

Post-War Peacebuilding in Eastern Sri Lanka: A Study on Challenges of Resettlement and Access of Basic Needs

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Introduction

This paper is to examine resettlement of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) and its challenges in the post-war Eastern Sri Lanka. The lives of millions of people around the world continue to be thwarted with violence, obliging them to flee from their own places or community mainly because of persecution and armed conflict (Ozerdem & Sofizade 2006). Elimination of democracy is also another important consequence of the conflict and war. Resolving this problem is complex and a pressing challenge. During war, civilians have been targeted by either the Sri Lankan government forces or Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) who are identified as a Tamil militant movement. After declaring the military victory against the LTTE by the government in the eastern Sri Lanka in July 2007, the process of peace building has been envisaged under several national level programs and projects. These victims of the internal conflict (IDPs) were immediately accommodated in temporary shelters, and provided with food, water and health care. Resettling IDPs in their place of origin became a prime task under the mega development program called 'Eastern Revival' to rebuild the affected areas of the Eastern Province. The government proclaimed that their resettlement process under this program was not only focused on rehabilitating physical recourses and infrastructure in those resettled regions, but also, more importantly, give the displaced people new hopes and confidence that they could restart their lives without the threat of terror as free people in their own areas once again (Shamini 2012).

Research Problem

There are some prime issues addressed in this study. After the end of the war, the government of Sri Lanka launched its development program to recover the nation rapidly. Eastern part of Sri Lanka was a very significant target under the 'Eastern Revival' program which covers three districts: Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee. The newly implemented program with

the main target being its resettlement of IDPs, it is still not successfully completed. As a result of the High Security Zone (HSZ) and Special Economic Zone (SEZ) certain portion of IDPs has not been allowed to resettle in their own areas and suggested they relocate to some other places. These people are residing at the welfare transit camps at present. However, rapid process of the resettlement met with criticism in terms of access to basic needs for resettled people in the aspects of socio-economic development. Further, Eastern Provincial Council (EPC), Divisional Secretariats, Local Governments and function of judiciary were re-established which are capable enough to provide supports to post-war recovery or manage emergency situation immediately after the war. Researcher has been motivated to carry out the study by these issues.

Objectives of the Study

The objective of this research is to explore constrains in access of basic needs by the resettled IDPs and to identify issues in relation to relocation. Further, to study challenges encountered by the resettled IDPs in the east in accessing state institutions in post-war political structure.

Theoretical Considerations and Empirical Evidence

There is the need to deal with the issue of internal displacement as well as internally displaced persons (IDPS), return and resettlement, because civil wars are considered one of the important reasons of internal displacement and its related issues. Importantly, the return, resettlement and reintegration of IDPs and ex-combatants have become one of the tasks to be carried out during post-conflict peace building (Sert 2008). The arguments by Klopp (2010), Mallki (1995) and Solomon (2009) clearly indicate that the emerging literature on peace building and internal displacement highlights a number of definite interrelations. Nevertheless, IDPs are facing number of challenges in the post-war return and resettlement.

Moreover, attention over the moderate/comprehensive approach has been encouraged and taken into the consideration under post-war institution building or democratic governance process to the sustainable peace building by the UN. “The traditional approach to post-conflict recovery has been to focus on providing humanitarian relief and rehabilitation assistance from the outset, leaving the complex process of institution-building for a later stage” (UNSC, 2011).

“However, as the Secretary-General (Ban Ki-moon) underlines in his 2009 report on peace building in the immediate aftermath of conflict, it is usually too late to start developing institutional capacities when peace building efforts are already at the exit strategy phase. The building of accountable, legitimate and resilient institutions should therefore be a strategic objective from the early stages of the process. The international community should offer its support to post-conflict countries to help them achieve functional and effective governance.”

Meanwhile, Ivan Barbalic (2011), Ambassador, UN Permanent Representative, Bosnia and Herzegovina agrees and supports the moderate idea of peace building at the UN Security Council stressing “the importance of institution building as part of a comprehensive (moderate) approach to the peace building process in countries recovering from conflict” and preventing the renewal of violence on the road to sustainable reconstruction or development.

Methodology

The research has been designed and carried out using a critical and interpretative approach, originating from critical theory and constructivism. By adopting an interpretive approach, the author expects to share the feelings and interpretations of the people under study (conflicting parties) by seeing things through their eyes (Neuman, 2003). Eastern Sri Lanka has been chosen for the case study. East, more than any part of the island is a site for multicultural contestation, alternative ethnic futures and former conflict location. This study is based on text analysis through 15 qualitative interviews and observations (limited). The three steps of approach are followed in the qualitative data collection from September-December 2013. The first step of the data collection is based on a literature survey which reviews all the literature available on the subject. In the second step: 5 elites were interviewed about their view and experience towards post-war state structure and new institution building. Third step: 10 other major stakeholders’ were interviewed; they are civilian population or former IDPs, Civil Society members and activists.

Key Finding and Conclusion

The study explores most of the areas being cleared of mines and the resettlement of IDPs has got off the ground. Most of the infrastructure development work was carried out under the 'Eastern Revival' program. Renovation of road and rail network, power & water supply and irrigation work were expedited. A large number of funds were allocated to renovate existing school buildings and construct new ones. Much emphasis was paid to uplift the health care and sanitation facilities. Stringent measures were taken to ensure the welfare of the resettled communities. Poverty alleviation and people empowerment programmes were carried out to improve the quality of life and harmonize civil society with sustainable livelihoods in conflict affected areas. With the successful resettlement of IDPs the welfare camps were eventually closed. The rehabilitated former combatants were gradually reintegrated into society. International governments and organizations tremendously supported this process.

Anyhow, absence of the proper institutional mechanism to address the grievances of war affected vulnerable communities caused more difficulties in their life. Absence of new institution building has directly influenced war affected minorities and resettled people. It caused contestation of resettled IDPs' with the existing institutions to access their basic needs and issues of property rights.

Study also emphasises that a portion of IDPs are still residing at the welfare transit camps. These IDPs repeatedly engaged in peaceful protest against to the government's projects and appeal to be resettled in their native places.

As the discussion of this paper shows, government of Sri Lanka has taken measures to resettle war affected IDP's and return them to normalcy in the aftermath of the war. Resettled people are facing numerous difficulties and challenges to access their basic needs from re-established government institutions. The final point which this paper makes is future attempts for successful resettlement will promote the achievement of sustainable peace in this small nation in the post civil war context.

Keywords: Democratization; Displacement; Election; War; Resettlement

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