



GROWING UP WITH WAR

**Experiences of Children Affected by Armed Conflict in the
Eastern Province of Sri Lanka**

Sarah Wimaladharma
Amarasiri De Silva
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October 2005

Working Paper Series No. 11 - 2005

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National Library of Sri Lanka-Cataloguing-In-Publication Data

Wimaladharm, Sarah

Growing Up with War: Experiences of children affected by armed conflict in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka/Sarah Wimaladharm; Amarasiri de Silva and Nilakshi de Silva.- Colombo: Centre for Poverty Analysis, 2005.- 38p.: ill.; 29 c.m.

ISBN: 955-1040-29-5

Price:

i. 305.906950835 DDC22

ii. Title

iii. De Silva, Amarasiri jt.au.

iv. De Silva, Nilakshi jt.au.

1. War affected – Children (Eastern province)

2. Social problems - War

ISBN: 955-1040-29-5

The CEPA Publication Series currently includes the following categories; Studies, Edited Volumes, Working Papers and Briefing Papers.

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The **Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA)** was established in 2001 as an independent institute providing professional services on poverty related development issues. CEPA provides services in the areas of applied research, advisory services, training and dialogue and exchange to development organisations and professionals. These services are concentrated within the core programme areas that currently include: Poverty Impact Monitoring, Poverty and Conflict, and Poverty Assessment and Knowledge Management.

The research study "*Growing Up With War*" is a product of the Poverty and Conflict (PAC) Programme at CEPA, which seeks to better understand the interaction between poverty and conflict in the Sri Lankan context.

The **Department for International Development (DFID)**, which sponsors the PAC programme at CEPA, is the UK Government department responsible for promoting development and the reduction of poverty. The overall aim of DFID is to reduce global poverty and promote sustainable development, in particular through achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Although assistance is concentrated in the poorest countries of Sub-Saharan Africa and Asia, DFID also contributes to poverty reduction and sustainable development in middle-income countries in Latin America and Eastern Europe. It works in partnership with governments committed to the MDGs and with civil society, the private sector and the research community.

Acknowledgements

This report is the result of a collaborative effort. Varuni Ganepola and Kanchana Ruwanpura provided valuable input to the research concept and design. Hemanthie Dassanayake, Niruba Pushpakumara and Sathiasobana Sathianathan assisted in the initial stages of the study. M. Malathy, S. Amuthamany, S. Ushananthini, R. Amutha, K. Jeeva, A. Elangeswary, T. H. Chamila Nadishani, M. Niranjaladevi and V. Yashodhini carried out the household interviews in the districts with the help and guidance of Vigitha Renganathan, Shakeela Jabbar and Mohamed Fahim, who also assisted in carrying out the qualitative field research. Shakeela Jabbar and Vigitha Renganathan contributed to the data analysis and preparation of the report. Varuni Ganepola and Claudia Ibargüen provided helpful comments on previous drafts of this report. Their assistance and the support of other colleagues at CEPA are gratefully acknowledged.

We would also like to thank all the interview and survey participants in the Eastern province who welcomed us into their homes, treated us with warm hospitality and, most importantly, shared their experiences with us. Their courage, determination and humanity are inspiring, and we are honoured to have had an opportunity to meet with them.

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Executive Summary

This research study was carried out to add to the understanding of how children are affected by armed conflict in the Sri Lankan context. It was conceptualised as an exploratory study and is focused on the three districts in the Eastern province. The findings of this research study confirm that children are affected both directly and indirectly by armed conflict. Given the long timeline of the conflict in Sri Lanka, many older children and young adults have been exposed to extreme periods of violence and insecurity and continue to live with a constant sense of fear. Their education was affected, as schools were frequently closed and teachers absent during the violence. While there are several ways in which conflict directly affects children – such as death, disability, loss of family members and displacement which are discussed in this report – most children were affected by the conflict through poverty. Almost every household covered by this study has become poorer as a result of the conflict. They have lost land, property and livelihoods and in some instances, children have been forced by their circumstances to become income earners. Conflict-induced poverty in the region, which has an inadequate and dilapidated infrastructure such as roads, hospitals and schools, has also affected the development and wellbeing of children. Finally, among both children as well as adults, there is a great fear that the conflict will resume but despite the conflict and their experiences, children expressed a great deal of determination and resourcefulness to overcome the problems faced by them, their families and their communities.

1. Introduction

The North and East of Sri Lanka have been affected by an extremely violent conflict over a period in excess of 20 years. Many people have died, great damage has been done to public and private property and entire lives have been disrupted. In times of conflict, vulnerable groups such as women and children are often the most affected. The Convention on the Rights of the Child 1989 (CRC) is the global charter for children's survival, protection and wellbeing, but as the 1996 Machel report to the United Nations on the Impact of Armed Conflict on Children¹ points out, war greatly increases the threats to children and clearly contravenes the mandate for their protection provided by the CRC. In Sri Lanka too this appears to be the case; some estimate that as many as 900,000 children in the country have been affected by the conflict in the North and East with as many as one-third of these being displaced at least once (Save the Children 1998, 2000).

However, there has been a dearth of systematic and localised information about how the conflict has affected children in Sri Lanka mainly because of accessibility issues in the North and East up until a few years ago. Statistical data for the North and East is still being compiled and poverty statistics are not yet available for the region - which makes the task of understanding the developments and changes in these areas over the past 20 years more difficult. Development interventions and policies are often formulated based on little or no systematic and localised research, but rather on experiences elsewhere in the country or the world.

This research study was undertaken by the Poverty and Conflict Programme (PAC) at the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) to add to the understanding of how children are affected by armed conflict in Sri Lanka and to inform the policy dialogue about appropriate interventions. The study attempts to bring to the development discussion the actual experiences of children in conflict-affected areas and to reorient a discourse that has tended to focus on a few issues specific to some groups, such as child soldiers, towards a more general picture of the effects of war on children.

Children can be affected directly and indirectly by armed conflict. They can be killed, injured or disabled by the violence. They may lose one or both parents, siblings and other family members. They may lose their homes and become displaced. These are well-known and apparent effects of the conflict. Children can also be affected in less apparent ways. Their education may be disrupted and they may be forced to become wage earners or to contribute to the family's income-generating activities. The general slow-down of economic activity in conflict areas, the destruction of infrastructure and prolonged periods of insecurity can have an impoverishing effect on the population. When a household becomes poorer children are also affected. A main theme running through this research study is the relationship between conflict and poverty. The study hopes to add to the understanding of how conflict and poverty interrelate, by looking at the experiences of children.

Issues affecting children cannot be fully understood without considering the issues faced by the households to which these children belong. The type of household, be it two-parent or female-headed, can have an impact on how children are affected and cope with war. In addition, given the prolonged nature of the conflict and the current Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)² prevalent in Sri Lanka, the research study was conceptualised to understand not just the current picture but also the past experiences of children especially during periods of extreme violence and insecurity.

¹ The full report can be downloaded at <http://www.unicef.org/graca/>. The report was subsequently updated by GraCa Machel with the publication of *The Impact of War on Children* in 2001.

² A ceasefire agreement, commonly called the MOU, was signed between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in February 2002.

The Eastern province is the focus of this study. It was decided to limit the research area geographically to allow the study to be in-depth. The East was selected because it has several characteristics that make the region particularly relevant for this type of research. The population in the Eastern province is an ethnic mix of Muslim, Sinhalese and Tamil. It is also considered to be an area of relative volatility with a potential for further conflict. In terms of the country as a whole, the Eastern province has also received little attention, both as a research area and in terms of development interventions. Even in conflict-related research and policy discussions, it has sometimes been ignored in favour of the Northern areas of the country.

There are three limitations in this study. While a significant number of children were orphaned by Sri Lanka's 20-year conflict and live in welfare centres, this study is focused on children who continue to live within a household rather than in an institutional setting. Further research is needed to understand if and how children in different care systems are affected by and cope with the effects of conflict. The second limitation is that the field research was not carried out in areas controlled by the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), mainly in consideration for the safety of the field research team. Finally, areas covered by the study, and consequently the families and children in these areas, were badly affected by the tsunami disaster of December 2004. Taking into consideration the distress suffered by families and children in these areas, it was decided to conclude the field research as of December 2004. Therefore qualitative interviews in the Trincomalee district could not be completed. As a result, this report reflects household information from all three districts in the province, but in-depth interviews with children from only the Ampara and Batticaloa districts, all of which were gathered before 26 December 2004.³

The report is organised into five main sections. The next section provides an overview of the study approach and methodology. Chapter 3 provides an overview of the households in which children live and discusses - at the level of the household - perceptions about the ways in which they have been affected by the conflict. The following two chapters focus on the experiences of children: Chapter 4 provides a discussion of how children have been affected in terms of their schooling, child work and other aspects; Chapter 5 reflects children's perceptions of the country's situation - today and in the future - and their own aspirations. The concluding chapter brings together the main findings from the report and provides a discussion of the policy recommendations that stem from these findings.

This research is exploratory, rather than definitive. Our focus is on real experiences of children and their families - rather than quantitative data or generalisations. To this end, as far as possible we have tried to retain the voices of children⁴ in the discussion about how they have been affected by the war.

³ See Annex I for map of Sri Lanka.

⁴ All names have been changed to maintain the anonymity of the children.

2. Methodology and Study Approach

The legal definition of 'child', as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child, is anyone under the age of 18. During the course of preliminary research for this study, it became apparent that limiting the study focus to this definition of 'child' would result in excluding from it the childhood experiences of those just over 18 years. Given the long conflict timeline in Sri Lanka, many who were children during the height of the violence no longer fit into the category of 'children' but rather are young adults. Similarly, given the ceasefire of the recent past, many of the younger children under the age of 10 years may not be able to recall being directly affected by the conflict.

As this study focuses on the experiences of children in Sri Lanka, it was felt that those affected by the armed conflict when they were children should not be denied an opportunity to share their experiences merely because they no longer fall within a legal definition. Therefore, it was decided that the study be carried out focusing on two groups of 'children': those between the ages of 10-18 and those between the ages of 19-25. In other words, this approach used the international definition of 'child' at two different points of time - one during the conflict and the other after the MOU. References to 'child' or 'children' in this report include both groups. This however should not be construed as an attempt to re-draw the definition of 'child'. It is merely a contrivance to fully understand the experience of children in relation to the armed conflict in Sri Lanka.

This study is based on both primary and secondary data and the following section provides an overview of the methodology followed.

Primary Data

As already mentioned, the research focused on the three districts of the Eastern province. Information was collected through interviews with organisations working in the area, with households and with children. The aim of conducting interviews with such organisations was to identify what projects are being implemented for children, whether they have been successful in addressing the problems and which responses required improvement, broadening etc. These interviews also helped to identify the villages for the study sample by clarifying issues of accessibility and ethnic composition.

The household survey sample was drawn by using a combined sampling method, resulting in a stratified random sample. In the first phase, the number of households in the sample was decided on so as to reflect the ethnic composition of each district. The 2001 census was used for this purpose. Household selection was not based on income or any other indicator of poverty; instead individual households which contained at least one child or young adult between the ages of 10-25 years were selected at random for the survey. This survey was directed at the household head or his/her spouse. Before interviews were conducted each village was mapped to identify the location of houses as well as provide a general description of the village.

In total, 310 household interviews were conducted in the three districts according to the sampling framework. Of the 310 interviews carried out, seven interviews had to be discarded due to incomplete data. The table below provides the final breakdown of the household sample.

Table 2.1 Distribution of Household Sample⁵

	Ethnicity	Sinhalese	Tamil	Muslim	Total
District					
Ampara		41	21	38	100
Batticaloa		n/a	62	38	100
Trincomalee		38	23	42	103
Total		79	106	118	303

As mentioned before, the ethnic distribution of the household sample is based on the 2001 census. However, since the 2001 census was not carried out in some parts of the Northern and Eastern provinces, the figures provided in it are considered provisional. While these figures have been generally accepted at face value (e.g. the census shows that less than 1% of the population in the Batticaloa district are Sinhalese and accordingly no Sinhalese households in this district were covered by the sample), the sample was adjusted where there were significant discrepancies with the previous census of 1981 (e.g. the number of Tamil interviews in Trincomalee District was increased, which resulted in more than 100 interviews for this district).

Household level information was gathered through a structured quantitative questionnaire which was first piloted in all three districts. It was administered through nine enumerators selected from the area based on prior experience or skills in similar work. Before carrying out the survey, the enumerators attended a one-day training workshop on sampling techniques, social mapping and interview skills.

Based on the household sample, a smaller sample of children was identified for more in-depth qualitative interviews. Again, the ethnic distribution was maintained, but only older children between the ages of 15 and 25 were selected taking into account the timeline of the conflict and sensitivity of the questions asked. These interviews were carried out using a semi-structured qualitative questionnaire.

Also, as mentioned before, scheduled interviews with children in the Trincomalee district could not take place due to the destruction caused by the tsunami of 26 December 2004. In total, 30 interviews were completed with children in the Ampara and Batticaloa districts.

Secondary data

An extensive review of literature relating to children, poverty and armed conflict was carried out as part of the study to identify issues as well as gaps in knowledge. The literature review also sought to understand the issues that relate to children and armed conflict in the Sri Lankan context. Further, it identified key events to the Eastern province in terms of the conflict. The review helped to focus the study on the different dimensions in which children can be affected by armed conflict, such as education, displacement, health, nutrition and child labour including child soldiering. Available, information on the effects the armed conflict in Sri Lanka has had on children generally takes the form of macro level studies rather than in-depth analysis. This study addresses some of these knowledge gaps by gathering primary data at the level of households and with individual children.

⁵ Please see Annex I for map of Sri Lanka and Annex II for list of villages visited in each district.

3. Effects of Conflict on Households

In order to understand how children have been affected by the conflict, it is necessary to first establish how households in which children live have been affected. This section focuses on households and the analysis is primarily drawn from information gathered through the household survey.

3.1 An Overview of the Eastern province

At the time of writing this report, the official poverty data for the Eastern province is still incomplete, and it is difficult to compare the poverty situation in the East with the rest of the country. Despite the paucity of data, there is general acceptance that this part of the country is comparable to, or possibly even poorer than, the Uva province⁶ in terms of income, accessibility and infrastructure (see Table 3.1.1).

Table 3.1.1 Household Income and Expenditure

	Eastern	Uva ⁷	National ⁸
Average household income (Rs.)	7,640	10,388	12,803
Median household income (Rs.)	5,500	6,680	8,482
Per capita income (Rs.)	1,777	2,528	3,056
Average household expenditure (Rs.)	10,769	9,352	13,147
Average expenditure on food (%)	58.8	49.1	44.5

Source: Household Income and Expenditure Survey for the Northern and Eastern Provinces 2002/03

Average household income in the East is estimated to be about Rs. 7,640 a month, 60% of the national average. More than half the population in the East is estimated to receive even less (Rs. 5,500 a month), and the poorest 20% of households is estimated to have an average income as low as Rs. 1,799. Poverty calculations are not yet available for the East but preliminary data indicates that more than 50% of households live below the national poverty line (Department of Census and Statistics 2003c, 2004a, 2004b).⁹

Household income is closely linked to the type of household occupation. In the Eastern province a large proportion of the population are engaged in agriculture and fishing. These sectors function as traditional occupations without sufficient absorption of modern methods and technology resulting in high input and production costs and low productivity and profitability. This area is also prone to adverse weather conditions such as cyclones and floods, which can cause huge losses to both the agriculture and fishing sectors. Finally, the restrictions on movement imposed during the past 20 years due to the conflict have also contributed to the economic slow-down in the area as farmers have not been able to access their land and fishermen have been prevented from entering certain water bodies to engage in fishing.

The province also suffers from poor infrastructure, which contributes to poverty. The road network is badly maintained and accessibility is further limited by road blocks, checkpoints, detours and other impediments introduced by the parties to the conflict. Health services are mostly available in urban centres: 98.9% of births in the country are assisted by a health care

⁶ See Annex I for map of Sri Lanka

⁷ The Uva province of Sri Lanka is considered the poorest province outside of the North and East of the country and has therefore been used as a reference.

⁸ Data excludes the Northern and Eastern provinces.

⁹ According to the Household Income and Expenditure Survey 2002, the national poverty line is set at Rs. 1,423 per capita per household, whilst the national average household size is 4.2 persons (DCS 2003b).

professional but the figure is as low as 68.6% in Batticaloa, 80% in Ampara and 86% in Trincomalee. Between 44% and 53% of children between the ages of 3-59 months are underweight in this region, compared with the national average of 29%. As many as 70% of the population in Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts do not have access to sanitary latrine facilities, which may also be attributable to the destruction of housing and displacement caused by the war as well as poverty (DCS 2004b).

While limited availability of data prevents a comprehensive discussion of the current poverty situation in the Eastern province or of the poverty impact of the conflict, the emerging picture indicates widespread poverty, in terms of income as well as other indicators. The household survey sought to understand the different dimensions of how conflict and poverty have affected the household. The results of the survey discussed below give an overall picture from the perspective of the householders and 'sets the scene' to better understand the issues raised in the in-depth qualitative interviews with children.

3.2 Household Perceptions of Conflict

The war in Sri Lanka has been at great human and economic costs which continue to have direct and indirect effects on people living in the conflict areas. Table 3.2.1 shows how household respondents answered the question "how has the conflict affected your household?"

Table 3.2.1 How has Conflict affected your Household?

Indicators	No. of Responses	Percentage of Households (%)
Loss of house, property, land	254	85.8
Loss of income	251	84.8
Displacement of family	242	81.8
Travel restrictions	142	48.0
Poor access to essential items	126	42.6
Loss of family member	77	26.0
Education disrupted	71	24.0
Disability	15	5.1
Total responses	1178¹⁰	

Source: Field Data (Household Survey) 2004

Loss of property and loss of income are the most frequently reported ways in which the conflict had affected households in the sample. Households have lost property through the destruction of housing, forceful acquisition of property by armed groups, displacement of rightful owners from properties resulting in others occupying them and abandonment of house and property due to landmines and unexploded ordinances (UXOs) making them uninhabitable.

"In 1990, around 119 men, who had gone for Esha night prayer, were killed in the village mosque ... we all left our homes and stayed in the mosque. During that time all our belongings were stolen. Even the windows were removed and taken away."
(Muslim family, Batticaloa)

¹⁰ A total of more than 303 responses were recorded as this question allowed for multiple answers.

Loss of property is also linked to loss of income. In some cases income-generating property, such as agricultural and fishing equipment or agricultural surplus, was destroyed in the war.

"We had gone to Kamaracholai-jungle (...) We had stored a lot of paddy at home and it was all lost. Shells damaged 4 coconut trees and completely damaged our house."

(Tamil family, Batticaloa)

More than 50% of the household respondents said that the conflict resulted in the family's longer term or permanent displacement. Interestingly, most of the families covered by the survey had experienced displacement to some degree. Some had had to leave their homes at night and stay with relatives or in public places such as schools, and only return home during day time whilst others were displaced from their homes for longer periods, often many years. As the above instance and many others like it indicate, when the families return they are very likely to find that their property has been damaged, looted or taken over by someone else.

"Very often we slept in the jungle ... All our neighbours, including the Tamil neighbours, left the farm (...). They blasted the transformer of the farm and took away the tractors and vehicles of the farm. The grama arakshakas (home guards) had also left the village out of fear."

(Sinhalese family, Ampara)

"Life in the refugee camp in Vavuniya was difficult and we came back in 1992. When we came back our house was damaged and the well was contaminated. Our cows had gone missing."

(Tamil family, Batticaloa)

3.3 Perception of Conflict and Poverty

Overwhelmingly, the information provided by households indicates that the conflict has made people poorer. They have lost their homes, land and other property; they have lost their sources of income and have been displaced disrupting their social networks and community relationships.

The clearest examples of conflict leading to impoverishment were seen when families lost their main income earner because of the conflict.

"My father died in the 1990 conflict (---) His death was a great loss to our family. That day my father went to work and we got the news that our father died. After father's death my mother went for wage labour."

(Tamil family, Ampara)

Household respondents also spoke of losing livelihood equipment such as the canoes, machinery for farming and livestock such as poultry, goats and cows. When income-generating assets such as cultivable land, agricultural and fishing equipment are lost, looted or otherwise destroyed/damaged families are further impoverished.

"My father had a small canoe. During 1985 riots somebody had stolen the canoe, now he does not have his own canoe so he works in other peoples' boats as wage labour."

(Muslim family, Ampara)

Lack of access to paddy land, especially in LTTE-controlled areas, and the inability to harvest the crop on time due to the unstable security situation were also mentioned in this context.

"Economically we are affected by the war. Our paddy cultivation was affected. We could not get the harvest on time. This situation happens very often."

(Muslim family, Ampara)

More than half the households also mentioned that they or their family members have been forced to migrate due to poverty. It was found to be a common effect particularly amongst the Tamils and Muslims in the Trincomalee and Batticaloa districts. This is most likely linked to the economic slow down in the area that has limited the number of employment opportunities available. Labour migration in search of employment has included migration to non-conflict urban centres such as Colombo and, more commonly, to overseas destinations such as the Middle East.

The results of the household survey show that many people affected by both poverty and conflict in the East also perceive their inter-connectedness. Table 3.3.1 below shows the number of households who attributed the same effect, be it loss of property or lack of essential items, to both the conflict and poverty.

Table 3.3.1 Effects Attributed to Both Conflict and Poverty

Indicators of Conflict Affectedness	Correlation with Poverty Affectedness
Loss of property (assets)	91.6 %
Poor access to essential items	75.8 %
Poor access to transport	68.3 %
Disruption of education	37.7 %
Loss of family member	2.7 %

Source: Field Data (Household Survey) 2004

The above table shows that almost 92% of the households who said that they lost property due to the conflict also cited poverty as a reason for this loss. Similarly, 76% of households whose access to essential items was restricted due to the conflict also cited poverty as a reason. It is indicative of the relationship between conflict and poverty. People are affected directly by the conflict in certain ways and this also makes them poorer. When they are poorer, they find it more difficult to cope with the effects of the conflict and to mitigate against these effects.

The survey also indicates that the conflict has affected people in multiple ways which are often linked. Most household respondents indicated more than five ways in which they had been affected by conflict. Those who said that they had lost property due to the conflict were also very likely to have cited displacement as an effect of conflict. Therefore, while households - and the children who live within them - may be affected to different degrees by the conflict, it appears that such conflict-affectedness might take many forms simultaneously.

4. Children and Armed Conflict

The objective of this study is to understand how children in the East of Sri Lanka have been affected by the conflict. One of the most publicised effects of the conflict on children, particularly in the Eastern province, has been the forceful recruitment of children into armed groups, in particular by the LTTE. The purpose of this section is not to identify the most traumatic or damaging effects of war, nor to focus only on the experiences of a particular group of children, but to identify the common concerns, relevant for a large number of children in the East. Accordingly, the following sections will explore issues faced by children in terms of their education as well as in relation to child work, children's health, parental care and support systems.

This section draws from the household survey as well as in-depth interviews conducted with children.

4.1 Conflict and Education

In Sri Lanka, the free education system has played a pivotal role in the country's advances in terms of human development. The national literacy rate is over 90% and rising and is almost equal for males and females (Dias Bandaranaike 2004). However, despite the free education system, not all children of school-going age are accessing the educational system equally.

4.1.1 Educational Levels and Drop-outs

The Child Activity Survey (CAS) of 1999 is the most recent survey available on children's activities. It was carried out in all the provinces of Sri Lanka except the Northern and Eastern provinces. The CAS reports that while 97% of children in the age bracket of 5-14 years are engaged primarily in education only 71% of 15-17 year-olds fall into this category.¹¹ This means that a relatively high percentage of the older age group, i.e. 29%, have dropped out of the formal education process. Economic difficulties were cited most often as the reason for early termination of education (DCS 1999).

Educational levels among children of school-going age (10-18 years) in the East

The survey provides an indication of educational levels and drop-out rates in the East for children in the age group 10-18. As shown in Table 4.1.1.1 below, close to 89% of the children between the ages of 10-14 years and 49% of children in the age group 15-17 years were attending school. Though these figures are lower than those reported in the CAS study for the rest of the country, they confirm the trends identified in the CAS; whereby a larger proportion of younger children attend school, while a substantially reduced number continue on to the GCE Ordinary Level examination and beyond.

Table 4.1.1.1 Children in School

Age Group	Male	Female	Total	CAS
10-14 years	87.9%	89.1%	88.6%	97%
15-17 years	48.9%	48.7%	48.8%	71%

Source: Field Data (Household Survey) 2004

The above table indicates that there is no substantial difference between drop-out rates of males and females under the age of 18. In fact, in the younger age groups girls seem fractionally more likely to be in school than boys. When ethnicity was taken into consideration, it was found that amongst all three ethnic groups a larger proportion of children in the 10-14 year age

¹¹ In Sri Lanka, education is compulsory until the age of 15 years.

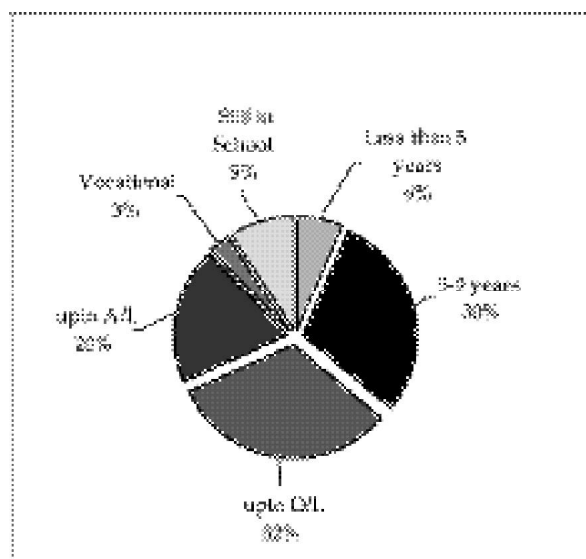
group were in school rather than out of school. In the 15-17 year age group, the picture is substantially different; almost as many children were in school as were out of school, except amongst the Sinhalese.

Overall, out of 599 children in the 10-18 age group, about 70% are reported to be still in school. 14% reported that they have only had 5 years or less of education whilst only 9 children, i.e. 1.5% of the sample, are reported to have had no education at all.

Educational attainment among young adults (19-25 years) in the East

Educational impact of the conflict in terms of levels reached can also be discerned from those who were children of school-going age during the conflict, i.e. the 19-25 year age group. As most of the individuals in this group are no longer in school, educational attainment, or the number of years of schooling they have had, is used to provide an indicative comparison with children of school-going age today.

Chart 4.1.1.2 19-25 Age Group and Educational Attainment



Source: Survey Data (Household survey) 2004

As the above chart shows, only about 6% of this age group have had less than 5 years of education and 36% have had 9 years or less of schooling. However, close to 70% overall have dropped out of school before completing 10 years of education (up to O/L standard), or before approximately the age of 17. The drop-out rate among young adults, i.e. those who were of school-going age during the height of the conflict, appears to be somewhat higher than that prevailing in the younger age group. As mentioned above, only just over half of the 15-17 age group are no longer in school, whereas 70% of the 19-25 age group had dropped out by 17.

There is some difference in terms of gender and educational attainment. Among those who had had less than 5 years of education, girls made up twice the number of boys, and the three persons who said they had had no education at all were female. However, this trend is reversed at higher grades and there are more females than males going into the Advanced Level classes!

There are substantial differences amongst the ethnicities and districts. The Sinhalese community, particularly in the Ampara district, has fared better than their Tamil and Muslim counterparts in terms of overall educational achievement, with almost 35% reaching O/L and 50% reaching A/L standard. Overall, among the Sinhalese, more than 86% had completed between 10 and 13 years of education and less than 1% had had less than 5 years of education. In contrast, only about half of those belonging to Tamil and Muslim ethnicities had completed between 10 and 13 years of education. About 10% of Muslims had had less than 5 years of education and most of this group were female.

These differences in ethnicity and across districts may be linked to relative poverty as well as the relative proximity to the violent conflict. Sinhalese living in the Ampara district tend to be geographically further away from the violence and in fact, Ampara town was never attacked. This issue, however, is beyond the scope of this study and further research may be useful to determine whether these differences are significant and, if so, why.

When questioned about why children drop out of school poverty was the most often cited reason, particularly where children dropped out of school at a young age.

"I decided to discontinue my education because there was nobody to look after my family or to earn income after my father died." (Boy, Age 24, Tamil)

Amongst older children, many dropped out after Ordinary Level due to lack of funds to meet the increased costs of pursuing higher education or vocational training. These educational institutions are often not within close proximity to their villages resulting in increased transport and/or accommodation costs. In some instances, older children drop out after having reached a particular educational level to make way for younger siblings to obtain a basic education.

"My twin sister had to stop schooling after her O/L because my parents couldn't afford the education cost for two of us. They hoped to educate at least one daughter, which was me." (Girl, Age 22, Muslim)

Other reasons such as health, disability and marriage were also mentioned as reasons for early termination of education but much less frequently than poverty and conflict related reasons. In a few villages and in some communities (such as the Muslims), cultural constraints and gender biases were also mentioned as reasons for children dropping out of school.

"My sisters and I stopped school due to financial constraints. Only my youngest brother is in school. He has priority." (Girl, Age 19, Muslim)

The fact that children have not formally dropped out of school may not mean that they have received or are receiving a quality education. To assess this, we need to go beyond the numbers reported above.

4.1.2 Educational Quality

In conflict areas, conditions are not conducive to providing a high quality education. Schools often become inaccessible to students during times of conflict because of security problems and travel restrictions. Sometimes military personnel or refugees occupy the premises. In areas dominated by conflict there is more likely to be a relaxation of formal administrative structures and therefore less control over drop-out rates. Teachers and other school staff may not report for duty due to security issues. When school days are lost the curriculum may not be completed and exams may not be held on time.

"During 1995-2000 due to war and the troubles the school was closed many days. The teachers closed the school and handed over the children to their parents." (Boy, Age 20, Sinhalese)

Irregular school attendance may be caused by hartals¹² and the imposition of curfews – both of which are common occurrences in the East. Children also reported that transport problems and travel restrictions prevented them from attending school. Fears of being targeted by the warring factions forced parents to keep their children at home, rather than risk sending them to school. In many instances children did not travel to school alone; instead they went in a group

¹² Hartals are public protests combined with the closure of shops, schools, places of work, and limited transport services.

or were accompanied by an adult such as the father. Children may have lost school days when these arrangements were not available.

"Whenever my father heard about an attack, he didn't allow me to go to school because he was scared that I would be caught in the crossfire."

(Girl, Age 20, Muslim)

In addition to direct consequences of the conflict, indirect consequences such as under-developed infrastructure and irregular or limited public transport also cause problems for children.

"The village school teaches only up to O/L. I have to go to Chengalady for A/L classes, which is 2 km away. I must go on bicycle. The bus fare is Rs. 5 but the bus doesn't go near the school."

(Girl, Age 16, Tamil)

In addition to access issues, children spoke of limited resources in their schools, such as lack of libraries, laboratories and other facilities, and the lack of qualified teachers. Several schools in the area only provide classes up to year 9 or year 11. When they do provide A/L classes, it is usually limited to the Arts stream. Many children travel to bigger schools in urban areas or larger villages to complete their education. There are additional costs involved in this, such as transport and time spent travelling which often do not make these options viable.

"I had to study what was available, which is the Arts stream. Logic was very difficult for me. That's why I couldn't pass my A/L, I failed Logic."

(Boy, Age 21, Tamil)

Through the qualitative interviews that were conducted, children or young people indicated that next to poverty, the second most common reason why they did not continue their education past O/L standard was because they did not achieve the required grades or results. This may be due as much to the poor quality of education as to the child's abilities.

"My O/L results were not enough to continue to the Advanced Level. Then I decided to discontinue my education and joined my father in the business."

(Boy, Age 21, Muslim)

Children's education has also been affected by frequent displacement during the conflict period. Several children recounted times when they hid in the jungles for periods ranging from one night to several months - during which their education was completely disrupted. Some children who spent long periods in refugee camps had attended temporary schools while being displaced. However, the camp environment was not always conducive to either learning or teaching.

"In 1990 we were in a [refugee] camp for 3 years. While living in the camp, we continued our education without any problems but during this time it was difficult to study."

(Boy, Age 23, Tamil)

This disruption in the lives of the children and their families can have a detrimental emotional effect on children as they lose their points of reference. This can lead to a series of other effects, such as disinterest in learning or wanting to achieve in a situation where nothing lasts very long. The general conditions of insecurity and fear can also affect children's concentration on their schooling and, ultimately, the quality of the education they receive (see Box 1).

Box 1: "We could not study at night with the lights on"

Gayathri's¹³ family farm a quarter acre of paddy land with several other families and supplement this income by making bricks and doing wage labour. She has just completed her Advanced Level exam.

Their village had been subjected to much violence during the conflict years. Its location at the de-facto border between the Sinhalese and Tamil parts of the Ampara district has caused the villagers much hardship. From 1990 to 2000 they had spent a very uncertain life, constantly on the alert for sounds of impending attacks. The family spoke of many instances when they had had to run into the jungle or further into the Sinhalese areas at night, while eating, cooking and so on. For many years the family had not slept a night in their house, going instead to sleep at a relative's house further in the interior.

Gayathri said that most of her life she had not been able to study properly because of the war. None of the children could study at night because they were too afraid to have any lights on in the house. Gayathri spoke of how she had been constantly afraid - at home as well as at school.

4.2 Conflict and Child Work

The Child Activity Survey (CAS) mentioned above also reported that a large number of children in Sri Lanka engage in activities other than education. This section looks at the situation in the East to understand whether the conflict has had an impact on the other activities in which children engage in - such as household work, unpaid labour to help the family in its income generating activities and paid labour. The purpose of this section is to identify the manner in which the conflict, as well as poverty, can influence children's work activities.

The minimum age for light work in Sri Lanka is 15 years,¹⁴ but the CAS reports that as many as 90% of young children (5-14 years) are 'engaged in some form of economic activity while schooling' (DCS 1999: 11). The survey, which covered all the provinces except the North and East, further states that close to 74% of those children engaged in economic activity while at school are also engaged in agricultural activities. A very small minority, less than 1% of children in this age group, are reported to be solely engaged in economic activity, i.e. they do not combine it with school. Among the 15-17 age group however, only a relatively small proportion, 30%, are reported to be also engaged in economic activities while schooling. According to the preliminary findings of the Consumer Finances and Socio-Economic Survey 2003/04 (CFS), 35% of 14-18 year olds are employed¹⁵, whereas only 28.6% of 19-25 year olds are considered employed (Dias Bandaranaike 2004).

The results of the household survey indicate that in the East too, children contribute in many ways to the economic activities of the household. In almost all the households surveyed, children were engaged in unpaid family work of some kind. Females were predominantly engaged in domestic chores, such as cooking, cleaning and child-care. Male children mostly contributed by working in the garden and helping with animal husbandry. While children's activities were not rigidly segregated by gender, child-care and cooking were mostly carried out by girls.

¹³ Names are changed to preserve anonymity of the respondent.

¹⁴ Sri Lanka is a signatory of all the major child-related conventions and directives of the ILO pertaining to child labour issues (ILO 38, minimum age requirement and ILO 192, worst forms of child labour) as well as the CRC 1990 and the Optional Protocol on Children Affected by Armed Conflict 2000, and thus is obliged to enforce the regulations in them.

¹⁵ The CFS 2003/4 states that 'household members who worked more than one hour as paid employee, employer, own account worker (self employed) or unpaid family worker during the reference period were considered as employed' (Dias Bandaranaike, 2004: 7).

"Three days a week I attend a science tuition class in town. On other days I help my mother in the household. I cook the rice every day."

(Girl, Age 15, Muslim)

While direct questions regarding the work done by children provided an indication of the range of domestic tasks they carry out, the extent of such work is not always clear. In the interviews with children their daily activities were discussed at length to uncover the true amount of time a child spends doing domestic work.

"I try to study about 2-3 hours each day because my Ordinary Level exam is only three months away. Because my mother is in the Middle East, I do all the housework, like cooking breakfast, lunch and dinner, cleaning and sweeping the house and fetching water for drinking. On school days I get up at 4.00 am and go to sleep at 11.00 pm."

(Girl, Age 16, Sinhalese)

Since she spends so much time on household chores, this child actually has less than one hour each day that she could devote to her studies. As the CAS data indicates, many children in Sri Lanka are engaged in household work and it is not extraordinary that children in the Eastern province also appear to spend a great deal of their time on chores. It is essential, however, to maintain a good balance between these activities to ensure children's learning and development are not hampered.

While most children seem to be juggling household work with their education, a few children also spoke of combining paid work with their education. This was common among the older children, who mentioned such work as helping with the harvesting and giving tuition classes as ways in which they supplement their families' income.

"One of my cousins is a technician and sometimes I go and help him. He pays me about Rs.200 to Rs.300 a day. I use this money to buy my books."

(Boy, Age 21, Tamil)

Some children are engaged in full time paid work and are no longer in school. About a third of the households surveyed had at least one child engaged full time on an income generating activity. As most children who work have dropped out of school and have few qualifications, they also tend to be engaged in low-skilled, low-pay work such as wage labour.

Most household respondents stated that children entered paid work because of reasons related to both conflict and poverty, such as the loss of the main income earner due to the conflict.

"My father was killed in the war. I got a scholarship to go to a school close to Colombo, but one time when I came home on vacation, I decided to discontinue school because of the situation of my mother and sister. I now have a small carpentry workshop."

(Boy, Age 22, Muslim)

Children who had dropped out of school said it was difficult for them to find employment other than wage labour. Some children could not find work at all and had to stay home. However, the research team came across many instances of children who had dropped out of school to enter paid work and showed remarkable resourcefulness in learning new skills and, in some cases, set up their own businesses (see Box 2). Those who, after many years of hard work, had secured a stable source of income, did not seem to regret not pursuing their education.

Box 2: "My first job paid Rs. 200 a month"

When Kumara¹⁶ was 10 years old, his father disappeared.

Kumara's family was relatively well-off before the war. They had four acres of paddy land and his father owned a bullock cart. He says that one day the LTTE forced his father to transport a load of stones. Soon afterward the army came and took his father away on suspicions of working for the LTTE. The family have not seen their father since and suspect that he was killed by the army.

Three years after his father's disappearance, Kumara decided to drop out of school and find a job. The first job he found through a friend was wage labour and paid Rs. 200 a month. Then he started a small shop, which he turned into a bookshop after 5 years. Today, Kumar and his brother operate a small but well stocked audio/video store where they rent as well as record CDs and tapes. They had obtained a bank loan and were constructing another house on their land, which will have water, electricity and toilet facilities. Kumara says that he never regrets dropping out of school and feels that they would not have been able to reach this level had he stayed on in school.

At the same time, there were those who had expended a great deal of resources, time and effort in completing their education, who were finding it difficult to find employment. As mentioned before, economic activity in the province is still limited and the area has not fully recovered even after two years of the MOU being in place. Some young adults noted that even though they had completed 13 years of education and, in some cases, even passed the Advanced Level, job opportunities other than wage labour were still not available to them.

"It's difficult to find a job if you don't have links to important people. NGOs will give work but only as a volunteer. I am not in a financial position to do voluntary work."
(Girl, Age 21, Tamil)

There is little mobility among these groups as they are constrained by their limited resources from moving out of the area in search of employment. Many respondents spoke of the expense (transport and accommodation costs) of going to a town or city such as Colombo to look for work. A few families who had social networks in other parts of the country were able to send a child or young adult to live with relatives or friends while the child looked for work in the urban areas. A large number of older children and young adults were either employed in work disproportionate to their education level or not employed at all. This situation, which signals the low returns attached to a child completing his or her education, should be taken into consideration in policy circles.

4.3 Conflict and Child Health

Prolonged periods of armed conflict can also affect the health and nutritional status of children. Available data indicates that child nutritional levels across the country vary significantly from moderate to severe under-nutrition. Often this is attributable to low birth weight as a result of poor nutritional levels of pregnant mothers (Save the Children 2000). The incidence of low birth weight (i.e. babies weighing less than 2.5 kg at birth) is reported to be approximately 26% in the Eastern province, compared with the national average of 16.7%. The Trincomalee district records the highest percentage of underweight births at 30.5%. Though there have been efforts during the conflict to allow for 'humanitarian breaks' to ensure immunisation can be carried

¹⁶ Names are changed to preserve the anonymity of the respondent.

out, only approximately 73% of children have been fully immunised in the Eastern province compared with the national average of approximately 93% (DCS 2004b).

During the course of the research, children spoke of several ways in which their health and nutrition were affected by the conflict. During periods of violence and instability, when shops are closed and there is no transport, people find it difficult to obtain even the most basic food items. Some children indicated that they often went to school without breakfast or had to share a friend's breakfast.

"Two of my siblings suffered from malnutrition because my mother did not have enough food to eat during her pregnancy. Even now they are under-weight."
(Girl, Age 16, Muslim)

Access to health services was also restricted by the conflict. During the acute phases of violence, many of the smaller hospitals and health centres were shut down and only the larger hospitals, which had better security, were functioning. These were usually located in the larger towns and, because of limited transport services, less accessible to those with limited means. Several children spoke of being unable to reach a medical service provider or obtain the required medicine when they fell ill during the conflict period.

"I have asthma. During the troubles when I used to get asthma attacks at night, my parents couldn't take me to the hospital immediately. We don't have our own transport and couldn't hire a van to take me to Ampara because the van owners and drivers are afraid to drive at night. So I would get some pills left over from an earlier visit to the hospital and apply some medicinal oil. In the morning, during day time, we could go to the hospital".
(Girl, Age 16, Sinhalese)

"When there were problems we don't go to the public hospital because it is far away from the village. So we buy medicine from private clinics. Sometimes the hospitals do not have medicine at all."
(Boy, Age 21, Tamil)

4.4 Children and their Support Systems

The study survey covered 303 households which contained 841 children under the age of 18. Of this total, 599 are between the ages of 10-18. In addition, the survey covered 280 young adults between the ages of 19-25 years. The majority of households where these children live (84%) are two-parent households headed by a male. Of the 70 households headed by a female, more than half are single parent households (see Table 4.4.1).

Table 4.4.1 Household Composition

Household Type	No. of households	Total (%)
Two-parent households (total)	254	83.8
Male-headed	224	73.9
Female-headed	30	9.9
Single-parent households (total)	42	13.9
Male-headed	2	0.6
Female-headed	40	13.2
Child-headed household	1	0.3
Household headed by other relative	6	2.0

Source: Field Data (Household Survey) 2004

The significant number of female-headed households may be linked to both poverty and conflict-related issues. For example, adult males have migrated out of the area for personal safety reasons, have become disabled, gone missing or been killed due to the conflict. In a substantial number of households, the mother was working in the Middle East and did not continuously live with the family. In those households, however, only a few reported themselves as single-parent and male-headed. The survey contained one family which was reported to be headed by a child in the absence of parents. In this instance, the family was headed by a 20-year old girl whose parents were both dead. She was supporting her younger brother and grandfather who also lived with her in the household.

The migration of caregivers in search of employment because of the limited economic opportunities available in the Eastern province is a common occurrence, and one which has had an impact on children. In the East, migration of family members can take several forms. Among the Tamil community, migration may occur as a direct result of the conflict. Fear of recruitment and harassment by various actors compels them to leave the area and seek refuge elsewhere in the country. In this case it is mainly the males who tend to migrate out of the area or even overseas. Amongst the Muslim community, a large number of women have migrated to the Middle East in search of employment. In all three communities, there are instances of migration due to the conflict as well as poverty. When paddy land or fishing rights are no longer accessible due to the conflict and there is no longer a means of earning a livelihood, the males, who are often the main income earner in the household, may migrate out to other parts of the country for employment.

There are several consequences that can arise from these migratory trends. The migration of male members of the family creates additional burdens of childcare on the mother and possibly older children. This can result in these families becoming more vulnerable and at risk of physical harm. Remittances from male members are often not enough to sustain the family at home, compelling either older children or mothers themselves to engage in some kind of economic activity. Another consequence is that male members that migrate often acquire a second family where they work in addition to the family they are supposed to maintain. This raises issues on how two families can be maintained at the same time and can lead to conflicts within the household that can affect the children of both families.

Of great concern, particularly in the Muslim community of the Eastern province is the high percentage of mothers that migrate to the Middle East to work predominantly as housemaids. This leaves the children in the care of the father. The type of care given to these children is often a cause for concern. There is a tendency for children to be 'palmed off' to other relatives, such as aunts or grandmothers, rather than being kept in the care of the father alone. It has been noted that fathers often stop working when their wives leave for the Middle East or use remitted money for drugs or alcohol, rather than on the care of the children. There have also been cases of fathers re-marrying in the absence of the wife and thus neglecting his duties towards his 'original' children. All these situations can put children at risk and make them vulnerable to abuse by the other care givers. The children may also feel the need to work to ameliorate the situation for the rest of their siblings.

"Both my parents went to the Middle East. Father came back last month. Money was sent to my uncle from my mother. Only the last payment came directly to me. She sends money once in three months." (Boy, Age 21, Tamil)

It is interesting to note that it is predominantly married women that take up jobs in the Middle East. One child remarked that it was not considered 'moral' for unmarried women to work abroad.

"My family does not agree to me going abroad to work. Men do not want to marry girls who have gone to the Middle East."

(Girl, Age 19, Muslim)

In most cases, however, migration of family members is perceived to be positive as far as children are concerned. The discussion so far indicates most children and households are affected by the impoverishing effect of the conflict and an employed member of the household – even when the person is living elsewhere - eases some of the household's more pressing problems. Several children spoke of having bought their school books and other necessities with money sent by mothers employed abroad. In some instances, the family was able to build or expand their homes and generally enjoy a better standard of living.

"My mother went to the Middle East and we were able to build this house in 2000. She is now in Kuwait and sends money regularly. We spend it on food, school expenses, electricity, exam fees, etc."

(Girl, Age 16, Tamil)

Migration in search of employment appears to be a mechanism by which households try to cope with the economic fallout of the war. However, when care givers – especially mothers are not available, the survival, protection, development and wellbeing of the children who are left behind may be undermined and the benefits of alleviated poverty should thus be weighed against its cost.

5. Children's Perceptions

The discussion so far was focused on how children may have been affected by the conflict but this study would not be complete until the issue is viewed through the eyes of children. This section focuses on the perceptions of children - how they have been affected by the war, about the country and its future and finally their own aspirations and hopes for the future.

When asked to look beyond their personal experiences of conflict and consider children as a group, a large proportion of children focussed on the disruption to education, loss of family members due to the conflict and loss of income. Individual perceptions about how children as a group may be affected were often based on their own experience or the experiences of their friends and neighbours.

"A lot of children have discontinued their education and some have missed years. In our class, there are a lot of older children who had missed years of study and have returned to school. Especially school-going students are affected by the conflict."

(Girl, Age 18, Tamil)

"Children's education was what was most affected. Most of them were living in the jungle and couldn't study and had nothing to eat." (Girl, Age 17, Sinhalese)

"Some children in this village have started jobs at an early age. Most of them are working in rice mills."

(Boy, Age 24, Tamil)

Children also focused on their own region or locality and hardly ever spoke of how children in other parts of the country may have been affected. They seem to have a narrow worldview, seeing things from their limited experience living in a circumscribed, geographic space. Travel and communication within the region has been extremely difficult until recently and many of these children know little about other areas in the East let alone other parts of the country and other countries. Education, which could bridge some of these information gaps, does not seem to have performed this function for these children.

Comparing the situation before and after the MOU, almost all the respondents stated that living conditions had improved in terms of improved access to transport services, education and health facilities. Many mentioned the lifting of travel restrictions as an important benefit stemming from the MOU.

"There is an improvement. I can go anywhere I want without restrictions."

(Boy, Age 23, Tamil)

"Those days Muslims did not come to our village but now they are coming to our shop to buy CD's. We didn't have proper transport but after the MOU, we don't have transport problem. Children are going to school without any problem."

(Boy, Age 24, Tamil)

"Now we can live without fear. The Tamil children can now move freely and go to school. We can go anywhere we like. More areas are given electricity. As the war is not there now we can go to school without fear" (Boy, Age 16, Sinhalese)

Despite the positive response to the MOU, children were less sanguine about the country's political situation and the prospects for peace in the future. Not all the children responded to questions about the political situation in the country - several children did not seem able to articulate their views on this subject, perhaps because the respondents were not comfortable

with discussing these questions with 'outsiders'.¹⁷ Of those who did respond, many expressed a sense of dissatisfaction with the efforts to maintain peace and find permanent solutions to the conflict in the North and East.

"Politics is a flop. It is a way of cheating others. However, the peace talks were successful to some extent. We have to strengthen the negotiations. If the negotiations and discussions are hampered then the country will be in peril. Because of the peace process, many industries in the area are flourishing (...) if peace is disrupted then all these developments will come to an end" (Boy, Age 16, Sinhalese)

"We need permanent peace and people should be able to live with freedom. We need a stable and good government which should always look after the people's problems." (Girl, Age 22, Muslim)

"I don't like politics. I don't know anything about it." (Girl, Age 19, Sinhalese)

Children also spoke of the continued lack of opportunity and development in the area and of the increasing insecurity in the area.

"Now there is a very confusing political situation in the East as well as in the country. When I was coming home today, I was checked by the police and questioned for a long time. I was scared that they will suspect me to be LTTE and put me in prison and no one will know what happened to me." (Boy, Age 21, Tamil)

Despite their misgivings about continued stability and peace in the area, many children were positive and hopeful about their own futures. By and large, their future aspirations were focused on finishing their education and finding employment to assist their parents and increase their income levels. There is a clear preference for public sector jobs - a trend observed among youth in other parts of the country as well (Ibargüen 2005).

"I want to become a doctor. That is my aim. I like to study more. If I am a doctor I can serve the people." (Girl, Age 16, Muslim)

"I want to do a state sector job, no matter what it is - even as a security guard." (Boy, Age 21, Tamil)

Those children that were already engaged in either apprenticeships or jobs wanted to improve their status in order to provide for their family or expand their businesses. Some even hoped to get jobs in the Middle East with their improved knowledge.

"I want to learn to be a good mechanic and go to the Middle East and earn money to uplift my family." (Boy, Age 19, Muslim)

The children interviewed through this research showed a remarkable degree of optimism and determination to overcome the limitations imposed on them by the conflict to better their condition and that of their families (see Box 3). Some of them saw education as a means of facilitating a change in their condition.

¹⁷ During the course of the study the security situation in the East deteriorated significantly as a result of the split in the LTTE early in 2004. Tensions grew with factional fighting resulting in distrust with people requesting 'information'. During the qualitative interview stage, it became evident that one householder had intentionally falsified information about his household out of fear that the information would be handed over to the armed groups.

"I will study. I don't like living in this area. I will find a suitable job and if the war starts again, I will go to another area. I don't mind any area that doesn't have the war."

(Girl, Age 16, Sinhalese)

The fear of the ethnic conflict restarting or 'other' conflicts arising was echoed by many children but they did not seem to feel that they themselves could be a force of change. Most children felt helpless in influencing the political landscape in which they lived. They were more focused on coping with the difficulties imposed on them by either the conflict or poverty, and their hopes and energies were focused on trying to move out of poverty.

Box 3: "They give us all the comforts"

Kavitha¹⁸ lives with her mother and younger sister in a small hut, not much more than a few planks and a thatch. They have no water, electricity or toilets and use their neighbour's facilities. The family lives on the meagre income earned by their mother, who makes and sells snacks to school children, and the support they get from Kavitha's married siblings. Nevertheless, Kavitha was very content and said that her mother and elder brother provided them all the comforts.

A week before the interview, Kavitha's younger brother, who had been helping their mother selling snacks to earn an income, had gone away to join the LTTE. Kavitha and her mother were extremely upset by this decision as they had discussed the merits of continued education with him. They had gone to the camp to ask him to return but to no avail.

Despite the myriad problems facing her, Kavitha was determined and had a clear vision of what she hopes to do with her life.

She is studying for her Advanced Level examination, for which she is using materials borrowed from her older sister and said that she wants to become a teacher, provide free education and help to develop her village.

¹⁸ Names are changed to preserve anonymity of the respondent.

6. Conclusions and Recommendations

This research study was carried out to add to the understanding of how children are affected by armed conflict in the Sri Lankan context. It was conceptualised as an exploratory study and is focused on the three districts in the Eastern province. This report is based predominantly on information collected through a household survey conducted in 2004 covering 303 households and 30 qualitative in-depth interviews with children.

The findings of this research study confirm that children are affected both directly and indirectly by armed conflict. Education, the main activity in which children are expected to be engaged, has been affected. While drop-out rates were not as high as might be expected in the circumstances, the rates are higher in the conflict areas than in the rest of the country. Formal termination of education seems to be higher among young adults (i.e. those who were children at the height of the war), which may indicate that the level of violence is related to the incidence of dropping out of school. While there may be a difference between school enrolments in conflict areas compared to the rest of the country, this study did not find evidence to indicate that this difference is substantial. Substantial differences appear to exist, however, in terms of the quality of education these children have had.

During conflict periods, while children remain formally enrolled in schools, their attendance is poor and many school days are lost because of insecurity caused by violent incidents. Teachers also stay away due to insecurity and fear and in some instances schools are taken over to house refugees or armed personnel. In addition, many schools do not have adequate facilities and as a result of the conflict are often not adequately maintained or resourced. Under these circumstances, while the children make an effort to remain in school, the quality of education they receive is likely to be poor.

Some children have dropped out of school to work as paid or unpaid labour. In some instances, this decision was closely linked to the effects of the conflict. When the main income earner has been killed or is disabled, children find it difficult to maintain their schooling due to poverty and drop out to look for ways of supplementing the household income. Many children who work are only able to find wage labour, which is both difficult and poorly paid. Even among the older children and young adults, employment prospects have not improved. Lack of economic activity and limited employment opportunities in the East contribute to limited income sources for adults as well as children who work.

Another consequence of the impoverishing effect of the conflict can be seen in migratory patterns in the area. In a number of households, a family member had migrated out of the area looking for employment. While an employed family member usually means a better quality of life for the children in terms of adequate food, clothing and resources for schooling, many children may miss out on proper care and protection when their parents, especially mothers, live far away.

Older children and young adults also spoke of adverse consequences of the conflict on their health and nutrition. During periods of widespread violence and instability, their household may not have adequate food and other essentials. Access to health services was also constrained when there was no transport or when it was not safe to travel.

Possibly as a consequence of all the violence they have witnessed, many children felt uneasy about the prospect of renewed conflict as they did not see it their power to have an influence on the course of events. They felt that there was some hope for the country if the conflict does not resume, but not otherwise. However, despite everything they have faced, most children interviewed through this study were optimistic about their own futures. They wanted to find secure sources of income so that they could cope with the adverse effects of the conflict, mainly poverty.

There are several conclusions arising from this study:

- While there are several ways in which conflict directly affects children – such as death, disability, loss of family members and displacement – most children were affected by the conflict through poverty. Almost every household has become poorer as a result of the conflict. They have lost land, property and livelihoods as a result of the war. Because of poverty, children have not been able to stay in school and, in some instances, have been forced by their circumstances to become income earners. Conflict-induced poverty in the region, which has an inadequate and dilapidated infrastructure such as roads, hospitals and schools, has also affected the development and wellbeing of children.
- While there are some differences, this picture seems to hold true across the three ethnicities and across genders. The impoverishing effects of the conflict have made all three ethnic groups poorer. Those living in the Ampara District, particularly Ampara town, seem the least affected as they were the furthest away from the areas of conflict in the East. However, it seems that conflict does indeed affect both boys and girls in similar ways in terms of education, child labour, health and nutrition.
- Comparing the two groups of ‘children’ covered by this study, it appears that those who were children at the height of the conflict are more affected than the children of today who are living under the MOU. During their formative period of childhood, the older group has been exposed to extreme periods of violence and insecurity and continue to live with a constant sense of fear. Their education was affected and their educational attainments may be lower than would have been the case had their education not been affected by the conflict. To add to their problems, today, when they are of an employable age, there is little economic activity and employment opportunity available to them in the East. In too many instances, the reward for pursuing an education despite great difficulties imposed by the conflict seems to be unemployment or unskilled wage labour.
- Finally, among both children as well as adults, there is a great fear that the conflict will resume. The children do not feel that they have any control or influence over this development. The conflict in the North and East defines their worldview, which is limited because they do not have a sense of how people in non-conflict areas live. In spite of the conflict and their experiences of it, children expressed a great deal of determination and resourcefulness to overcome the problems faced by them, their families and their communities.

Policies and programmes to assist children in war affected areas focus on issues specific to children - such as education, child health and child labour. While these issues do need the urgent attention of policy-makers, the findings of this research suggest that children are greatly affected by poverty prevalent in the Eastern province in general as well as more specifically within their households, which also needs urgent attention. Accordingly, several policy recommendations arise from this report:

1. The people in the East are finding it difficult to cope with the effects of conflict because they are poor. Household poverty results in childhood poverty, which is detrimental to the wellbeing and development of children. What is urgently required today in the Eastern province of Sri Lanka to ameliorate the situation of children are development interventions that target households by providing employment and income generating opportunities, rather than initiatives which focus solely on children. There is a need and demand for micro-finance initiatives, assistance for SME development, and assistance to modernise the agricultural and fishing sectors in the East. Such interventions would assist those who are children today as well as those who were children during the conflict by creating diverse opportunities lacking up until now.

2. There is also an urgent need to reconstruct and rehabilitate infrastructure and public services in these areas. Economic activity is stifled because of poor transport facilities, such as dilapidated roads and infrequent public transport services. Due to the poor maintenance of the irrigation systems, agricultural activity is not always optimal, especially with regards to paddy cultivation. This poses a serious problem in the interior areas particularly in the Ampara district where people rely on rice farming for their livelihoods. Inadequate markets for agricultural products as a result of poor infrastructure and access to them also hamper the development of the area. These developments will assist children, mainly indirectly through more income at the household level, but also directly through the provision of better transport services and infrastructure. This will provide access to resources such as water and thus the time and effort children spend in getting to and from school, fetching water for the household and so on will be substantially reduced. It will enable them to spend more time on their education and other personal development activities and will also contribute to better health and nutrition.
3. The quality of education provided to children in the Eastern province needs to be improved. With the exception of one or two large schools in the towns, inadequate teaching staff and facilities such as libraries and laboratories contribute to the poor educational attainment in many of these schools. Most schools only cater for the Arts stream as a result of under-resourcing and thus children do not get an adequate grounding in the mathematical or science fields, which might enhance their abilities to obtain employment outside the traditional crafts. Inadequate libraries and other means of learning about the world outside of their village or community restrict the worldview of these children who might approach their lives differently if this were not the case. Better quality of education coupled with wider opportunities for employment in line with higher educational attainment is needed to address these issues. Otherwise children who stay in school despite the severe hardships they face are only wasting their time which sooner or later will lead to greater instability and new forms of conflict in the area.

A final word...

As this report reiterates, great potential exists for renewal of conflict in the East of Sri Lanka. Among all ethnic groups there is a consistent sense of disillusionment with politics, politicians and the current political situation. A political solution to the conflict in the North and East with the LTTE, while essential for development of the area, will not solve all the problems in the East, nor ensure the absence of violent conflict. There is a great scarcity of resources in the East and these shortcomings need to be addressed urgently to reduce the conflict potential in the area.

The findings and recommendation in this report remain valid despite the devastation caused by the tsunami of 26 December 2004. If at all, the need for interventions to develop the East and increase employment and income generating activities has become more urgent. Ignoring those who have suffered for more than 20 years because of the conflict by focusing only on those that have been directly affected by the tsunami could also lead to further and new conflicts. This holistic, broader approach is yet another argument favouring development interventions, which uplift the region, rather than target a particular set of beneficiaries – be they tsunami affected or conflict affected. Because of the tsunami, the flow of aid as well as the attention of policy-makers has moved to the Eastern regions, and the recommendations made in this report – for the general development of the East, to rebuild and rehabilitate the infrastructure and provide adequate sources of employment – may have become that much easier to implement.

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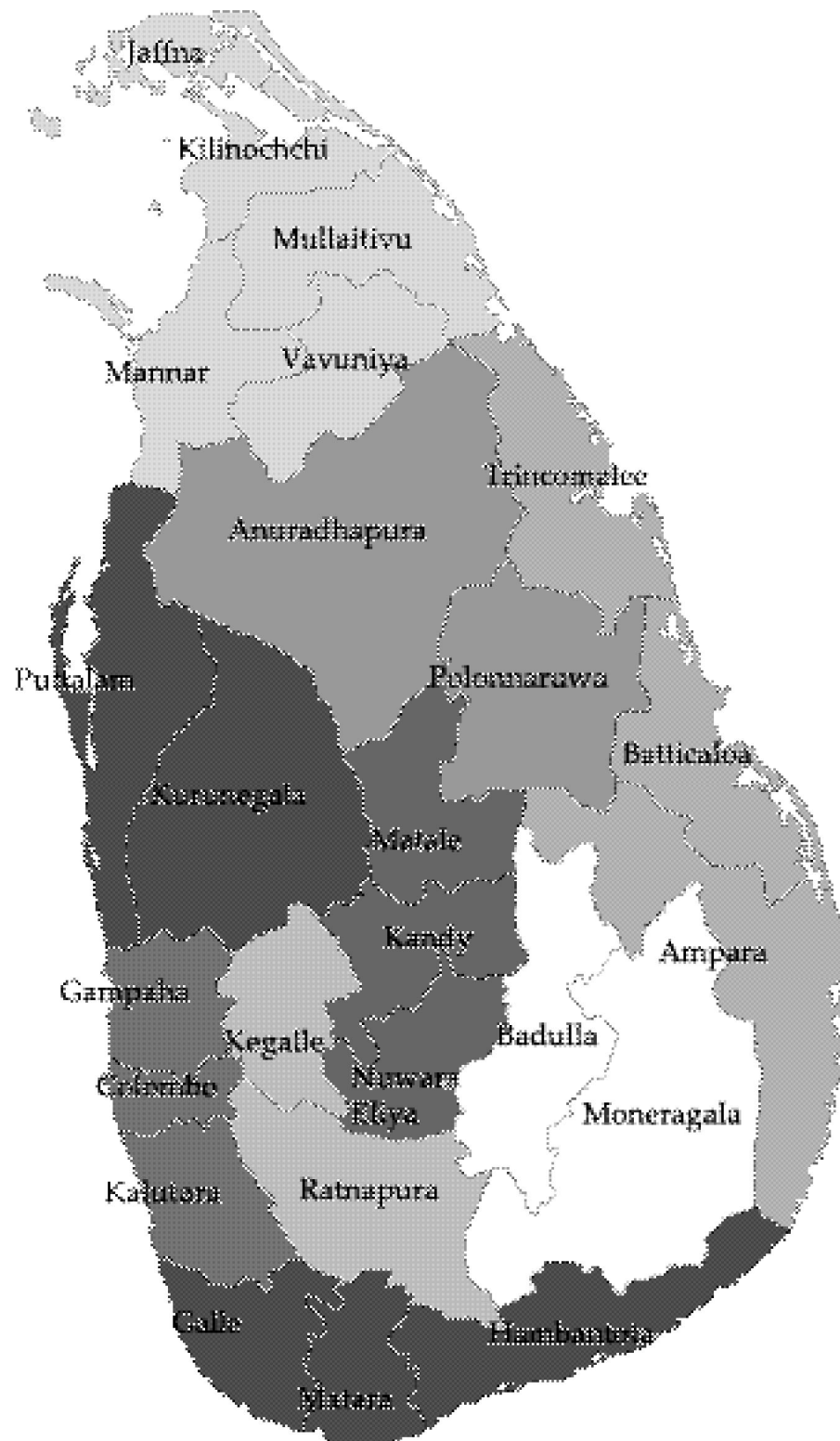
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Annexes

Annex I: Map of Sri Lanka



Legend

 Northern Province	 Central Province	 Southern
 Eastern Province	 Uva	
 North Central Province	 Sabaragamuwa	
 North Western Province	 Western	

Annex II: Names of Surveyed Villages

Ampara District

Akkaraipattu
Ampara Town
Attalachenai
Attalapalam
Central Camp
Chinamagathuwaram
Kalmunai
Kalmunaikudy
Karathivu
Jayawardenepura
Ninthavur
Palamunai
Samanthurai
Thirukkovil
Thiryakerni
Weheragama

Batticaloa District

Chathurukondan
Chengalady
Eravur
Kathankudy
Kiran
Komanthurai
Ottamavadi
Poonguchamunai
Thandiyadi
Valachenai

Trincomalee District

Alles Garden
Anadhapuri
Deevaragama
Iqbal Nagar
Jamaliya
Kasthuri Nagar
Kinnya
Kuchchaveli
Muthur
Rotarygama
Vallur
Vilagamviharaya