

Conflict, Vulnerability and Long-term Displacement: The case of Puttalam

This article is the twelfth in a series of articles by the Centre for Poverty Analysis (CEPA) exploring various dimensions of poverty in Sri Lanka.

Introduction

This paper is based on the study on Making Peace-Keeping Peace study (Thalayasingam et al 2009) conducted by the Poverty and Conflict (PAC) programme at the Centre for Poverty Analysis. The study focussed on the following two aspects of community relations and conflict in Puttalam district:

- i. "Making Peace"- how incidents of conflict in the area have been dealt with in the past.
- ii. "Keeping Peace"- how communities and local organisations have been able to sustain these solutions, manage conflicts and maintain these situations in the future.

Following many rounds of qualitative data collection, the team chose 6 conflict incidents to follow as case studies. The conflicts were based on issues illustrative of wider conflict dynamics in the district. The choice of conflict lines also determined the geographical focus of the study. It focussed on 4 Divisional Secretariat (DS) divisions- Mundal, Vanathavilluva, Puttalam and Kalpitiya, all with different levels of ethnic heterogeneity and different histories of hosting internally displaced persons (IDPs).

The study finds that the main cause of conflict in the district during the study period (2006-2008) was the deteriorating relationship between the host community and the IDPs.

This is not the only source of conflict in the district. The study identified several other issues, including ethnic identity-based competition, religious identity-based competition and competition between political groups as further sources of conflict.

This paper focuses on IDP - host relations and its role in conflict in the district.

In Puttalam, the host community perceives that IDPs, despite their long stay and improved living conditions, asset bases and commercial links during their long displacement, continue to be specially supported, while many other vulnerable groups receive very little support and assistance. The IDPs and their representatives contend that they are still vulnerable and retain the rhetoric of displacement and maintain the groups wish to return to their original homelands as a justification for their continued vulnerability.

Over time, attitudes among the host community towards the IDPs have changed from one of welcome and support immediately after their expulsion to direct competition for livelihood support, development benefits and services. This competition has led to incidents of conflict and a growing resentment between the IDPs and some groups in the host community. The prevailing atmosphere of competition and conflict has led, many within the district, to contest the continued recognition by the state and development institutions of the IDPs as a vulnerable population group. Some people feel that the IDPs are better off than other groups in the host community. The debate about their status vis a vis other groups in the district continues. The making peace-keeping peace study examines conflict and conflict resolution in Puttalam within the wider backdrop of these assertions, competitions and challenges.

History of in-migration in Puttalam

Puttalam district has a long history of in-migration. Despite waves of in-migration during the ancient times, migration due to trade during the colonial era, and post-independence migration as a result of irrigation settlement schemes, the arrival of the IDPs in 1990 continues to have the most impact on Puttalam.

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Conflict-related Displacement

In October 1990, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Ealam (LTTE) expelled almost 100,000 Muslims from Mannar, Jaffna and other districts in the North and East. Many of those displaced in that time came to Puttalam. The IDPs were largely from Mannar (74%) and almost exclusively Muslim (99%) (United Nations High Commission for Refugees (UNHCR), 2006). They have remained in the district since their initial expulsion. Some went back to their homes for a short period of time during the ceasefire period between 2002 and 2006, but returned when fighting resumed. It is their long-term displacement that sets IDPs in Puttalam apart from other displaces in Sri Lanka. While they were welcomed initially by the host community, this relationship deteriorated over time into competition and conflict.

Protracted Displacement and Vulnerability

The categorisation of people as IDPs means that they are automatically seen to be vulnerable. The category is recognised by international humanitarian law as a special category whose vulnerability demands a certain response from their hosting state and development and humanitarian agencies.

This vulnerability is closely tied to their sense of impermanence in their places of exile. The sense of being forcibly displaced into a different place where they are forced to remain characterises this group. For this reason they are seen to be vulnerable.

The expectation that their stay would not be permanent also determined the host community response in this case. The immediate response by the host

community, as is explained in more detail below, was helpful and accommodating, in the expectation that the stay of this displaced community would be temporary.

Most IDPs in Puttalam have been present there since the expulsion in 1990. Their long stay in the district, and their retention of the IDP label challenge the traditional notions of vulnerability associated with this category. The presence of IDPs for more than 17 years has brought a considerable amount of change among the IDP communities. Many of them exhibit signs of settling permanently in Puttalam district, by buying land and establishing permanent houses and businesses in the district.

According to the 2006 UNHCR survey, the majority of Puttalam IDPs have already *de facto* integrated into Puttalam. Seventy four percent of the IDPs surveyed claim to have acquired land in Puttalam, and 58% reported that they also possess a house.

During the cease fire period between 2002 and 2006, many IDPs sent members of their families back to their original homes. This trend of wishing to migrate back to places of origin changed with the collapse of the CFA. IDPs are locally integrated and have established relationships during the course of their lengthy stay.

Further evidence of the integration of the IDPs and hosts is the cross influence of cultural practices. Some cultural practices of IDPs, such as, giving/taking dowry and wearing dresses, have begun to influence the host community as well. According to information gathered from local host community, the dowry system was not that prevalent among Puttalam Muslims before the arrival of IDPs, but presently, it is becoming a more common practice.

Performance of IDP children in education was higher when compared to locals. Mostly, the girls of the host community were not encouraged to follow secondary education before the arrival of the IDPs. IDP children, including the girls, completed the

tertiary education as well. This has changed the practices of local host community to encourage their girls to follow secondary and tertiary education.

Despite these indications of integration, IDPs feel that the local host community treats them as a separate group of people. A sense of marginalising and discrimination prevails among the IDPs. Referring to the children of IDPs as '*ahathi*' (refugee) in schools is an example for this situation. While rejecting the discrimination and marginalisation they are faced with, the IDPs also favour maintaining certain aspects of their separate identity. These aspects include separate administration, separate means of assistance from governmental and non-governmental sources and separate political representatives.

The IDPs have often settled in in Puttalam because they have had pre-existing links with the district. Most of the displaced from Mannar arrived in Kalpitiya by sea, when they felt that travelling by land was not safe. Further, Puttalam is close to the Mannar district, and people had trade links between the districts prior to displacement. Puttalam was a market for people who lived in Mannar. They used to sell their agricultural produce, farm animals and fish in Puttalam. People from Mannar could access Puttalam by both sea and land routes. Those with links to the district brought other families along. The existence of largely concentrated Muslim communities also made Puttalam an acceptable choice for these Muslim displaced people.

Changes in IDPs' vulnerability over time

Most of the IDPs were poor during the time of displacement, since they were not allowed to bring their wealth with them. Some managed to bring or sell their assets later, and became economically stable while others continued to be poor. Development institutions often assume that all the IDPs are equally vulnerable and in need of assistance. They do not acknowledge that IDPs adopted different coping strategies; some had access to their

wealth after displacement, and over time, some were successful in trade, creating a wide range of economic conditions within the IDP group.

IDPs' housing conditions were poor immediately after displacement, but this also has changed over time. Initially, they lived in welfare camps with quite poor living conditions. They were living in IDP welfare camps for a long time until the late 1990's with the expectation of return. When people began to sense that their resettlement would not be imminent, these welfare centres were transformed into more permanent housing settlements. Some IDPs bought land in Puttalam and some were given land grants facilitated by politicians. IDPs turned the camps into permanent settlements in this way. Many of these welfare camps are now upgraded and contain more improved housing units with sanitary facilities, electricity and water. This is not uniform and some IDPs continue to live in poor conditions. The IDPs who live in the camps with improved facilities also appear to have political support. Those with political support use it to obtain lands and get houses built. This political support has helped to draw the attention of government and non-governmental organisations (NGOs) in assistance. IDPs with relatively high levels of education and influential social networks are able to progress much faster than those without these advantages. IDPs from Mannar have more political support than those from Jaffna district.

While the vulnerability and poverty of the IDPs cannot be denied or undermined, there are also people and communities in the host population who are similar, and sometimes, more poor and vulnerable. Many development projects in Puttalam focus solely on the needs and vulnerabilities of IDPs. This limited focus has created tension because groups in the local community also see themselves as deserving of external assistance.

According to some development workers, "almost 90% of the NGOs' work for the IDPs' but there are poor marginalised locals also in this area. They have been neglected in these

conditions." Locals acknowledge that this is leading to conflict. They say that "Now there is no big conflict in this area between IDPs and locals. But, locals feel that they are being marginalised by the government, NGOs and INGOs, because most of the assistance, such as, housing, free rations and livelihood assistance are mostly targeting the IDPs, and, local poor people are not receiving any assistance. Now the living standards of the locals have become lower than that of the IDPs." (Thalayasingam, 2009).

According to de Silva, "The rich IDPs have bought land and houses in the Puttalam DS division, particularly in the urban area, so that, it helps them in augmenting their businesses. The children of these affluent families are sent to better schools in cities, and they get better infrastructure facilities that are available in the division. These rich Muslims are powerful both politically and economically. They have now gone into manipulating political power in different ways in the urban sector" (De Silva, 1999).

Changing Attitudes of the Host Community

The attitudes of the host community towards the IDPs have changed significantly since their arrival. People in the host community provided immediate assistance when the IDPs first arrived. Some locals donated their land for use as IDP camps. The IDPs were treated as a special, vulnerable group. When it became clear that their presence was not temporary, and when the IDPs began to establish in their villages, members of the host community began to resent their presence.

Most locals did not expect the IDPs to settle in Puttalam. Fear of losing resources available in the district by sharing them with a larger group of people was the primary source of resentment and hostility. This situation has fuelled the competition for land, livelihoods, government jobs, wages and services, such as, health and education. Competition to qualify for

university education is widely mentioned by many respondents. The district quota available for Puttalam district is now shared between the locals and IDPs. The host community perceives this as a disadvantage, because, there is greater competition for the same number of places.

At different times, this competition has been the source of conflict and violence. This resentment remains in Puttalam, and is made worse by political figures manipulating the grievance of groups for their own gain. Development projects also continue to see the IDPs as the most vulnerable group in Puttalam. They are not flexible and open minded enough in their approach to implementation in the district, and do not recognise the changes that have taken place there over time.

The perspective of IDPs about the issues of sharing resources is slightly different from what locals feel. Given the present situation of protracted displacement and resettlement, their perception centres around the 'right to live' anywhere in the country since there is no viable solution presented by the government with regard to the 'resettlement' or 'integration' of IDPs.

Impacts of IDPs in Puttalam

The Making peace- keeping peace project found many instances of negative attitudes among the hosts and IDPs about each other. This was balanced in part by the acknowledgement that the IDPs impact was not always negative. People in the host community, for example, spoke of how the areas in which the IDPs have settled improved since they arrived, chiefly in the areas of infrastructure, service provision and enterprise development. The IDPs' investments in the area contributed to a more diverse and vibrant economic environment in the district, providing employment opportunities for both IDPs and locals. The increased competition to traders, however, caused some of them to view this as a negative development. A lot of fallow land was purchased by IDPs who then began to invest in them and

use them in a productive manner, increasing their economic value.

Improvements were seen to be shared unequally. Many members of the host community felt that the increase in welfare of the IDPs was negative despite general economic conditions are improving in the district.

IDPs' Structural Separations and Perception of the Host Communities

Another source of resentment between the IDPs and the host communities was the separation of the IDPs in some aspects and their integration with the rest of the districts in others. The hosts noted that the IDPs always lived away from the hosts and created small enclave settlements. They also resented their separate access to political representation, institutions, and local administration.

The Ministry of Resettlement handles issues linked with the IDPs. The IDPs are able to elect their own political representatives, since they are registered to vote in their places of origin, and not in the host district. The host community feels that the representatives of the IDPs support their constituents, securing resources and maintaining their vulnerability.

Separate political representation for IDPs skews the power structure in the district, and at the national level, giving people in Puttalam the impression that the IDPs have more political influence. Many people in host communities question why IDPs who have been in the district for so many years, and are integrated economically, need special representation and assistance.

The Role of Development Projects

The study found that development projects play an important role in the district. Puttalam is a poor district with 4 of the 10 poorest DS divisions in Sri Lanka. Despite this, many of the development projects in the district have a special focus on IDPs. The study found, however that, over time, many development

institutions have begun to recognise other needs in the district. For example, it was found that some projects were remarkably sensitive to the divisions that existed in the communities and targeted their interventions in order to distribute resources and benefits in a more equitable manner. Some projects intervened in the conflicts, providing solutions acceptable to the different conflicting parties, and, in doing so, recognising all their needs. Many of the partners who contributed to the study from the district, and many others who were involved in sharing the study results recognise the need to be sensitive to different groups needs and to mitigate conflict by not being seen to discriminate. Despite this renewed recognition of the depth and the breadth of need in the district, other development institutions seek to only support one group over the other, contributing to the tension in the district.

Re-Examining Vulnerability

The study through its focus on conflict and its causes, and means of resolution also encountered different conceptions of and different responses to vulnerability. A significant finding of

the study was that the fragile peace in the area among the different communities was contingent on recognising the vulnerability of other groups along with IDPs.

"The locals have been suffering many disadvantages for the last 16 years. Religion links the IDPs and locals. But when both of them go beyond this, it will change into violence. Therefore, you should solve this trouble before these things happen"

- (KI, Mosque leader)

The process of sharing study findings and getting local feedback helped identify other groups that have special types of vulnerability that also require their own solutions. Female-headed households, households with migrant parent/s, migratory fishermen were thought to be especially vulnerable. Hosts communities perceive that these vulnerabilities should be ignored. Development actors, for example, continue to stick to narrow mandates, and ignore the effect this has on conflict and social cohesion. Recognising other

vulnerabilities is key to making peace and keeping peace in Puttalam.

References :

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Footnote:

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