

# **Rural women in Sri Lanka's post-conflict rural economy**

## **Author**

Leelangi Wanasundera  
Centre for Women's Research Sri Lanka

Centre for Women's Research Sri Lanka

Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations  
Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific  
Bangkok, Thailand

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Ms. Mary Rhodes  
USA

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For copies write to:

Ms. Revathi Balakrishnan  
FAO Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific  
Maliwan Mansion, 39 Phra Atit Road  
Bangkok 10200  
THAILAND  
Tel: (+66) 2 697 4000  
Fax: (+66) 2 697 4445  
E-mail: Revathi.Balakrishnan@fao.org  
or  
Ms. Leelangi Wanasundera  
'cenwor@slt.lk'

## Foreword

In South Asia, Sri Lanka is a country which demonstrated early success in social indicators such as women's health and education. But social development indicators do not always tell the true story of social realities when people suffer due to political conflict and inequities in the benefits gained from development. In recent decades the ongoing civil and ethnic strife has undermined social development characterized by equity. The country's progress is under constant threat due to conflict on ethnic lines that is concentrated in a few regions but which has an adverse impact across the population.

The peace process brought a lull in the conflict and the development community made some headway in providing assistance to rebuild the war torn regions in the North and East. The fragile peace is again under serious threat and in recent times renewed concerns for people and social progress have emerged. During the post-conflict phase considerable resources were invested in rebuilding the region. But concerns persisted that gender dimensions may not have been well recognized by development agencies, both national and international, which were seeking funds and implementing projects to promote agricultural livelihood and rural economic opportunities. Both donors' preconceived assumptions as well as national indifference to gender issues led to a situation where the position of rural women with regard to their conditions and circumstances was not systematically understood prior to the launching of rebuilding interventions. Among others, the information chasm on rural women was an impediment to the transition from post-conflict relief to peace building development.

The Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), as an agency involved in rebuilding efforts, needs objective information on rural women to direct inventions to achieve both efficiency and sustainable outcomes for the people in the North and East of Sri Lanka. Such field research elicited information is also an important input for development agencies involved in designing post-conflict development assistance in the agriculture and rural development sectors.

This publication presents the findings of a study supported by FAO and designed and implemented by the Centre for Women's Research, Sri Lanka. The publication reviews and analyses, using a gender approach, the challenges to rural livelihood in a society torn by conflict and where the productive assets have been destroyed. The publication also analyses the various efforts of development agencies, both international and national, to address gender differentiated needs of local communities trying to rebuild their lives.

We hope that this publication, developed with the national research group, will guide development stakeholders to appreciate the importance of integrating women's concerns in a social context stratified by gender, class and ethnicity and confronted by civil conflict.



He Changchui

Assistant Director-General and  
Regional Representative for Asia and the Pacific  
Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations

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## Abbreviations and acronyms

ADB	Asian Development Bank
CBOs	Community Based Organisations
CENWOR	Centre for Women's Research
CHA	Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies
FAO	Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations
GCE A/L	General Certificate of Education – Advanced Level
GCE O/L	General Certificate of Education – Ordinary Level
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
GOSL	Government of Sri Lanka
GTZ	German Technical Cooperation (Deutsche Gesellschaft für Technische Zusammenarbeit)
IDPs	Internally Displaced Persons
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IMR	Infant Mortality Rate
INGOs	International Non-Government Organisations
IFSP	Integrated Food Security Programme
LDO	Land Development Ordinance
LTTE	Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam
MMR	Maternal Mortality Rate
NECORD	North East Community Restoration and Development Project
NEIAP	North East Irrigated Agricultural Project
NEP	Northern and Eastern Province
NERF	North East Reconstruction Fund
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations
PRGF	Poverty Reduction Growth Facility
SIHRN	Sub-Committee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs in the North and East
SLRs	Sri Lankan Rupees
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
UNHCR	United Nations High Commission for Refugees
WFP	World Food Programme
WRDS	Women's Rural Development Society

### **Currency and Equivalent**

Currency Unit = Rupees

US\$ 1 = SLRs 101.19 (average 2004)

## Conflict and women's status in the North and East of Sri Lanka<sup>1</sup>

Sri Lanka experienced armed conflict for more than thirty years, first in the South and later in the North and East. The last two decades of intractable secessionist conflict brought substantial social, political, economic and cultural ramifications. The cost of the war from 1983-1996 is estimated at twice the GDP of 1996, and rose from 1 percent to 22 percent of the GDP during this period. Defence spending rose dramatically and direct and indirect war costs are estimated at 168 percent of the GDP at 1996 prices (Arunatilake, 2001; Tudawe, 2003; Kelegama, 2004). Economic growth was below 6 percent during most of the period, recording the lowest growth rate of -1.4 percent in 2000.<sup>2</sup> Social costs are even more staggering. Loss of an estimated 60 000 lives, internal and external displacement of nearly a million people, war widows, trauma of survivors, insecurity for children including conscription by militant groups, breakdown of the social fabric, disruption to livelihood activities and deterioration of basic services are some of the conflict's consequences. Mixed communities in the North and East and in areas bordering these provinces have become ethnically divided.

The social welfare policies adopted by successive post independent governments brought improvement of Sri Lankan women's status relative to education, health and nutrition and labour force participation. Nonetheless, gender inequities persist. Women have low political participation; relatively few women have access to higher levels of decision making in the public and private sectors and violence against women and rights violations have surfaced. Women who experienced the armed conflict in the North and East acutely felt the reversal of earlier gains in education, health, employment and political participation while at the same time they were subjected to war time rights violations.

In 2001, women were 50 percent of the North and East's population (1 237 700).<sup>3</sup> The sex ratio was 107 whereas the national ratio was 97.6. The number of women in the North declined from 533 000 in 1981 to 526 000 by 2001.<sup>4</sup> The female population in the East increased from 466 600 to 711 700 during the same period,

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<sup>1</sup> A major constraint to this study is the absence of research on women's roles in agriculture before and during the conflict. Research conducted during the 1985-1995 United Nations Decade for Women identified women's domestic and public roles and critical issues affecting them. The large body of literature on women generated since that time has comparatively few studies on women in the North and East compared to the nation. National level data excludes the whole of the Northern and Eastern Province (NEP).

<sup>2</sup> The North and East have been excluded from most of the data. If the performance of these two provinces were included the growth rate would be lower.

<sup>3</sup> Parts of the North and East were not enumerated. Lack of data seriously impinges on assessment of women's situation in the North and East. Rural-urban data are unavailable.

<sup>4</sup> The 2002 census of population was conducted 20 years after the previous census in 1981.

attributed mainly to natural increase. Most females (64%) were working age (14-64 years) compared with 32 percent of the males. The female population over 65 years in the North and East was 4 percent compared to 5 percent of the male population and the national figure of 7 percent (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2002). The female dependency ratio of 57 percent was lower than that of males.

Widows in the North and East province totalled 49 612 in March 2002, and female-headed households numbered 19 787 in the five NEP districts in 2000. Where data for Jaffna, Ampara and Trincomalee available, the number of female-headed households would be much higher (Sri Lanka NEP, 2003). A 21 percent of urban households were female headed; in rural areas, females headed 19 percent of households, corresponding to the all island figure (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2003e). Of the widows, 22 323 were in the North and 27 291 in the East. Of the eight districts, Jaffna had the highest number of widows followed by Batticaloa, Ampara and Trincomalee districts. Most widows (69%) were over 51 years of age; 44 percent were over 60 years.

Women's labour force participation in the North and East prior to the conflict was low by national standards. Cultural norms kept Tamil and Muslim women engaged in household work and income generation within the home. Women contributed to the household economy by working in family farms. However, the changing economic environment, economic stress and conflict related poverty brought increased labour force participation rates for rural women mainly in the rural informal sector and for educated and skilled women in the formal sector. Although women in the North are 64 percent of the working age population, women's labour force participation rate is only 16 percent, significantly lower than the male's rate, 55 percent. The female labour force participation rate in the East was 18 percent compared to the male rate, 64 percent. The national labour force participation rate is 32 percent for females and 67 percent for males (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2004b, c). The lowest labour force participation rates for females were in Mannar (13%), Trincomalee (13%) and Vavuniya (14%) (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2004c).

Half the employed women in the North had less education than the General Certificate of Education (GCE) O Level; of these, 17 percent were below Grade 5. A 70 percent of men did not study beyond the O Level, and 21 percent were below Grade 5. In the East, 64 percent of females did not proceed beyond Grade 5 and 77 percent of males had education less than GCE O Level. The proportion of employed females with an education above GCE A Level exceeded that of males; this was more pronounced in the North than in the East. The largest proportion of females in the North was employed in the private sector whereas in the East the largest proportion of women was own-account workers (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2004b).

Eleven percent of women employed in the North were unpaid family workers compared to 31 percent in the East. Of the employed males, 4 percent were unpaid family workers in both areas. Most female employment was in the agricultural sector where in both the North and the East women were engaged in forestry and fisheries (32 percent and 21 percent respectively). More females than males were in manufacturing in both areas. Twenty percent of women in the East were in wholesale and retail trade compared with 12 percent of the males. In the North, women in manufacturing were about half that of men (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2003a).

Unemployment rates show wide disparities. The all island unemployment rate for females is double that of males, but it reaches 32 percent in the North, nearly five times that of males, and 38 percent in the East where the male rate is 9 percent. Younger age groups suffer the highest unemployment in the North and East especially among ages 20-29. Unemployment rates are highest for holders of GCE A Level and above, of whom 45 percent in the North and 38 percent in the East are unemployed (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2004b).

During pre-conflict period women benefited from the extensive health care network established in the late 1940s with pre- and post-natal care extended throughout the country. The improved health over the decades was reflected in declining crude birth rate, crude death rate, fertility rate, maternal and infant mortality rates and child death rate. The conflict reversed these accomplishments. Health services deteriorated and accessibility and availability of rural health care facilities is limited. Compared to the pre-conflict period, the maternal mortality rate (MMR) deteriorated in all Northern and Eastern districts. In Jaffna, the 1981 MMR of 0.3 is now 2.8; the rate increased from 2.7 to 9.7 in Mannar, and from 0.6 to 9.7 in Ampara (Sri Lanka Department of Health Services, 2003). Nationally, 90 percent of households had access to safe drinking water, though only 88 percent of rural households had safe drinking water. Overall, 48 percent of households in the North and East have sanitary facilities, though the rate is lower in rural households. Ground water contamination is a major health hazard as reflected in incidences of typhoid and cholera (Multilateral Group, 2003).

The conflict brought human rights violations (Amnesty International, 2004). Women and men could not participate in elections because elections were not held in all the areas of the North and East. Even when elections were held, allegations challenged whether they were free and fair. Unknown gunmen killed the only woman elected to a local government office. Women have no voice in the peace process.<sup>5</sup> Sexual and gender based violence in both domestic and public spheres is a concern (Wijayatilake, 2004).

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<sup>5</sup> This also applies to the South.

### **A woman farmer in post-conflict rural economy**

Just six kilometres from the major city of the East, Trincomalee, 32 year old Ambika<sup>6</sup> and her family live in a dilapidated house with no electricity, drinking water and sanitation facilities. Her husband is 36 years old. She has three surviving children after two children died when they lived in the 'welfare camp' – one at childbirth and the other at age three months. After ten years in a welfare camp, they returned to Kappalthurai in 2002 to find their land occupied by strangers. Now they live and farm on two acres of encroached state land. They are unconcerned about regaining their land.

Ambika was a farmer before displacement. When they returned, she obtained a loan to cultivate paddy but could not repay it due to crop failure on account of the drought. There is no alternative source of water as tanks are in a state of disrepair. Ambika must protect her crop from wild elephants. Despite these obstacles she has a great desire to continue farming. She grows her own seeds, purchases fertiliser from a store three kilometres distant and sells produce to the trader who comes to the village. She attends to household chores and the children. She collects firewood from a nearby forest for cooking and obtains drinking water from a neighbour's well. When she needs medical attention she must walk several kilometres. Ambika's homestead has vegetables and poultry. She ensures that her children go to school. Her husband is a labourer, but spends most of his income on alcohol. He likes Ambika to participate in economic activities. She was silent on the issue of domestic violence.

Ambika belongs to the Madar Sangam (Women's Rural Development Society) but it is her husband who joined the Farmers' Organisation. She has no awareness of gender issues and accepts her situation. She is unsure of their future and does not want to build up assets or improve their housing condition as they could be displaced if war breaks out again. Her main wish is an end to the war.

## **Study objectives and methodology**

This study assesses rural women's situation in reconstruction and rehabilitation of agriculture and the rural economy in areas emerging from conflict. The purpose is to ensure that gender issues are incorporated and that reconstruction and rehabilitation processes do not bypass women. The review focuses on the Northern and Eastern provinces of Sri Lanka and certain areas of North Central districts and Uva provinces that border the North and East. The primary focus is on the North East province that bore the brunt of the armed conflict for almost two decades.

Sources include a wide range of published and unpublished documents prepared by various stakeholders that included the Government of Sri Lanka at central and

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<sup>6</sup> Pseudonym.

provincial levels, the United Nations and its agencies, international non-governmental agencies, national NGOs including women's NGOs, and individual and institutional researchers. Web resources were used extensively.

Field assessments supplement the analysis of literature. Fieldwork was carried out in Kappalthurai in the Trincomalee district and Naanthanvely Divisional Secretariat Division, Kalmunai in the Ampara district in the East; Kaththasinnakulam 215 B Grama Sevaka Division in the Vavuniya district, Neelvely in the Jaffna district, and a LTTE Controlled Area in the Mannar district 25 km from Mannar in the North; Kotiyagala in the Siyabalanduwa Divisional Secretariat division in the Moneragala district and Bo-atta in the Welikanda Divisional Secretariat Division in the Polonnaruwa district.<sup>7</sup>

The study conducted eight focus group discussions and developed case histories through detailed interviews and discussions with women in locations selected for fieldwork.

Additional persons consulted included officials of central government ministries responsible for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of the North and East, the Gender Unit of the Ministry of Planning, the Ministry of Women's Affairs and officials of the divisional secretariats. Programmes, projects and strategies were discussed with relevant UN agencies and members of the UN Gender Working Group. A member of the Standing Committee on Gender Issues set up during the peace talks was interviewed. The views on gender issues of officials and field level workers of national and international NGOs and community-based organisations were obtained.

The conflict zone of northern and eastern Sri Lanka consists of the districts of Kilinochchi, Mullaitivu, Mannar, Vavuniya and Jaffna in the North and Trincomalee, Batticaloa and Ampara in the East. The eight districts that comprise the Northern and Eastern province cover 29 percent of the country's land area, 60 percent of the coastline and over 24 000 ha of brackish water lagoons. An estimated 11 percent of the national population of 2001 live in the area studied.<sup>8</sup> Population density and pressure on land is minimal compared with most other districts of the country.

Within the eight administrative districts are areas referred to as 'cleared' 'uncleared' and 'grey areas'. The 'cleared areas', now under the control of the Government, include much of the district of Jaffna and a portion of the Mannar and Vavuniya districts in the North, and most of Ampara, Batticaloa and Trincomalee districts in the East. The Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) controls the 'uncleared' areas that include the districts of Mullaitivu, Kilinochchi and parts of Mannar and Vavuniya, and the smaller enclaves of Batticaloa and Trincomalee. The Government did not function in the 'uncleared' areas during the conflict period.<sup>9</sup> Periodic military advances and

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<sup>7</sup> Grama Sevaka is the lowest administrative unit.

<sup>8</sup> A full census of population could not be conducted in 2001.

<sup>9</sup> The government continued to supply essential goods to the people in these areas.

retreats altered the borders of 'uncleared' areas from time to time, but since cessation of armed confrontations in 2002 the borders have been static. The 'semi-cleared' or 'grey areas' were unstable due to violent activities by armed and paramilitary groups.<sup>10</sup> Government presence was limited and LTTE presence strong.

## Livelihood and poverty conditions in the conflict region

The economic base of the North and East is agriculture, livestock and fisheries. While 80 percent of the population depends on the agricultural sector for their livelihood, agricultural activities contribute less than 10 percent of household monetary income. The mean income is SLRs 734 (in the North) and SLRs 620 (in the East) (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2003c).

Prior to the conflict this region was a significant agricultural hub of Sri Lanka and production was higher than in most areas of the country. The displacement, salinity, security zones, damage to irrigation infrastructure, land mines, lack of access to markets and lack of capital during the conflict brought abandonment of paddy lands (Sri Lanka NEP, 2003). Despite the area's decline of agricultural activity during the conflict, the sector's growth rate increased to 7 percent consequent to the cease fire agreement of 2002 (Central Bank, 2004). In Maha 2002/2003, paddy acreage in the North and East increased by 18 percent, though mostly in marginal lands as prime land was located in areas controlled by the LTTE and in government high security zones. All districts in the North and East reported increased paddy output which, though much lower than pre-conflict output, still accounted for 7 percent of the total Maha output (Central Bank, 2004). Production of other major cash crops such as chilli, onions, cow pea, lentils, vegetables, maize and cassava also increased (Central Bank, 2004).

In the North, fisheries were the primary productive activity in 1990 and accounted for 35 percent of the agricultural sector. In the next five years, however, fisheries experienced a 12 percent negative growth rate due to restricted offshore and lagoon fishing, restricted spatial and temporal mobility, banned use of motorised boats, destroyed fishing gear and other assets, displaced and destroyed houses and disrupted marketing links. The consequent reduced fish production seriously affected fisher families' livelihoods. In the Eastern province, in contrast, fisheries grew by 16 percent in the same period; although production declined when the war resumed in 1995, the industry did not suffer the constraints experienced in the North and had the resilience to pick up after two years.

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<sup>10</sup> Eelam People's Revolutionary Front (EPRLF-East), Eelam People's Revolutionary Front (Jaffna), People's Liberation Organisation of Tamil Eelam (PLOTE). Some members of these organisations have entered mainstream politics.

Fisheries grew substantially with the easing of military confrontations in 2002 and the consequent removal of some offshore fishing restrictions and opening of the main road to the North; the sector's response, however, fell below that of the agricultural sector. On the positive side, wartime restrictions expanded resource stock that resulted in a harvestable surplus. Poaching by foreign fishers, however, including companies using capital intensive technology in Sri Lankan waters off Jaffna, could lead to resource depletion if not contained (Central Bank, 2004; Shanmugaratnam, 2003).

Guerrilla warfare and the clearing of forests for military purposes extensively damaged the forests and environment in the North and East. Decline in forestry activities reduced the rural population's employment opportunities. Acute shortage of firewood, the primary energy source for cooking, especially affected the Jaffna peninsula that has no forests. Depletion of forest cover affects ground water levels and creates environmental problems. Unlawful operations such as illicit timber harvesting contribute to environmental degradation (Silva, 2003).

Livestock rearing is integral to crop farming, but herds have dwindled. Chicken rearing is the most popular activity (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2003b). Despite dwindling livestock numbers, the Northern and Eastern provinces surpassed the all island growth rates in 1990-1995. Constraints on development include the lack of quality breeding stock, scarcity of grazing lands, lack of veterinary services, the collapse of dairy cooperatives and inadequate support to livestock farmers.

## **Industry**

Prior to the conflict, large and medium scale industries such as the cement factory, paper factory, salterns and seafood processing factories provided employment; most are not operating now. Small-scale industries also suffered, thus, industrial employment opportunities are limited. Manufacturing employs 12 percent of women in the North and 21 percent in the East, though women's employment exceeded the percentage of men in this sector.

Subsistence level production resulted from the cumulative effects of numerous factors. Production efficiency declined due to damaged infrastructure facilities such as roads, irrigation and water supply. War damage and lost equipment aggravated the situation. Service delivery to support production was disrupted due to constant displacement of people and disrupted institutions. Acts of war directly affected the small and landless farmers and those engaged in small-scale business activities. Other income generating activities had little or no scope due to constant restrictions on movement of people and goods. Consequently, transportation links and market opportunities dwindled.

## Poverty

Isolation, food and livelihood insecurity and inaccessible assets, services, basic amenities, and transport facilities contribute to poverty due to conflict in the North and East. People in areas that experienced almost continuous fighting are poorer in terms of income, infrastructure, development and livelihood options (Jayaweera *et al.*, 2004). Poverty data on the North and East are limited, though micro studies indicate widespread poverty.<sup>11</sup> The mean household income in 2002 for the Northern and Eastern provinces was SLRs 8 155 and SLRs 7 640 per month respectively compared to the national average of SLRs 12 803. Fifty percent of the households in the North and East received less than SLRs 5 858 per month or SLRs 5 500 per month respectively. Monthly incomes of urban households in both provinces were relatively higher (Sri Lanka Department of Census and Statistics, 2003d). The World Bank (2005) found no difference between male and female headed household poverty rates. The emergence of households headed by widows due to the conflict, however,

### **A village in a LTTE controlled Zone 25 km from Malavi, Mannar district**

Twenty years of conflict had left the village with very few facilities and services. The only government officers working in the area are the school principal of the mixed school, the two graduate teachers and the Grama Niladhari, who is not resident in the village. An agricultural extension officer had visited the village once. Although the households live below the poverty line, no welfare benefits reach them. Health care facilities are at a minimum. The Sri Lanka Red Cross holds a clinic once a week and a midwife visits the village once a month. Emergency medical attention is available only in Mannar and Malavi, 25 km away. It is reported that about ten people in the village die in a year from snakebites without emergency medical attention and pregnant women face immense difficulty often having to rely on a village elder at time of childbirth.

A road had been repaired one year ago but transport facilities are minimal. There is no public transport and a tractor, three motorcycles and bicycles are the only means of transport available in the village. Although Vavuniya is the closest town, access is through the high security zone, which is closed to the general public. The villagers have to go to Mannar or to Malavi for all their needs. The bridge, connecting the village to the major towns has been blown off isolating the village during the rainy season.

Housing conditions were very poor. The wattle and daub houses in which the people live lack basic amenities although roofing consists of asbestos sheets supplied by an NGO. These houses had no toilet facilities. Kerosene oil in bottle lamps is used for lighting while fuel wood is used for cooking. Except for a bicycle, household assets were almost non-existent. Although Tamil women invest in jewellery, women in this village had only the minimum – a chain and a bangle or two. Some wore a thali (wedding chain).

<sup>11</sup> The Official Poverty Line for Sri Lanka published by the Department of Census and Statistics in June 2004 excludes the eight districts of the North and East.

could contribute to significant differences as most of them have not been income earners, have limited education and skills and their earning capacity is below that of male heads of households (Sri Lanka Ministry of Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Refugees, 2003).

Most households obtain minimum food requirements through state transfers and other sources. A World Food Programme survey (2003) of school children's nutritional status in the conflict districts of Kilinochchi, Vavuniya, Batticaloa and areas of Polonnaruwa district adjacent to the conflict zones showed extremely high prevalence of wasting and underweight. A child in the North or East was twice as likely to be malnourished as one in the South.

Government services are limited and there is acute shortage of public servants, teachers and medical officers. Local representatives are ineffective. Transport is almost non-existent (Field assessment, Mannar). The population in LTTE controlled areas is marginalised. The cease-fire agreement partially removed their isolation but worsened their short-term situation with the influx of goods into the region and the inability of the few local producers to compete with them (Sarvananthan, 2003).

## Rural women and livelihood activities

Rural women's farming and farm-based activities are major sources of household income (Sri Lanka Ministry of Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Refugees, 2003). As elsewhere in the country, women do labour intensive work in paddy cultivation such as planting and harvesting. Women in families that traditionally engaged in agriculture work on the farm when possible and want to continue cultivation in the post-conflict period (Field assessments). Landless women labour in tobacco cultivation, mainly carrying water to the fields, and on chilli and onion farms. The greater flexibility in gender roles during the conflict enabled women to undertake more active economic activities. In Trincomalee district women engaged in highland cultivation which allowed flexibility in household labour allocation (Field assessments). Backyard livestock rearing provides stock for consumption or for sale. Women in coastal areas engage in fishery activities such as drying and salting fish, usually done within the home. Some women migrate to find work in other areas of the district. Wages paid to women, however, are half that paid to men for similar work (Field assessments).

Marketing of local agricultural produce is a self-employment activity that usually is done by women. During the conflict women took the produce to market as they could more easily pass the checkpoints than could men. Women also prepare cooked foods, especially rice flour-based foods for sale, run small grocery shops, and make and sell handicrafts. These micro economic activities are extensions of women's domestic work that bring only very small profits.

### **Livelihood options for rural women**

In Kappalthurai in the Trincomalee district women's rural livelihood options were limited to cultivation, poultry keeping, goat rearing and trading. Most of the women belonged to families that traditionally engaged in farming. They had the desire and the ability to cultivate, but were constrained by lack of resources.

Almost all the women interviewed were either cultivators or had the desire to cultivate. Women perform a substantial quantity of work in the fields. Many belong to farming families and had been cultivating the land even before marriage. They have the traditional knowledge and skills to engage in farming. Many prepare their own seeds, maintain a home garden and rear livestock.

Marketing of local agricultural produce is a self-employment activity that usually is done by women. Women also prepare cooked foods, especially rice flour-based foods for sale, run small grocery shops, and make and sell handicrafts. These micro economic activities are extensions of women's domestic work that bring only very small profits.

Most Muslim women who lived in the North prior to their expulsion in 1990 were economically stable though not economically active. Those from Mullaitivu and Mannar were poor; they worked in agriculture and reared livestock. In the East, some Muslim women occasionally earn income but are dependent primarily on male earnings. Very poor women engage in home based informal sector activities such as mat weaving, food preparation, rice pounding, *chena* or highland cultivation, poultry keeping, dress making and selling betel (Jayaweera *et al.*, 2004).

Women's role in agriculture expanded during the conflict period due to absence of males, increasing poverty and demand for cheap female labour. In the Wannu region for example, casual wage labour provides income for female headed households, estimated at 20 percent of all households. Internally displaced women who relocated in agricultural areas also engage in wage labour. Women in fishing communities do fish processing, marketing, net making and net repair.

Traditionally, fishing was considered as women's leisure time activity in Batticaloa and Ampara (Dharmaretnam and Thamilchelvi, 2003). They collected fish in shallow waters of the lagoon. The catch mainly was for consumption while any excess was salted and dried. Prawns and mussels were sold. Muslim women did not fish in the lagoon waters or market the catch, but mostly they repaired the fishnets. Today, women undertake fish harvesting, processing and marketing as well as shallow water fishing in the brackish water lagoon. Women in both 'cleared' and 'uncleared' areas engage in fishery related activities. "In a community where exploitation of the aquatic natural resources was considered as an extension of the reproductive activities in an earlier generation, it is now considered as a productive activity of women affected by conflict." The younger generation, however, tends to leave this traditional form of

economic activity for more 'respectable' forms of employment that include overseas migration (Dharmeretnam and Thamilchelvi, 2003).

During the years of conflict local and international NGOs provided women, especially widows and families who lost income earners, with the opportunity for income generation through micro and small-scale projects. Livestock rearing, petty trading and home gardening projects have been initiated for women. More recently INGOs and local NGOs trained women in non-traditional occupations (Field assessments). Women in Jaffna are skilled in making cement blocks; in Batticaloa they are trained in industrial sewing with which skill they obtain employment in the formal sector. Women are encouraged to start savings schemes and to loan money. A study of the displaced in Batticaloa found women engaged as domestic workers and gathering fuel wood for sale (Wanasundera, 2000). Lack of employment opportunities compel many women to depend on government and NGO relief while Muslim women, especially from the welfare camps, increasingly looked to overseas contract employment as a survival strategy (Field assessment).

Rural women's lives are inextricably tied to the natural resource base. Collapse of the agricultural sector during the conflict impoverished rural women and their families. Women IDP returnees seeking to recommence farming were constrained by lack of inputs and access to markets (Field assessments). They continue to engage in subsistence level farming and other small-scale economic activities.

## Social realities of rural women in the conflict region

Northern and Eastern Tamil and Muslim women as well as Sinhalese women in the East live within a patriarchal structure, though Muslim women are under stricter control than Tamil and Sinhalese women. Women in all three communities subscribe to a similar cultural pattern of behaviour. Their primary functions are reproductive. The sexual division of household labour is deeply ingrained though it is more flexible in the lower castes and classes. Women's sphere generally includes decision making on household matters, education of children and health. Men make other major decisions such as buying and selling of assets.<sup>12</sup>

The armed conflict affected women and men differently. Men were the main casualties of war. Of the survivors, women were the most affected by the loss of family members, death and disappearance of income earners, migration of young men and displacement. All women were affected by the conflict though they experienced different effects based on their ethnicity, location, class and socio-economic status. The more affluent Tamil population in the North fled the conflict areas either to the

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<sup>12</sup> Women in the Jaffna peninsular have property rights but under the Tesawalami law they are unable to dispose or mortgage such assets without the written permission of the husband.

South or to western countries. The poorer classes found refuge in India or were displaced within the country where they found shelter in camps or welfare centres. Others remained in the conflict areas amidst armed confrontations. The Muslims evicted from the North live as displaced persons in other parts of the country, some on their own and some in welfare camps. Sinhalese women and their families fled the conflict areas to the South but those in areas bordering conflict zones, having lost their spouses, children and livelihoods, eke out a living with fear and insecurity. Women's responsibilities increased in the absence of basic services and insecurity. Women in LTTE-held areas live in poverty and isolation. Women were victims of sexual and gender based violence; many bear psychological scars (Maunaguru, 2005).

Scholars' assessments of the conflict's impact on gender roles and relations differ. Coomaraswamy (2003) argues that the armed conflict brought a major transformation in Tamil society and women's roles. Most visible is the entry of women, apparently weak and powerless, as fighters. Feminists who envision a non-violent society question the value of women's role as fighters. Samarasinghe (1996) argues that formation of the Mothers' Front created a new construction of gender in relation to the exigencies of war that was not a mere extension of everyday roles. Women from the North (and South) organised the Mothers' Front to protect husbands and sons from the militants and the Government citing their gendered role of motherhood in symbolic protest (Samarasinghe, 1996). Another shift of women's traditional to strategic roles occurred when women moved out of the domestic sphere and took on male roles in the absence of male family members; women consequently acquired more self-confidence and greater mobility and decision making powers within the family (Bennett, 1995). "We used to do "many things. Especially after the operations by the Sri Lanka Army, we women had to shoulder more tasks and protect our men or send them away" (Quoting Thiranagama in Hoole, 1990).

#### **Cultural conflict in conflict zone**

Although common concerns brought people of different castes in the village in the Kaththasinnakulam 215 B Grama Sevaka Division in Vavuniya district together, marked attitudinal differences continue to exist between women from Jaffna who settled in Vavuniya and women born in the locality. Apart from the caste system, other major differences relate to the social practices of dowry and virginity. While Jaffna women's ideas were rigid, Vavuniya women held more liberal attitudes and rejected social practices. The caste system persists, but the influx of displaced people from Mannar, Mullaitivu, Jaffna, and Kilinochchi into Vavuniya and their subsequent interaction made the caste system less rigid.

Women who became heads of households with the loss of their spouses are the most visible category of women victims of the conflict. Desertion, separation and divorce also resulted in female-headed households. Women are de facto heads of households in instances where the spouse migrated. The inability of the spouse to engage in income generation pushed women to become principal income earners.

Numerous factors contributed to dilution of rigid patriarchal values and the caste system in the North and East. Such factors included population displacement and movement, women moving into public arenas without the protection of male family members, women's greater involvement in NGO and community based activities and women taking up arms. The large numbers of widows who must fend for themselves erodes social exclusion and taboos against them and results in greater social acceptance of widows and single women (Field assessments).

Despite changes that affected women, traditional restrictions on women persistently were perpetuated through the caste system and attendant social practices, such as dowry, that reinforce women's lower social status within the family, community and in larger society (Thiruchandran, 1989; Field assessments). The conflict reinforced the practice of girls' early marriage in the North and the East. Displaced families arrange marriages early to avoid unwanted pregnancies, as a means of providing security to young girls and to avoid recruitment to militant groups. Even LTTE women must abide by traditional forms of feminine behaviour, although marriage is not permitted while a member (TamilNet, 2003).

Women's physical mobility was restricted during the conflict, and the gradual collapse of support systems due to displacement and migration exacerbated women's problems. Physical and psychological abuse within the home resulted from increased incidences of alcoholism (Wijayatilake, 2004). Redress usually is unavailable due to traditional insensitivity of law enforcement machinery, the existence of dual justice systems and the challenge to women's agency (Maunaguru, 2005). While both genders experience stress, women are the more traumatised having to bear poverty, violence in the community and domestic violence (Jayaweera *et al.*, 2004).

#### **Women's loss in conflict and violence against women: Persisting patriarchy**

Kappalthurai is a very traditional village with prevalent patriarchal values. Observers found that women have a lower status in the household and in the community. Many men disapprove of women's participation in community activities. Men do not disapprove of women's participation in economic activities, nor do they have compunction in using women's earnings. Alcoholism is prevalent among men. Gender-based violence reportedly is high and family disputes common. A survey by the Trincomalee District Youth Development Society showed that women are under mental stress due to domestic violence, difficult living conditions and the burden of household management. They also bear scars of the civil war that brought loss of family members, displacement and loss of assets. In the Naanthanvely D.S. Division of Ampara women identified men's alcoholism as a major problem. Half of the adult males consume liquor, but women sell kasippu (a local brew). Alcoholism and domestic violence which were pervasive, reduced somewhat with arrival of the LTTE in Kalmunai, the signing of the MOU and establishment of a camp.

## Rehabilitation of agriculture and the rural sector in the North East

Although the agricultural sector declined in the past twenty years, it accounts for about 18 percent of the GDP (Central Bank, 2004). In the last decade the agriculture growth rate was 2 percent smaller than industry or services (Central Bank, 2003). By 2004 the domestic agricultural sector contributed only 11 percent of the GDP.<sup>13</sup> Yet the Sri Lankan economy is significantly agrarian; agriculture directly accounts for about 33 percent of employment, and most of the rural population depends on agriculture, fisheries or livestock for their livelihood.

### **Agriculture, fisheries, livestock**

Sri Lanka's agricultural policy strives to achieve self-sufficiency in paddy production. The frontier model of expanding land under cultivation, increasing irrigation investment, adopting high yielding varieties and fertiliser use and diffusing agricultural knowledge contributes to increased production, but self-sufficiency in paddy has not been achieved. Food production lagged behind population increase; per capita food production recorded a negative growth rate of -0.3 during 1996-2000 (UNDP, 2003). Large areas of the island including much of the North and East are vulnerable to food insecurity (World Food Programme, 2003) (Map). The country depends on a narrow range of crops. Despite emphasis on cultivating additional field crops such as onions and chillies, output declined over the last decade.

Ingrained structural weaknesses reinforce the sector's sluggish performance. Such weaknesses include inadequate supply of high yielding seed varieties, poor agricultural extension services, high post-harvest loss, marketing bottlenecks and restrictions in the land market. Delay in achieving change retards growth; it took seven years for the Seed Act finally to be passed in 2003. Other factors retarding agricultural success include state ownership of land, competition among numerous agencies to administer government land and cumbersome administrative procedures in obtaining land for cultivation.

The agriculture sector suffers under government policies and regulation of imports and tariffs, credit, subsidies and marketing. The government's ad hoc tariff policies negatively affect producers and consumers but also bring reduced tax revenues (Epaarachchi, 2002). Tariff structures of some food items were changed to protect the farmer but they are lower than the level permitted by the World Trade Organisation.<sup>14</sup> Government attempts at price stabilisation often fail for lack of financial

<sup>13</sup> Paddy, other field crops-grains, oil seeds, pulses, root crops-fruits, vegetables and sugar.

<sup>14</sup> Sri Lanka has bound tariffs on almost all products including rice, onion and chillie falling at 50 percent except for certain domestic food crops including potato and some varieties of beans that have been bound at 100 percent.

resources, thus compelling farmers to sell their produce to private traders at depressed prices. Paddy farming is unprofitable despite government subsidies on credit, fertiliser, water and prices. Consequently, many farmers, especially in the wet zone, move from full-time farming to non-farm employment (Epaarachchi, 2002). Constraints on the crop sector include low productivity (refuted by the Central Bank, 2005), lack of diversification to high-value crops, stagnation in land use, low growth in irrigated area and fragmentation of land.

### ***Policies***

The National Agriculture Policy and Strategy (NAPS) aims to stimulate growth, improve labour productivity and develop an efficient food processing industry. It prioritizes food security but not to the detriment of increased domestic food prices. NAPS defined these areas for reform: market reforms, a greater role for private entrepreneurship, consolidation of smallholdings with the objective of introducing capital-intensive technology, product zoning and area specialisation.

The rural-urban divide shows wide differentials in the monthly rural-urban household incomes of SLRs 6 464 and SLRs 10 067 respectively. Placing high priority on rural development, the World Bank suggests liberalisation of trade for agricultural outputs, gradual reduction of state involvement in agricultural marketing and improvements to rural infrastructure. The poor likely will be affected in the short and intermediate terms by this strategy of trade liberalisation and withdrawal of the state from agricultural marketing.

### ***NEP agricultural development strategy***

The North East Provincial Council's agricultural development strategy envisages shifting from subsistence agriculture to commercially oriented agriculture, cultivating high-value items for the internal and external markets and establishing an agro-industrial base. A significant proposal will diversify paddy cultivation with high-value vegetables, fruits and other field crops. Private entrepreneurs will take a lead. Retention of the nuclear farm system will involve larger numbers of small farmers. Research, extension and training will be strengthened. The NEP strategy will refocus livestock-raising from a backyard enterprise to a commercially viable industry to increase farmers' income and reduce risk of crop losses. The fisheries industry will be reoriented from fish harvesting to fish culture and processing while continuing with marine fishing. The strategy focuses on rehabilitation of the fisheries infrastructure, modernisation of existing fleets and equipment. The private sector will play a major role in revival of the fishing industry. New agro-industries will add value to farm produce and create employment opportunities. The manufacture, repair and service of machinery, tools and equipment used by farmers and fishermen also are envisaged.

The NEP will bring at least 30 percent of the land area under forest cover and will initiate a social forestry programme with the active participation of the communities. An agro-forestry programme will integrate trees and shrubs on farms for manure, fuel wood, fodder, medicine and other benefits.

Development of the agricultural and rural sector is a priority to reduce conflict-induced poverty, increase incomes and reduce vulnerability to food insecurity. The recovery of the agriculture sector will depend on release of farmland from within the high security zone and areas held by the LTTE. Re-establishment of farming must consider conflicting claims about land, the forcible acquisition of land, encroachment, problems about farm inputs and landmines. Land issues are volatile especially in the East where the Sinhalese, Tamil and Muslims access the power bases either in Colombo or the Wanni to put forward rival claims for land and irrigation water. The dominance of political capital and patronage further marginalises the powerless.

### ***External assistance***

Since the 'Kilinochchi Agreement' of 2002 the international donor community committed support for reconstruction and rehabilitation of conflict affected areas.<sup>15</sup> Subsequently, donors pledged US\$ 4.5 billion and the IMF approved a three-year Poverty Reduction Growth Facility (PRGF) lending arrangement and release of previously withheld funds, and the World Bank and IMF pushed through economic reform. Both sides to the conflict can gain from the development effort, but the reforms and donor approaches to conflict resolution and development must be critically re-evaluated to determine whether existing inequalities would be exacerbated. Donor commitments do not meet the actual requirements. Assistance is in the form of loans except for the North East Reconstruction Fund (NERF) which received grants. Sri Lanka's history of under utilising development assistance reveals lack of administrative capacity to manage the development process in the North East. Transparency, accountability and timeliness of development assistance must be considered in the reconstruction and rehabilitation of conflict affected areas.

### ***NGO contributions***

Numerous international and local agencies undertake rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes in the North and East, though these civil society organisations reveal many contradictions (Bastian, 2003). The NGOs foci vary from providing welfare and humanitarian assistance to initiating small-scale development projects or cultural activities and conflict resolution. Some women's NGOs provide legal services and counselling. The Suriya Women's Development Centre mobilises and empowers women in Batticaloa. The LTTE recognised three major NGOs in the area: the Centre

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<sup>15</sup> The cease fire agreement signed between the GOSL and the LTTE.

for Women's Development and Rehabilitation (CWDR) formed in 1992, the Tamil Rehabilitation Organisation (TRO) and the Economic Consultancy House Ltd. (ETECH). All address women's and children's welfare and gender equity (TamilNet). The three recognised NGOs receive funds from numerous sources including the World Bank, the Asian Development Bank, UN agencies, local and international NGOs, local and expatriate Tamil communities and, to a lesser extent, the Sri Lankan Government.

Umbrella organisations coordinate intervention activities. The Consortium of Humanitarian Agencies (CHA), for example, selects and allocates projects to NGOs and facilitates optimum utilisation of funds to avoid duplication. The Consortium monitors project implementation but has no enforcement authority. The Divisional Secretariat which requires registration of all NGOs regularly consults with them, yet many NGOs maintain their own agenda.

#### **A constructive role for NGO in conflict zone**

The Social Development Foundation is a leading NGO in the Jaffna district with 53 branches in the peninsula. These branches organise farmers at the village level and include both women and men. Unlike in farmer organisations, women participate and hold leadership positions.

Few well-established local or international women's NGOs are involved in women's development projects, though some NGOs consciously incorporate women into project activities mainly because of the donors' priorities. They include women and provide them with skill development, income generation and micro credit. The institutional and management structures of these NGOs, however, show gender imbalances with traditional male power structures remaining intact, and it is questionable whether women's empowerment will result.

### **Needs' assessments, gender considerations and women's needs**

Numerous international organisations and agencies that are working in Sri Lanka identify gender issues as important consideration in post-conflict assistance. The National Framework for Relief, Rehabilitation and Reconciliation formulates policies and strategies through a consultative process to assist conflict-affected communities. The consultations included a wide range of stakeholders, but neither the Ministry of Women's Affairs nor the National Committee on Women were included, and no women's NGOs working in conflict affected areas were consulted. None of the experts were working on women's or gender issues thus reflecting gender imbalances in administrative and civil society structures themselves. The outcome is a document written for the most part in gender-neutral language.

The Multilateral Group's needs assessment recognises "...the key role played by women as economic actors, social leaders and managers of natural resources. Its overall objective is to ensure that women have access to resources, including land

and credit, and to the benefits made available under rehabilitation programmes.”<sup>16</sup> Vulnerable widows and female-headed households were included in proposed projects, and the assessment specified the need to safeguard women and children's rights, consult with women in provision of infrastructure facilities such as domestic water, sanitation and electricity, and to provide training and skill development in non-traditional areas employment and training.

The Sub-Committee on Immediate Humanitarian and Rehabilitation Needs in the North and East (SIHRN), which has LTTE involvement, proposes to improve women's situation and ensure greater gender equality. It prioritizes health care and nutrition for mothers, education, vocational training, credit and employment opportunities for female headed households and widows and special care for war-traumatised women.

The UN mandates clear strategies and action plans to incorporate gender perspectives in rehabilitation and reconstruction programmes, including monitoring mechanisms, and the incorporation of explicit attention to the situation of women and girls in needs assessments, appraisals and implementation plans for all sectors; and the development of targeted activities, with adequate resources, focused on specific constraints facing women and girls (UN, 2003).

The UN Inter-Agency Assessment Mission in 2002 recognised “support and protection of women affected by the war needs to be central to any UN action”, and specified that “structures and mechanisms [be] created in these processes to reflect women's many voices and experiences of violent conflict”. The Joint Strategy (2002) document, however, is silent on gender considerations. The UN recently established the Gender Working Group to ensure adequate attention to gender issues in overall policy and programmatic responses of the Multilateral Group. Although a gender strategy is being prepared there is no reference to gender issues in the rehabilitation of the North and East.

The UNHCR policy to integrate refugee women comprehensively in programme planning and implementation focuses on families, and also recognises widows as a vulnerable group. The Commission recognises that the sexual and gender based violence that rehabilitation programmes may contribute to may undermine the programmes' positive impacts.

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<sup>16</sup> Criticisms of the Needs Assessment include the lack of consultation with grassroots organisations, omission of the issue of governance, which cuts across sectors, and unrealistic cost estimates. Consultations for the assessment were confined mostly to government officials at the national and provincial levels, the LTTE, International NGOs and NGOs. Elected representatives were not consulted (Sarvananthan, Muttukrishna. 2003. “Review of the assessment of needs in the conflict-affected areas of the North East”. *Lines 2(1)* May 2003: pp. 27-29.) while, apart from the discussions held with the Sub Committee on Gender, the few other women consulted were mostly from International NGOs. The Needs Assessment however presents a fairly accurate picture of the situation of the North East.

UNDP's transitory programme to support internally displaced persons, refugees, local communities and vulnerable groups emphasises women's and children's needs. The programme supports small-scale projects training that targets capacity-development of communities.

The Asian Development Bank's (ADB) gender strategy in Sri Lanka aims to mainstream gender into all of its projects. Its revised strategy under development, will apply to ADB supported projects in the North and East.

The 2003 World Bank Country Assistance Strategy has no gender focus in its support of resettlement and revival of livelihoods in the North and East.

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) promotes gender equality in access to sufficient, safe and nutritionally adequate food; access to, control over and management of natural resources and agricultural support services; participation in policy- and decision making processes at all levels in the agricultural and rural sector; and in opportunities for both on- and off-farm employment in rural areas. Nonetheless, FAO's local projects have no specific gender focus, nor do they integrate gender into the project design, nor are there targets for women except for the female headed households the percentage of which is not quantified. An official stated, "FAO is not against including gender but neither does it focus on it" (FAO, 2001).

While project statements accept consideration of women's needs, there is a general lack of understanding of gender issues. Stereotypical perceptions of women as dependent housewives persist among project designers that could lead to women farmers' exclusion from agricultural training programmes.

The NEP agricultural policy states that "The agricultural development strategy will be incomplete without a component to assist women. This is being stressed because the conflict has led to the loss of several males who were principally farmers and fishermen. There is also an immediate need to educate women in techniques and methods of commercial farming in view of their fast increasing role in agriculture. The knowledge and attitudes gained by them in a conservative environment are no longer valid to face the challenges of future development" (North East Provincial Council).

"The conflict has resulted in large numbers of female-headed households where women have to carry out the farming and fishing activities and support parents and children. Poverty and destitution will increase unless some firm measures are taken to offset this trend. The strategy therefore stresses the need to train such women in income generating skills and support them with soft credit and marketing facilities...." (North East Provincial Council).

Women who move into commercial farming are marginalised; they need special support mechanisms to take advantage of new opportunities. The NEP agricultural

development strategy and other programmes identify female-headed households for special attention, yet do not recognise women's productive role in agriculture. All women farmers need to be included in the new environment.

### **Recommendations for gender responsive policies and programmes**

Design and implementation of rehabilitation programmes in conflict affected areas require a multi-stakeholder approach incorporating consultative and participatory processes. References to gender equality and women's role must be enacted with specific policies, adequate finance and ground level action. NGOs at the grassroots level better understand women's needs that are incorporated in the projects' designs, but micro level initiatives could be negated if the macro environment is not gender sensitive:

- Gender considerations must be included in the overall policy framework of rehabilitation.
- Capacity building programmes must undertake gender analysis, implement projects in a gender sensitive manner and monitor and evaluate the gender impacts of programmes and projects.
- Mid term evaluations should ensure that adverse gender biased impacts are recognised and corrected.

## **Implementation and performance for gender responsive rehabilitation**

Female headed households and war widows have high visibility in policies, and projects primarily target their practical needs while ignoring the experiences of other women who survived the conflict.

### **Implementation effectiveness and limitations**

Four major projects in conflict areas are the North East Community Restoration and Development Project (NECORD), North East Irrigated Agricultural Project (NEIAP), the North East Coastal Community Development Project and the UN Transitory Programme. One among projects implemented with bilateral donor assistance is the Integrated Food Security Project in Trincomalee.

NECORD offers overall relief and rehabilitation in both the 'cleared' and 'uncleared' areas of the NEP by improving living conditions and the well-being of communities, particularly those with significant proportions of internally displaced people. The project covers agriculture, fisheries, income generation, water supply, sanitation, health and rehabilitation of minor roads. It particularly addresses the most vulnerable

population based on poverty levels, and recognises gender disparities in occupations and wages. It acknowledges inequitable distribution of labour and the additional strain on women who assume traditional male tasks, and identifies the need for appropriate projects especially in relation to micro enterprises. However, no NGOs implementing the project are women's NGOs; the Community Based Organisations (CBOs) are male dominated; women are reached mostly through small organisations with limited capacity and outreach that channel micro credit to women for income generation.

The North East Irrigated Agriculture Project (NEIAP) of the World Bank addresses restoration of damaged small scale irrigation systems in 398 villages, 30 of them in the Jaffna district. It will expand in 2005-2011 to 600 villages. The project works to improve irrigation infrastructure and has a capacity-building component supporting NGOs for social mobilisation. The project director in Kappalthurai, the survey village in Trincomalee district, is a woman who selected Madar Sangam (Women's Rural Development Society) to implement project activities because it was the most efficient CBO in the area. Officials implementing this project understood little of gender issues, but selection of Madar Sangam gave the project dynamism. Women have access to credit for starting micro enterprises, poultry keeping and grinding mills among other activities. Recognising women's groups' commitments, NEIAP gave priority to women's organisations in several villages (Field assessments).

The Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) did not apply a gender analytical framework to the Emergency Provision of Agricultural Inputs to Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) project; nonetheless the project appears to have positive affect on women's practical needs. The project covers eight districts of the North and East as well as Puttalam and Anuradhapura districts. It supplies IDPs with vegetable seeds, fertiliser and hand tools to commence agricultural activities on homestead plots, and trains participants in modern agricultural practices. Women were trained in food processing income generating activities, such as milling black gram and other crops, and drying fish. Of the 5 500 families that received emergency provisions 16 percent were female-headed households, 5 percent had a disabled member and 12 percent were landless.<sup>17</sup> Widowed families received preference.

The Emergency Rehabilitation of Quality Seed Production in Conflict-Affected Areas of Sri Lanka, also funded by FAO, is more development oriented than the former. The project benefits resettled IDP farming families and other farmers. It selects 200 or more progressive farmers to produce quality certified seeds through a contractual seed grower scheme. The project targets a minimum number of women farmers from each district to produce seeds (Field assessments).

The fisheries sector of FAO will establish three fish reception and handling centres in Jaffna, to be managed by Fisheries Cooperative Unions that will provide cold

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<sup>17</sup> Approximate figures provided by the FAO-ECO.

storage facilities, refrigerated trucks and solar driers. The project opened job opportunities for women's groups in fish drying and processing.

The Integrated Food Security Programme (IFSP), a development project sponsored by the German Technical Cooperation (GTZ), supports the Department of Agrarian Services and the farmer community in rehabilitating minor tanks and enhancing the capacities of farmer organisations in the Trincomalee district. The project serves 272 farm families selected from subsistence farmers, small farmers, landless labourers, fishermen, female headed households, orphans and unemployed youth who face food insecurity. Project evaluation recognises increased participation by the village community, increased food security, and improved health and nutrition of infants and children. Participants express a high satisfaction of asset creation and community mobilisation (Schenk and Srimanobhavan, 2003). GTZ includes gender as one of four issues to be addressed, but no data are available on the women beneficiaries or the quality of their participation. Lacking a specific strategy to empower women, a tentative conclusion is that although women may have benefited from the IFSP their long-term strategic interests will not have been met (IFSP, 2002; Korf and Bauer, 2002).<sup>18</sup>

The United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) administers 11 projects in Jaffna, 10 in Vavuniya, three in Mannar, four in Trincomalee, two in Batticaloa and one each in Ampara and Kilinochchi. Agriculture and fisheries projects predominate, most of which operate through cooperative societies for fisheries, seed production or for multi-purposes. Some women benefit directly, others indirectly as members of beneficiary families. The projects could marginalise women, as their participation in cooperatives is not on par with men.

### **Performance limitations**

Rehabilitation and reconstruction of the North and East are undertaken within the Triple R Framework developed through a consultative process that recognised stakeholders' different roles, perspectives and responsibilities. The Framework defines clear roles for government ministries and departments at all levels. Government agencies are mandated to ensure gender equality although the proposed coordinating committees are expected to address women's empowerment. Virtually no women are represented in decision making positions or in implementation.

The multiplicity of institutions with varying responsibility for reconstruction of the North East, and the shortage of personnel have serious implications for project implementation. Overlapping agencies' functions confuse the ordinary citizen (Field

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<sup>18</sup> Despite an extensive search it was not possible to find an analysis of the gender impact of the project. There are no sex disaggregated project indicators and the database maintained by the project office also has no sex disaggregated data.

assessments). The complexity of rehabilitation and reconstruction and the absence of effective coordinating mechanisms are major drawbacks. Administration must maintain an ethnic balance in areas of ethnic plurality, must implement projects in both 'cleared' and 'uncleared' areas and in relocated and original communities and must focus on vulnerable groups while ensuring that host communities are not disadvantaged. The administration is limited by its limited institutional capacity to implement and coordinate the large number of government and externally funded rehabilitation programmes (Multilateral Group, 2003).

Reliance on local NGOs and CBOs to reach grass root communities and vulnerable groups has facilitated a degree of social mobilisation and community participation, but when CBOs are male and elite-dominated only incidental benefits flow to women. Even for projects with a gender perspective in the project design, evaluations report that the perspective changes during implementation for lack of understanding gender issues.

### **Recommendations to ensure gender responsive rehabilitation**

- A situation analysis preceding policy formulation should recognise that women's experiences may have been negative as well as positive, women's roles may have changed and vulnerable groups emerged. Recognition of these factors should be the basis for a gender analytical framework for programme development.
- Collection of sex disaggregated data should be mandatory in all projects.
- Periodic reviews should assess whether project objectives are being achieved and whether women are being marginalised. Follow up corrective action should be taken in consultation with beneficiaries.
- Senior officials and project managers should ensure that all institutions engaged in post-conflict rehabilitation incorporate gender issues.
- An extensive capacity building programme should be undertaken from the national to local level to build capacity for gender analysis.
- The capacity of local women's NGOs that partner with the government and international and national NGOs should be enhanced, and gender incorporated into their management.

## Rural women's access to resources and assets in the conflict region

### Assets and resources

Ten percent of agricultural operators in the NEP do not own land, and 22 percent own only a home garden, 22 percent own both a home garden and other land, and 22 percent own other land only. Districts show marked variations in land ownership. The highest percentage of landless agricultural operators is in Mullaitivu and Vavuniya; the lowest percentage is in Trincomalee. Sex disaggregated data are available to assess women's land ownership patterns. In both Tamil and Muslim communities inheritance follows the matrilineal line. A study of 50 Tamil households in an 'uncleared' area in Batticaloa district found that 94 percent owned land and that women were 70 percent of the landowners (Jayaweera *et al.*, 2004). Women and their families had at least minimal access to cultivatable land. They engaged in paddy farming and highland cultivation. Ownership was in question, as there were no permits for much of the state land on which cultivation was done. IDPs encroached on the lands of other IDPs and on state land (Field assessments).

Different land ownership laws (the *Tesawalami*, the Muslim law, and the Roman Dutch law) and the lack of a uniform civil code make land use assessment difficult.<sup>19</sup> The customary law, *Tesawalami*, governs inheritance of property and matrimonial rights of Tamil women in Jaffna. Under *Tesawalami* a woman can own property individually, is entitled to patrimonial and non-patrimonial inheritance, can acquire property during marriage and can keep the dowry she received. Control of her property, however, is in the hands of her guardian, and as the guardianship of a woman passes from the father to the husband, the husband maintains control of her property. The woman cannot invest in the property, mortgage, lease, or sell it without the prior permission of her husband. A woman cannot enter into contracts without his consent and women are treated as 'minors' in the Courts of Law. Thus effective control rests with the husband. A woman who receives a dowry loses her right to inherit parental properties if she has surviving brothers. She may however inherit a half share of the spouse's property acquired during marriage.

Muslim law regulates Muslim women's land rights. Although it appears that women are dealt equitably in terms of inheritance and property under the Muslim law, in actual fact the widower and son get more.<sup>20</sup> Female children receive a lesser share of property than do male children. Recent research in areas outside the conflict area

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<sup>19</sup> A proposal to introduce a uniform civil code, replacing the customary laws, is in abeyance due to resistance by minority groups.

<sup>20</sup> In case of inheritance there are heirs called sharers whose shares are fixed by the Quar'an, agnatic heirs called residuaries and uterine heirs called distant kindred. The sharers are four males (father,

found that some families treat sons and daughters equally in matters relating to immovable property.

The Roman Dutch law governs land rights of all not covered by *Tesawalami* or Muslim law. Women are assured equality in ownership and there is no gender bias in inheritance rights. The civil law applies to women and men equally.

The Land Development Ordinance (LDO) of 1935 regulates state agricultural lands given by state-issued permits to Sri Lankan citizens. The LDO is gender neutral, but administrative interpretation and practices often favour the male. A widow or a woman who previously owned land qualifies; however, on remarriage a widow loses the right to cultivate if she has not been nominated, and she cannot nominate a successor. Succession thus has a clear preference for male heirs and violates the principle of gender equality articulated in the Constitution for distribution of state land. Intense lobbying by women's groups has not yet achieved removal of the discriminatory provisions of the LDO.

Secure land rights are important in the post-conflict situation where large numbers of women have sole or primary responsibility for income generation through cultivation of land or work as agricultural labourers. Land issues are the core of most disputes and surfaced with return of internally displaced persons to their places of origin. Women are made vulnerable by the lack of documentation, inability to prove ownership, inability to dispose of land in the absence of their husband's death certificate and the non-recognition by officials of women's altered status. A proposed land reform project could benefit women from the land-titling programme used elsewhere in the country when it eventually extends to the North and the East, but interim measures are required to safeguard women's land rights and claims.

### ***Access to common property resources***

Forest resources in Jaffna peninsula have dwindled; the only forest cover remaining is 100 ha of Casuarina fuel wood plantations. The loss of forest resources and the lack of reforestation activities adversely affect women as primary users of fuel wood; landless women's rights to forest resources need special recognition. Any reforestation programme should include women's participation in decision making and should identify how such a programme will benefit them.

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father's father, half brother by mother and husband) and eight females among whom are the sister, consanguine sister, uterine sister, mother, true grand mother. These shares are fixed at either half, one fourth, one eighth, two thirds, one third and one sixth. However, the widow would get only half the share that a widower would get. The residuary heirs fall into three categories. They are – residuary in their own right, residuary with another's rights and residuary with another. No female falls into the first category. Females who as sharers are entitled to either a half or two thirds and who become *residuaries* if they co-exist with their brothers, fall into the category of *residuary with another's right*. A female heir becomes a residuary because of her co-existing with another female heir, becomes a *residuary with another*.

## **Water**

Water availability for cultivation and domestic purposes is a major issue in all locations assessed except in Mannar. Sixty-six percent of the agricultural land in the North East is fed by major irrigation tanks or run-off-river (anicut) schemes or by shallow open dug wells. Most irrigation schemes suffered war damage and lack of maintenance, and operate at much reduced capacity or provide no irrigation for agricultural production. Many farmers abandoned farming for lack of water. Rather than undertaking grandiose irrigation schemes, the existing wells should be repaired to ensure a regular supply of water for cultivation (Field assessments).

### **Access to water**

Prior to the conflict farmers in Kappalthurai accessed irrigation water. The destruction of small tanks during the conflict and the lack of maintenance of others that were not damaged make the farmers now totally dependent on rainwater for cultivation. Farmers suffer crop losses due to drought or floods. One solution is construction of agro-wells, one for four households. Another is to devise a system to obtain water from the Devara Ara canal. Restoration of the Adamkulam tank was proposed. Resolution of the critical problem access to water could restore agriculture as a profitable enterprise.

Women's participation in water related activities is minimal even though they are major users of water for agriculture, home gardening and household purposes; in some areas they spend two to three hours fetching water. Women should be included in water user organisations and their needs considered during planning, construction or reconstruction and maintenance of water supply schemes.

## **Wages**

In the North East as elsewhere in the country women's wages are much lower than men's. Without improvement of the rural economy, women's wages will continue to stagnate due to imbalance of labour supply over demand for labour. Women attribute their lower wage to their lower output and fewer work hours, and do not identify this as an issue. Nonetheless, exploitation of female labour should be ended (Field assessments).

### **Wage inequity**

Wage differentials for agricultural labourers in the Kaththasinnakulam DS Division in the Vavuniya district are marked. Women receive between SLRs 80-100 a day for harvesting paddy whereas men receive SLRs 200. Women's labour is valued at SLRs 125-200 while men's labour is valued at twice that amount. However, although opportunities for contract labour are limited, the wages are divided equally among the members of a family that obtains a labour contract for harvesting paddy.

## **Credit**

Under the New Comprehensive Scheme of Rural Credit the government gradually is withdrawing subsidised credit; and, banks reportedly to have stringent requirements for credit disbursements to farmers, fisher folk and traders (Sarvananthan, 2003). These credit restrictions make it nearly impossible for women, who traditionally are disadvantaged in obtaining bank credit, to receive loans for productive purposes. Consequently, women obtain agricultural inputs from informal sources, but they must repay loans in kind post harvest with much of the profits (Field assessments). No durable solution has been found for the decades-long problem of rural credit and indebtedness.

Externally funded development programmes channel funds through NGOs that operate numerous micro credit programmes targeting women. CBOs often serve as credit intermediaries accessing micro credit and re-lending it to their members. Leakages are reported due to misuse of credit by men in NGOs and due to CBOs issuing women credit on behalf of their spouse because the women accept responsibility for repayment (Field assessments). Women bear the added burden of inequitable gender relations. More women should have access to credit facilities and revolving funds in the proposed projects. As micro credit alone has not brought women out of poverty, credit should be combined with services, and larger scale up operations should be addressed.

## **Access to markets and market information**

Farmers suffer from inability to obtain fair prices for their produce (Field assessments). Their bargaining power is limited by dependence on a few traders, lack of price information, limited access to credit, the consequent dependence on informal credit sources and settlement of loans with the harvest. In LTTE controlled areas limited access to markets is a major problem. Policy makers should ensure a fair price at harvest time, the availability of market information and demand for new crops.

### **Poor access to market and information**

Marketing poses no problem for the farmers of Kappalthurai in the Trincomalee district as traders visit the village to purchase produce. Farmers, however, are unaware of prevailing prices and many cannot take their produce to Trincomalee due to transport difficulties. The proposed establishment of a marketing centre could give the farmers more bargaining power if combined with dissemination of price information. In the village in the Kaththasinnakulam GS Division in Vavuniya private traders buy directly from farmers; neither the government nor farmers' organisations engage in purchasing. In the LTTE controlled village in Mannar some traders now come to the village post-cease fire agreement, but they dictate purchase prices that are not fair to the farmers. Farmers follow cultivation practices passed down through generations because they lack information about new cultivation practices and technology. Agricultural extension officers visited the village in the Naanthanvely D.S. Division only once.

## ***Access to infrastructure and services***

Women are negatively affected by the poor condition of access roads, minimal transport facilities, inadequate housing, poor water supply and sanitation and limited access to health care services. Only rehabilitation of infrastructure facilities and restoration of services will enable women and their families to improve their quality of life.

## **Institutions**

### ***Farmer organisations/women's organisations***

Policy shifts at the national and provincial levels will offer greater roles to the private sector and farmer organisations. Farmers may be encouraged to form marketing and distribution companies. Farmer organisations will help operate and maintain water supplies. They may engage in seed production as do farmers in other parts of the country. With such policy shifts, special attention must ensure that women are not marginalised in farmer organisations. Today, few women belong to these organisations

#### **Women's organisation is a valuable social capital**

Madar Sangams are active in several districts especially in Jaffna. They provide loans, operate revolving funds and assist in income generation. The society organises women in small groups to achieve economies of scale and sells its members' products under its own brand the. But their lack know-how and skill constrains further expansion. The NEIAP, NECORD and other projects use these CBOs effectively. The CBOs should be revitalised and their ability to participate in rehabilitation projects should be developed.

and those who belong have no bargaining power and do not hold decision making positions. Their lack of access to decision making positions could marginalise them further.

While the state uses women's NGOs to encourage women's participation in development, policy makers often detach from their own role to eliminate gender inequalities and lose site of women's concern with welfare. Women's organisations should be supported and gender issues addressed. Women should be trained to lead, to advocate and to enhance their entrepreneurial skills. The *Madar Sangam*, a local women's organisation in the NEP,

should be revitalised and its participation in development, reconstruction and rehabilitation should be enhanced.

## ***Training***

Agricultural extension services have not functioned well in many field locations. Women participated in few training programmes, thus highlighting the need to target

their training (Field assessments). Several proposed projects with training components should receive special attention to reach women. Recruitment and training of more women for the extension services could help meet women's information needs. The Department of Agriculture should establish a service on the lines of the Farm Women's Agricultural Extension Programme to improve women's agricultural activities. Women should have access to training and information on livestock rearing, skill development in non-farm activities and non-traditional areas such as construction.

## **Policies and programmes**

### ***Macro policies***

The years of conflict in the NEP also were years when market oriented economic policies were implemented nationally. Isolation of the NEP prevented full impact of economic reforms in the region. Opening up the North and East, and greater integration with the South, will result in market forces determining allocation of resources. Studies in the South demonstrated the adverse impact of the reforms on poorer segments of society, especially poor women, and their displacement from traditional sources of income generation and employment. The structural weaknesses of the domestic agricultural sector and the whole process of donor-driven development must be reconsidered when rehabilitation programmes are implemented in the North.

### ***Commercialisation of agriculture***

The strategy to commercialise agriculture and the entry of the private sector will have long term effects on women with few livelihood skills. Women, especially IDPs who spent long periods in welfare camps, lack skills in new techniques and commercial farming methods. Thus agricultural and off-farm extension services must include women extension workers and must identify effective and appropriate methods of disseminating information on new technologies.

### ***Taxation***

The LTTE-imposed taxation system burdens the sale of produce in Jaffna by reducing the profit margins of farmers who have low productivity and high production costs. The checking points and taxes levied on all produce going into and leaving Jaffna are disincentives to producers. Another concern is the continuing outflow of Jaffna residents to avoid tax payment to, and harassment by, the LTTE (Sarvananthan, 2003; Sriskandarajah, 2003).

### **Levies add financial burden**

The greatest boon after the cease-fire agreement has been increased mobility resulting in access to markets, fertilisers, better quality seeds, information and availability of consumer goods. The resultant ability to obtain better prices for products and the lower prices for consumer goods has helped both the producer and the consumer. The discussants were burdened, however, with taxes levied by the LTTE, the collection of which had intensified after the cease-fire.

### ***Project implementation***

People interviewed about the donors who pledged financial assistance for development of conflict affected areas expressed cynicism and frustration about outcomes including the lack of visible development efforts, the INGOs' ad hoc projects that lack sustainability and the relatively small benefits received from projects funded with large sums of money. Project recipients' disenchantment resulted from their dissatisfaction with project implementation and monitoring, the perceived attitudes of government officials toward the recipients and the inability of projects to meet their basic requirements. INGOs that lack community links could compensate by employing more local people and considering their views. Other steps to should address are the project administrators' lack of credibility with community recipients and the disconnect between announced goals and achieved outcomes.

Women and women's organisations should have a greater role in project planning and implementation. The capacity of women's NGOs should be developed and training should include peace building and social integration. Women's NGOs should be trained in gender analysis.

### ***Listening to the people***

Women who survived the conflict and experienced its trauma and hardship felt removed from the planning process when it came to rebuilding, and they criticised their exclusion from consultations on matters important to them. A common grievance was that they did not obtain redress even when they articulated their needs. Farmers' groups reported that only a few (male) leaders had been summoned to the Jaffna Kachcheri to discuss the Jaffna Plan but most became aware of it only from newspaper reports. Other development plans followed this pattern.

### ***Livelihood options***

Women have limited livelihood options. Although their main occupation was agriculture, inadequate profits and risk of crop failure made livestock rearing preferable. Except for preparation of cooked food and a few other income-generating

activities such as dress making, women had few skills for self-employment activities. Providing women access to skill training options and removing their inhibitions could enable them to diversify income-earning activities.

## **Gender and women in rehabilitation**

### ***Gender mainstreaming***

The visibility of war widows and female headed households seems to have influenced policy makers to take cognisance of women in two ways: First, it is crucial to reduce women's vulnerability and assist their reintegration into society in the post-conflict period; and second, policy planners must assess transformations in gender relations and women's role in society at large. The second is a much wider agenda. An obstacle to women's expanded roles is the lack of recognising their roles and agency at the local and macro levels. The near absence of women beneficiaries who are not female heads of household in projects illustrates this point.

In a publication titled *Focused support for women and children*, the government recognises the importance of addressing women's and children's needs for a dignified livelihood (Government of Sri Lanka, 2002). Unfortunately, this statement is too narrowly focused and avoids a holistic and broader view of women emerging from conflict. The section on rural economic development and skills training for young people is couched in gender neutral terms. Without specific recognition of the gendered nature of vocational and skill development, women likely will be channelled into skill areas having low marketability.

Gender is not a devolved subject under the 1989 constitutional amendment nor is it on the 'concurrent list'. Women's issues nonetheless are in the provincial councils' mandates that have expressed interest in women's programmes "reflecting the increasing visibility of women's issues in the national scenario, their pragmatic and political value at local level and the desire to replicate the central government administrative structure" (Jayaweera, 2002). In the provinces this subject is consolidated with several others within the five provincial council ministries; consequently the subject receives low priority. In the North East Provincial Council, women's affairs are under the purview of the Ministry of Rehabilitation, which potentially could advantage women.

The section on Women Affected by Conflict in the National Plan of Action for Women focuses heavily on sexual and gender-based violence and trauma. Without denying the critical importance of these issues, other critical needs of women who lived under conflict situations for two decades also should be addressed by a plan of action.

During the 1990s, the North and East primarily focused on addressing needs of internally displaced persons living in welfare camps and those living in the conflict

areas that were government controlled. Yet as women's groups have observed, the insensitivity of relief programmes to gender issues and women's concerns negatively affects relief efforts. In part, this outcome results from minimal consultation with women and women's groups. The 2000 CEDAW Committee report defined the missing gender focus by stating, "of serious concern also is the plight of women who are affected by the conflict in the North and East of the country. Governmental programmes have been 'family' based and have thus far not seen gender based intervention strategies" (CEDAW Committee, 2002).

Formulated rehabilitation projects and those implemented by government and donor agencies identify female-headed households as target groups and beneficiaries. While other women's roles and positions generally are ignored in programmes and projects. The Integrated Food Security Project implemented in the Trincomalee district in the East, prepared data sheets for 400 villages that included the number of female-headed households. Apart from this single reference to women, there is not even sex disaggregated population statistics. The LIFT project implemented by CARE recognises the importance of gender, but the lack of gender analysis in the project formulation stage resulted in a project design without emphasis on gender.

In conflict situations women bear increased responsibility for economic survival by accepting new roles to cope with changed circumstances. In this context, post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation should integrate gender into all policies, programmes and projects thus legitimising the gains they have made during the long years of armed conflict and displacement and sustaining their new roles.

### ***Female headed households, widows and ageing***

A survey of female headed households and widows is urgently needed to facilitate accurate assessment of their socio-economic status and needs. Statistics of the North East Provincial Council show that at least 42 percent of the widows were over 60 years of age. National data and statistics for the NEP indicate an increasing number of ageing women. Most of these women are poor and rural. Their specific needs should be identified and addressed.

### ***Inclusion of all women***

The almost exclusive focus that policies, programmes and projects have on female-headed households and war widows overshadows productive roles of other women in the NEP. The proposed projects identify female-headed households as target beneficiaries but do not address women farmers' needs or those of other rural sector producers. Various categories of women should be incorporated and their needs mainstreamed into policies, programmes and projects. Many internally displaced persons and refugees have been resettled or relocated; most of their livelihoods were

land resource based. Now the IDPs need assistance to recommence their original livelihood activities or to start new ones. Women should be recognised as producers contributing to their household economies to ensure that they too receive resources and inputs for income generation.

### ***Data***

Women are not reflected in official statistics and data at the macro level despite their contributions and involvement in agriculture, in the informal sector and in family farms. Development of macro policies requires meaningful assessment of women's situation through sex disaggregated data for agriculture and other sectors. Official statistics for the NEP are unavailable after 1981, and no enumeration was made in most of the NEP in the 2001 census. Neither the agricultural census of 2002 nor most of the statistical data made available by the NEPC have sex disaggregated data, nor do the IDP surveys conducted by the Ministry of Rehabilitation, Resettlement and Refugees and the UNHCR. Data generated by micro studies often are not representative and not comparable across time and space. Data generated for the NEP and sex disaggregated macro level data are crucial issues to be addressed.

### ***Indicators***

Qualitative and quantitative gender sensitive indicators should be developed in critical areas such as access to training and extension services, credit and other inputs, membership, participation and holding of decision making positions in farmers' organisations and other civil society organisations and project participation activities including project management. Qualitative indicators should identify changes in gender relations with regard to decision making, domestic violence and greater mobility among other factors.

## **Conclusion and recommendations**

The major objective of the review was to assess rural women's situation in post-conflict rehabilitation and reconstruction in those areas emerging from armed conflict. The study focused mainly on the North East province but included assessment of women's situation directly affected by the conflict in three adjoining areas. Conclusions are based on the literature review, field assessments and discussions with stakeholders.

Years of conflict eroded economic activity and increased poverty in the NEP. Infrastructure facilities, basic services and livelihoods were affected adversely by the armed conflict while substantial numbers of people were displaced. Areas under control of the LTTE declined considerably and were economically marginalised with pervasive poverty and deprivation. Social costs of the conflict ranged from loss of lives to trauma, breakdown of community networks and ethnic polarisation.

Outside the conflict zone the Moneragala district was the least affected by the Northern conflict but the Southern insurrection compounded the deprivation of an already impoverished district. The conflict spilled over to the North Central Province with the killing of civilians living in areas bordering the NEP, thus bringing displacement and abandonment of livelihood activities. The conflict's social consequences are more marked than economic costs to the NCP. While the exodus of Muslims from the North to Puttalam adversely affected the local host communities, especially the poor, their presence revitalised the local economy with expansion of agriculture, fisheries and trading activities and the demand for services and land.

The conflict-affected areas need major rehabilitation and reconstruction interventions to achieve normalcy. Rural poverty and the dependence of nearly 80 percent of the population of the North and East and the four adjacent districts on farming require agriculture and rural development to be the major foci of reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes.

Even before the signing of the cease fire agreement, the government recognised the imperative of development, but only in 2002 was concerted effort made to implement extensive development programmes. Although Jaffna was under government control from 1996, the peninsula was not opened to the remainder of the country until 2002. A development plan for Jaffna is awaiting implementation while a plan for Mannar and Vavuniya is under preparation. A needs assessment was completed by the Multilateral Group based on the projects developed for funding, but there is no comprehensive plan for North East development that identifies priorities and a coordinating mechanism.

In its statement to the Oslo conference the Sri Lankan government acknowledged women as victims of the armed conflict and identified them as a vulnerable group that requires special focus. The Needs Assessment recognised gender as a cross cutting issue. The Jaffna Plan, however, contains only one section on female-headed households and the Triple R Framework of the government is exceptionally weak on gender issues. Acknowledgement of women's agency is difficult to find in official pronouncements.

The process to identify needs and prepare plans was flawed to the extent that the limited consultations with local level women and women's NGOs gave rise to women's perception that these were mere exercises without their participation. The national machinery for women had no role to play although the Sub Committee on Gender was consulted a few times.

Despite resolutions to adopt a gender sensitive approach in situations of armed conflict, peace and reconstruction, the UN in Sri Lanka had no gender strategy. An inter agency mechanism on gender has just started to function. Most of the UN projects are narrowly focused, identifying female-headed households as target

beneficiaries almost to the exclusion of other women. The FAO and the UNHCR have broad gender policies, but in the case of the FAO, a gender analytical framework was not consciously applied to locally implemented projects although female headed households were project beneficiaries. The UNHCR identifies widows but adopts a family based approach in its activities. The ADB, on the other hand, developed a general gender strategy for Sri Lanka and will include the North East in it. The numerous institutions implementing programmes in the NEP had few women in decision-making positions, and government officials regarded women as victims in need of welfare benefits, indicating an absence of gender issue understanding.

The conflict changed women's situation. Women have assumed roles in sharp contrast to notions of femininity and traditional values of the Tamil and Muslim communities. Most women were victims, but women also perpetrated acts of violence. At the same time, the conflict opened new opportunities for Tamil and Muslim women to overcome traditional conservatism, to achieve greater mobility and to participate in the public sphere. The emergence of numerous CBOs and NGOs provides opportunities for women to enter the public sphere especially in the post cease fire agreement period. Women – without their men – assumed responsibility for their families' economic and emotional survival, taking on new roles to enhance family income in the face of economic hardship. Simultaneously, women were exploited as cheap labour. Muslim women from the North, for example, who were displaced and living in welfare camps in the Puttalam district became proletarians. A significant development was women's mobilisation, yet women still are marginalised in traditional community-based organisations such as farmer organisations and cooperative societies. Unequal gender relations persist even with new responsibilities added to the existing unequal gender division of labour. The absence of basic facilities such as water, access roads, transport, health care, sanitation and sub standard housing compound women's workload.

Field assessments show that women's productive activities in all locations equal that of men. Women engage in cultivation either in their own farm or as agricultural workers. They perform all the tasks in the field including work on the threshing floor, from which women traditionally were excluded. Women in all locations cultivate the homestead and rear livestock. Women's involvement in the fisheries sector is confined to post harvest activities and marketing. Non-farm income earning activities that women initiate, however, is extremely limited in all locations.

As income earners there is no equality between women and men. Women and men alike accept the wage differential thus perpetuating this discriminative practice. In project proposals women farmers are subsumed in the households; services and projects target the household head that usually is male. When women are identified as project beneficiaries, the major focus generally is on widows and female headed households ignoring the overwhelming majority of poor women who contribute to the household economy while bearing major responsibility in the domestic sphere.

Despite being farmers in their own right, women's membership is limited in farmers' organisations or other agro-economic based societies and they rarely hold positions of authority.

Agriculture extension services are erratic and dissemination of agricultural information is not effective. A positive development, however, is seen in the Mahaweli villages in Anuradhapura and Polonnaruwa where agricultural officers reportedly provide guidance to both women and men.

Several issues identified from the literature were confirmed during field assessments. The most critical of these is the lack of a gender focus in most programmes and projects and the lack of gender awareness among government officials and project personnel. The projects did not include gender analysis components or indicators for assessing gender differentiated impact. The Gender Unit of the Ministry of Policy Planning only very recently started collecting such data relating to government implemented projects.

A critical need articulated by women, except those in Mannar which received adequate rainwater, is the need for uninterrupted water supply for cultivation during both seasons. Access to markets, fair prices, post-harvest storage facilities, information and knowledge and the availability of credit when required are other critical needs of women. Women in all locations need skill development and identification of alternative income generating activities.

Field assessments show that women are under considerable mental stress and that many bear psychological scars. This is evident especially in LTTE controlled areas that were marginalised and isolated.

## **Recommendations**

### ***Gender mainstreaming***

The gender-planning unit established by the Department of Policy Planning to mainstream gender issues could most effectively address gender considerations in reconstruction and rehabilitation of conflict affected areas through institutional mechanisms. It should be strengthened with the addition of gender analysis expertise and by undertaking gender audits. It is strongly recommended that actively functioning gender focal points be established in all government agencies having responsibility for rehabilitation and development of the NEP.

All agencies involved in post-conflict reconstruction and rehabilitation programmes should be gender sensitised. Extensive gender awareness training programmes should be conducted for executive agencies, project officers and field staff at national and provincial levels.

Detailed assessment should be made of women's role in agriculture and the rural sector of conflict affected areas, their access to inputs and support services. Current and future major projects should be assessed for their gender effects. Projects that have positively affected women should be identified, best practices documented and information disseminated.

The collection of sex disaggregated data and development of databases should be made mandatory.

A gender strategy for the NEP should be developed subsequent to a needs assessment of women, including female headed households, widows, married women, single women, displaced women, the disabled and youth.

All programmes and projects should include mandatory provision for gender analysis. All projects should include a gender responsive strategy to mobilise women, overcome constraints that limit their participation and improve their capacity. Indicators to assess the gender impact of projects should be developed.

### ***Capacity building of Madar Sangams (Women's rural development societies)***

Of the many CBOs functioning in the NEP the *Madar Sangams* (Women's Rural Development Societies (WRDS)) is the most promising to mobilise women. The capacity of women's organisations, especially the WRDS, to identify, design, implement and monitor projects should be strengthened. The WRDS should conduct gender awareness programmes for women and men in the community especially in view of the new realities and the high levels of alcoholism and domestic violence. Women's organisations should link with each other with the objective of forming district level societies and an apex body. They should form links with women's groups outside the NEP especially for information exchange and marketing. Linked women's organisations should facilitate exchanges across ethnic boundaries, and new information technology should be explored for this purpose. The WRDS should work toward women's participation in local governance and local level representatives to ensure attention by political leaders and government officers.

### ***Agriculture***

- Immediate action should rehabilitate minor irrigation tanks and construct agro-wells.
- High value crops should be introduced and women trained in new cultivation methods. Distance learning programmes using new information technology could be used for information dissemination.

- Marketing channels should be expanded with government enabling greater private sector participation in marketing activities.
- Construction of adequate storage facilities should be considered to assist farmers in obtaining higher prices holding paddy for better prices.
- Reform of discriminatory laws resolving issues relating to encroachment and occupation of state lands and those of the displaced must be addressed.
- The extensive role of women in agriculture and livestock must be recognised and equal access to training and skill development, new technology and inputs made available to them.

### ***Non-farm employment, skill development***

- Women should be trained in skills, credit and market information and should be encouraged to participate in non-traditional areas. Women should have access to new information technology; proactive measures should be taken to ensure that women's groups become owners of Village Knowledge Centres that are to be set up by the Information and Communication Technology Agency throughout the country.

### ***Health and nutrition***

The Family Health Worker system of the Department of Health should be reactivated to address poor sanitation, health and mental health and nutrition practices.

## **Epilogue**

Since the study was completed a major natural disaster hit Sri Lanka. The tsunami that struck Sri Lanka on 26 December 2004 affected approximately two-thirds of the country's coastline. The highest damage in terms of life and property loss was in Eastern province. The tsunami also resulted in destruction of infrastructure. Areas affected in Northern province were Kilinochchi and Mullaitivu. Large scale displacement occurred with the Batticaloa, Ampara and Trincomalee, the three districts that comprise Eastern province, accounting for about half of the total displaced population (270 000). Of these three districts, Ampara was most affected. Livelihood activities were destroyed and disrupted. Most of those adversely affected were small scale fisher folk, petty traders and those engaged in various micro enterprises. The tsunami damage in the east far exceeded losses inflicted by the armed conflict. Social costs were as high as material costs. In fact the tsunami disaster exacerbated the conflict-induced problems.

Recent research studies and assessments show the gendered nature of the tsunami disaster's impact. Relief assistance in most instances was 'gender blind', but cash grants were given to males. Land issues have surfaced with regard to a coastal buffer zone, state and private land, and occupation and ownership. A continuing critical need is restoration of livelihood activities. Single parent families have increased and vulnerable groups such as the elderly have taken on additional responsibilities.

The 2002 cease fire agreement held in the months following the tsunami disaster. A change in political leadership saw renewed efforts to reach a negotiated settlement of the conflict, but talks stalled and cease fire violations took a turn for the worse with fears of a return to full scale war looming.

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