sensitive to problems faced by people in the agricultural sector in particular farm incomes, the prices of farm inputs, the division of land held

by small holders and the unwillingness of the younger generation to take up farm work. They command a large following of unemployed educated youth. The grievances and disaffection felt by young people in relation to their socio-economic situation is echoed by the JVPs anti-systemic views. They feel that the present system of government is responsible for their situation and see the JVP as the sole political force which is capable of changing the system and willing to attempt the change.

For perhaps the same reasons, the JVP also commands a great deal of support among labour unions that oppose policies such as privatisation and the linked retrenchment of government workers. One of the reasons their last attempt at unseating the government was nearly successful was that they were able to mobilise labour union forces in a series of strikes in key public service areas that caused huge socio-economic damage to the country.

The insurrection of 1987 brought to the fore another element of the political identity being developed by the JVP. They defined themselves as a nationalistic patriotic party, thereby winning support from people opposed to political moves like the involvement of India in the conflict with the LTTE. This identity has developed further and in recent times has been defined by the party's opposition to the peace process based on the idea that it would divide the country.

This mix of nationalism and opposition to traditional state structures continues to increase its support. In particular, the politicisation of fears that the peace process would result in a divided country allowed the JVP to rise as a formidable political party. Its recent victory in the elections confirms its status as a political force in Sri Lanka.

Conflict related to the JVP also displays evidence of the use of socially divisive factors such as caste and class to fuel situations of conflict. Class dimension was always an important factor in the politics of the JVP. They defined themselves as a group that was trying to develop the tenets of Marxism in order to apply them to the Sri Lankan political context. Much of their thinking about society and resulting conflicts was defined along class lines. The caste factor is less apparent. It is thought that people in positions of leadership within the JVP represented the higher castes while many of their cadres were from lower caste

communities. Perhaps the most direct caste correlation would have been that rural poor from low castes, being doubly marginalised, may have had more reason to support a movement defined on Marxist lines of social equality, which questioned and challenged the established system.

Violent conflict involving the JVP is, of late, generally confined to electoral clashes between supporters of rival parties. However, The JVP continues to have significant potential for social disruption especially given its close involvement with the highly politicised labour and student movements.

The correlation between this particular type of conflict and poverty may be less apparent than with other issues which will be examined in this paper. The strength of the JVP lies in its capacity to employ the disaffection of educated and unemployed youth, the feelings of marginalisation of the rural agricultural populace, and the disaffection of those who lack access to formal political structures. Its image as an anti-establishment force persists even though it is now part of the governing coalition. Many JVP supporters believe that it is better placed and better equipped to address the problems they face in relation to their livelihoods, that it will address aspects of rural and urban poverty that the system seems to have created, that they will address issues linked to the lack of access to political and social influence, to problems in the agricultural sector such as the high cost of inputs and resulting debt burdens, and to problems of unemployment for young people. These are the various ways in which poverty and the JVP are linked as factors contributing to conflict.

2.2 Conflict over Natural Resources

Competition over scarce natural resources is another significant area that leads to conflict with significant poverty dimensions. It will form the other broad category under which conflict in Sri Lanka will be examined in this paper.

Conflicts over water

Water as a scarce natural resource has led to competition and conflict in many different areas. The conflict is exacerbated by development projects designed to manage this resource, which fail to provide their intended benefits. One such

project is the Lunugamvehera irrigation scheme in the Southern province. It has failed to provide water supplies to the large agrarian population who depend on it. The situation was made worse by prolonged periods of drought. Conflict occurred when water users at the top end of the channel illegally diverted the flow of water giving them sufficient water for agricultural production thus depriving users further down stream. When the traditional livelihood of the community depends on such a limited natural resource, competition easily leads to conflict. Other incidents of conflict over water have been recorded in the Uva province where farmers compete with those who use water for domestic consumption. This also involves competition for the same resource for different livelihood needs.

A third element of this conflict is created in part by development interventions where projects introduce small scale fisheries in inland tanks as both a means of income generation as well as a supplementary food resource. Incidents have been recorded where such tanks which are now used both for fishing and farming cause competition between different users who both depend on it for income and family food security. (The possible caste aspects of this conflict have been outlined above). While this can be categorised as another conflict based on poverty and the use of scarce natural resources, it is important to acknowledge the contribution of development or poverty alleviation projects to this type of competition. Integration of these concerns into the planning of development interventions in areas where people's livelihoods depend heavily on a natural resource such as water would minimise the occurrence of this type of conflict.

Another possible conflict in relation to this resource is the threat of social unrest in protest against the privatisation of the water system in urban areas. Protests in other countries against the privatisation of water resources have turned violent and caused extensive social unrest. While the issue has only drawn one formal organised protest in Sri Lanka to date, water is widely perceived as a resource that should be freely available at a price which all users can afford. It has already revealed significant conflict potential. Further efforts to privatise this sector could result in renewed and intensified social disaffection, especially if the issue becomes increasingly politicised.

Conflicts over land

Land can also be defined as a scarce natural resource on which many people's livelihoods depend. The importance of this resource allows scarcity and competition to lead to conflict. One of the foremost areas where such conflict takes place is the estate sector, where estate land left as reserves or allocated to estate workers is encroached on and used for vegetable cultivation. The income the encroachers receive from their illegal cultivation is higher than that received by estate workers and thus a direct income-based competition takes place. Elements of other conflicts relating to ethnicity and grievance about low socio-economic status as discussed above, also play a part in this conflict.

Internally Displaced Persons are involved in a two-fold competition for land resources. One aspect of this competition comes from IDPs that return to their original homes to rebuild their lives and livelihoods. Very few returning IDPs have legal documents which prove their claims to their land. Boundaries have been destroyed by the conflict and much illegal seizure and occupation of land has taken place. Returning IDPs must thus compete with others who may dispute their right to resettle. Disputes over boundaries and ownership of land severe for those such as farmers whose livelihoods largely depended on it.

IDPs who choose to settle in areas to which they have been displaced also compete for land with the original inhabitants of these areas. While this conflict may have a significant ethnic dimension, it is often competition for natural resources such as land that is the immediate cause for conflict. People in the host communities feel the new settlers will threaten their livelihoods and conflict occurs as a result.

This section concentrated on natural resource conflicts. However, it would be too simplistic to confine these issues solely to that category. It is important to that they be understood as complex social phenomena incorporating elements of poverty, socially divisive issues (discussed above) as well as private aspects (below).

2.3 Other Conflict Dimensions - Conflict in the 'Private Sphere'

While many of the conflicts discussed above occur in the public sphere (with significant private aspects), a profile of conflict in Sri Lanka must also include

conflicts that occur in the private sphere. This section will focus on the socio-economic effects of domestic violence and suicide within the family sphere.

Domestic violence

Violence against women and children in the home is a serious problem. Types of domestic violence include assault, sexual violence and rape. The tragedy of violence extends beyond physical and emotional injuries to women. Children of violent homes are also at an increased risk of both physical and emotional abuse. Even if the violent spouse does not physically harm the child, the child lives in an unhealthy, unsafe environment, and manifest symptoms of battered children (i.e. nightmares, excessive fear, aggressive behaviour, learning negative attitudes etc). Children from abusive homes can also suffer in the critical spheres of education, health, and nutrition through neglect. While a correlation is drawn between domestic violence and substance and alcohol abuse, recent research also indicates a dangerous level of social acceptance of this link which reinforces these negative attitudes and behaviour patterns.

Domestic violence often has an adverse impact on family economies through added costs such as extra health care and loss of money due to physical or emotional inability to work. Sometimes children are forced to endure additional economic and emotional burdens, often at the expense of their education. In this case, limited educational attainment will have a bad effect on the futures of the child and the child's family. The effect of domestic violence on various aspects of livelihood is readily apparent. Also significant is the effect on the personal security of poor people. Domestic abuse creates an atmosphere of unease and insecurity within the private sphere. The security aspect of poverty extends beyond the idea of livelihood security to include insecure family and home environments. The effect of domestic violence in creating these conditions allows this conflict to also be spoken of in relation to poverty defined as the lack of personal security.

Suicide

Suicide in many districts in Sri Lanka such as Anuradhapura, Moneragala, and Badulla occurs mostly due to psychological distress caused by difficult socio-economic situations. Lack of natural resources, lack of assets, unreliable farm production and income, and lack of access to alternative income sources

Suicide in Sri Lanka-1995-2001

Year	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	2001
Total	8519	7367	6228	5869	5907	5412	4995
Males	6256	5741	4674	4518	4536	4034	3778
Females	2263	1626	1554	1351	1371	1378	1177
Youth (20-30 years)	2030	2715	2164	1300	1220	1045	1553
Youth as percentage of total	23.8%	36.9%	34.7%	22.1%	20.6%	19.3%	31%

Source: Police Department statistics (2003)

are features of the endemic poverty prevalent in these areas. These often lead to the type of vulnerable states where the reaction to an additional external shock can trigger suicide. Although mental illness is also a cause for deliberate self-harm, difficult personal and social circumstances are more likely to trigger suicidal behaviour. Tragically, many people conclude that the only way out of their poverty plight is to take their own lives.

The breakdown of family structures is identified as a significant reason for suicide among the farming families, especially in the north central region. Indebtedness is a significant reason for farmer suicides. With the open market economy in the 1980s, agrarian farmers have shouldered heavy burdens. Coupled with the inability of the state systems to protect the poorest sections of the people, severe rural poverty drives farmers to suicide. Poor housing, uncertain livelihood sources, insufficient food for the family, and perceived helplessness drive the poorer sections of our society to suicide. Tragically, poverty triggers suicide and suicide perpetuates the cycle of poverty. Poverty is a dimension that permeates all these conflicts of the private sphere, either as a catalyst or an outcome or both.

3. Conclusion

The issues explored above reveal the complexity of the Sri Lankan conflict situation and its interconnections with poverty. It is impossible to deny the relevance and social importance of the various aspects of conflict and the manner in which each must influence the type of development or poverty-orientated programmes to be planned and implemented in Sri Lanka.

Further Reading

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