

## TRANSITING FROM PROLONGED CONFLICT TO POST CONFLICT DEVELOPMENT: LOCATING THE CASE OF TRINCOMALEE DISTRICT OF SRI LANKA

LATE ANDERS NARMAN &  
UPALI VIDANAPATHIRANA

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### ABSTRACT

In early part of the 2000s Sri Lanka moved into a stage of cease-fire and peace negotiations, after almost twenty years of open civil war. The war, which resulted in an enormous destruction of human and material capital, has been largely concentrated in the northern and eastern parts of the country, even though the resultant insecurity has spilled over to the other parts of the country, even the capital city of Colombo. This paper gives an account of the peace initiative in one of the eastern districts of Sri Lanka, Trincomalee. The complex ethno-religious character of Trincomalee has been the cause of heavy fighting in the district. One important issue that has to be addressed in post conflict Trincomalee peace-building process is how to balance the various ethno-religious demands, including the interests of its Muslim communities. Another difficulty is to settle the dilemma of the internally displaced persons. In conclusion this paper argues that there is a strong correlation between peace and development. After all, it is rather the rule than the exception that a conflict may return to the stage of an open confrontation if the basic disagreements are not handled carefully in the process of peace negotiations.

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### BACKGROUND

Since 1983, Sri Lanka has been embroiled in a civil war between the Government and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). The political differences between the majority Sinhala and minority Tamil population had grown into an open military conflict at that time. The escalation of hostilities was based in a perception of discrimination among the Tamil community in Sri Lanka. A major demand of the LTTE was a separate 'Eelam' or state for the Tamil people within the country. After a bitter armed struggle that lasted close to two decades, peace negotiations between the Government and the LTTE were initiated early 2002 and the country is now slowly moving towards achieving stability. Direct talks, however, have been stalled for the time being due to a change of government in Sri Lanka after a recent parliamentary election. Hurdles such as these indicate the pitfalls inherent in the delicate negotiation process in Sri Lanka. Too often, peace follows upon a compromise that does not fulfil the original objectives of any of the warring parties. Therefore, the stage of post conflict in Sri Lanka has to be handled with the utmost care, and a new process of national development has to be initiated to avoid a feeling among the combatants that they have been compromised.

This paper reports on the Sri Lankan district of Trincomalee in the eastern province as an area that is moving towards a situation of stability at present. As will be seen, the socio-economic conditions in this district have been affected severely by the wartime activities. An intensive reconstruction process has to be undertaken here if Trincomalee has to catch up with national development trends. If this does not happen, the prevailing exclusion or structural violence can eventually result in new periods of open violence. After all, it is rather the rule than the exception

that a conflict may return to the stage of an open confrontation if the basic disagreements are not handled carefully in the process of peace negotiations.

One of the difficulties in an analysis of a post conflict region such as Trincomalee is that there is only a limited set of data available. Due to the prevailing human insecurity, the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka have not been included in any kind of socio-economic surveys or censuses in recent years. Therefore, they have been left out of the comparative analysis on economic and social well being on a national scale. Government statistics, when included in national reports, have almost always been built on rough estimations for eastern and northern provinces of Sri Lanka, which is the Tamil heartland in Sri Lanka. The underlying assumption, though, is that this region is worse off than other parts of the country, not least as a result of the fierce civil war since the early nineteen-eighties. From this follows that national statistics on human development in Sri Lanka may not realistically reflect the extreme poverty that exists in different parts of the island country.

Towards the end of 2001, serious talks were initiated to prepare for a lasting peace in Sri Lanka. What followed was a prolonged process of discussions on possible solutions often interrupted by various incidences of violence. At the same time external monitors, in most cases from Norway, kept an eye on what was happening, while the aid community promised to assist in the re-building of war torn areas. These peace negotiations can only form the first possible phase in a complicated process towards reconciliation and development. Experience has shown that in one-third of the cases where reconciliation is achieved, lasting peace has often been elusive, as one or both parties have not respected promises made in the peace agreement.

In this paper, we will first give a short account of the relationship between development and peace, which will be followed by a general discussion on the civil war in Sri Lanka. This will form a background to the analysis of Trincomalee district based on available statistics, newspaper articles, academic journals and books. Finally, we will discuss the potentials for a post conflict development scenario in Trincomalee district in Sri Lanka.

## **PEACE AND DEVELOPMENT: SOME ISSUES**

As pointed out by Hettne (2002) peace and development are two sides of the same coin. Violent conflicts create a state of turbulence in the environment and in particular, in the minds of people, which retards the process of economic as well as social development. Similarly, violent confrontation often leads to a destruction of physical and social infrastructure including roads, electricity, schools and hospitals. Conflict areas, therefore, may be cut off from most of the development initiatives of the state and the private sector. This process invariably leads to a state of real and supposed exclusion among peoples and regions that can create a fertile breeding ground for protracted frustrations. A real or perceived exclusion can also be expressed as a state of structural violence, which in turn can be the reason for direct or open violence. Consequently, if the root causes of a civil war are not attended to as part of peace negotiations, conflict may very well return. It is this delicate post conflict situation that we find emerging in the northern and eastern parts of Sri Lanka.

Conflicts are presently one of the main impediments that restrict the emergence of development in many countries in Asia as well as Africa and Latin America (Ropers 2002). While national level budgetary allocations and development priorities have been adjusted to cover the direct military costs of war, social facilities are being continuously destroyed by conflict. The poor, in particular, are being increasingly excluded from national development in countries of the developing world. This perpetuates a situation in which a majority of the population becomes adversely affected, both economically and socially, by the conflict. If conflicts arise merely out of grievances is, of course, a debatable issue. For some researchers it is the political and power dimensions generally known as greed, not merely grievances, that create and maintain a prolonged internal strife (Collier 2000). Therefore, as war can be of benefit to some individuals, such as unscrupulous traders and ambiguous politicians, these elements will also be the enemies of peace.

Causes for conflicts can often be related to variations in socio-economic development between individuals, ethnic communities and geographical locations. A systematic exclusion of certain sections of the population in less affluent countries can be related to the globalisation process (Hoogvelt 2001). External factors for conflicts are often closely interwoven into internal ones, such as:

- *Uneven regional structures*, often as part of the colonial heritage, but also accentuated by post independence policies - as the present neo-liberal open economic policy.
- *Exclusion and marginalisation*. Besides pure sociological dimensions to exclusions there can be broader socio-political factors such as absence of democratic rule from a wider point of view. It can also be the manner in which emerging elites use their position for personal benefit.
- *Cultural, religious, racial and ethnic variations*. (Närman 2002)

When such variations in development cannot be assessed quantitatively even the perception of discrimination can create fertile grounds for looming conflicts.

Within this context the conflict that engulfed the island of Sri Lanka is quite a complex one. There are many debates and arguments over the definition and nature of the current conflict. Some people are comfortable with labelling this conflict as a 'terrorist' problem, while many others view it as an 'ethnic' problem. A part of the Tamil population may even regard it as a justified 'war of liberation'. The understanding of root causes and implications of the war has in fact been quite complex, except if for some personal reason one chose to subscribe to any of the above viewpoints.

## **A SHORT ACCOUNT OF THE CONFLICT IN SRI LANKA**

The current conflict in Sri Lanka dates back to late 1970s. Incidentally, the origin of the conflict coincided with the introduction of the neo-liberal open economic measures in 1977. Recruitment to the armed forces on both sides of the divide, that is, the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE, has taken place primarily in the poorer southern and eastern regions of the country. From field studies carried out in Hambantota District in Sri Lanka it is obvious that the army has been the only

occupational alternative for many young boys from the poor families, while girls had other opportunities, such as the textile industries (Närman and Dangalle forthcoming). Similarly, most of the fighting cadres of the LTTE have been drawn from the poverty stricken eastern province of Sri Lanka. Therefore it is sometimes seen as a war in which the poor and disadvantaged youths have been fighting a war of the rich - the agenda and the vested interests of the sponsors to be known at a future date.

There have been attempts to estimate the macro economic implications of the Sri Lankan conflict. For example, it was calculated that between 1984 and 1996 the total cost of war could be in the range of about 170 percent of the 1996 GDP of the country (Kelegama 1998). Further, it was claimed that the war has reduced the economic growth rate by about 2 percent per annum (Central Bank 1999). In a study by the National Peace Council of Sri Lanka (2001) the economic costs of the war have been classified into the following categories:

- **Direct expenditures** that include the direct expenses for the Government, as well as the LTTE. This includes war related equipment, arms and ammunitions and salaries of cadres etc.
- **Indirect Expenses** that include costs of public security, which emerged as a main employment generation activity in the country where private firms that provide security guards have mushroomed in various parts of the country. In addition, rehabilitation costs of displaced persons also constitute a major expense in the recent years.
- **Cost for damages and reconstruction** that covers cost of reconstruction, civil works and replacement of machinery destroyed by the war. Some of the major items include roads, railways, passenger aircrafts, buildings and telecommunication equipment.
- **Loss of productive output** that include economic activities discontinued such as agriculture, fishing, manufacturing and tourism together with losses to the productive labour force, which is internally displaced and out migrated.

The total cost, direct and indirect, of the war up to 1998 has been estimated to be 1.444 billion rupees (US\$ 19bn.). These calculations, however, fail to capture the real nature of the damages of a prolonged conflict like the one in Sri Lanka. At most, they reflect a partial estimate of the direct expenses of the war and secondary costs arising from human sufferings throughout these years. For instance, it may never be possible to account for the true cost of factors such as disability and the growing number of orphans or internal displacees that are caused by the war. Over the years, many civilians have been internally displaced by the civil war, which has also resulted in rise of new local conflicts over meagre available resources. One has also to account for the psychological trauma resulting from living under a constant threat of violence. A prolonged conflict can also penetrate into the whole family, leading to domestic violence and disruption of family structures. In many cases, the perception of poverty is directly related to a prolonged war.

It is also important to mention the deeper political costs of conflicts that are difficult to express in monetary terms. The political capital is grossly eroded during the war and extended periods of emergencies. Human rights abuses, including torture, enlisting of children for combatant duties, arbitrary arrests and denial of accepted legal remedies will be expressions of the recurring violence. A culture of

violence tends to emerge in which the rule of the gun prevails (National Peace Council of Sri Lanka 2001).

In Sri Lanka a great deal of attention has been given to the armed struggle between the Government and the LTTE in the eastern and northern parts of the country. Not enough attention has been paid to the violence in the southern districts of Galle, Matara, Kalutara, Hambantota, etc. in the early 1970s and late 1980s by the Jathika Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). This could be an even better example of war breaking out as a result of social and economic exclusion. Presently, JVP has been functioning as a political party with a significant support base in the southern district of Hambantota in particular (Narman and Dangalle forthcoming). It has been suggested that the kind of armed resistance that emerged in the southern parts could never have been of that magnitude if it had not happened parallel to the struggle in the North and East.

Prior to the present phase of peace negotiations between the Sri Lankan Government and the LTTE, there had been a continuous escalation of violence, which covered the North, East, North Central, Western, and North Western provinces of the country. This included operations and counter operations of the state forces, attacks and ambush operations by the LTTE and retaliatory attacks targeting civilians in war zones, border villages and also in the main cities including Colombo and Kandy. These violent events had resulted in the killing of about 60 to 70 thousand civilians and the collateral damages running into billions of US dollars (as seen above). In course of the on-going peace negotiations, the idea of a federal solution seems to meet with a lot of support as the possible future mode of governance. This may alleviate fears of separation and threats to territorial integrity as expressed in many quarters.

Among the many thorny issues to be addressed in the current phase of the peace negotiations is the 'Muslim' factor, particularly in the eastern province. The demographic profile of the eastern province makes it interesting as it is critically balanced between Tamil, Muslim and Sinhalese communities without any single group commanding a majority.

As in many other civil wars in Third World countries, a key factor in the peace debate is ethnicity. It would be easy to find 'evidence' showing this as being the crucial matter in the Sri Lankan case. Even if this is essential as observed by Korf and Silva (2003) there is a danger that it may conceal the multi-layered and complex reality. We may forget to give an analysis of poverty, underdevelopment, social exclusion and marginalisation in understanding the civil war in Sri Lanka. At the same time it is common to find members of one ethnic group often blaming another for the misfortunes encountered. There have been many claims from the Tamils in Sri Lanka of being discriminated against on issues such as land distribution in settlement schemes. It is thus easy to see how a struggle for resources is given an ethnic identity. The same is also relevant in debates over the actual distribution of entitlements among different groups. For example, the number of Tamil professionals has declined since independence. This, in turn, can be directly related to how the access to education has been distributed ethnically, especially the admission to universities (Peiris 2001). To some extent this kind of a situation arises in response to the colonial legacy, which tends to favour certain minority groups against the majority (Pandey 1990).

An important aspect of regional development dynamics of Sri Lanka is the high incidence of spatial poverty. For instance, the income gap between regions, as measured in terms of GDP per capita has shown clear symptoms of increasing disparities in the period between 1991 and 1995 (Gooneratne 2001). Similarly, the incidence of poverty, which was as low as 19 per cent for the district of Colombo was as high as 66 per cent in the Moneragala District. Other districts in the periphery have not been spared of this pattern. The question then is how serious is the incidence of poverty in the regions of the North and the East for which no macro level data are available?

Some studies have estimated that the number of the poor in the North and East range from 5,00,000 to 10,00,000 people, with the level of poverty ranging from 25 to 55 per cent, which is no worse than the other poor regions in Sri Lanka (National Planning Department 2000). Yet these estimates do not reflect the normative dimensions of poverty. Simple income or expenditure data do not capture the human misery of the people living in the affected areas and even in the border villages. Poverty arising out of a serious breakdown of human conditions, such as loss of life, destruction of property, disintegration of family life, psychological trauma and disabilities caused by the conflict is much more devastating than simply poverty data.

As data given are merely estimates it is difficult to give an accurate illustration of the regional structure in Sri Lanka in the last couple of decades. We have merely assumed that the conditions in these areas have been extremely difficult as people are living in a state of open war. Obviously a complete national development policy framework may have been held back due to the war. As noted above disadvantaged regions have been lagging behind even more as war hinders normal development activities in these areas. Moreover, the market driven economic activities supported under the neo-liberal economic policies have failed to percolate down to the hinterland let alone the North and East of the country. It is on that note that we will try to focus on Trincomalee district.

## **TRINCOMALEE DISTRICT: A REPORT**

Trincomalee district is situated in the northernmost part of the eastern province of Sri Lanka (see map on p. 23). The district has a long sea front and about 2630 Sq. Kms. of fertile flat land. It is an area of great scenic beauty, which will be of tremendous value for tourism if the general conditions stabilise. Historically, it has been known as the 'Sacred Hills of Three Temples'. In ancient times, early Tamil settlers built an enormous Hindu temple, which was later destroyed by Dutch colonialists in 1622. The complex ethno-religious character of Trincomalee is obvious as it is also a sacred place for Buddhists, with the remains of a monastery some 30 kms north of Trincomalee town. Because of the Bay with its unique deep water harbour It was a point of interest to early colonisers from Europe. The Portuguese, Dutch, French and British dominated it in succession from the 16<sup>th</sup> up to the 19<sup>th</sup> century. During the World War II it was used as the British naval headquarters in the Pacific. At the same time it was the United States air base for attacks on the Japanese in Burma and Malaysia. The unique deep-water harbour makes Trincomalee to be of great strategic concern even today.

Internally, the district's strategic importance is its location between the two major arenas of heavy fighting between the Government army and the LTTE. To its north is the Mullaittivu district, one of the main strongholds of the Tamil guerrillas. To its south we find Batticaloa district that has provided most of the fighting cadres of the LTTE. To its west we find the two districts of Anuradhapura and Pollonnaruwa districts, which are mainly inhabited by Sinhalese population. These two districts have provided a large number of fighting cadres to the Sri Lankan army. Trincomalee itself has a mixed ethnic composition that has made it a hotbed of the civil war during the past few decades. For instance, in a number of planned attacks the army and the LTTE have massacred about eight hundred civilians belonging to the three communities between 1985 and 1999. During late 1990s fighting for territory in Trincomalee and Batticaloa has been sporadic, but has a high level of terror. This has deepened the suspicion and mistrust between different ethnic groups of the population (Goodhand and Lewer 1999). It is significant that Trincomalee has been considered as an alternative site for a capital city in a free Eelam nation by LTTE.

Trincomalee District is divided into 11 administrative units, which are known as Divisional Secretary Divisions (DSD), with a total of 437 villages. The main city of Trincomalee is situated at the bay. Population figures on an area of civil war are generally controversial and politically sensitive. The last complete population census was taken in 1981, giving a total of 255,948 inhabitants. At that time the ethnic division among the major groups was thus: (i) Tamils 36 percent, (ii) Sinhalese 33 percent, and (iii) Moors 29 percent. The steady increase of Sinhalese from merely 5 percent in 1921 to 33 percent in 1981 is noteworthy (Brun 2003). Some parts of the district have been under direct LTTE rule. Consequently, a separate judiciary, police and tax system operated there. One dilemma for the future peace process is how to integrate the two distinct administrative modes in a united Sri Lanka.

In 2001 a total of 192,902 inhabitants were included in the census, but the coverage was limited. Two of the DSDs - Muttur and Vergul/Echilampatti - were not included at all, while two others were partly covered. Based on complementary information the total population estimated in 2001 was 340,158. This would suggest an annual growth of 1.4 percent, which is slightly above the national average. The four DSDs, excluded fully or partially, were however all strong Tamil strongholds.

One major problem in post conflict areas is the issue of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs). It is estimated that some 800,000 persons have been displaced during the war in Sri Lanka. Trincomalee district has not only generated IDPs but has also received them from other conflict zones. An unconfirmed source estimates the total number of IDPs to be some 50 per cent of the total population of the district. According to UNHCR some 10,654 IDPs returned to Trincomalee, while 2531 left the district in 2001 for their original homes elsewhere.

One of the critical issues related to the war conditions is that people abandon their land. According to Peiris (2001) some 8000 ha of land had been left idle in the northeastern parts of the country. Among the most problematic areas was Trincomalee, with farmers leaving because of insecurity and displacement. This is an added dilemma to the increase in population density from 98 inhabitants per sq. kms.

in 1981 to 135 two decades later. Out of the total agricultural land some 85 percent was used for paddy cultivation in 2001 (Government of Sri Lanka 2002).

According to the Minister-in-charge of Eastern Development, Rauff Hakeem, (*Daily News* 10 Aug 2002) there is a need to focus attention on local economic growth in areas under acute poverty, such as Trincomalee. He says that there is a need for some additional 20,000 acres for paddy cultivation. As the district is located in the dry zone expansion of agriculture is limited, even without the war. Two sectors suggested by the concerned minister, as possible contributors towards poverty alleviation, are milk production and fishing.

There is no reliable data on wage employment in Trincomalee district, and we notice a fairly limited industrial sector. It appears that many small-scale industries deal with carpentry, garments and some food processing. Among large enterprises in the district are Prima Flour Milling Factory, Mineral Sands Cooperation, Sugar Factory and Mitsui Cement. To what extent a post conflict period would increase the demand for labour is an open question, as we have such limited information on the present situation. However, if a development process could be initiated the demand for professionals would be quite substantial. Since such persons may not be easily available in Trincomalee development assistance could be badly affected in the post conflict development.

Another sector that could possibly benefit some local people is tourism. When conditions stabilise, this could be an important source of income, but it will be long before they can reap full benefit. A network of transportation and hotels has to be established and the area cleared from land mines. Further, the image of eastern Sri Lanka as a war zone has to be overcome.

As noted above there is no proper quantitative assessment of poverty situation in Trincomalee. In a major poverty study of Sri Lanka conducted by the Asian Development Bank (2001) Trincomalee was selected to understand the perception of poverty in an area directly affected by civil war. The stress on people was so devastating that it affected almost all aspects of life. An important finding of the ADB Report was that poverty levels had increased considerably during the war. Trincomalee had been kept away from all kinds of national development programmes during the war. In addition, insecurity and restrictions on mobility had the severest of impact on the poor. Psychological dimensions of the war, such as trauma, will constitute an even graver challenge for the future than the damage caused to the economy.

The few attempts to assess the situation in quantitative terms are as follows. According to TamilNet ([www.tamilnet.com](http://www.tamilnet.com)), 90 percent of the population in Trincomalee depends on state support for mere survival. Further, 90 percent of the population has been displaced since 1983. It is also claimed that malnutrition is a serious problem, with 27 percent of the local population affected by it (national average being 10 percent). The official estimates for families eligible for *samurdhi* (welfare benefits) is 50 to 60 thousand families in 2001-02 (Government of Sri Lanka 2002). According to an international NGO working on IDPs ([www.idpproject.org](http://www.idpproject.org)) 30-40 percent of the local children do not attend school. Poverty is said to be the main



reason for this. Other causes for low school attendance are multiple displacements, lack of schools and teachers, and other bureaucratic obstructions.

## WHAT NOW?

On the difficult road towards the future Sri Lanka sees two major issues emerging – the flare up of new conflicts and the state of poverty in major parts of the country. The international donors and NGOs are willing to contribute towards the development of this nation if it is able to establish stability. While there have been some positive signs on the economic front this has not much benefited the poor.

What one finds now is a country that has just entered into the delicate process of peace negotiation and consolidation. This involves a major experience in social transformation in respect of peace and part development. If either of these two components is ignored there is a grave danger of failure, as the disadvantaged group(s) might go back to seeking a military solution to their predicament.

While most would regard peace as a desirable objective it is not easy to achieve. There are gains to be made by ruthless profiteers from trade in small arms and light weapons. Besides, there are numerous demands from international donors and NGOs whose ulterior motives are not known and will rarely be known. And if the eastern province is given extra development attention, it may lead to regional competition and conflict within the country. Although development is best initiated from within, such initiatives are not easy to expect from a region badly affected by civil war for so many years and yet not free from ethnic tensions.

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