

IMPACT OF MULTIPLE DISPLACEMENTS AND THE WAR ON THE EDUCATION OF THE DISPLACED STUDENTS IN THE VANNI

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Introduction

Sri Lanka has a long experience of conflict-related internal displacements. Conflict-related displacements have been a conspicuous feature of the history of Sri Lankan Tamils. The crisis of the Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) is one of the most alarming humanitarian issues in Sri Lanka. The prolonged ethnic crisis in Sri Lanka has resulted in a massive Tamil Diaspora and forceful and multiple internal displacements. It is evident that in Sri Lanka, a large number of people have been uprooted from their habitual residence and forced to move, as a result of the ethnic crisis that has spanned over two decades. There is another significant fact both multiple displacements and the armed conflict made the IDPs have vulnerable to adverse social and economic conditions. The lives of the IDPs of the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka have been full of difficulties. As at 1st September, 2009, UNHCR figures stated that there were 2, 64822 IDPs belonging to the Vanni who are living in the welfare centres located in Vavuniya District. Although the official figures of the Vanni IDPs are at 2, 64822 these are limited to figures obtained from welfare centres and do not take into account the IDPs living with family or friends. The IDPs in the Vanni have been forcefully uprooted from their familiar surroundings many times. The issue of the IDPs was earlier looked at

from a political point of view. Only recently it has drawn the attention of sociologists, many of whom are now involved in analyzing these issues from a sociological point of view.

The working title of this research project should be understood with this in mind – it was not intended to be a comprehensive study of a cross – section of all the displaced students in Sri Lanka, but is focused on the relatively few displaced students belonging to the Vanni and those IDPs who are currently staying in the welfare centres. The Vanni mainland was the major focus of the armed conflict. As at 26th June, 2009, according to the figures released by the Zonal Education Office-Vavuniya, there were 63,378 displaced students from the Vanni who are currently residing in the IDP camps. The IDPs in the Vanni are, of course, the most vulnerable community in terms of economic advancement, education, self-esteem, self-actualization, food security, social security and physical security in Sri Lanka. Since May, 2009, the human security situation in the Vanni has worsened due to an “extreme war” between the LTTE and the Sri Lankan Military. This situation once again led to a displacement of the civilians on a massive scale in the Vanni. The research study is necessary in the present time.

Objectives

The main objective of this research paper is to assess the impact of multiple displacements on the education of displaced students and to identify the major constraints on the educational achievement of displaced students.

Research Methodology

This research study utilizes both quantitative and qualitative data. This project relies more on qualitative data than on quantitative data. The primary data was collected through focus group discussions and key informants' interviews. Displaced students, their parents and other family members, and teachers participated in the focus group discussions and key informant interviews.

Limitations of the study

There were some limitations identified during the study. The major limitations are as following:

Doing a participant observation or other kind of observational studies in and around the welfare centers and surroundings of the study area could provide formidable challenges to the researcher due to security restrictions. Safety is a fundamental issue for both researchers and the displaced communities. The research study focuses on the impact of multiple displacements on the education of the Displaced Students who are living in the welfare centres. But there is a considerable number of displaced students living with either friends or relatives. This study was limited to the IDPs who are currently residing in the welfare centres. Also, ensuring the accuracy of the information regarding the IDPs and the displaced students

population was difficult, because many people moved to other safe areas within and outside the Vanni.

Findings and Discussions

The findings of the research reveal a rapid decline of the level of education among the IDPs, and the research study found that the educational standards among the displaced people residing in the welfare centres are very undesirable. Due to the protracted civil war and multiple displacements, the education sector has suffered setbacks in teaching, learning processes and infrastructure facilities essential for education. Educational opportunities and the environment are very often crucial for displaced people in welfare centres. The research study found that the educational conditions of the displaced children, especially those who are in the welfare centres have declined. It is evident that the educational standards of the Vanni displaced students have declined due to multiple displacements and war. Schools in the Vanni area, particularly those located in the Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu districts, have remained closed ever since the outbreak of war in mid-2008. Many displaced families from the Vanni have experienced an average of five or more displacements. Displaced children's interest in education has declined due to multiple displacements and the war. They are unable to study well in such an undesirable atmosphere. The break-up of families due to the war, death of family members, and the disappearance of parents and siblings have rendered the students of the Vanni psychologically depressed, and made them disinterested in education. They no longer see education as an

investment for their future, since life does not hold any meaning for them at present after the traumatic experiences of the war. The presence of arms-carrying soldiers and the militarised administration of the camps continue to hold the IDP student population in the grip of fear and frustration.

The work of humanitarian organizations in Sri Lanka particularly in the Vanni has been obstructed by the Government of Sri Lanka. Thus the IDPs who reside in the so-called Transitional Relief Villages located in the Cheddikulam area of Vavuniya District often find it extremely hard to obtain humanitarian aid and services. Many displaced families in the welfare centres face problems related to low income, food insecurity and low standards of living. Food insecurity is more prominent in welfare centres. In many cases, they do not have enough money to buy the instruments necessary for education. It is true that multiple displacements disrupt the activities of "normal" family life and major livelihoods and as such are expected to have a generally detrimental effect on the education of the displaced children. Parents, teachers and students from the welfare centres have expressed a negative evaluation of their children's educational attainment. There are possibilities for the decline of the educational attainment of the displaced children, because those displaced families have been living in the welfare centres without proper facilities and arrangements for many days. This study has also proved that many displaced children have forced to become early school leavers due to multiple displacements and the war.

It is evident that the atmosphere in the welfare centres does not appear to be conducive for educational purposes. Many participants of the focus group discussions stated that they had been facing a lot of problems in continuing their education in the welfare centres. They pointed out that the following factors are the key obstacles to the process of learning. Thousands of small IDP cottages are located in the so-called Transitional Relief Villages. The over-crowded atmosphere is always noisy. They are unable to concentrate on their studies during the day time or even in the night. The IDPs have been given small houses. The entire family has to live in one tent. They do not have separate rooms for studying in. All the day-to-day activities including cooking, sleeping and studies are done in these small tents. Malnutrition among the IDP students prevents them from actively participating in educational activities. Another crucial fact is that a considerable number of the displaced children in the Vanni are currently not involved in educational activities or do not attend schools as a result of the negative consequences of the armed conflict.

As this study indicates, the education of the students of the Vanni has been badly affected and neglected due to multiple displacements and the war. The educational standards of the displaced children have considerably declined. The war and multiple displacements, war trauma, impacts of social ill-being, worsened conducive atmosphere, poor facilities and services available are the main causes of the decline of the educational achievements of the displaced students. The multiple displacements

and the armed conflict have largely affected the displaced student population, and the educational infrastructure needs to be rebuilt with much care for the development and prosperity of the future generation of the Vanni population.

References

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