DEPENDENCY OF RESETTLERS ON FOREST RESERVATIONS: THE CASE OF VAVUNIYA DISTRICT

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In the North and East of Sri Lanka, the two decades long civil war has reduced the natural forest cover of 700,000 ha to an alarming level (18%). The project to resettle refugees has been accelerated since 2002 to improve the lives and incomes of refugees. However, the direct and indirect impacts on the nearby forest have drawn little attention in the project planning. This study investigates the socio-economic factors influencing dependency on forest (Poovarasankulam) reservations in the selected (Sunderapuram) resettlement scheme in the Vavuniya district. Data were collected from May to July 2004 from a stratified random sample of 70 resettled refugee families in the Sunderapuram resettlement scheme. A multiple linear regression model was developed incorporating six socio-economic variables.

The investigation on the living standards of refugee settlers shows that there was a significant increase in their average annual family income to Rs.88, 270.00, while the income distribution is skewed more towards below poverty level where, 57% of the total resettlers were found to be still living under poverty line (2 US $/ day). About 24% were involved in full time fuel wood collection and about 17% of the resettled refugees had less than primary education. The regression results show that, as hypothesized, household head's age, agriculture productivity and non-forest income have negative and family labour availability has positive impact on forest dependency. However, distances from forest and education have shown no influence on forest dependency. This is due to the lower level of education, poor income, increase in scarcity of fuel wood and its necessity for the consumption. Likert scale analysis shows an average (2.6 out of 5 scale) preference in community participation in forest conservation programmes. The results suggest that conservation of forest can only succeed if the resettlers' living standards are improved.