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Rural Livelihoods at Risk: Land Use and Coping Strategies of War-Affected Communities in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

Rural societies in war-affected areas can be described as ‘distressed livelihoods’: they experience a dramatic increase in risk and uncertainty. How does this affect land use and agricultural coping strategies of small-scale farm households? This was the key research question of a multi-disciplinary, comparative village study carried out in the war-torn areas of Sri Lanka, funded by GTZ. The study employed the analytical framework of rural livelihoods promoted by the Department for International Development, UK (DFID 2000). In addition, theoretical models of risk management were instrumental in illustrating behavioural patterns of households in the war zones.

The conflict in Sri Lanka is embedded in and is an expression of existing social, political, economic and cultural structures. The civil war is not a temporary crisis, but a long-enduring feature. In such a vulnerability context, farm households have to adapt to gradual deteriorating economic trends and to cope with sudden political shocks in the form of violence. Coping strategies with a focus on short-term survival become predominant and threaten sustainable resource management and utilisation. It is essential that humanitarian agencies working in such emergency situations understand how people cope with the war in order to target their interventions more prudently and efficiently.

The study shows that changed patterns of mobility are a key response of people to adjust to the risk-prone environment. These strategies place heavy demands on the extended family network. Furthermore, access to and priority claims for resources are critical in determining differences in livelihood strategies in different communities. Limited accessibility to natural resources due to war restricts the freedom of livelihood options. Many adapting strategies of farm households reflect the declining entitlements to resources due to war and violence. Households gradually deplete their capital stock after each political crisis. Investment in sustainable land management is not rational for farm households that are uncertain about future developments affecting the fundamentals of their lives. Households therefore employ risk minimisation strategies to downsize possible losses and focus on cash earning (especially from overseas employment) and/or state welfare for survival.

Keywords: Coping strategies, entitlements, farming systems, land use, livelihood, risk, sustainability, vulnerability