The Impact of Protracted Conflict on Secondary School Students: A Case Study from North and East Sri Lanka

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Abstract
The 20-year-old civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) has seriously undermined the country's enormous development potential. Approximately 800,000 people, 1/3rd of who are children, have been displaced. Nearly 900,000 children live in areas most affected by the ethnic conflict; in addition there are 300,000 displaced children and 2,500 child recruits. The majority of the children in the North East have known nothing but conflict. On 22 February 2002, the United National Front Government entered into a formal ceasefire agreement with the LTTE. The commencement of peace negotiations has increased humanitarian access to many areas in the conflict-affected North and East regions of the country. The impact of the Tsunami of December 2004 has added yet another dimension of complexity to the conflict areas of the East and North.

This study utilized qualitative methods to examine the ongoing education process in six districts of protracted conflict in North East Sri Lanka. The research used an interpretive case study approach in which multiple methods included focus group discussions, semi-structured interviews, school visits and collection of documentary data. Questions were designed to explore the secondary students’ understanding, perceptions and attitudes to conflict, displacement, risk and vulnerability. The qualitative findings identified factors which influence the education process and make meaningful interpretations of background, culture and the situation in North East Sri Lanka. The constraints in the implementation of effective education were identified as an acute shortage of teachers, lack of security, lack of resources and limited finances.

Background to the Study

The Island Nation of Sri Lanka

The island nation of Sri Lanka is a Democratic Socialist republic situated in the Indian Ocean, off the south-eastern tip of the subcontinent of India. A 22 mile stretch of shallow water known as the Palk straight separates Sri Lanka from India. Sri Lanka is a small, multi-racial, multi-ethnic and multi-religious country. Nearly three quarters of its population of 19.5 million is Sinhalese who speak Sinhalese and are mainly Buddhist. Sri Lankan Tamils account for 18% of the population. The majority of them are Hindus with a substantial Christian minority, living in the North and East of the country (Human Rights Watch, 2004). About 4% of the population is Muslim and are concentrated in the Eastern provinces and Colombo. There are also small groups of Burghers (Eurasians of mixed decent), Malays and Veddahs 2.

History of the Political Conflict in Sri Lanka

A former Portuguese, Dutch and British colony, Sri Lanka gained independence in 1948. From the 1950s tension between Tamils and Sinhalese grew, considerably so after Sinhalese was made the only official language (instead of both Sinhalese and Tamil) in 1956. Following ongoing tensions, the Tamil United Liberation Front who demanded a separate Tamil state was formed in 1976. A further escalation of tensions led to civil war between the Government of Sri Lanka (GoSL) and the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1983, which continued with short interruptions and changing intensity until 2002. Lead by Vellupillai Prabhakaran, the LTTE fought for a separate state, “Tamil Eelam” in the North and East of Sri Lanka for the Tamil minority. Talks to negotiate a settlement in 1995 broke down when the LTTE unilaterally withdrew from talks and resumed fighting. It has been estimated that 60,000 people died in the conflict prior to the peace agreement in 2002. Currently, since April 2006 renewed violence has threatened the fragile ceasefire.

Theoretical Underpinnings

Ethnic Conflict and Civil war

Within the body of literature on civil wars, there is very little scholarly research on the de-escalation, management and resolution of conflict. Despite the growing role of international intervention, theoretical development in understanding third-party action in civil conflict is still lacking (Biswas, 2006). Civil wars often related to ethnic conflicts have become increasingly common in recent years. They impose enormous and long lasting human, social and economic costs. The aggravation of ethnic friction to the point of armed conflict leads many multiethnic societies to periods of prolonged economic, political and social crises and often sets back progress by decades.

The total costs of conflict, death, disability, displacement, psychological trauma, violence and terror are not quantifiable3. In Sri Lanka, the consequences of this long period of conflict are felt in every sphere of life. There is a widespread sense of insecurity and vulnerability especially among the Tamil population. A large civilian population has been displaced.

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several times. A major refugee problem has developed and large numbers have sought refuge overseas. At the same time, pre-existing threats such as gender based violence, labour exploitation or malnutrition and disease increases their vulnerability to adverse outcomes and developments⁴.

**Education and Social Cohesion**

The education systems of countries in conflict can also easily be politicized to the detriment of children. Education systems can be manipulated into instruments to distort history for political purposes, encouraging hate and segregate, repress and condition a population to accept ethnic differences while propagating fear and pre-emptive self defence (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). Registration rates may give an indication of the number of children enrolled in schools in conflict areas; they do not reflect the quality of education nor the actual attendance patterns. Where children in conflict areas do go to school, their learning is often hindered by trauma, hunger, untrained or ill-prepared teachers and a lack of sufficient school materials (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). While education generally adds a measure of stability to children in conflict areas, conflict can distort its benefits and introduce additional risks.

In a plural society with ethnic and religious divisions, education has failed conspicuously to promote nation building by fostering mutual understanding and tolerance and respect for the rich cultural diversity of Sri Lankan society and in this process has made little contribution to ensuring social cohesion and stability (NEC, 2003).

Education and educational change are necessary but not sufficient conditions for social harmony, education is but one component of a much broader social, political, legal and economic programme of change (DFID, 2000). According to Smith & Vaux (2003), the greatest challenge is to develop better understanding and awareness of the links between education and conflict as an integral and routine part of policy, planning and practice among all working within different levels of the education sector.

**Impact of Conflict on Children**

The impact of war and conflict on children has been well documented in academic literature. The recent generation of children and adolescents in North East Sri Lanka has been exposed to extensive social and military violence unprecedented in modern history. The armed conflict in this island nation represents the single most debilitating and pervasive factor affecting the lives of especially women and children. Many children in the North and East of Sri Lanka have witnessed death, displacement, disappearances of family members and friends⁵. It is estimated that over 500,000 children have been directly or indirectly affected by the conflict in the North and East⁶.

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Children in Sri Lanka

National Plan of Action for the Children of Sri Lanka

Sri Lanka is committed to its children, and has been for some time, as can be seen in the National Plan of Action for the Children of Sri Lanka, to be implemented from 2004-2008, and the recent declaration of the year 2006 as the Year of the Child in Sri Lanka by President Mahinda Rajapakse. Services provided by the government to all children are free education and health care, a subsidized minimum food basket and subsidized transport and utilities\(^7\). However, women and children throughout the world today bear the brunt of poverty, disease, conflict and displacement\(^8\).

In the wake of the ongoing conflict in the Northern and Eastern provinces, children have suffered losses, displacement, disruption of their education, food insecurity and increased morbidity and mortality. The National Plan of Action for the Children of Sri Lanka was developed by the Department of National Planning in 2004 and its main objective was to create opportunities for Sri Lanka’s children. The plan provides an integration of interventions that benefit children while ensuring their consistency with Sri Lanka’s cultural values, human rights and fundamental freedoms\(^9\).

The Economic Cost of War

The economic disruption of the past two decades due to war and the resultant economic blockades and disruption of civil administration in the North East directly affected 3 million people. Of these, 800,000 people are living overseas and numbers of these are refugees. Another approximately 1 million people are internally displaced and living in welfare centers and in the houses of relatives and friends. The majority of these internally displaced people are living on rations, in temporary huts and shelters with no proper income or job opportunities. Long-term existence in such conditions due to delays in resettlement because of economic disruptions, high security zones and lack of funding is contributing to the worsening of the situation of children\(^10\). As has been well documented, there is widespread damage to the physical and social infrastructure in the North East and in some areas even the basic facilities do not exist. Due to prolonged war and conflict there is also devastation of social fabric and displacement resulting in the destruction of family units.

Women, Children and the Conflict in Sri Lanka

Women and children are the worst affected in the twenty year-old conflict having endured severe mental and physical problems due to war. Children in the Northern and Eastern provinces are among the most vulnerable children in Sri Lanka. Children in the North-East have been excluded – for differing periods of time - from essential goods and services, such as schools, health care facilities, water and sanitation, and being denied the protection from

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\(^8\) UNICEF. The State of the World’s Children 2006


exploitation, military recruitment, violence, abuse, neglect, and the ability to participate fully in their society. In 1999 it was estimated that the armed conflict had displaced as many as 380,000 children, and many have been relocated repeatedly. Furthermore, up to 200,000 children are estimated to have been displaced prior to 1999. Other research estimates that up to 900,000 children in the North and East of Sri Lanka are directly affected by the conflict and many more indirectly (Amarasinghe, 2002).

One of the most alarming issues of the two decade long civil war in Sri Lanka is the recruitment and use of children in armed conflict, a violation of the Convention of the Rights of the Child, to which Sri Lanka is a signatory. The local capacity to minimize or prevent the recruitment of children is limited. Eventually, joint efforts of parents, NGOs and the UN lead to a release of children in some cases. However, the majority of recruited children are not released. Fear and intimidation perpetrated by the recruiting agencies lead to under-reported numbers of children recruited\(^\text{11}\) (UNICEF, 2006).

**Education of Children in North & East Sri Lanka**

Most children’s education has been disrupted by the civil war. Detailed information of school enrolment and the infrastructure of schools in the North-East is limited. The LTTE is known to have positioned recruitment booths near schools and used street theatre to induce children to join (Nicolai & Triplehorn, 2003). In the North-East poverty and economic pressures also inhibit children from attending school. War affected families often do not have the funds to pay for secondary costs such as school materials and shoes. Survival pressures may also force parents or care-givers to withdraw their children from school to engage in income earning activities, or exclude one child from school to look after the household while the parents are working.

**The Tsunami and its Impact**

On December 26, 2004, an earthquake off the western coast of Sumatra created tsunamis that washed over the Eastern and Southern coasts of Sri Lanka. The Tsunami created an “emergency within an emergency” as it hit Sri Lanka’s costal areas affected by 20 years of conflict\(^\text{12}\). Two thirds of the island’s coast line and outlying 13 districts were affected. The Tsunami killed 35,322 people, displaced over a million people. Besides this tremendous loss of life, housing, businesses, livelihoods, healthcare facilities, railway tracks, and infrastructure were damaged beyond repair. The North-Eastern region of Sri Lanka was particularly hard hit. Thousands of children lost their lives and many more were separated from parents or orphaned by the tsunami\(^\text{10}\). Children displaced by the war in the North-East and those living in Tsunami transitional shelters face significant issues of loss, bereavement and separation from parents and family, fear, anxiety and helplessness.

In December 2005, UNICEF Sri Lanka undertook a survey of 323 transitional shelter sites in the Southern, Eastern and Northern provinces (TNS Lanka, 2006). The tsunami broke down existing social structures of protection and increased IDP communities’ vulnerability to violence and harassment. A total of 30% of the total population residing in the survey sites


\(^{12}\) Save the Children International (2006). 1 Year Progress Report: Rebuilding lives after the Tsunami: Rebuilding Lives after the Tsunami through the eyes of children. STC UK.
were children between the ages of 5-18 years. Nearly a quarter (23%) of the school going children had inadequate school material. Shoes, books, stationary and text books were among the items children. Most of the settlements and schools had no space for children to play or library facilities. Some residents surveyed complained that their children were unable to attend the same school they went to before the Tsunami (TNS Lanka, 2006).

The tsunami has affected hundreds of schools, some are partially damaged and others are completely destroyed. Post-tsunami there is a high dropout rate in the schools with students living in displaced camps. The Ministry of Education trained teachers in counselling and placed them in schools throughout the Tsunami affected areas. It was reported that school drop-out is high in the coastal areas. Catch-up Education (CUE) was introduced by the MOE and supported by UNICEF in order to meet the needs of children who have missed school due to the Tsunami and conflict. It has been successfully implemented for over a year now with the use of special teachers.

The Research Design
This research study hoped to interweave protracted conflict, displacement, resettlement and notions of peace into an understanding of well being, risk and vulnerability of adolescent secondary school children. The main aims of the study were to:

1. Examine how adolescent secondary school children perceived the process of conflict, loss, displacement and resettlement;
2. Discuss adolescent secondary school student views of their personal, economic and social environment, the nature of everyday experiences at school, struggles over skill acquisition, and formation of emerging identities;
3. To make some recommendations that may assist in possibly improving educational outcomes for children in the North and East Sri Lanka

Methods of Data Collection
The culturally sensitive nature of the present study led to a multi-method rapid ethnographic, case study approach to allow triangulation of the methods and cross validation of the data. Using qualitative methodologies, the data collected complemented each other and together formed a more coherent and complete picture of the issues being studied (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). The study had a conceptual structure organized around a small number of research aims that seek information (Merriam, 1998).

The research involved an interpretative ethnographic approach that included the combination of multiple research methods including the constructive and critical theory perspective. The critical theory perspective implied that reality is shaped over time by social, political, cultural, ethnic and gender factors (Guba & Lincoln, 1994). This study also drew on a constructive perspective, which assumed that there are multiple realities in which the researchers and their subjects create their own understanding (von Glasersfeld, 1993).

The methods of data collection included in-depth interviews, focus group interviews, school visits, and a systematic review of documents (Punch, 2003). Participants were identified in various ways using snowball, opportunistic and volunteer sampling techniques. Assistance
and advice was sought from the community leaders & NGOs in the field with respect to recruitment, interviewing and focus group discussions.

**Documentary Data Collection:** Documentary data collection was wide-ranging and comprehensive. In addition to a review of peer-reviewed literature, data collection incorporated a collation and critical analysis of other available documents, such as conference proceedings, and official (both government and non-government) reports, and communications from key groups currently or previously involved with children in North and East Sri Lanka. Materials were purposively reviewed and critically analysed.

**Focus group discussions:** FGDs were used as a research method in this study because they enabled discussions with a relatively small number of participants focusing on a specific area of interest. FGDs enabled the researcher to explore student perceptions and experiences and provided a rich and detailed set of data about thoughts, feelings and impressions. The adolescent students participated in thematic focus group discussions and interviews pertaining to their experience of being caught in the conflict and the impact this has had on their lives.

Focus group discussions (FGDs) enabled discussions with a relatively small number of secondary school students focusing on a specific list of semi-structured assessment questions. The FGDs enabled the researchers to explore perceptions and experiences of predominantly Tamil secondary school students and provided a rich and detailed set of data about thoughts, feelings and impressions. A total number of four FGDs with secondary school students, one FGD with a youth group and zonal education officers each, were carried out over a period of 4 weeks in early 2006 in North-East Sri Lanka.

**Key-informant Interviews:** In-depth semi-structured interviews were chosen as a research method because the interviewing style was informal and guided by a broad interview schedule. The interviews were open and explanatory, the focus was on the interviewees’ own perceptions and interpretations. In-depth interviews and focus group discussions allowed the researcher to examine and compare responses. In all 6 key informant interviews with school principals, and zonal education officers were conducted during the in-field period.

**School Visits:** The researchers visited 6 schools in the North and East Sri Lanka that had been affected by the conflict and tsunami. They witnessed first hand the difficult conditions and environment in which the principals, teachers and student work and learn.

**Analysis**

Analysis occurred throughout the data collection phase to enable early information gathered to inform later parts of the research\(^\text{13}\). Guided by framework analysis, common themes were sought which reflected the range of experiences that were presented and allowed for constant generation, comparison and development of themes during the whole research process. The continuous feedback provided by the key informants refined the chosen categories and

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\(^{13}\) Thomas, D. 2003, ‘A general inductive approach for qualitative data analysis’, School of Population Health, University of Auckland.
themes in light of existing programme strengths and resources and strengthened validity by providing a form of member checking\textsuperscript{14}.

**Quality Criteria in the Research**

Trustworthiness of qualitative research is important to demonstrate credibility, dependability and transferability of research findings. Patton (1990) recommends both openness and integrity in the conduct of the fieldwork and in the reporting of the results. The discipline and rigor of qualitative analysis depends upon presenting solid descriptive data, which are often called thick descriptions (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000), in such a way that others reading the results can understand and draw their own interpretations (Patton, 1990, p.375).

Triangulation, the use of different methods to substantiate and reproduce findings was used to gain validity and robustness (Burns 2000). In order to guarantee construct validity, this study used multiple sources of evidence and key informants (Ritchie, 2001).

An audit trial consisting of field notes, transcriptions and coding procedures provided sufficient data to leave a trail of the study process. This provided transparency of the process from data collection to findings (Krueger & Casey, 2000).

**Results and Discussion**

Broad topics and themes raised for focus group discussions and interview discussion explored: the socio-cultural contexts of the lives of the children in the conflict area, the sense of insecurity perceived and community cohesion experienced; cultural identities, anxieties about the future, the need for peace and the mediating influence of school.

In FGDs and interviews specific issues relating to their ties with the land/home/village they had to flee, perceptions of their future security in their country and changing access to resources was explored. Interview analyses and subsequent quotes from the secondary school children gave a human dimension to the complexity of life in protracted conflict. By weaving analysis of documentary data with observations, and FGD interview themes it was possible to gain a more complete and coherent picture of the constraints and challenges faced by the secondary school students in areas of protracted conflict.

Discussions in the field centred on the post-tsunami context as most of the areas of conflict were also affected by the Tsunami in December 2004. Most key informants, school head teachers and district education officers informed the researchers that several UN and international aid organisations had provided much needed help and assistance in the forms of latrines, water and sanitation projects, books and rehabilitation of schools.

Recurrent themes while talking about children, health, education and vulnerability were: the increase in the number of children dropping out of school after the tsunami due to displacement and loss, the need to supervise younger children while parents were at work as daily wage earners, evidence of community resilience and support. In rural areas, people

talked about lack of access to health and education facilities and an acute lack of transport facilities.

**Micro-situational Analysis**
In all six districts of the field visits [Ampara, Batticaloa, Vavuniya, Mannar, Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu] the underlying sense of insecurity, fear of war, a sense of hopelessness and uncertainty were very prevalent. All participants (high school children, the youth and conflict affected women) wanted peace and security, the opportunity to improve their lives, educate themselves, have jobs and improve their economic condition. The interpretations of themes that have emerged from the data are presented in the form of three short case studies. The case studies were written by the researchers and include analysis of actual school visits, researcher observations and key informant interviews.

**Case Study 1**
*Most of the youth in the fishing villages of Mullaitivu and Jaffna peninsula had experienced multiple losses and displacement due to the Tsunami. They have lost family, relatives and friends.*

The youth felt that the education level and quality had deteriorated post-tsunami. Most of the youth found it difficult to continue their education. Some of them reported that due to the tsunami they were now unable to concentrate at school and the trauma has affected their mind. Many had lost family members and in some cases were sole survivors. They felt that they did not have sufficient opportunities to develop themselves especially for tertiary education.

The youth in Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu and Jaffna Peninsula have mobilised themselves to form groups and create animators who provide swimming training and sports meets. Almost all youth feared travelling to Jaffna or Colombo for further studies. Most of them had no money and had a sense of hopelessness as they were not sure where their lives will be leading to.

**Case Study 2**
*Most of the adolescents in high school had varied experiences of the conflict. Some children had been separated from their parents. A few had their fathers arrested by the Sri Lankan Army which had then led to their subsequent disappearance.*

Children mentioned that as recently as a few months ago, unidentified armed groups would storm houses at night trying to abduct children. If there was resistance then a family member could be killed, sometimes fathers were injured in such instances and families then lived in fear.

Students had lost friends and family members to claymore mines; some children had lost arms and/or legs. Many families were still displaced by the conflict and have no permanent house. All of the adolescents wanted to pursue higher education and become teachers, doctors, lawyers (so that they can solve problems and bring justice), and computer engineers. The children were just unsure if they would be able to realise their dreams and hopes. All of the children (young boys and girls) wanted peace and security, displayed
underlying unique resilience and an immense capacity to achieve even under difficult circumstances.

Case Study 3
In a key informant interview with the District Zonal Education office he mentions: In my Zone itself, 15 primary and secondary schools were totally destroyed and 2 were partially destroyed. Currently there are about 40 schools within IDP camps in the district.

There is a severe shortage of English, Tamil, Science and Mathematics teachers and all teachers in school need in-service professional development. Catch up education was successfully implemented in the district, in many of the tsunami and conflict affected districts, more than 1000 students had received assistance and are now back in normal schools.

Catch up education was particularly important after the Tsunami as many children were displaced and in camps. We used private teachers for catch up education and this programme was implemented before and after school for a year.

Analysis from School Visits and Key Informant Interviews
In this study, 86% of school attending children attended a school outside of their camp and walked on average 1 to 2 km to school. Respondents also reported being teased and bullied by other children and teachers in their new schools. The influx of displaced children also places immense pressure on teachers who were under resourced. Further findings were overcrowding, food insecurity and insufficient access to health services.

Most children especially under-age recruits who have been child soldiers undergo catch-up education (CUE) for a year before being integrated into mainstream school. Key-informant interviews with officials revealed that 90% of underage recruits had not been forcibly recruited. Girls and boys recruited often come from families with problems and were therefore soft targets for recruitment. Sometimes villages felt that they had to give a child to the LTTE cause. Many of the under-age recruits often joined if friends and older siblings had joined the LTTE cadres.

School head teachers and zonal education officers expressed the need for language, science and mathematics teachers. There is a severe shortage of teachers and a need for ongoing professional development. Although the MOE had recruited young graduates as teachers for secondary schools most of the graduates did not have teaching qualifications. In some areas under LTTE control, education officers complained about the poor quality of Tamil translated text books. Many of the textbooks are not delivered on time and are translated by those who do not have the subject and language proficiency. The officials felt that this would create an unfair bias in the quality and delivery of education to Tamil students in the conflict areas.

Recommendations from the Study
Based on the preceding analysis the following recommendations have been suggested:

1. The need for the Government of Sri Lanka and the LTTE to continue the ceasefire, proceed with peace negotiations and try to find a solution to this protracted conflict,
keeping in mind the needs and vulnerability of civilians, especially women and children.

2. Teachers’ in the areas of protracted conflict need ongoing professional development but their backgrounds should be considered in conceptualising, planning, and implementing training programmes. The reality is that secondary teachers are graduates in different subjects, most hold undergraduate degrees in their subject areas without preparation in pedagogy and with very limited teaching experience. The professional development training should be differentiated and diversified in order to accommodate the differences in preparedness.

3. Special effort should be exerted to prepare and retain capable textbook authors and translators by training them in the necessary techniques. Very few of the personnel who worked on textbook translation were experienced. Their expertise was developed during the process of textbook writing in a sort of on-the-job training.

4. There has to be an integrated effort between the Ministries of Education, Social Services, Women and Children and their LTTE counterparts to work together for the common benefit of children and youth in the conflict areas

**Conclusion**

This study has highlighted the impact of protracted conflict on students in North and East Sri Lanka. At the micro-situational district setting, the constraints in the successful implementation of effective education have been identified as: the ongoing conflict and subsequent insecurity, the impact of the Tsunami, the lack of basic infrastructure in schools, quality of teachers, content and relevance of the curriculum, shortage of human resources, acute lack of material resources and finances required to rehabilitate, reconstruct and rebuild infrastructure. Longer-term sustainable funding initiatives are required to strengthen local initiatives and partnerships in areas of conflict specially aimed at vulnerable children.

In the macro-situational national political context the challenge lies in the government’s ability to respond to these constraints. Currently, Sri Lanka is going through a critical phase and every negotiation, every solution brings with it new questions and new problems. Is there the political will to stay the course, to dialogue and negotiate and work through the problems? The degree of success in this regard will depend on the ability of the Government of Sri Lanka, the LTTE and the international community to critically understand, adapt, reshape and respond to internal changes and solutions for the common benefit of all Sri Lankan children.

**References**


