

Livelihoods at Risk: Coping Strategies of War-affected Communities in Sri Lanka ¹

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Abstract

Rural societies in war-affected areas can be described as 'distressed livelihoods': they experience a dramatic increase in risk and uncertainty. How does this affect land use and agricultural coping strategies of small-scale farm households? This was the key research question of a multi-disciplinary, comparative village study carried out in the war-torn areas of Sri Lanka. The study employed the analytical framework of rural livelihoods promoted by DFID. In addition, theoretical models of risk management were instrumental in illustrating behavioural patterns of households in the war zones. The study shows that changed patterns of mobility are a key response of people to adjust to the risk-prone environment. These strategies place heavy demands on the extended family network. Furthermore, access to and priority claims for resources are critical in determining differences in livelihood strategies in different communities. Limited accessibility to natural resources due to war restricts the freedom of livelihood options. Many adapting strategies of farm households thus reflect the declining entitlements to resources due to war and violence. Households gradually deplete their capital stock after each political crisis. Investment in sustainable land management is not rational for farm households that are uncertain about future developments affecting the fundamentals of their lives. Households therefore employ risk minimisation strategies to downsize possible losses and focus on cash earning (especially from overseas employment) and/or state welfare for survival.

Keywords: war-affected communities, Sri Lanka, rural livelihoods, risk management

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1 Background of the Study

The civil war in Sri Lanka is embedded in and is an expression of existing social, political, economic and cultural structures. It is thus not a temporary crisis, but a long-enduring feature. The discourse in humanitarian assistance uses the term complex political emergency to denote such phenomenon of post-modern warfare: These emergencies originate from political competition over resources, and are often ethnicised or ethno-nationalist in nature, characterised by loyalty to one particular communal group, accompanied by strong antipathy towards other communal groups living within the same state. In the Sri Lankan case, it is essential to understand the conflict as a multi-dimensional phenomenon, or a conflict cocktail. The fundamental issue of the macro-conflict is the grievance between the Tamil minority and the Sinhalese-Buddhist majority which has escalated into a war between the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) and the largely Sinhalese dominated armed forces. In addition to this major line of dissent, there are other social, political and ethnic cleavages between the three main communal groups, e.g. Muslims, Sinhalese and Tamils.

In the vulnerability context of such a complex political emergency, households have to adapt to gradual deteriorating economic trends and to cope with sudden political shocks in the form of violence. Rural societies in war-affected areas can thus be described as 'distressed livelihoods': they experience a dramatic increase in risk and uncertainty. This paper seeks to outline the strategies that people make use of to secure their livelihoods under such extreme conditions based on empirical studies in the eastern part of Sri Lanka. The region has been particularly affected by warfare and inter-ethnic troubles. Understanding the livelihood strategies of people is essential to design more appropriate intervention strategies of humanitarian and development assistance in times of emergencies. Such policies should try to support and stabilise existing livelihood strategies and to widen the spaces and opportunities for people to survive instead of reducing them to simple recipients of welfare and relief.

2 Livelihoods, War and Vulnerabilities

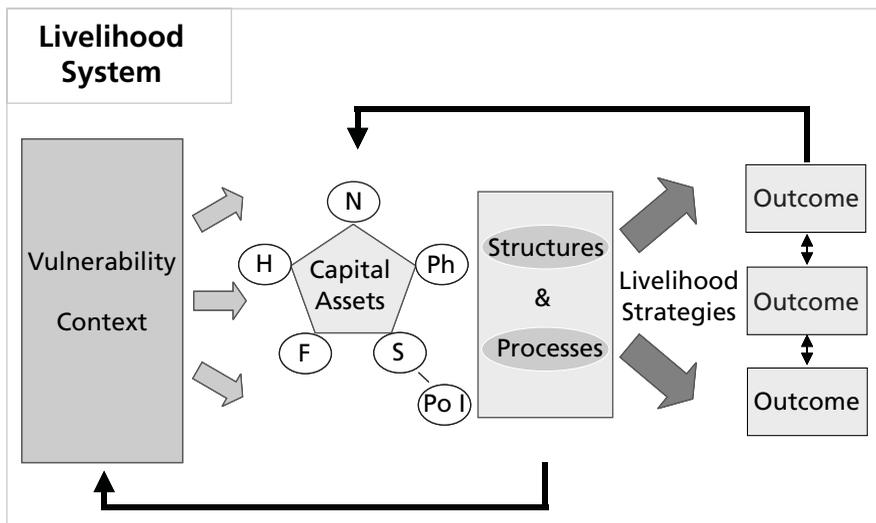
The sustainable rural livelihoods frame is a way of thinking about the scope, objectives and priorities of development that is promoted by the Department for International Development of the British Government (DFID, 1999). An important strength of the livelihoods frame compared to earlier approaches is that it emphasises people's potential in a holistic way rather than stressing on their problems, constraints and needs. It understands that livelihoods and institutions that influence and shape livelihoods are dynamic. DFID defines:

A livelihood comprises the capabilities, assets (including both material and social resources) and activities required for a means of living. A livelihood is sustainable when it can cope with and recover from stresses and maintain or enhance its capabilities and assets both now and in the future, while not undermining the natural resource base (CARNEY, 1998).

While DFID (1999) employs the framework to derive sustainable means of fighting rural poverty in an environmentally sustainable way, the present study uses the livelihood systems frame as an analytical tool to observe, analyse and better understand behavioural patterns of communities living in complex political emergencies, thus under extreme social, economic and political frame conditions.

The livelihood systems frame (Figure 1) is thus a way of looking and analysing the system of a household's internal and external factors that affect its socio-economic survival. It looks into livelihood strategies of people in a given vulnerability context (the frame conditions). People have access to six forms of capital assets (natural, physical, human, social, political, and financial). These are the resources, which people can make use of and combine in order to carry out livelihood strategies and achieve certain outcomes. These outcomes have positive as well as negative impacts on the livelihood (feedback loops).

Figure 1: The Livelihoods Frame



(Source: DFID, modified by the author)

Structures and processes (institutions) are dynamic and are continuously reshaped over time (SCOONES, 1998). In complex political emergencies, civil institutions are largely distorted: These structures and processes largely determine the effective entitlements (access) to resources and to services, such as markets, inputs. They are part of a social and political negotiation process. In complex political emergencies, the power asymmetries favour militant actors (including both military and rebels) at the costs of 'civil(ised)' actors and institutions. The 'rule of violence', threat and fear are superimposed upon political and social institutions.

Livelihood strategies will differ with regard to whether people have to deal with gradual trends or sudden shocks: Adaptive strategies denote processes of change which are more or less conscious and deliberate in the way people adjust livelihood strategies to long term changes and challenges (trends). Coping strategies are short-term responses to periodic stress or sudden shocks of both natural and political hazards. Rural livelihoods in the war-affected areas face multiple vulnerabilities caused by environmental hazards, market-related risks and conflict-related uncertainties which enhance the threshold of vulnerability. The concept of vulnerability (BOHLE, 1993; CHAMBERS, 1989) has been mainly used to describe the livelihood risks in natural disasters. It can also be used to describe the internal and external dimensions of household vulnerability in complex political emergencies (CPE):

- (i) Exposure to crises, stress and shocks: In CPE, political shocks are the most prominent feature, while we can also observe long-term declining trends (dilapidation of infrastructure, decline of agricultural production).
- (ii) Inadequate coping strategies: Civilians have very limited ability to cope with severe consequences of violence and fighting (political shocks). The main strategy seems to be leaving the arena of struggle (displacement, migration) by those who have the means to do so.
- (iii) Severe consequences: The shocks and crises, households experience in CPE, seriously harm the recovery potential of households to prevent a deterioration of their productive potential. A reduced (mentally, socially and economically degraded) situation becomes a 'normal' state of existence.

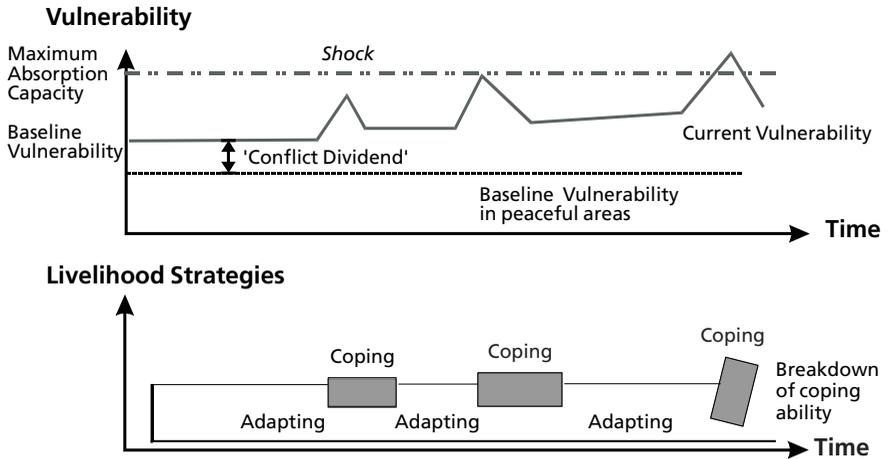
Figure 2 illustrates how exposure to stresses, shocks and crises on complex emergencies affects the vulnerability of livelihoods and how households adapt to and cope with these externally imposed conditions. In complex emergencies, the baseline vulnerability is higher than in peaceful areas due to the increased risk level – security risk and economic risk – and declining economic opportunities (negative conflict dividend).

Here people adapt their livelihood strategies to this 'reduced situation'. Short-term shocks (natural disasters, political shocks, violence) suddenly upset the precarious equilibrium and increase vulnerability (current vulnerability). People adopt coping strategies in response to livelihood crises. Slowly, the system recovers and households employ a new adapting strategy composed of elements from the former adapting strategy and the coping strategy to develop a new portfolio of livelihood activities.

3 Material and Methods

In summer 2001, an interdisciplinary German-Sri Lankan team investigated socio-economic livelihood strategies in four locations in Trincomalee district in the war-affected eastern region of Sri Lanka. The study was commissioned by the GTZ supported Integrated Food Security Programme Trincomalee (IFSP) and conducted in collaboration with the Seminar für Ländliche Entwicklung (SLE), Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin. The objective of this research study was to identify livelihood strategies of war-affected

Figure 2: Vulnerability and Livelihood Strategies



Source: KORF *et al.* (2001)

communities in order to advise the IFSP how it could improve the targeting and impact of its village projects.

All four research areas are situated at the borderline, either between uncleared (or 'grey') and cleared areas or between the settlements of different ethnic groups. Uncleared areas are those under the control of the Tamil rebel group, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). Entrance to these areas was until very recently subject to approval by the Ministry of Defence (MOD). The borderline areas are characterised by a high occurrence of fighting, violence, the presence of both armed parties, and intimidation. The locations were selected according to different poverty levels, agro-ecological clusters, and ethnicity in close consultation with the IFSP and included villages where IFSP had already been working and new villages.

The study predominantly used qualitative research methods based on rapid rural appraisal (RRA). The teams conducted semi-structured interviews with individuals, focused group discussions, transect walks, and employed other RRA tools where appropriate. The DFID livelihood systems frame provided the methodological background. This qualitative dataset allowed the research team to:

- (1) develop livelihood system models for each research location for different households ('filling the model'),
- (2) derive common and antagonistic patterns of livelihood strategies in the four case studies,
- (3) categorise the livelihood strategies according to a model of three pillars:
 - (i) Managing personal risk of life looks into how people cope with the increased probability of negative consequences for personal lives.

- (ii) Managing household economies identifies different strategies of organising the capital assets within a household.
 - (iii) Accessing external support discusses how individuals or communities make use of structures and processes, i.e., how they access or influence political and military actors.
- (4) differentiate coping from adapting strategies.

Figure 3: The Livelihoods Frame



Source: KORF *et al.* (2001); Layout Christine Schenk

4 Results: Coping with Risk and Uncertainty

Trincomalee is a multi-ethnic district positioned at a strategic location between the northern and the eastern provinces of Sri Lanka. Trincomalee disposes of a big natural harbour and is the proclaimed capital of a Tamil Eelam. The population ratio between

the three ethnic groups is a politically contentious issue with currently roughly one third belonging to each ethnic community (Tamil, Muslims, Sinhalese). The Sinhalese mainly live in the cultivation and colonisation areas close to the interior of the island, while Tamil and Muslim villages are in close proximity at each other, located mainly at the coastal strips. The general psychological effects of war are striking all over: a lack of self-confidence, a tendency to keep a low profile, frustration in view of limited life opportunities, fear and desperation are widespread in these non-stabilised areas.

Table 1: Village Sketches

	<i>Ithikulam</i> [I]	<i>Kalyanapura</i> [Ka]	<i>Kumpurupitty</i> [Ku]	<i>Vattam</i> [Va]
<i>Vulnerability Context</i>	Tamil community in uncleared area; dilapidated public infrastructure	Sinhalese border village	Tamil settlement in 'semi-cleared' area; onion boom	Muslim border village at coastal strip
<i>Main income sources</i>	Highland cultivation, wage labouring	Paddy cultivation, home guards, wage labour	Wage labouring, onion cultivation, land lease	Fishing, middle east employment
<i>Key trend</i>	Converting threats into opportunities	Fragile prosperity at the fringe of power	Missing the onion boom	Squeezed between the lines

Source: Own representation, compiled from (KORF *et al.*, 2001)

Conflict, war and risk, nevertheless, have quite a different impact on each of the four research locations (Table 1). In some locations, villagers still pursue their traditional livelihood activities and farming systems, even though under constraining frame conditions. In other locations, the conflict forced villagers to leave traditional resources behind due to the war and to search for alternative livelihood options. In Ithikulam, a Tamil village in the uncleared (i.e. rebel controlled area), farmers converted the security threat into new opportunities: leaving traditional paddy cultivation behind, they now earn a considerable cash income from highland cultivation and wage labouring putting them into a comparative economic advantage to traditional tenant paddy cultivators. Villagers in Kalyanapura, a Sinhalese village at the borderline and thus subject to frequent attacks from the rebels, are able to secure a fragile prosperity due to the support given to them by the army, police and the central government. In Kumpurupitty, a Tamil village in an officially cleared, but, in fact, 'grey' and disputed area, farmers are reluctant to engage in the highly profitable onion cultivation because of a lack of capital (lost during displacement) and a risk averse attitude. In Vattam, a Muslim fishing village, people prefer to keep a low profile, because they are just trapped in the middle between the two fighting parties. These four examples show the variety of contexts and responses to the circumstances which make a generalisation of findings very difficult. Nonetheless, there are certain livelihood strategies which are common to all four locations, while others are typical for a particular community only.

Table 2 outlines the different livelihood strategies in the four case studies categorised according to the three pillar model. All in all, livelihood strategies of households in

Trincomalee comprise a portfolio of short-term coping and long-term adapting strategies. The study shows that changed patterns of mobility are a key response of people to adjust to the risk-prone environment (GOODHAND *et al.*, 2000). These strategies place heavy demands on the extended family network. Many adapting strategies deal with declining income earning opportunities and the risk of investment, which is higher in conflict areas compared to peaceful areas. Households gradually deplete their capital stock after each political crisis. Cash income is more easily acquired through outside funds (state payments for home guards, welfare) or overseas employment (remittances cash flows) than through cultivation. Relief-oriented aid offered by the state and NGOs might have supported a reorientation of household strategies towards tapping these funds instead of investing scarce assets in an insecure environment. Adapting strategies reflect the declining entitlements to resources, e.g. the disrupted access to land, water and jungle resources, that restricts the choice of livelihood options. Investment in sustainable land management is not rational for farm households that are uncertain about future developments affecting the fundamentals of their lives. Households therefore employ risk minimisation strategies to downsize possible losses and focus on cash earning (especially from overseas employment) and/or state welfare for survival.

Has the conflict accentuated poverty and thus livelihood strategies? How different are the livelihoods in conflict areas from those in peaceful areas of Sri Lanka? Coping and adaptive strategies are the outcome of an interplay of various factors and impacts - not one single one such as the conflict - on the different elements of livelihood. It is therefore difficult to make a firm distinction between poverty and conflict coping. However, the first pillar in our model - managing personal risk of life - is clearly linked to the conflict and the increased personal risk related with conflict. Apart from that, uncertainty and insecurity also increases the economic risk of investment, and this factor is mirrored in various coping strategies of the second and third pillar. In this regard, increased economic risk can also be caused by macro-economic conditions, e.g. through national open-market policies, and coping with such induced risks might be similar to coping with economic risks induced by the security situation. Some argue that state welfare and relief could prevent a large-scale decline of the population into deep poverty (O'SULLIVAN, 1997). In the research locations, government welfare in the form of Samurdhi food stamps, dry rations, and resettlement aid are an important food and income source and people have adapted strategies for tapping these resources. This could also be a sign of the erosion of household capital assets due to the protracted duration of the war: Households gradually deplete their capital stock after each shock and thus increase their dependency on outside assistance.

It is important to note that power and reciprocity in vertical networks of support more and more determine survival strategies of people in the war-torn areas of Sri Lanka (third pillar of livelihood strategies: accessing external support). We can observe ethnicised interactions in political and economic terms: entitlements to agricultural resources and markets are unequally distributed among the three ethnic groups. Especially the Tamil population suffers from a comparative disadvantage, since the armed forces suspect them of collaboration with the rebels. Sinhalese and Muslims largely dominate trade

Table 2: Three Pillars of Coping Strategies in Civil Wars: Examples from Trincomalee

Managing personal risk	Managing household economics	Accessing external support
<p><i>Minimising risk</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> leaving places of residence or cultivation permanently or temporarily [all], fleeing to the jungle during sudden eruption of fighting [I, Ka], residing with relatives in the peaceful areas of Sri Lanka and returning for cultivation only [Ka], sending children to relatives in more secure places for schooling and safety [all], sending women and elderly persons through checkpoints for marketing, because young men are more likely to become harassed [I], working in fields in groups and seeking protection by the army [Ka]. <p><i>Risk taking (for economic survival):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> collecting firewood in the jungle even though this is a very risky place, trespassing in the restricted fishing areas imposed by the navy, when fishermen expect a big catch of fish. 	<p><i>Securing income:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> migrating for income opportunities to Middle East [all, Va], confining to key income sources due to reduced life choices [Ka, Ku, Va], seeking home guard employment for Sinhalese farmers [Ka], <p><i>Organising the family:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> handling traditional gender roles and tasks more flexibly: women take a more active role in marketing, trading and cultivation [I], re-sizing and re-uniting the family according to security and economic needs, e.g. sending vulnerable family members to more secure places [all]. <p><i>Managing expenditure and investment:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> avoiding investment in tangible assets (e.g. boats, houses) [Ku], even though in two locations, people started building new houses [Va, I], reducing expenses for entertainment and consumption patterns [all]. This is often coupled with a partial degradation of social status, using informal food markets (incl. smuggling and illegal liquor production). 	<p><i>Alliancing with power holders (active):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> establishing good relationships with local government officers [Ka, Ku, Va], seeking alliances with armed actors to get personal advantages (e.g. for trading) [Ka], keeping a low profile in order not to cause trouble [I, Va] <p><i>Satisfying claims of armed actors (passive):</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> giving the necessary as bribe (in avoidance of being forced to give) [I, Ku], by-passing taxation and bribery wherever possible with tricks etc. [I, Ku] <p><i>Qualifying for state and NGO support:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> forming community-based organisations to access NGO support [Ka]. However, many local institutions are falling apart due to the reluctance of local leaders to become too noticeable [I, Ku], concealing economic facts in order to qualify for state welfare [Va, Ku]. <p><i>Accessing formal and informal economic institutions:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> pawning jewellery to receive credit from banks, money lenders or mudalali (traders), relatives, practicing traditional group savings (seetu) for small-scale expenses [Va, Ka].
<hr/> <p>Comments: I = Ithikulam; Ka = Kalyanapura; Ku = Kumpurupitty; Va = Vattam</p> <hr/>		

Source: Own representation, compiled from KORF *et al.* (2001)

networks, since they can form alliances with the military and thus easily pass through military checkpoints while Tamil traders face a lot of troubles in transporting their goods. In addition, the central government provides generous assistance to Sinhalese farmers in the border villages to encourage them to remain living in these areas. The government employs a large number of young Sinhalese in these villages as home guards to protect their community. This provides considerable and stable income which would otherwise

not be available in these villages. On the other hand, the rebels levy taxes on Muslim traders and thus expropriate part of the gained profits from them.

Such interactions develop into a form of 'war economy' where economic businesses and interactions involve military power holders. In the long term, this has serious consequences: Social capital (support through community networks) is gradually undermined by the dominance of political capital and patronage: entitlements are attributed to those with a stronger link to political and military power holders. The problem with such political and economic practice is that it reinforces those grievances among the ethnic groups which fuelled the escalation of social conflict into civil war.

5 Implications for Development-oriented Emergency Aid

Development-oriented emergency aid at community level should focus on supporting livelihood strategies of people, especially those of vulnerable groups. In the past, aid agencies in the war zones of Sri Lanka have often superimposed micro-projects that did not correspond to the local livelihood strategies and were thus doomed to failure. If we look at the livelihoods frame, it becomes clear that aid agencies can hardly change the vulnerability context in a civil war, since the fighting parties follow their own strategies and tactical considerations. Within this limited opportunities frame, however, community development can focus on two levels of interventions: on the one hand, agencies can strengthen available household assets through improved training (human assets), financial transfers (financial assets) and the facilitation of processes that support re-establishing social ties within communities (social assets). On the other hand, livelihood opportunities are largely determined by structures and processes that determine how households can make use of their assets. Development agencies can support the establishment of more effective and more inclusive institutions.

BIGDON and KORF (2002) point out that 'empowerment' goes beyond capacity building, since empowerment depends upon the context in which someone or a social group is to be empowered. In the logic of the livelihoods frame, we can define 'empowerment' as the ability or the power of individuals (or social groups) to pursue their livelihood strategies and activities sustainably which depends on the institutional environment in place. In the context of a civil war, local institutions are often biased towards clientelist networks that determine who receives access and influence on the utilisation of natural resources. Aid agencies thus work in an arena of negotiation where different actors bargain for strategic resources (BIERSCHENK, 1988). These struggles for power and resources take place on the community level as well as on the intermediate level of government and non-governmental organisations. In civil wars, it is furthermore the fighting parties that influence decisions in favor of their clientele and that put pressure on decision-makers. In such an environment, aid agencies must be careful not to reinforce the logic of grievances that drive war, and thus to do harm.

While most aid agencies in the war zones of Sri Lanka have focused on short-term relief and rehabilitation measures, I argue that development-oriented emergency aid must also take the institutional level into consideration to remove constraints on the level of structures and processes in the livelihood system. This approach shares its

international NGOs should urge their partner institutions and other involved organisations to take action in a way which is transparent and understandable to all stakeholders. Good governance, trust of people in their governmental institutions, is a pre-condition for peaceful co-existence of the three communal groups in Trincomalee.

'Coping' is often associated with defensive, re-active behavior. However, this study has shown that people in war zones are not all helpless victims, but actively develop livelihood strategies to survive under such difficult circumstances. It should hence be the task of aid agencies to stabilise and support those coping strategies that engage in constructive and sustainable livelihood activities instead of further undermining these with a relief-oriented approach.

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