Investigating Social Vulnerability in Community-Based Poverty Monitoring in Sri Lanka: Scaling Down to the Household Level

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ABSTRACT

This paper provides a critical reflection on empirical experience using qualitative research methodologies for CBPM from two rural case study locations in Sri Lanka: Hambantota district, located on the south coast, and Batticaloa district located on the east coast of the island. The analysis of this data serves two main purposes: firstly, to highlight challenges involved in the utilization of qualitative poverty monitoring exercises by focusing more strongly on social, cultural and political dimensions of poverty at the community level by bringing issues of social vulnerability and social integration into the forefront of poverty analysis. Secondly, the qualitative focus is also an opportunity to investigate conflict related aspects of poverty in two locations with similar ecological setting and comparable socio-economic characteristics of the population, but with different ethno-political impacts of various forms of violent conflict in Sri Lanka over the past 20 years. The communities of both research locations are embedded in a landscape of prolonged social unrest and violent conflict. However, the forms of violence that were experienced over the past 20 years as well as the subsequent ethno-political impacts differ greatly in both research locations. This allowed for a controlled analysis of the different ways the ‘conflict factor’ impinges on poverty dynamics. The identified issues that were found to trigger, aggravate, or ameliorate poverty phenomena are described under the above-mentioned five analytical dimensions (ecological, economical, social, cultural and political) within each poverty profile. Due to the scope of this paper, the poverty profiles have to remain brief cross-sections of the diverse data that was gathered during the exercises. In addition to a discussion of the research findings, further attention is given to reflection on methodological experiences and challenges.
1 Introduction

There is, without doubt, an increased agreement among academics and development practitioners nowadays that poverty is not solely about economic grievances, but rather is a complex social, political and economic phenomenon that can only be addressed adequately by using interdisciplinary and multidimensional approaches (Devereux 2003; Hulme and Shepherd 2003). In order to identify and understand the structural processes that generate and transform poverty, researchers strive for overcoming conventional dichotomies of conceptualised space (such as local level vs. national or global level) and time (short-term vs. long-term effects). Consequently, if poverty researchers want to successfully integrate these different analytical perspectives into a holistic and contextual analysis of poverty processes, the research methodology has to be multidimensional, too. Poverty monitoring has been an important step into the right direction. In monitoring exercises in various countries attempts have been undertaken to overcome the limited information of national-level poverty data by institutionalising the collection of relevant data at the regional and, in some cases, the local level (for instance Krishna 2004; MIMAP documents1). Also, many poverty monitoring exercises seek to overcome the restricting time factor by undertaking longitudinal studies, using panel data to compare structure of poverty at different points in time (e.g. Reyes 2003).

Besides including the community level for data collection, what seems to be of foremost importance, however, is to identify new indicators that – rather than merely pointing to an increase or decrease of poverty within a given community, region or country – are able to uncover the underlying factors and processes that drive people into poverty, keep them in poverty, or help them to move out of poverty. These factors and processes may operate at different levels, i.e. individual, household, community, regions, country and world system. Though they are not necessarily amendable to measurement in quantitative, statistical terms, they can often be observed in real life situations at the community level, using qualitative research methods.

Any community based poverty analysis also has to take account of the structural processes that impinge on individuals. Coping strategies in regard to such structural processes can differ

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substantially between communities, regions and time. The temporal dimension for any community-based analysis is quite critical. It can range from such sudden incidents as loss of employment to inter-generational accumulation and transmission of assets and capabilities. Similarly important, empirical research on poverty should not focus entirely on the poor alone, because the poor do not exist in isolation of their wider social environment, particularly, the non-poor. Poverty is usually a relational phenomenon. In other words, an analysis of economic, social, political and cultural relations that poor people are engaged in is critical for a proper understanding of the changing life chances of the poor. The local community can provide a critical vantage point to observe multifarious interactions and transactions between the poor and the outside world.

This paper provides a critical reflection on empirical experience with using qualitative research methodology for CBPM from two rural case study locations in Sri Lanka: Hambantota district, located on the south coast, and Batticaloa district located on the east coast of the island. The analysis of this data serves three main purposes: firstly, to highlight challenges involved in the utilization of qualitative poverty monitoring exercises by focusing more strongly on social, cultural and political dimensions of poverty at the community level, bringing issues of social vulnerability and social integration into the forefront of poverty analysis. Secondly, this qualitative focus is also an opportunity to investigate conflict related aspects of poverty in two locations with similar ecological setting and comparable socio-economic characteristics of the population, but with different ethno-political impacts of various forms of violent conflict in Sri Lanka over the past 20 years. Thirdly, the paper draws on experiences of getting community members involved in the collection of qualitative data. Linked to that, the paper reflects on the potentials and limitations of such attempts.

The following chapter will highlight some of the conceptual elaborations that led to the analytical framework utilized for the community-based poverty monitoring exercises in Sri Lanka, before presenting selected findings of the research.

2 Linking Poverty with Social Integration and Conflict

In recent years explanations of poverty have extended beyond definitions of conventional income and consumption approaches to investigating aspects of vulnerability of individuals,
groups and/or populations. Vulnerability is inclusive of various different dimensions, such as the access and availability to basic resources (necessary for safeguarding a sustainable livelihood) and involving more complex belongings such as economic, ecological, infrastructural, social, cultural and political asset (DFID 1999; Bohle 2001).

Beside personal investment assets (e.g. education, training skills), physical investment assets (e.g. housing, land), supplies (e.g. food, cash savings) and individual health, the vulnerability approach in a broader sense has also incorporated less tangible assets that do not lend themselves to easy concretion; in the form of available social capital (e.g. claims on others such as relatives, neighbours, patrons, or the state), coping strategies (differentiated in terms of region, community, gender, age etc.) and, by considering concepts such as dignity and autonomy, priorities of the poor (with regard to survival, security and self-respect). The strength of the vulnerability approach thereby lies in its attempt to investigate and contextualize the processes of poverty, rather than seeing poverty as a static phenomenon (Chambers 1995; Baulch 1996).

So far, the main application of the vulnerability approach has been largely limited to assessing the risks threatening natural resource based livelihoods, thus focusing on questions of survival of vulnerable groups in times of crisis, mainly related to natural disasters and problems of food insecurity (Mayer 2002). However, in order to utilize the concepts of the vulnerability approach for an assessment of conflict potentials, an attempt has to be made to look into factors that not only limit people’s ability for basic survival but also reduce their available options for a livelihood appropriate to their individual needs and aspirations.

An important dimension for analyzing poverty and conflict related aspects is the impact of social change on the satisfaction of basic needs and its relation to conflict potentials within different societies. In the context of rapid social change, needs, especially those regarding security, welfare, identity and freedom, can become contradictory to available opportunities. It is therefore important to ask how and in which areas human needs are not being properly fulfilled, and to assess the perceived reasons for these deficiencies. This, in turn, provides a good entry point to tentatively assess the degree of preparedness for violent conflict within social groups by investigating the factors that determine sufficient access to adequate life chances. By doing so, the focus of analysis has to shift from questions of basic survival to understanding contradictions between social expectations, social aspirations and human needs.
and on the available means to achieve different life perspectives. This can be, and has been, linked to theories of social violence and related issues (e.g. Watts 2000).

Within empirical investigation, firstly the characteristics of desired life chances for specific target groups have to be looked up in a gender-, caste/class- and age- specific differentiation. Secondly, the analysis has to focus on economic as well as social factors and risks that ensure or that threaten an adequate and desired livelihood. When focusing on social groups the analysis also has to incorporate investigations regarding identity building, general social integration, human rights and political and socio-cultural participation.

To link conflict analysis with poverty-related issues a further elaboration of conventional poverty concepts is necessary. In his latest book “Development as Freedom” Sen relates individual human development with different types of rights and opportunities such as “political freedoms, economic facilities, social opportunities, transparency guarantees and protective security” (Sen 1999). This approach provides a good theoretical framework for the analysis of poverty, with a view to assess the available “space of life chances” of selected social groups and for empirical testing of the hypothesis that a limitation of adequate life chances is likely to increase potential for violent conflict.

Poverty in this regard can be understood as the limited ability to choose between different ways of living due to social or individual constraints. Following Sen, attentions within poverty investigation and identification have to shift away from means (e.g. income) to ends that people have reasons to value, and the capabilities to satisfy these ends (Sen 1999: 87ff.). Generally, the most important factors to increase people’s capacities for making desired choices are seen in unhindered access to education and health care. Nonetheless, general social conditions will still determine to what extent a person can make use of good education and stable health: “The political economy of actual use can be very different from the potential possibilities generated” (Dreze and Sen 1996: 11). Aspects of social and political participation and empowerment, therefore, become highly important in increasing the capabilities of a person to choose between different lifestyles.

It is, however, important to keep in mind that limited life chances and a higher degree of structural restrictions alone do not necessarily translate into violent conflict. Firstly, in order to gain greater social support and approval for violent conflict, radical individuals/
organizations would have to capitalize on frustrations arising out of such limitations of life chances. Any large-scale radicalization of people requires also an organizational platform for agitation and the conduct of forceful action. Without such structures, destructive tendencies of conflict can hardly appear and be supported to prolong into violent action and reaction. Secondly, violent conflict can also be triggered by other forms of discrimination or dissatisfaction that are not necessarily linked to dimensions of life chances, but to larger questions of identity and ethnic or cultural ownership. It is therefore important to use the above model for the analysis of specific, poverty related dimensions of conflict in order to gain a more contextualized understanding of the relationship between poverty and violent conflict in particular setting. In the context of Sri Lanka, such an analysis can be an important contribution to the overall understanding of the multi-dimensional causes of violent conflict, which also has relevance for similar research elsewhere.

2.1. Social Vulnerability and Conflict

Social vulnerability draws upon different dimensions such as the access to and availability of basic resources. Resources here include more complex belongings such as social, cultural, and political assets, but particularly social relations. Of course social vulnerabilities can exist in pretty much the same way in areas where there is no conflict. In conflict-affected areas, however, they have been compounded by long years of conflict-related deprivations. Social assets, particularly social relations, which can exist as sources of support and coping mechanisms have been disrupted after long years of conflict. Social relations include a wide range of relationships, e.g. between families, peer groups, religious and cultural institutions, but also links with civic and political authorities. The diverse experiences of war have often altered existing social relations through death, separation, displacement and other kinds of temporary or permanent losses. ‘Social’ may also be extended to include an economic dimension, since many individuals and families suffer from destitution through the material and economic devastation of war, thus losing their social status and place in their familiar social networks.

The depletion of such social resources can render people vulnerable, as they may not be able to draw upon the usual problem-solving mechanisms when confronted with a critical situation. Experiences such as displacement, human rights violations and the lack of consistent law and order can also result in social disarticulation, i.e., the disruption of formal and informal social networks and links at a community level. This may also include factors
such as a lack of social cohesion and communality, the reluctance of community members to invest in permanent community structures and a pervading sense of fatalism that hinder projects which attempt to mobilise community members to actively participate in their own development. Moreover, the increase in social problems such as increased violence and lawlessness and increased substance abuse severely obstructs community-oriented development work.

2.2. A Framework for Analysis

To capture the degree of deprivation of different social constituencies, six analytical dimensions could be put together to evaluate the availability of the “space of life chances” and its scope for potential restriction/ enhancement (see Table 1). The dimensions “ecology”, “economy” and “politics” mainly investigate external factors that influence the design of life chances positively or negatively. An important aspect of analysis is put on the impact of structural processes and changes, such as – in the ecological sphere - pressure on environmental resources (due to climatic change, new forms of land use, overpopulation, lack of technical advice for sustainable agriculture etc.). In the economic sphere, problems and challenges emerging from the restructuring of national and regional economies under the impact of globalization, and existing mismatches between education and employment, are important dimensions to examine. In the political sphere, the differing structures of social dominance within different political orders have to be studied, e.g. by looking at institutional regulations for decision-making on different (national, regional, local) levels and the structures of local level authorities and civil society organizations.

On the internal side “identity-formation”, “social integration” and “recognition of human rights” are three dimensions mainly investigating the potential of groups or individuals to counter structural or external restrictions of their life chances through effective resistance and own action. Again, the aspect of change is an important component for analysis. Changes in local culture and regional identities form the degree of self-esteem for people to act. The level of social integration (in family, community or wider societal structures) constitutes the scope for individual initiatives. Both dimensions (identity formation and social integration) are closely linked to the capabilities of social groups for the formation of public action. These capabilities, built mainly on recognition of human rights of individuals - ultimately provide the prerequisites for empowerment.
It is important to keep in mind that the separation of different dimensions into “external” and “internal” sides serves only analytical purposes. In reality there is a close interaction between all described dimensions and any final conclusion has to put the different factors together into a coherent picture. Policy reforms that are aiming towards a reduction of structural constraints and projects that are trying to strengthen local capacities for constructive empowerment of marginalized communities can increase the availability of life chances. This ultimately has to improve the economic integration of the poor, but more importantly has to contribute to an improved status of psychosocial well-being.

While quantitative data collection can be very useful for a general understanding of livelihoods in terms of indicative patterns of distribution etc., an in-depth analysis of livelihood structures based on detailed empirical observations at family and community levels can be critical for an examination of a range of poverty-related issues such as types and causes of poverty, different dimensions of poverty (such as exclusion, lack of self-esteem, powerlessness), underlying poverty processes etc. While some of the factors may be internal to families, households, communities, others may extend very much beyond the local boundaries. Respectively, any community based livelihood analysis has to take structural processes impinging on individuals into account as well. Coping strategies in regard to such structural processes on the other hand can differ substantially between communities, regions and time. The temporal dimension for any community-based analysis is quite critical. It can range from such sudden incidents as loss of employment to inter-generational accumulation and transmission of assets and capabilities.

3 Assessing Local Poverty Processes: Methodological Extension and Intensification of CBPM

Community-Based Poverty Monitoring (CBPM) has so far concentrated more strongly on the collection of quantitative data on a set of indicators. While quantitative data is necessary and adequate for the compilation of macro-level poverty profiles, poverty understood as a complex social and relational phenomenon can only partly be apprehended at the micro-level by means of quantitative indicators. We therefore propose to integrate a set of qualitative research tools into CBPM practices. Institutionalising qualitative methods, we argue, can provide deeper insights into the causal relationships of poverty phenomena expressed by
quantitatively assessed indicators. It can also point to hidden social, political and economic linkages that are difficult to detect otherwise. As will be shown in the case studies that follow, qualitative research can reveal, for example, important linkages between incidences of poverty and lack of social integration and/or impact of violent conflict on households at the local level. Therefore, we see the inclusion of qualitative tools as an extension to the existing CBPM methodology, which can deepen the analytical content of CBPM on the basis of the personal experiences of the people directly affected by poverty.

3.1. Cooperating with Local Investigators

CBPM has already proven to be innovative in cooperating with communities to collect, verify and update quantitative data. In the course of the pilot studies in Sri Lanka the research team assessed the options for cooperation between academics (professionals and students) and local partners in the realms of qualitative data collection. In doing so, adequate research methods were tested and possible means for institutionalising such cooperation were assessed. In the following sections, we will give an account of the experiences gained during the case studies, and point to options and limitations for implementing qualitative CBPM.

Assessed against ‘hard’ scientific standards, qualitative data collection is subject to distortion by a range of factors. In particular, the interview and facilitation skills of the ‘researchers’ are of prime importance for insuring a high data standard that allows for the comparison and synopsis of qualitative information gathered from different individuals, households, or community groups. The success of qualitative CBPM exercises, therefore, relies to a large extent on thorough training and supervision. Here, CBPM should make use of locally available capabilities. In an ideal setup of CBPM, where the research exercise also leads to community empowerment, community members themselves collect relevant socio-economic data. This, in turn, would facilitate a discursive process in the village, which could eventually lead into a more participatory and proactive development process ‘from below’. Experiences from the pilot phase in Sri Lanka have revealed interesting differentiations with regard to the potentials and limitations of data collection by members of the community themselves. For example, questions related to social networks and other sensitive issues such as intra-community or intra-household conflicts revealed more accurate information when collected by community members. It appears that there may be more reluctance to talk about social and political issues with outsiders, whereas it may be difficult to withhold such information from
people who are also aware of the respective incidences through their own local experience and inclusion in the local community.

However, it should be noted that community members themselves are unlikely to be impartial, as they are intertwined in local politics – either willingly and actively, or simply by their (or their families’) social existence as an organic part of the community. Thus, qualitative (as well as quantitative) data collection by community members requires very careful selection of local facilitators and investigators. They need to be widely accepted as unbiased in the community and should not be actively involved in local politics (e.g. in political parties or other influential community-based organisations (CBOs)). Even then, their scope for data collection may be limited in certain socio-political setups to a set of issues of low sensitivity that need to be pre-assessed during pilot tests. Drawing from the experiences of the Sri Lanka CBPM pilot phase, villagers were extremely reluctant to reveal any information related to income, details on food consumption patterns, or loans/ savings to members of their own community. Interestingly, information about health status (especially incidences of diseases) and food habits proved to be sensitive in this manner, too.

3.2. Tasks for External Investigators

Therefore, data identified as sensitive may have to be collected in collaboration with outsiders rather than by community members alone. For this purpose an effort was done to utilize an often-unrecognized resource; that of the large numbers of social science graduates of Sri Lankan Universities who come from under-privileged rural areas and disadvantaged social backgrounds. These graduates are in an advantageous position in relating to and mobilizing other educated rural youth who remain un- or underemployed in the villages. The project tried to identifies ways to use their potential in a constructive manner by teaming them up with community members, especially youth, for the purpose of CBPM.

For instance, University students with a rural background could participate in a training class as part of their curriculum that is offered on a regular basis by their university. Ideally, such courses would take place in preparation for the finalisation of a first or second degree, as the research know-how could then be profitably applied, e.g. as part of field research for a final thesis. Once the training course has been conducted, a senior researcher experienced in empirical social research could supervise the students in ‘transporting’ data gathering and presentation techniques into the communities. Here, the actual ‘empowerment’ process takes
place. Facilitating community dialogue creates awareness and capacities for change at the local level. The data and the insights gained from focus group discussions, problem rankings and in-depth problem analysis can also be used for setting up community projects, for facilitating contact with non-governmental organisations, and education institutions. Here, the emphasis should be placed, on the one hand, on the (mainly academic) interest of increasing the knowledge on relational aspects of poverty dynamics, and on the other hand on contributing to community empowerment by supporting local partners in the proactive use of community-level data on the other hand.

In this process the external students, equipped with adequate techniques, can take on a strong role in creating awareness and facilitating local discourses on the causes and processes that generate and exacerbate poverty in the community, instead of merely collecting data in an enumerator style. This process of community discourse should include different perspectives of gender, caste/class and age. During the pilot study in Batticaloa, for instance, triggering community-level dialogue on poverty issues among the younger generation, who often feels disempowered by politicians and ruling elites, proved to be very successful and informative. Both male and female participants were very keen on contributing towards the positive development of the community. They made ample use of exchanging their views on a broad range of issues that affected their daily lives in the village. As their families persistently have to cope with the impediments of poverty and, in the Batticaloa case, the ethnic conflict, young men and women had a very clear understanding of the underlying factors, which kept families trapped in poverty and deprivation. This intra-communal dialogue, fostered by external ‘professionals’, seemed to contribute towards increased ‘community’ awareness and planning for the future. It was also taken up as a means for examining solutions to particular day-to-day problems (e.g. garbage disposal, local flood problems, etc.). Moreover, such participatory discussions with multiple groups can also be used to inform the community of existing avenues for accessing support from governmental and non-governmental sources, thereby leading to a true exchange of knowledge between community members and external facilitators. From the point of view of the students, qualitative CBPM has the potential to increase the young researchers’ understanding of social processes and qualify them for future research work inside or outside the university sector.

Despite the advantages of working with external investigators, the vital role local researchers can play in in-depth analysis of complex poverty issues and for building up a relationship of
good rapport and trust became clear during the Sri Lankan pilot phase. When thoroughly prepared during a pre-test and training phase, cooperating with local researchers bears the opportunity for receiving more reliable and detailed data about issues that often impinge on poverty dynamics in a very critical manner – in spheres of community life that cannot be tapped into by data on income, economic activities, education and health status alone. Thus, further local options for qualitative data collection by community members could be explored.

3.3. Options for Institutionalisation

In order to establish lasting and regular cooperation between the local level and research institutions, CBPM processes need to be formally institutionalised between the directly cooperating partners and, preferably, local government institutions such as the Divisional Secretariat or the Pradeshiya Sabhas. In the case studies, the local majors (Grama Niladaris or Grama Selvakas) played an important role in facilitating initial contact to the community, and the village population also felt all official projects in the villages should be channelled through them. Also, locally operating NGOs or, in some cases, CBOs may be a means of institutionalising CBPM, as they are usually somewhat less involved in - though not necessarily completely impartial to - local party politics. The locally available options for cooperation and formal institutionalisation of CBPM have to be assessed prior to any monitoring exercise. Building up trust takes a considerable amount of time and effort, which should be included in project design from the very beginning. Once the project is underway and running, the institutionalisation has to be monitored by maintaining regular contact with the relevant agencies. This would incorporate annual (or more frequent) meetings with members of the community and relevant governmental, non-governmental and academic institutions in order to sustain mutual ownership of the project.

4 Qualitative Poverty Profiles:
Cases from Southern and Eastern Sri Lanka

In the Sri Lankan pilot phase for CBPM, the conflict related aspects of poverty were assessed using qualitative methodology in two locations with similar ecological setting and comparable socio-economic characteristics of the population. The communities of both research locations are embedded in a landscape of prolonged social unrest and violent conflict. However, the forms of violence that were experienced over the past 20 years as well as the subsequent ethno-political impacts differ greatly in both research locations. This allowed for a controlled analysis of the different ways the ‘conflict factor’ impinges on poverty dynamics. In the
following, we will first give an overview of the methodological steps taken in the study, before providing a brief introduction to the differing lines of conflict that have affected the two research areas. We will then move into the analysis of the poverty-conflict nexus in each case study by drawing ‘qualitative poverty profiles’. The identified issues that were found to trigger, aggravate or ameliorate poverty phenomena are described under the five analytical dimensions introduced earlier (ecological, economical, social, cultural and political) within each poverty profile. Due to the scope of this paper, the poverty profiles have to remain brief cross-sections of the diverse data that was gathered during the exercises.

4.1. Methodology

In both case study locations, a sample of 16 households was selected using a combination of participatory methods such as mapping of the social and natural resources, wealth ranking of households, and semi-structured interviews of key informants. The wealth ranking exercises were undertaken using local concepts of wealth, which were examined prior to the actual ranking exercise. This facilitated the classification of households into a set of different socio-economic categories that had experienced different poverty dynamics over time (i.e. moved in or out of poverty, or remained at the same high or low poverty level). In the selected households, in-depth interviews that followed a flexible set of questions were conducted with different household members. The collected data was then compared with the information from other households. Additional interviews were held after cross-checking the data where necessary. Also, the life histories and family trees of household members were recorded in order to adequately place the results of the individual interviews in the context of personal life paths and family backgrounds.

Of all the methods tested, individual in-depth interviews with household members were discovered to be most informative for the analysis of relational aspects of poverty. While individual interviews may reveal more sensitive information, e.g. on conflict impacts (in the case of Batticaloa), income and community politics, etc., group discussions in general and problem ranking exercises in particular can point out to some major structural issues that prevent people from improving their livelihoods according to their aspirations and ideas. The family trees and life histories, on the other hand, were invaluable for obtaining a better understanding of relational aspects of poverty. Family relationships were qualified into ‘positive’ and ‘negative’ as well as ‘strong’ and ‘weak’ relationships and the impact the family safety nets had on poverty dynamics was discussed. Other PRA tools such as mobility
maps proved useful, since they lead into a discussion of social networks and bonds inside and outside the community. Here, however, it was crucial to recognise the frequently dissimilar needs and aspirations of different social strata (particularly of age and gender) within the community. Like conducting interviews with different individuals will reveal different opinions, conducting discussions on a specific topic with different social groups is likely to generate variant data. Therefore, reliability of the data can only be achieved by working separately with a number of individual and focus groups in each social grouping.

4.2. **Case 1: Changing Livelihoods in Kalametiya Lagoon**

Kalametiya is a coastal lagoon system in the Hambantota district on the southern coastline of Sri Lanka. It is based in a rural setting, and a range of natural resource uses takes place in the area. This includes lagoon and near-shore sea fishing, shell mining, turtle egg collecting and farming (paddy farming, chena cultivation and cattle rearing). Due to its’ close proximity to the coast, fisheries is the major economic sector in the area. The communities in the area are considered to be amongst the most economically disadvantaged in the country. Based on 2002 national survey data, the highest percentage of poor households (37.8%) was reported from the Hambantota District (Department of Census and Statistics 2003).

Hambantota district is part of a region that was twice the stage of a large-scale unrest of rural Sinhalese youth. Especially the second insurgency from 1987 – 1991 brought the country to the verge of collapse. The brutal breakdown of the movement by the Sri Lankan government left 40,000 to 60,000 dead or missing, most of them youth. The reasons for the unrest can be seen in the structural changes in the agricultural sector that has limited livelihood opportunities. Missing (or not perceived) alternatives have led to unemployment and frustration of a large number of educated rural youth. The radical *Janata Vimukti Peramuna* (JVP), a Marxist oriented party that was behind the youth unrest in the past, has regained substantial political power over the last 10 years. This can be seen as a strong indicator for the pertaining dissatisfaction of the rural youth with the existing social and political system.

In Kalametiya, the 16 households were selected from the Gurupokuna, Wewegoda and Thuduwa villages bordering the lagoon. The population of the villages is entirely Sinhalese.

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2 Poor households – those households spending more than 50% of the expenditure on food, and average adult equivalent food expenditure is less than Rs. 1338.48 per adult per month are considered as poor households (Department of Census and Statistics Sri Lanka 2003).
As most of the interviewed families are to some extent dependent on natural resources for their income, a strong link between environmental changes and poverty processes was identified. During the in-depth interviews, the nature of this nexus was examined and differentiated into greater detail. The most important and rather obvious linkage was that impacts on the natural resource (e.g. the lagoon or the sea in the Kalametiya case), in either a positive or negative sense, had repercussions on the households’ economic state. In some cases, environmental change triggered negative dynamic processes that exacerbated poverty. For example, several lagoon fishermen reported that the lagoon ecology had changed dramatically over the past three decades, mainly due to upstream irrigation interventions as well as infrastructure construction at various points in the lagoon. As a consequence, the lagoon hydrology was severely altered, which was seen as the major reason for a decreasing abundance of fish by the fishermen, as stated in the following:\(^3\):

> “The income I obtain from lagoon fishing is much lower today than what it was in the past. I now only make about Rs. 100/= of Rs. 150/= per day. The main reason for this is the decrease in the numbers of fish found in the lagoon. This is most probably a result of the lagoon size shrinking, a thick layer of silt collecting in the lagoon and also due to waterweeds spreading rapidly over the surface of the lagoon. There is no space in the lagoon for fish to breed” (Lagoon fisher, age 49, Thuduwa village).

Similar developments were reported from the sea, although, there, the major contributor to decreasing fish catches was seen in the intensification of marine fishing, which had also led to increasing competition among the sea fishermen. However, the revenues from sea fishing (and to a lesser extent lagoon fishing) have always been seasonally variable, and fishermen had adopted a strategy of livelihood diversification in order to make up for seasonal losses. Among those activities, casual labour work was found to be the most prominent among the poor households. Common activities included labouring in the fisheries sector itself, in paddy farming, or in brick making. Thus, labour work in Kalametiya is highly seasonal, too, and to a large extent dependent on nature’s endowments. For example, unexpected floods that occurred in the region in May 2003 had destroyed the paddy cultivation, which also meant a considerable loss in opportunities in casual employment. Another strategy that was adopted by several fishermen was the intensification of their fishing efforts by using improved

\(^3\) A more detailed account of the hydrological changes was given in a paper presented at the 4th National Symposium on Poverty Research in Sri Lanka (cf. Senaratna Sellamutu, S. and A. Clemett 2003).
technology and fishing gear, targeting additional fish and crustaceans species, and by investing more time per day in fishing activities than earlier. Here, the intertwined causal relationship between environmental destruction, human interference, and economic demise become apparent. Drawing from the qualitative data, environmental changes particularly affected the poor households who often had only one, often unskilled breadwinner per family. In these segments of the sample, the combination of decreasing revenues from fishing and a second factor such as old age or ill health often led to a negative poverty trend:

“In the past I used to engage in both sea and lagoon fishing. Now I am too old to go sea fishing, so I just go and help out sometimes at the fish landing site and am usually rewarded with a couple of fish for my effort, which I bring home for our consumption. Until recently, I used to cast a net occasionally in the lagoon during the shrimp season, but since the shrimp resource in the lagoon has declined dramatically, there is no point anymore, as I would often not even catch enough to bring home for one meal.” (Retired sea and lagoon fisher, age 76, Gurupokuna village)

A coping strategy commonly adopted by the households that had shown an upward trend of social mobility was the distribution of risk by securing an income from more than one household member. This was often only possible due to investments in the human capital of the family. The higher education of a family’s children was seen as a major asset, which enabled them to gain permanent employment outside the primary sector, e.g. in computer training centres, the local government administration, or in the armed forces. Another increasingly common measure towards a rising household income was to send a family member, usually women, to work abroad. Typically, young women would go to Middle Eastern countries and work in unskilled jobs such as housemaids and kitchen aids, often under difficult circumstances. The remittances are sent home regularly. However, this strategy is not always successful for moving out of poverty, because rates for labour migration agencies are high, payment irregularities in the host countries are common, and the expenditure of the earnings are often not invested into productive assets but used for daily consumption. The following example clearly illustrates this reoccurring scenario in rural areas.

“I went to the middle east as a housemaid in January 2002 as my husband was engaged in lagoon fishing and his income was far from sufficient for
us to live. We did not even have a permanent house in Thuduwa and lived in very basic conditions. Unfortunately all the money I had sent to my husband to build our house he had spent on entertaining friends and other unnecessary things, so my hard-earned money had been completely wasted! The house is still incomplete as a result. I get so upset and angry with my husband when I think of how badly he managed the money I sent him.” (Wife of Lagoon Fisher, Age 4, Thuduwa Village.).

In line with that, respondents of positively dynamic households emphasised their sound management of financial resources as a major reason for their upward mobility, which they considered particularly important in the light of rising consumer prices. Due to a stable income the families were able to save money and make provisions for the future, as illustrated in the following statement:

“I would like to ensure that I could help my sons to build their own houses. I also am very keen to educate my youngest son – he is good in his academic studies so we hope that he will continue his higher education and then get a good job. I do not want him to follow my two elder sons and me and get into sea fishing as a livelihood. I also hope to save some money – so that if my wife and I have any medical problems in the future, then we do not have to be a burden to our children and can look after ourselves.” (Sea fisher, age 48, Gurupokuna village).

Poorer families, however, found it much harder to cope with increasing costs of living. Investing in human capital or saving money was not a possibility for them. Instead, families belonging to the category of poor households explained during the interviews that they had to change consumption patterns. They often missed a meal or replaced the common rice and curry with less costly, and less nutritious substitutes such as tea and bread. Moreover, they often had to buy goods on credit, or borrow money from a village moneylender.

Here, we enter into the social sphere of livelihood strategies. In the absence of a functioning formal social safety system, many families relied on assistance they retrieved through their networks of family, relatives, and neighbours. In all the upward-mobility households the presence of a strong family safety net was an important positive factor. The assistance they
received from the extended family included food, money, and educational items for the children. Siblings helped one another financially, or with their labour. In many cases the siblings were relatively well off. But even when the siblings were poor, they appeared to help by devoting their time and labour for various activities such as looking after the children, helping during special occasions or events such as weddings, funerals and almsgivings. Siblings who lived in other villages or distant towns did not assist on a regular basis, but provided assistance for special occasions. In the case of more elderly couples, the children supported their parents – providing them with all their financial and material needs.

The chronically poor households, however, all reported the lack of a functioning network of family assistance, mainly because their families were either equally poor and therefore could not provide much help or because of geographical distance between the siblings. Other inhibiting factors were disagreements and conflicts in the family that had led to a complete breakdown of family networks.

“I cannot go fishing any more. My wife and I are old and therefore it is difficult for us to make a living now. We are entirely dependent on our children. It is difficult for them also as they are married and have families of their own. My son’s wife did not get along with us and we had a disagreement. As a result my son has stopped supporting us. My three daughters support us, but they too have financial problems of their own. We are very unhappy about our current situation as we do not like to be a burden to anyone.” (Retired sea and lagoon fisher, age 76, Gurupokuna).

Already mentioned above, this statement illustrates once again that old age and ill health were identified as major contributors to a social and economic decline by the respondents. Apart from these, yet another reason that was given as key constraint of improving a family’s livelihood was alcoholism. Particularly household heads of poor households were addicted to alcohol, which was explained by family members as a vicious cycle that had led to a breakdown of family life and well-being, as a large proportion of the income was spent on alcohol. Alcoholism was also a source of domestic conflict and violence that mostly targeted the wives and sometimes also children. Correspondingly, among the better-off households, the absence of alcoholism in the family was a common feature.
“There is no difference in our economic status in the past and now. This is all because my husband is an alcoholic. Most of his income he spends on alcohol. We do not have enough money for our daily expenses. We never get to save any money for the future. Even if I manage our finances carefully, I think we will always be poor as a result of my husband’s drinking.” (Wife of Sea Fisher, Age 50, Gurupokuna Village).

With regard to community-based organisations (CBOs), the support these can provide to positive socio-economic changes in the village seemed to depend to a large extent on the office bearers. Most respondents expressed that they were disillusioned with most of the CBOs due to frequent cases of corruption, nepotism and patronage of influential and wealthy members of the respective organisation. Under several projects that took place in the communities, the fishermen had not received the benefits they were promised to get, and often were entitled to. The frustration with CBOs is expressed in the following statement:

“Although I was eligible to receive an oruwa [non-mechanised fishing canoe] through the Fisheries Society as my primary livelihood is lagoon fishing, because I am poor and do not have any influence in the society, someone else who was more influential than I received the boat, even though he only fishes in the lagoon occasionally. This individual then proceeded to sell the oruwa and take the money from the sale! But who is there to look out for us and point out these unjust actions?” (Lagoon fisherman, age 49, Thuduwa Village).

Membership in a CBO, therefore, is highly political. In fact, in Kalametiya, people complained that all spheres of community life are highly impregnated by party politics and its power plays. Several respondents reported of political and social discrimination and stigmatization. Particularly the poorer segments of the villages’ population often lack political linkages and are miss out on benefits distributed by the government:

“We have had to face political discrimination due to our party affiliations. For example we were entitled to receive tiles for our roof but due to our political affiliations we did not receive the tiles. Other households that were not entitled to this received the tiles as they supported the same
party. Although we have only a thatched roof, we did not get the tiles”.

(Sea fisherman, age 33, Gurupokuna village)

In addition, these families indicated that they were also discriminated against by those in their own political party as a result of them being poor and not having much influence in the community or not having the means to play a very active role within the village political party system.

Despite ongoing political discrimination no major cases of violence or conflict was reported from the respondents in the three villages. In contrast to political quarrels, according to all respondents there was a high degree of unity amongst the households in the village, particularly during community events such as funerals and weddings. At such occasions, the entire community volunteered for assisting in different manners. Moreover, all respondents indicated that they were proud of their village identity and about being Sinhala Buddhists. None of those interviewed appeared to have much contact with people from other ethnic or religious backgrounds.

4.3. Case 2: Livelihoods under the Threat of Conflict: Batticaloa Lagoon

Batticaloa lagoon is the largest coastal lagoon ecosystem on Sri Lanka’s east coast, extending about 56km from north to south. It provides the basis for a diverse range of resource-based and mostly small-scale income earning activities. Primary forms of resource use, such as various modes of fishing and – recently introduced – aquaculture, serve secondary small and medium-scale industries, e.g. lime making and fish trading.

In the Batticaloa case, the communities have been heavily affected by the war between the Sri Lanka state and the Tamil militancy. This conflict is mainly fought out between the Sri Lankan army and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE). After almost 20 years of armed violence, the conflict, which had once started as a struggle for political rights and self-determination of a minority community, has generated new conflicts - some of which did not exist earlier (e.g. Tamil-Muslim polarization in the Eastern province). The ongoing violence has destroyed modes of co-existence between diverse and often mixed ethno-religious communities. Besides the ethno-political dimensions of the conflict other causes are rooted in questions of resource utilization and land distribution in the predominantly rural areas in the North and East and in the access to state controlled assets and employment opportunities.
Estimates assume that nearly 60,000 people were killed in the course of the conflict and approximately 800,000 people have been displaced. After an increasing escalation of the conflict in 1998 to 2001, a newly elected government with the support of Norwegian facilitators was able to enter into a ceasefire agreement with the LTTE in early 2002. The initiated peace process has brought substantial relief to the population; however, the situation still has to be seen as fragile due to tensions not only between the government and the LTTE, but also between the main Sinhalese political parties. Also, it has yet to be seen in which way LTTE will establish their rule in the North-Eastern parts of the country under a political settlement, especially with regard to their treatment of local minorities as well as tensions between different regional fractions of the LTTE.

As a result of the conflict, Batticaloa lagoon is a politically and militarily highly contested resource. The frontline between the two parties runs along the longitudinal axis of the lagoon, separating the lagoon in an eastern shore that has been under the control of the Sri Lankan army, and a western shore that is part of the area under the control of the LTTE. While these spatial polarisation have become slightly blurred in the course of the 2002 ceasefire, violent incidents are still common and the political situation remains highly volatile.

In the Batticaloa case study, the sample of 16 households was selected from two villages: the Hindu village of Mavilangathurai, which is directly bordering the lagoon, and the Muslim village of Iyankerny, located app. 2km off the lagoon shore. The 16 households were either partly or entirely dependent on the lagoon for their income, which they customarily derived from small-scale fishing using simple fishing methods (e.g. cast nets, gill nets, lines, and fish traps).

In Batticaloa, the most severe environmental problem resulting in increased economic hardship, however, is the regular flooding of the lagoon shores and large areas of the rural hinterland during the rainy season. Both villages were regularly affected by different types of floods: Mavilangathurai is mainly prone to flooding as a result of a rising water level in the lagoon, whereas Iyankerny regularly experiences floods because of its topographical features and poor drainage system in the village. Not only are the profits from fishing limited during the rainy season, the fishing families’ material assets (houses, furniture, etc.) are also in peril during the floods, which reportedly reached up to waist-level in 2003. Due to heavy environmental pollution by solid waste and untreated sewerage, health risks resulting from stagnant, contaminated water are a severe secondary problem, e.g. the lack of clean drinking
water and the spread of vector-borne diseases such as malaria and dengue fever. During the peak floods, the residents try to cope by putting up wooden platforms in their houses, or by temporarily moving to relatives.

Also, the rapidly changing natural environment was identified as an issue of major concern by the respondents. This was seen as largely man-made by the fishermen, as increasing numbers of fishers had resulted in overfishing and subsequent ecological changes of the lagoon. The identified causes and effects (unsustainable fishing methods, hydrological changes, etc.) were almost identical to those examined in the Kalametiya case study and will not be discussed in greater detail. However, the social consequences of the environmental changes had taken on more serious traits in Batticaloa. For example, incidences of sabotage and theft were reported, e.g. stealing and destroying of fishing canoes and nets. Also, frequent quarrels within the villages (often involving alcohol abuse) about fishing methods were reported. On a more positive note, several fishermen emphasised that open access to lagoon and forest resources, which was re-established after the ceasefire came into being, has affected their economic situation in a positive way. However, both Muslim and Hindu fishermen still feel insecure when fishing, and therefore remain in the near-shore waters, which to a great extent are over fished and heavily polluted. In the Muslim community, lack of access to alternative natural resources such as the sea and the forest were discussed as urgent current problems in a problem ranking exercise. Although official access restrictions have become invalid since the signing of the MoU, access is sometimes controlled indirectly by levying specific taxes by the LTTE (e.g. for sea fishing).

Despite the ceasefire, the economic repercussions of the conflict are still heavily affecting poverty dynamics in the two villages. In in-depth interviews and problem ranking exercises a lack of employment opportunities and, consequently, a lack of income security and diversification were identified as the most severe factors impeding the improvement of livelihoods. In the Muslim community, education is still seen as an important avenue towards upward mobility, despite high rates of unemployment:

“Education is very important to us. If we want to go abroad, we have to be educated. There is a school in the village which is quite well equipped and has good teachers. But because families are poor they don’t have enough

4 Before the ceasefire came into being, lagoon and forest access was restricted to day time only, and fishermen were frequently abducted with their canoes and imprisoned if they failed to adhere to the many restrictions imposed on movement in and around the lagoon by the Sri Lankan army.
money to pay for their children’s education. Most parents stop sending their children to school after five years. Due to this low education level, there are many other problems in the village. For example, it is harder to get jobs if you are not educated. Then, youths often get on the wrong way and start drinking, smoking and stealing. Because of that they lose their status in the society, and they remain poor.” (From a focus group discussion with 6 girls, aged 14-18, Iyankerny village.)

However, this perception, which is very common in Sri Lanka, is beginning to change, and several young men explained they were disillusioned with higher education. In Mavilangathurai, many young men said that due to the lack of employment opportunities, fishing is still a good alternative to studying, as one can at least derive a regular, though small income from it. Despite the complexity of the education-economy nexus, a lack of economic opportunities was unanimously perceived as a direct effect of the ‘ethnic’ conflict. Before the conflict started, many of the inhabitants in Iyankerny, for example, used to rear cattle and produce buffalo curd, which they sold locally and in Colombo. After the riots between Muslims and Tamils began in 1990, several families lost their cattle and access to the grazing land. Also, existing marketing networks broke down, mainly due to the cessation of transport services (e.g. the railway line to Colombo). Thus some families took on lagoon fishing as a source of income.

In in-depth interviews, respondents explained that setting up small businesses would be a viable alternative to dependency on the labour market and natural resources. Here, however, lack of capital was seen as a major impediment for self-employment in the rural areas. Public financial services and credit facilities are often not accessible to rural families due to a lack of creditworthiness (no land title, no physical assets, and no regular income). While some microcredit schemes are at work, they do not reach remote communities or the extremely poor households in a particular community. Especially younger men expressed their dire need for basic capital in order to invest in small-scale economic activities such as retailing, vegetable gardening and sale, or animal husbandry. However, in both communities the foremost coping strategy to increase household income was sending family members abroad for work. Almost all families that had managed to maintain or improve their livelihood relied on the returns of one or more temporary migrant labourers.
Facing these day-to-day difficulties, many fishermen had turned to alcohol, which has become another serious impediment to the economic development of fishing communities in Batticaloa district. A group of young men in Mavilangathurai explained why they thought alcoholism was the single most important obstacle to development in the village:

“Alcoholism is the main problem in the village. Almost all fishermen are addicted to alcohol, even young boys. Due to this, every day there are quarrels in the village, which sometimes lead to violence. The alcohol-addicted parents don’t care about their children’s education. Because they spend so much money on alcohol, they can’t manage to pay for education costs. They also don’t have enough money left to buy nutritious food for their children. It is because the fishermen do such hard work that they get easily addicted to alcoholism. Fishing is a seasonal work, sometimes fishermen earn a lot, and sometimes they don’t earn anything. So, in the hard days they suffer a lot, and they have to take a lot of risk in order to catch some fish. When they earn some money, they need some enjoyment and to relax. Low education is another reason for getting addicted to alcohol, and in turn, alcoholism leads to low education levels. Also, if people can earn more they can improve their standard of life. Once they are a little better off, they want to maintain their standard, which means they also have to educate their children who then won’t get addicted to alcohol anymore.” (Group of 5 young men aged 24-28, Mavilangathurai)

With regard to family networks and neighbourhood relations, similar patterns of support and cooperation were observed in the Muslim and the Hindu Tamil communities. In both Iyankerny and Mavilangathurai, people expressed in in-depth interviews that they had very good relationships with their family members and neighbours. When discussing this matter in informal group discussions, some distinct patterns of support came to light. In Iyankerny, people seemed to rely considerably on neighbours for help and only in some cases on relatives, who often lived further away. Often, their close relatives were also struggling economically, which was seen as a reason for why obtaining financial assistance was difficult:

“My brothers and sisters are poor like me and also suffering every day. They are not in a position to help me and my family. One of my brothers is
now a little better off, but he lives far away from here. Therefore I can’t go there and get help from him. My wife’s brothers and sisters are better off than my relatives, because they went abroad and then came back here. But we don’t have any contact with them. They don’t want to liaise with us because we are so poor.” (Fisherman, age 57, Iyankerny village).

In-depth interviews in Mavilangathurai revealed that social relations were of minor importance and often not very healthy. They reported of regular quarrels and fighting between some families:

“We often quarrel with our relatives over financial issues. When one family borrows money from the other and can’t pay it back soon enough, disputes start. My husband often goes to my sister’s house to drink toddy. When he pays for it and is even one rupee short of the due amount, she would still ask that one rupee, too. I don’t like my husband’s relatives.” (Housewife, age 42, Mavilangathurai village)

As these statements show, it is not necessarily the expansion of social networks which is important but rather the ‘quality’ of the existing relationships, if the network is to be accessed as part of a coping strategy in times of hardship and scarcity. This notion was thoroughly discussed when drawing family trees and collecting people’s life histories. For example, while some families have all their relatives living nearby in the village, they may not be of great assistance to them, if the relationship is charged with jealousy and the burden of various disputed issues of day-to-day village life. In most cases, the respondents themselves grew up in households, where their parents were economically constrained, and poverty was transmitted from one generation to the next The inter-generational transmission (IGT) of poverty seemed to be not only dependent on a family’s economic status, but was also seen as closely connected to caste and social status. In the Hindu Tamil community, where most inhabitants belonged to the fishing caste, only very few families managed to move away from fishing into more lucrative economic activities. Such transformatory social processes seemed to have begun only relatively recently. They were catalysed by temporary international migration and new local economic opportunities opening up within the frame of the ceasefire. Still, IGT of livelihood strategies and social status was the normal and most common case.
Entertaining social networks outside the village was restricted by security concerns, which inhibited freedom of movement. Particularly girls and young women in both communities were often not allowed to move around freely. These restrictions were heavily enforced upon young women in Iyankerny. In Mavilangathurai, the lack of transport was the major impediment for maintaining relationships with people outside the village, and for fulfilling one’s aspirations:

“If we want to follow private tuition classes, we have to travel for four hours for one hour of class, because there is no bus service to our village. If the bus is late, breaks down or gets stuck in an accident, we miss the classes. But what can we do? There is no other way of attending tuition classes” (Girl, age 18, Mavilangathurai village).

Both Iyankerny and Mavilangathurai seemed to be highly politicised grounds. Political matters were regarded as having repercussions on the livelihood and the fulfilment of people’s aspirations in many different ways. In Iyankerny, for example, party politics were the single most disputed problem within the community, and in some instances also had negative effects on family integrity. Frequently, political dissent had led to violent clashes in the community. Some murders were reported in Iyankerny due to these political clashes. Political violence is normally limited to the election time, when it not only poses a serious threat to social cohesion but also adversely affects livelihood security:

“The people in the village support different parties, and often squabble about them. Sometimes, the fishermen fight in the lagoon over party affiliation. Then, some fishermen don’t go fishing anymore, because they are afraid of getting involved in this. With no income from fishing, we then have to borrow money from others.” (Housewife, Iyankerny village).

Discrimination due to party affiliation was identified as another major issue impeding on poverty dynamics in both villages. Having the ‘right’ political contacts was acknowledged to be a major avenue for access to Government grants, such as housing schemes and flood relief. While some people try to avoid party politics altogether by keeping a low political profile in the village, others who are more outspoken about their political affiliation have to take on other coping strategies in order to be more independent from political favouritism:
“I was discriminated against for supporting a certain political party. I was promised to get a house from government grants, but because I belong to the wrong party I did not receive anything. Then, I sent one of my daughters to work abroad. When she is back after two years, we will be able to build a house” (Housewife, Iyankerny village)

Similar problems arose with regard to NGOs and the support they had provided to the communities. Apart from direct political discrimination, respondents in both communities said they also suffered a great deal from the social and political cleavages the conflict had left in the region. As a direct consequence of the conflict, the ethnic / religious communities (i.e. Hindu and Muslim) have become highly segregated both in spatial and economic terms. There is only little interaction between both groups, and fears of being harassed by the militant groups of the ‘other’ as well as the Sri Lankan army are widespread. Levels of trust between these groups are low, and economic exchange outside Batticaloa town is very limited. This highly impinged on the livelihood opportunities of the rural population. Thus, it is not surprising that the first and foremost concern of the people in both communities was that the peace process would proceed, and that the resumption of armed conflict could be avoided. While members of both the Tamil and the Muslim community expressed their willingness for reconciliation with the people of the ethnic other, they raised great concerns about the top-level political developments, on which they had no influence, for example:

“We are enjoying the freedom we have gained through the peace process. But I think the Sri Lankan president will never give the interim administration to the LTTE, so it will definitely lead to another war. If the war starts again, we will have to leave the village. We will flee to the LTTE-controlled area, and come back when things are better. That will take a long time though.” (Young man, Mavilangathurai village)

4.4. Comparing the Kalametiya and Batticaloa Experiences

As the case studies indicate, a range of similar factors affecting local poverty dynamics have been identified. Alcoholism, for example, was seen as a major impediment for families to move out of poverty in both Kalametiya and Batticaloa. Also, issues of environmental change
have been brought up by fishermen in both locations, and the changes were in both cases mainly attributed to human interference (the construction of infrastructure, overfishing, and pollution). With regard to coping strategies, it became clear that livelihood diversification has for long been a way of reducing the risk of income failure due to seasonal or otherwise recurring environmental changes. In both case studies, upward social mobility was mainly achieved through economic uplift by an additional income earner who, in many cases, worked outside the resource-based livelihood sector or worked abroad. Family networks, therefore, proved to be effective means to secure or improve the livelihood of those families that had shown an upward trend, while the poor lacked either a strong or extended social network from which they could derive economic and other benefits.

The major differences between the two case studies were found in the dimensions and range the local conflict setup has affected poverty dynamics of individual households. In Kalametiya the last incidences of violent conflict took place in the early 1990s. Since then, community life has been framed by an overall state of (formal) peace, where people could pursue their normal economic and social activities and community organisations are able to operate. Despite the formal settlement of the conflicts more than a decade ago, village politics are still highly volatile, for instance with regard to political parties that cleave the community and lead to economic disadvantages in a setup of institutionalised patronage and discrimination. Particularly the economic dimension of political discrimination has been shown to often occur with those poorer individuals who are entitled to certain subsidies or benefits not getting access to these due to their political affiliations.

In the Batticaloa case, on the other hand, the two-decade long conflict is still omnipresent in community life, despite the two-year ceasefire. The constant threat of the conflict and its secondary outcomes such as economic downturn and spatial segregation along ethnic and religious lines has greatly altered livelihoods, livelihood strategies and, thus, poverty dynamics. Access restrictions and political violence between the militant groups have led to diminished mobility and economic interaction. Social networks are one major avenue to diversify a family’s income, and those households who had experienced deteriorating poverty dynamics often lacked large social networks or had relatives that were equally deprived. During the war all families in the sample had experienced a downward trend, while, on the other hand, not all households were able to profit from the structural improvements the ceasefire has brought. Increasing competition in lagoon fishing, for example, has begun to
weaken the resource-based income opportunities in the villages, with serious implications for environmental sustainability.

In both case studies, socio-cultural and political aspects greatly affect the rural livelihoods. Although largely resource-based, the process of constant social and political interaction of different stakeholders determines local poverty dynamics to a great extent both in a peaceful and in a violent setting. Affiliation to (politically or economically) powerful groups or networks is a major asset that can be tapped in order to improve or maintain a livelihood. Social cohesion within a village is often eroded by cleavages that disadvantage one group against another. In a setting of high prevalence of violence, these social and political factors of the local economy may seriously impinge on development efforts undertaken by community members or outsiders (NGOs, international donors, etc.). Supplementing quantitative poverty monitoring data with qualitative in-depth studies therefore is a valuable and necessary step towards increasing the relevance and applicability of CBPM within the wider framework of development planning and project design.

5 Conclusion: Benefits of Qualitative CBPM

As the case studies have shown, qualitative research techniques can improve the understanding of dynamic social processes that affect poverty, especially on aspects related to the question of conflict and social integration. Where quantitative methods often lack the ability and flexibility to adapt the research process to the social, political or cultural specificities of the setting, qualitative techniques provide the opportunity for in-depth analyses of specific issues and concerns. Such analyses are able to provide information that is far more meaningful and utilisable in the given contexts. While each household case study is unique and circumstances different, the case studies demonstrate that there are a number of factors (sometimes common or exceptional) that influence poverty dynamics. It is the particular combination of these inter-dependent factors present in each case that result in a household being either more or less vulnerable, which in turn results in a household being in a state of either chronic poverty or in a transient phase of poverty. Such findings are important to avoid a simplification of the phenomena of poverty.
Themes that are difficult to cover in a quantitative survey, such as social integration or hidden conflict, family relations, social networks, political dimensions of marginalisation, etc., require in-depth qualitative study if the core issues relevant to those themes are to be revealed. Furthermore, the emphasis that respondents put on specific social phenomena, such as alcoholism, as key inhibiting factor to upward economic mobility could be given adequate room for analysis in the course of problem ranking exercises and individual in-depth interviews. Due to the flexibility common to most qualitative techniques, it is easy to create a space for deeper investigation of issues that arise in the course of the discussion. Hence the use of qualitative methods provides a more comprehensive understanding of dynamic poverty processes; it also gives the respondents the opportunity to pinpoint to and expand on issues he or she considers important.

With regard to assessing the impact of the violent conflict has had on the livelihoods of individual households and the social integrity of the community at large, in-depth interviews revealed a multitude of linkages between these issues. In in-depth interviews, the convolutions of social realities can be depicted in a holistic and inclusive way, while in the same time analysing the magnitude, or quality, of the linkages that exist between realms of social lives that, on the surface, seem to be largely unconnected. In the end, such analyses may provide a far more realistic picture of the complexities of poverty in a community setting. This ability to deepen the understanding of relational aspects of poverty at the community level has been illustrated in the case studies in Sri Lanka.
References


